Please, cite as:
Navarro-Lucena, F., Anaya-Sánchez, R. and Molinillo, S. (2024), "The effects of esports viewers' customer experience on intention to purchase sponsoring brands: the mediating role of social identification", Marketing Intelligence & Planning, Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print. https://doi.org/10.1108/MIP-01-2024-0052

The effects of esports viewers' customer experience on intention to purchase sponsoring brands: the mediating role of social identification

Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this study is to understand how the dimensions of esports streaming viewers' customer experience influence their intentions to buy brands produced by sponsors, both directly and through the mediating effect of their identification with players and teams.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected through an online survey of 396 regular esports viewers in Spain, using convenience sampling. The proposed conceptual model was evaluated using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM).

Findings – The results showed that the four dimensions of the viewer´s customer experience (cognitive, affective, sensory and social) predicted his/her social identification with players/teams. In turn, social identification positively influenced purchase intentions for the sponsoring brand. The cognitive, affective and social dimensions of the experience indirectly influenced purchase intentions for the sponsoring brand, through social identification.

Originality/value – This study improves the understanding of esports viewers´ experiences and their impact on purchase intentions toward the sponsoring brand, and the key role of the viewer's social identification with players/teams.

Keywords: Esports, Sponsorship, Customer Experience, Social Identification, Purchase Intentions.

Paper type: Research paper.

1. INTRODUCTION

Electronic sports (esports) generated 1,384 million dollars in 2022, 39% more than in 2020. Of this revenue, sponsorship of events, teams and/or players accounted for close to 60% (NewZoo, 2022). Esports are mainly broadcast over the internet (live streaming or streaming) on platforms such as Twitch and YouTube; this conditions the type of viewer who watches them, as other sports are mostly watched on television (Cuesta-Valiño *et al.*, 2022). The esports audience in 2022 has been estimated to have been 532 million viewers (NewZoo, 2022). These high figures have sparked academic and professional interest in learning about the possibilities of this emerging industry (Flegr and Schmidt, 2022).

Esports are a group of sports activities in which people display mental and/or physical skills using electronic systems or ICTs (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017; Wagner, 2006). Various authors have classified esports based on their genre, or on game type, differentiating between: multiplayer online battle arena, battle royale, collectible card games, real time strategy, sport games simulators, fighting games and racing games (Funk *et al.*, 2018; Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017). Three main roles have been identified in esports. The consumers of the games are viewers (who may only watch them sporadically), and fans/enthusiasts of esports tournaments. Players are professionally engaged in esports, either individually, or as a member of a team (Mora-Cantallops and Sicilia, 2018). Sponsors are individuals or organizations that provide funding/means for the players to compete.

Companies are trying to take advantage of the opportunities offered in the sector to reach consumers to offer products/services. In the marketing field, increasing literature is examining viewers´ motivations (e.g. Rietz and Hallmann, 2023; Zheng *et al.*, 2023), and the behaviors of followers toward players/teams and the sponsorship of events and streams (e.g. Cuesta-Valiño *et al.*, 2022; Gawrysiak *et al.*, 2020). For example, Fanjul-Peyró *et al*. (2019) concluded that sponsorship has a more positive effect on viewers´ brand perceptions than has general advertising placed during broadcasts; Elasri-Ejjaberi *et al*. (2020) demonstrated that esports sponsorships by brands have a positive impact on brand awareness and perceptions; Cuesta-Valiño *et al*. (2022) identified four antecedents of the perceived image of the sponsoring brand and determined the effect of this image on the viewer's response to the brand; Abbasi *et al*. (2023) showed that viewers' esports engagement is an important predictor of their behaviors toward sponsoring brands. Although these, and other studies, have significantly increased the understanding of the effects of sponsorship, more research is required to address customers´ experiences and relationships with brands and players/teams (Flegr and Schmidt, 2022).

The prior literature shows that followers´ identification with teams and players is among the most important variables in the explanation of their behaviors toward brands sponsoring sports activities (Mühlbacher *et al*., 2022). Similarly, Trent and Shafer (2020) argued that viewers´ social identification with esports teams could help explain their behaviors. However, there is very little knowledge of how esports viewers' identification with players/teams influences their behaviors. In this sense, the social identification of the viewer with the player/team has been shown to be a key variable in the consumption of esports broadcasts (Jang *et al.*, 2021). Some authors, such as Calapez *et al.* (2024) and Kordyaka *et al.* (2020), have highlighted the need to understand how viewers' social identification with esports players and teams affects their attitudes toward sponsoring brands. The characteristics of this sector (especially the way in which relationships are established between viewers and streamers) differentiate it from traditional sports and other types of streams/content generated by influencers (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017; Hilvert-Bruce *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, the results obtained by research in other sports and streaming contexts are

not entirely applicable. Consequently, Flegr and Schmidt, (2022) highlighted the need to better understand the factors that underlie viewers´ identification with esports teams/players to find an explanation of how this identification influences their behaviors.

On the other hand, customer experience is a key factor in understanding the decision-making processes they go through in their interactions with products/brands (see Lemon and Verhoef, 2016; Molinillo *et al.*, 2022; Rather *et al.*, 2022a). Customer experience is a prominent variable in understanding live-streaming viewer behaviors. For example, its impact on viewer engagement (e.g. Xiong and Li, 2024) and purchase intentions (Li *et al.*, 2024) has been proven. However, the customer experience literature in the specific field of esports is very limited (e.g. Levy *et al.*, 2022; Meng-Lewis *et al.*, 2024). In addition, research that has studied the experience of the esports consumer has regarded it a one-dimensional variable, which limits the knowledge that can be achieved through its multidimensional conceptualization (i.e. cognitive, affective, sensory and social dimensions) (Bleier *et al.*, 2019). In addition, previous studies have not addressed the specific relationship of sponsoring brands with the esports consumer's experience. Finally, although customer experience is a variable that influences the consumer's social identification and is decisive for his/her identification with brands (see Ahearne *et al.*, 2005; Han *et al.*, 2020), the effects of customer experience on social identification have not been addressed in the specific field of esports.

In addressing these gaps in the literature, the present study contributes to the existing literature by understanding viewers´ experiences of esports broadcasts, the effect on their identification with players and/or teams and the impact on their purchasing behaviors toward the sponsoring brands. Specifically, the aim of the present study is to understand how the dimensions of the esports' viewer's experience influence his/her purchase intentions toward sponsoring brands, first, directly, and second, through the mediation of his/her identification with players/teams. To this end, a conceptual framework based on the customer experience paradigm in online environments (Bleier *et al.*, 2019; Lemon and Verhoef, 2016) and social identity theory (SIT) (Tajfel and Turner, 1979, 1986) is proposed. The proposed model was evaluated with data collected from a sample of regular esports spectators in Spain. The results show the direct effects of three of the four dimensions of customer experience, cognitive, affective and social, and the mediating effect of social identification, on both social identification and purchase intentions.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Tajfel and Turner's (1979) theory of social identity proposes that the image that a person has of himself/herself is related to the categories or social groups (s)he believes (s)he belongs to; this image prompts people to develop social identification. It has been argued that the theory can be extrapolated to celebrity endorsers (Basil, 1996), influencer endorsers (Chapple and Cownie, 2017) and influencer marketing in general (Muda and Hamzah, 2021). Similarly, authors such as Qian and Seifried (2023) argued that SIT makes it possible to analyze the interdependencies between the different participants in esports live streams (players, brands and viewers) because the theory places interaction at the center of the development of social interaction. In this sense, it has been argued in some studies that viewers identify socially with broadcasters and streamers, and that this identification leads them to undertake positive behaviors toward the streamers. For example, Hu *et al.* (2017) found that identification with streamers is a key predictor of intention to continue viewing

their content; Li *et al*. (2021) showed that identification increases emotional attachment to streamers; and Qian (2022) concluded that identification with sporting events´ streamers leads their audiences to collaborate more and to higher viewing figures. It has been argued that audiences identify with streamers for various reasons, such as their similarities with the streamer, personal affinity and common interests and lifestyles (Gräve, 2017; Hoffner and Buchanan, 2005). Similarly, the viewer's identification with the streamer is positively influenced by his/her interaction with the streamer and by his/her perceptions of his/her actual and ideal self-congruity with the streamer (Hu *et al*., 2017). Therefore, taking account of the characteristics of esports, social identity theory can help explain the effects of the audience's identification with the esports player/team on their behaviors toward sponsoring brands.

2.2. Customer Experience and Social Identity Theory

Customer experience is key for explaining consumer behaviors toward brands during the customer journey (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020; Kumar *et al.*, 2023). Schmitt (1999) defined customer experience as a holistic, multidimensional construct that represents customers' reactions to interactions with companies or brands. Brakus *et al.* (2009, p. 52) defined the customer´s brand experience as "sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments." More recently, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) conceptualized customer experience as a multidimensional construct that measures the customer's cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensory and social responses to a company's offerings throughout the customer purchase journey. In the online environment, customer experience has been shown to be based on verbal and visual stimuli displayed on the web (Bleier *et al*., 2019).

In the field of traditional sports, Ladhari *et al.* (2020) showed that sports team brand experience is a significant predictor of emotional attachment toward brands, and Skard and Apenes (2022) argued that the active participation of viewers produces brand experiences that reinforce their attitudes toward event-sponsoring brands. However, little is known about the effects of the esports audience's experience on their relationships with sponsoring brands (Cuesta-Valiño *et al.*, 2022; Flegr and Schmidt, 2022). The concept of customer experience should not be confused with that of fan experience. The term “fan” encompasses people who engage in behaviors that go beyond simply purchasing or consuming a product associated with a famous person, brand or team; it is commonly used to refer to a person who displays extraordinary emotional connection, enthusiasm and loyalty to a person, brand or team (Jones *et al.*, 2022). For this reason, fan behaviors have been extensively studied in the sports literature (e.g. Wakefield and Bennett, 2018). The viewer or audience's experience refers to the regular customer (Becker and Jaakkola, 2020), because esports live streams are watched by multiple types of viewer, from the occasional watcher to the enthusiastic follower who does not miss any of the player's or team's competitions. The present study examines a broader viewer profile, that is, it is not limited only to fans.

The present study draws on Bleier *et al*. (2019) to increase knowledge of the effects of the esports viewer's experience. These authors described the online experience as a four-dimensional construct: cognitive, affective, social and sensory. Cognitive experience relates to rational elements, that is, the conscious mental processes that people undergo. The affective dimension relates to the generation of moods, feelings and emotions. The sensory dimension relates to stimuli that involve the senses. Social experience relates to the relationships that one has with other people when living an experience. Previous literature

highlights the role of customer experience in the formation of social identity in different fields of study. For example, Rahman (2014) argued that customer experience positively affects their identification with brands; Han *et al.* (2020) argued that customer experience was the variable most likely to provoke their identification with brands; Chi *et al.* (2020) proposed that a positive customer experience is likely to lead to consumer identification with companies.

2.3. Hypotheses development

As stated above, customer experience has been said to be the most important factor in making the consumer identify with brands (Han *et al.*, 2020). It has been observed that experiences with brands/companies that consumers identify as important, unique and widely consumed, are more likely to make them develop social identification with the companies/brands (Ahearne *et al.*, 2005). This social identification leads consumers to build relationships with brands based on their experiences, and these experiences influence consumers' self-identities (Lemon and Verhoef, 2016). Thus, when consumers enjoy their experiences with brands/organizations, such as esports players/teams, this has positive effects on their attitudes toward the brands/organizations, which lead consumers to identify with them (Jones and Runyan, 2013; Kumar and Kaushik, 2018). The cognitive dimension of experience is associated with rational elements, such as information received, thoughts and mental absorption (Lemon and Verhoef; Molinillo *et al.*, 2022). It has been shown that exchanges of information and the sharing of ideas and interests among members of a community (for example, through chats) can generate social identification among its members (Chen and Lin, 2019). Hu *et al.* (2017) showed that when a stream viewer feels that (s)he is on the same cognitive level as other viewers during the communications they exchange during games, (s)he will feel more identified with the community. Therefore, it is proposed in the present study that when the esports viewer undergoes a positive cognitive experience based on absorption and the generation of curiosity and thoughts, (s)he will identify to a greater extent with the player/team:

H1: *The cognitive experience of the esports viewer will positively affect his/her identification with the player/team*.

The affective dimension of the experience relates to the consumer's emotional judgments and feelings evoked by his/her relationship with the brand, and to the fun or entertainment experienced (Brakus *et al.*, 2009; Schmitt, 1999). Previous studies have shown that social media users' emotional connections with other viewers and streamers can enhance their sense of identity and engagement (Yang and Lee, 2024). Indeed, affective experiences have been shown to generate strong emotional bonds between the parties involved (Sumino and Harada, 2004) and lead audiences to identify with the content generator (e.g. players/teams) (Carlson *et al.*, 2020; Ladhari *et al.*, 2020). In traditional sports, it has been shown that a positive relationship exists between consumers´ affective attitudes toward brands/organizations and their feelings of identification with the brands/organizations (Lithopoulos *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, in the present study it is proposed that when the esports viewer experiences positive emotions, such as fun or entertainment, (s)he will identify to a greater extent with the player/team:

H2: *The affective experience of the esports viewer will positively affect his/her identification with the player/team*.

The sensory dimension of the customer experience involves characteristics that stimulate the consumer's senses (Bleier *et al.*, 2019). Stimuli perceived by the senses (e.g. sight, sound)

in an online environment can generate positive bonds between the senders and receivers of the stimuli (Ai *et al.*, 2022). Hollebeek *et al.* (2022) concluded that the consumer's sensory experiences influence his/her attitudes toward online video games, which affects his/her behavioral intentions. In addition, it has been shown that the visual quality of live streams can strengthen the bonds between audience and streamer by reducing perceived distance, which in turn creates deeper social and emotional connections (Yang and Lee, 2024). In sports, team anthems, emblems and flags can evoke positive perceptions in the audience (Waterman, 2019), which may create in the viewer a feeling of social identification with the player/team. Based on these findings, it is proposed that if the experience appeals to the esports consumer's senses, (s)he will identify to a greater extent with the player/team:

H3: *The sensory experience of the esports viewer will positively affect his/her identification with the player/team*.

The social dimension of consumers' online experiences with brands is linked to the degree of human presence they perceive during their encounters (Bleier *et al.*, 2019). The consumer's social experience is closely linked to social identification. Schmitt (1999) proposed that "relate" is one of the five dimensions of customer experience. It refers to the relationships/connections of the consumer with other people and groups through which relationships are built between him/her and the social meaning of a brand, which is part of the consumer's social identity, as Lemon and Verhoef (2016) confirmed. Along these lines, Bustamente and Rubio (2017) also conceptualize social experience within the framework of social identity theory. Previous studies have shown that the social exchange relationships that develop between people affect how they identify with each other. In esports, Seo (2016) concluded that most members of esports communities establish friendships with other members. Specifically, social interactions/ties between members of communities can produce feelings of shared social identification (Haslam *et al*., 2016). Consequently, when esports' viewers feel positively about their relationships with other members of a community, they may identify more with the relevant player/team:

H4: *The social experience of the esports viewer will positively affect his/her identification with the player/team*.

Many SIT-based studies have confirmed that identification with brands or organizations influences consumers' purchase intentions (e.g. Cornwell and Coote, 2005). This is because consumers who identify with a brand establish a stronger bond with it by incorporating it into their own identity. Consequently, they will show a strong preference for the brand. In the social media environment, some authors, such as Carlson *et al*. (2020) and Farivar and Wang (2022), found that a positive relationship exists between the consumer's identification with influencers and their intention to purchase sponsoring brands. In the same way, in live streaming, consumers who identify socially with a streamer develop positive attitudes, emotions and behaviors toward brands (e.g. Hu *et al*., 2017; Li *et al*., 2021; Qian, 2022). In the traditional sports context, previous studies have argued that when the consumer identifies with a team or group of people this influences his/her attitudes toward brands (Schlesinger and Güngerich, 2011). In the field of esports, it has been shown that identification with teams improves the image of the sponsor, leading the consumer to show more interest in, and make purchases from, the sponsoring brand (Cuesta-Valiño *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: *Social identification with an esports player/team positively affects purchase intentions toward sponsoring brands*.

Social identification is an influential factor in shaping consumers' behaviors (Hsieh, 2023). Studies into consumers' social identification in live streaming and influencer marketing

environments have shown that consumers identified with a community develop positive behaviors toward the preferred brands of the community and/or the streamer (e.g. Croes and Bartels, 2021; Hu *et al.*, 2017). Thus, the social identification variable mediates between the effects of consumers' attitudes and experiences and their behavioral intentions toward streamers and brands. Several studies have addressed the mediating role of social identification: He *et al*. (2012) argued that customer brand identification has a mediating effect on the impact of brand identity on perceived value, satisfaction, trust and brand loyalty; Chen and Lin (2019) concluded that customer identification with an online group mediates social media marketing activities, and influences, through satisfaction, purchase intentions for products recommended by the group; Wei *et al*. (2022) showed that social identification mediates the effects of social relationships between influencers and followers and customer brand engagement. In the context of brands, Kumar and Kaushik (2020) demonstrated that the customer's identification with the brand mediates the effects of brand experience on the customer-brand relationship. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6: *Social identification with an esports player/team mediates the relationship between cognitive (H6a), affective (H6b), sensory (H6c) and social (H6d) experiences and purchase intentions toward the sponsoring brand.*

Please, insert Figure 1 here.

3. METHODOLOGY

To analyze the theoretical model, data were collected through a self-administered online survey in Spain. The link to the questionnaire was shared in specialized esports forums (e.g. Reddit and Mediavida) and in the comments sections featured on live streams (Ibai, LVPes). In addition, a snowball sampling method was used to ask participants to distribute the questionnaire to other esports consumers. Some recent studies have analyzed the behavior of esports consumers in Spain (e.g. Cuesta-Valiño *et al.*, 2022; García and Murillo, 2020) and in culturally similar countries (e.g. Calapez *et al.*, 2024). The Spanish market has been characterized by sustained growth over the last few years. The esports viewers are mostly (75%) between 18 and 30 years old, exhibit various levels of viewing, from casual to hardcore, and watch an average of 2 hours and 45 minutes per week (Deloitte, 2022).

The questionnaire was developed using LimeSurvey software. It posed questions about the participants´ esports viewing habits, questions to measure the variables of the theoretical model and sociodemographic questions (Annex 1). The variables were measured using 7-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) validated in the literature. The dimensions of customer experience (cognitive, affective, sensory, social) were measured through scales adapted from Hsu and Tsou (2011), social identification drawing on Hu *et al*. (2017) and purchase intentions drawing on Biscaia *et al*. (2013). The questionnaire was first reviewed by three researchers whose feedback was used to make improvements. As the original questionnaire variables and items were in English, they had first to be translated into Spanish. Subsequently, a pilot test was conducted to address the readability and clarity of the survey, using a convenience sample of ten college students who regularly watch esports broadcasts. From the first contact, the respondents were informed that the study was anonymous and that their privacy was guaranteed. The objective of the research was also explained to them, that is, it was a university-led study which aimed to increase the knowledge of esports, and that their answers would help improve the experience of esports consumers.

G*Power v3.1.9.7 software was used to determine the appropriate sample size (Faul *et al.*, 2009). The a priori analysis (Cohen, 1988) of the R^2 statistical test was used. For an effect size f^2 of 0.15, a power of 0.95, an error of 0.05 and for five predictors, it was assessed that the minimum sample size should be 138. The survey, distributed in November 2022, attracted 396 complete and valid responses. Most of the participants are men, women representing 18.9% of the sample. The respondents are predominantly under 25 years (77.1%). In terms of educational level, most have vocational training (44.2%) or secondary education (26.8%). In terms of occupation, more than half work part-time (54.3%), and 22.2% combine part-time work with studies. The participants' monthly incomes are distributed broadly evenly across the spread of options. Finally, the most used streaming platform is Twitch, preferred by almost two-thirds of viewers, followed at a great distance by Facebook Gaming. Therefore, the composition of the sample fits the profile of Spanish esports viewers (Deloitte, 2022), and the profile of global esports viewers (WinkTTD, 2019).

4. RESULTS

The hypotheses were tested using partial least squares structural equation modeling (SEM-PLS), with SmartPLS 4.1.0.0 software. This technique was adopted because of the novel and exploratory nature of the model's relationships (Hair *et al.*, 2017a), and because it does not require normalized data (Hair *et al.*, 2017b). A bootstrapping procedure (10,000 subsamples) was carried out to ensure the stability of the estimates (Roldán and Sánchez-Franco, 2012). The analysis was carried out in two phases: first, the measurement model was analyzed to evaluate its reliability and validity and, second, the structural model was analyzed to evaluate the significance of the proposed relationships.

To reduce the risk of the common method bias (CMB) that may be caused by systematic measurement errors, several procedures were applied. First, pre-tests were carried out to assess the participants´ understanding of the study, the design of the survey and to validate the measurements of the constructs (Hulland *et al.*, 2018). Second, the survey items measuring the constructs were separated and thereafter presented to the participants randomly to prevent them providing repetitive/systematic scores. Finally, a post-hoc full collinearity test was carried out (Kock and Lynn, 2012). This test examines whether the variance inflation factor (VIF) values of the items is less than 3.3. If they are less, this could be an indication of pathological collinearity, which could mean that the model is contaminated by CMB (Kock, 2015). Using SmartPLS, it was verified that all the VIFs in the model were above the threshold. The preventive measures taken, and test results, taken together, indicate that CMB is not a problem in the model.

4.1. Evaluation of the measurement model

To evaluate the measurement model, an assessment was made of the reliability and validity of the measurement scales. The evaluation of reliability and convergent validity found that the Cronbach's alpha (CA) (Cronbach, 1951) values and the factor loads were higher than, or very close to, the minimum requirement (0.7). Similarly, the composite reliability (CR) values were above the recommended 0.8 (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). The average variance extracted (AVE) values were above the 0.5 threshold (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Thus, it can be concluded that the proposed model has convergent reliability and validity (Table I).

Please, insert Table I here.

Two procedures were used to analyze discriminant validity. First, it was established that the inter-construct correlations were less than the square roots of the average variance extracted

values (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Second, it was established that the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratios of the inter-construct correlations were less than 0.9 (Henseler *et al.*, 2015). Thus, all the recommended requirements were met (Table II).

Please, insert Table II here.

4.2. Evaluation of the structural model

Prior to the analysis of the structural model, a test was undertaken to establish whether multicollinearity existed by examining the VIF values of the model´s variables. All VIF values were below the recommended threshold of 5 (Hair *et al*., 2012). Next, the significance and relevance of the proposed relationships were analyzed. First, the path coefficients (β) were assessed using a bootstrapping procedure (Hair *et al*., 2014) with 10,000 subsamples. It was observed that the p-values of all the coefficients of the proposed relationships were significant, except for the relationship between sensory experience and social identification (H3); that is, the data supported 4 out of the 5 direct relationships proposed in the model (Table III). The most significant relationship was observed to be between social identification and purchase intentions ($\beta=0.530$; $p<0.05$), followed by the relationship between social experience and social identification ($\beta=0.199$; $p<0.001$) and the relationship between affective experience and social identification ($\beta=0.179$; $p<0.05$). Finally, the least intense relationship was observed to be between cognitive experience and social identification ($\beta=0.161$; $p<0.05$).

The R^2 values of the dependent variables are above the recommended minimum of 0.1 (Falk and Miller, 1992). The predictive capacity of the model was measured using the Stone-Geisser test (Q^2) with blindfolding (omission distance 7) (Geisser, 1975; Stone, 1974); the values were greater than 0 in all cases. The effect sizes (f^2) showed that social identification had a strong impact on purchase intentions and that affective, cognitive and social experiences had a small impact on social identification. In addition, to further analyze the data, two multigroup analyses (MGA) were carried out to identify any differences in the results of the model based on the gender and age of the participants. The results showed no significant differences in any of the model's relationships based on the gender of the participants. On the other hand, it was observed that the effect of social identification on purchase intentions was stronger among those above 25 years.

Please, insert Table III here.

Finally, an indirect effects analysis was undertaken to evaluate the mediating effects of social identification. Table IV shows that a mediating effect was observed in all the model´s relationships, except for the relationship between sensory experience and purchase intentions (H6c). In all cases the mediating effect was partial, that is, the cognitive, emotional and social dimensions of the experience influenced purchase intentions both directly, and indirectly through social identification with the player/team. Therefore, H6 is partially supported.

Please, insert Table IV here.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Theoretical implications

The results of this research raise a series of theoretical implications for the sponsorship of esports players, teams and events. First, it was confirmed that the viewer's experience when watching an esports match is a key predictor of the development of his/her identification with the player/team. This extends results obtained in other contexts, such as branding (Jones

and Runyan, 2013) and tourism (Kumar and Kaushik, 2018), where it was shown that the consumer's experience influenced his/her social identification with brands and opinion leaders. In addition, it was shown that not all the dimensions that make up customer experience influence in the same way. Specifically, the social, affective and cognitive dimensions, in that order, were shown to have positive effects on the viewer´s identification with the player/team. Thus, when viewers socialize with other viewers and players, feel cognitively connected to players/teams, establish affective and emotional bonds, and receive useful information from the game, they are more likely to socially identify with players/ teams. These findings extend the results obtained in previous studies in tourism (e.g. Rather *et al.*, 2022a) and in live video streaming platforms (e.g. Hu *et al.*, 2017) which highlighted the importance of customer experience but measured as a one-dimensional, not four-dimensional, construct, as in this research (e.g. Hu *et al.*, 2017).

Contrary to expectations, no significant relationship was found to exist between the sensory dimension of experience and social identification with the streamer, a result that conflicts with previous studies in other digital environments (e.g. Rather *et al.*, 2022b). This result may be due to several circumstances. First, it may be that what viewers perceive at a sensory level in an esports stream may not be enough to evoke identification with the player/team, with aspects such as emotions, available information and social relationships with other users being more important. That is, viewers undergo a sensory experience when watching esports streams, but this experience does not influence their behaviors and attitudes due to the greater impact of the other dimensions (see Spence *et al.*, 2014). In addition, the viewer might value the sensory experience of viewing the game, but not value the associated streaming experience, which is the focus of this study. Second, several studies in digital contexts have concluded that the sensory dimension of the experience does not affect the behaviors of younger consumers, such as those in the sample (e.g. Sharma *et al.*, 2024), and that negative sensory experiences influence the customer's experience to a greater extent than do positive experiences (e.g. Mehraliyev *et al.*, 2020). In other words, the stimuli (image and sound) in the stream might enhance the viewer's sensory experience, but not make him/her identify with the streamer. The viewer identifies with players based on some aspects of the experience, such as the game's narrative, social interaction with players and other viewers and emotions (e.g. fun).

Second, it was verified in the present study, for the first time in the field of esports, that consumers´ identification with players/teams they view positively influences their purchase intentions toward the sponsoring brand. This result extends the findings of previous literature in other contexts, such as celebrity endorsement (Carlson *et al*., 2020). Thus, it has been shown that the effects of identification impact not only on behaviors toward esports players and teams, but also on sponsoring brands.

Third, it was shown that the viewer's experience not only influences his/her social identification with players/teams, it indirectly impacts also on his/her purchase intentions toward the sponsoring brand. In other words, social identification partially mediates the effects of three dimensions of experience (social, affective and cognitive) on purchase intentions. That is, the positive effects of the consumer experience on purchase intentions toward the sponsoring brand are greater among those viewers who feel more identified with the player/team. This result is novel in the field of esports, and extends findings obtained in previous research in other areas of study (see Kumar and Kaushik, 2020). The results of the present study may be better understood by taking account of the demographics of the study population, as esports are mostly followed by young people, especially men (Deloitte, 2022). In this sense, the literature in other fields of study has shown differences exist in the effects

of customer experience on consumers' behaviors toward brands based on their gender (Pandey and Chawla, 2018) and age (Khan *et al.*, 2020).

5.2. Practical implications

In the present study a series of implications for marketing practice were identified. Companies need to understand that viewers must enjoy a good experience to positively influence the sponsoring brand's sales. Consequently, brands should choose players who connect with the public, understand their followers and are congruent with the company´s positioning. In addition, consumers should be provided with information about the esports games which will make them feel curious/intrigued, stimulates their creative thinking and makes them feel closer to the player/team. It would be valuable if players/teams could interact with the sponsoring brand during games, for example, by having the sponsor present on the set, displaying its products or by simply using the brand.

Companies should try to create emotional bonds between the parties, which would help the consumer feel connected to the brand that the players/teams recommend during games. As social and affective connections seem to be established through audience identification with the streamer, the product/service promoted must be consistent with both the streamer's personality and his/her lifestyle. Brands must carefully choose the people they use to get their messages across and make their marketing initiatives as coherent and natural as possible. Thus, for example, players might recommend the sponsoring brand´s products that they use in their game playing, carry out raffles among followers and organize meetings or events where these products are featured. It would also be useful to encourage consumers to develop relationships with other consumers with whom they share tastes (e.g. about certain players/teams) and, therefore, with the brands they sponsor, for example, by using social networks and organizing events where they can meet each other.

It was not shown the sensory experience had a significant impact on the identification of viewers with the player/team. The results suggest that streamers should focus more on the content they present than on audio-visual stimuli. While aesthetic details may capture some attention, or be important during the game itself, they are not as crucial to the viewer's identification with the team/player. Therefore, aspects such as lighting, decoration and other creative elements of the broadcast set, as well as the projection of the sponsor's image through corporate colors, may not be decisive. Similarly, although sound and musical quality seem to be important elements in audiovisual broadcasts, they are not essential for the audience's identification with the team/player. Brands can be integrated into broadcasts without the need to worry excessively about being subtle or creative, since the viewer's identification with the team/player does not depend so much on these sensory factors.

5.3. Limitations and future research

This research has some limitations. First, the data are cross-sectional, thus, future longitudinal studies could assess changes in consumer behaviors over time. Second, as the study is purely quantitative, its results would be complemented by using neuroscientific techniques (e.g. eye tracking) to examine viewers´ unconscious responses while they view brands during esports games. Third, the research did not examine any specific type of esports or brand, rather esports were assessed as a whole. It would be interesting to compare the results with those obtained in studies into different types of esports, as type of audience and sponsoring brands may vary. Fourth, the age variable was measured in sections and there was a high concentration of responses in the group of viewers under 25 years of age. Future research might examine the model's relationships using a greater spread of viewer age. Finally, the respondents are Spanish speakers, thus, future research might test the model's relationships in other cultural settings.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study provide valuable information on the role of viewer experience in their identification with esports players and teams, and its influence on their purchase intentions toward sponsoring brands. The results offer interesting insights that may allow streamers to create meaningful experiences for the viewer, helping players/teams, brands and live streaming channels to optimize their marketing strategies. Specifically, it was confirmed that the viewer's experience is crucial for developing identification with esports players and teams, as has been observed in other digital environments. The social, affective and cognitive dimensions are the most influential. In other words, viewers identify more when they interact with others, create emotional bonds and receive relevant information from the game. This suggests that brands should promote interactions and content that stimulate creative thinking, curiosity and socialization. These dimensions also indirectly impact purchase intentions toward sponsoring brands. A positive experience increases the likelihood that viewers will purchase products from the sponsoring brand, on the basis they feel identified with the player or team.

On the other hand, the sensory dimension does not seem to have a significant effect on the social identification of viewers. Although viewers may value the sensory component of the experience, it is not enough to generate in them identification with the player or team. Therefore, streamers should focus on content and interaction, rather than on factors such as aesthetics. It is worth mentioning that, perhaps, viewers may value the sensory experience of watching the game, but not so much the streaming experience. The analysis of the results suggests that brands should select players/teams that align with their audiences and offer content that strengthens emotional and cognitive connections. For example, players/teams might interact with sponsored products, organize giveaways and encourage the creation of communities around the shared interests of viewers.

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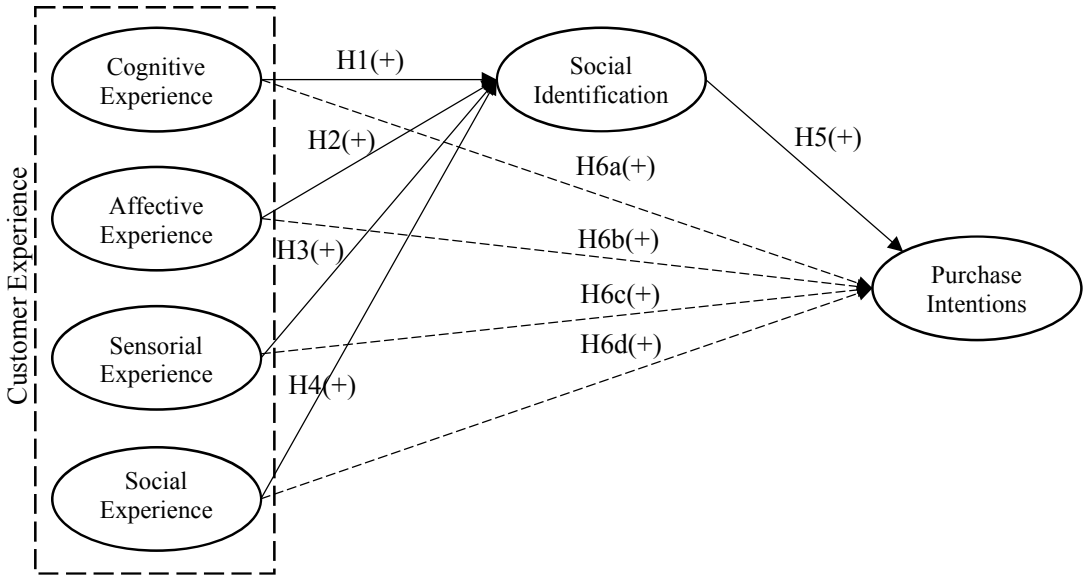
ANNEXES

Please, insert Annex 1 here.

Figure 1: Theoretical Model



Note. Solid lines represent direct relationships. Dashed lines represent indirect relationships.

Table I: Evaluation of the reliability and validity of the measurement model

Constructs	Cronbach's alpha	CR	AVE	Factor Loading
Cognitive Experience (CE)	0.777	0.867	0.687	0.692-0.900***
Affective Experience (AE)	0.855	0.902	0.968	0.776-0.861***
Sensorial Experience (SE)	0.683	0.826	0.612	0.745-0.829***
Social Experience (SOE)	0.840	0.904	0.759	0.745-0.829***
Social Identification (SI)	0.817	0.878	0.643	0.758-0.856***
Purchase Intentions (PI)	0.871	0.912	0.721	0.770-0.881***

Note. *** $p<0.001$.

Table II: Discriminant Validity.

Construct	CE	AE	SE	SOE	SI	PI
CE	**0.829**	0.577	0.700	0.415	0.492	0.399
AE	0.717	**0.835**	0.864	0.541	0.575	.0286
SE	0.499	0.661	**0.783**	0.664	0.558	0.253
SOE	0.319	0.458	0.504	**0.871**	0.449	0.335
SI	0.434	0.494	0.429	0.384	**0.802**	0.559
PI	0.353	0.247	0.199	0.293	0.484	**0.849**

Note. Values on main diagonal (in bold) are the square roots of the AVEs. Values below the main diagonal relate to the Fornell-Larcker criterion. Values above the main diagonal are the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratios.

Table III: Results of the hypotheses testing

Hypotheses	**Path Coef.**	**P-Value**	**Result**
H1. Cognitive Exp.→Social Identif.	0.161	0.009**	Supported
H2. Affective Exp.→Social Identif.	0.179	0.005**	Supported
H3. Sensorial Exp.→ Social Identif.	0.099	0.087 ns	Not Supported
H4. Social Exp.→ Social Identif.	0.199	0.000***	Supported
H5. Social Identif.→Purchase Int..	0.530	0.000***	Supported
	R^2	**Q^2**	
Social Identification	0.239	0.213	
Purchase Intention	0.280	0.081	

Note. *** p<0.001; ** p<0.01; ns: not significant

Table IV: Evaluation of the indirect effects

Path	Original Sample	Sample mean	Standard deviation	T statistics	p-value	Mediation Type	Result
H6a. CE → SI → PI	0.085	0.087	0.038	2.257	0.012	partial	Supported
H6b. AE → SI → PI	0.095	0.095	0.038	2.524	0.006	partial	Supported
H6c. SE → SI → PI	0.053	0.054	0.039	1.363	0.086	-	Not Supported
H6d. SOE → SI → PI	0.015	0.107	0.029	3.66	0.000	partial	Supported

Annex 1

Table of constructs and questionnaire items

Constructs	Items	Authors
Cognitive Experience (CE)	CE1: Watching esports streams intrigues me.	Hsu and Tsou (2011)
	CE2: Watching esports streams stimulates my curiosity.	
	CE3: Watching esports streams appeals to/activates my creative thinking.	
Affective Experience (AE)	AE1: Watching esports streams changes my mood.	Hsu and Tsou (2011)
	AE2: Watching esports streams stirs my emotions.	
	AE3: Watching esports streams makes me respond emotionally.	
Sensorial Experience (SE)	SE1: Watching esports streams captures my senses.	Hsu and Tsou (2011)
	SE2: Watching esports streams affects me sensorially.	
	SE3: Participating while watching esports streams is interesting to me at the level of my senses and perceptions.	
Social Experience (SOE)	SOE1: Watching esports streams makes me want to interact with other viewers.	Hsu and Tsou (2011)
	SOE2: I can interact with other viewers while watching esports streams.	
	SOE3: The platform on which I watch esports streams tries to remind me of social rules and provisions.	
Social Identification (SI)	SI1: I'm proud to watch esports streams featuring this player/team.	Hu *et al*. (2017)
	SI2: The values of this player/team interest me.	
	SI3: My values are similar to those of this player/team.	
	SI4: The player/team is a role model for me.	
Purchase Intentions (PI)	PI1: I would buy merchandise from the players/team's sponsor.	Biscaia *et al*. (2013)
	PI2: The next time I need to purchase a related product, I will consider buying one from the player´s/team´s sponsor.	
	PI3: When a brand sponsors the player/team I am more likely to buy products from that brand.	
	PI4: I would be willing to purchase a product from the player´s/team's sponsor.	