A Review of the Psychological Mechanisms Linking Audience Engagement and Sponsor Brand Interaction in Esports

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Abstract. In the current era, due to the electric industry's growth, esports are booming. With the development of esports, it has attracted more audiences and investors, which also represents its increasingly obvious economic benefits. In this context, this study combines academic achievements in audience participation, audience psychology, and sponsor brand involvement in the context of electronic sports events. In order to investigate the personal emotional impact of esports on audiences and their perception of sponsor brands, an analysis was conducted by combining the framework and results of previous papers. Overall, it has been found that electronic sports have an interactive effect on audience emotions. The audience of electronic sports has important key impacts on brand awareness through cognition, emotion, and behavior. This article will broaden the perspective of participation and observe and summarize from multiple dimensions. But based on previous literature research, most studies' analyses are based on questionnaire surveys and cross-sectional survey designs, which retain significant subjectivity and may limit causal inference, ultimately affecting research results. For example, there may be a reverse effect of brand attitude on engagement, with reverse causality. Considering the limitations, the advice given to participants is to consider building deeper emotional connections. For esports officials, it is recommended to consider immersive scene design and enhanced engagement design. For sponsors, brand exposure should shift towards deeper emotional resonance and community integration.

Keywords: Esports, Audience Engagement, Audience Psychology, Sponsor Brand Engagement, Psychological Mechanisms

1 Introduction

In recent years, with the booming development of the digital industry, the electronic sports industry has also ushered in an important opportunity. The esports industry has a huge online audience and constantly increasing investment value. Unlike traditional sports events, the rapid rise of esports in the digital industry has also become an important moment, with a huge online audience and constantly increasing commercial

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investment as its prominent features. These highly developed technological environments have given rise to new forms of interaction between audiences, event content, and sponsoring brands, thereby reshaping traditional sponsorship models.

With the increasing commercial value of the esports industry, sponsorship investment has become an important part, and brands have found that this digital environment is conducive to brand penetration and an important mechanism for establishing audience connections [1,2]. Based on current literature, multidimensional exploration of audience engagement with depth and breadth in this context typically involves cognitive, emotional, and behavioral factors that enhance its operability [2,3]. At the same time, research on sponsored brand participation examined how audiences form brand attitudes, record emotional associations, and participate in events through contact.

Existing research indicates that the main factors influencing audience participation in esports are immersion and emotional investment. But there is currently no direct and clear discussion on the tripartite relationship with audience psychology, audience participation, and audience interaction with sponsored brands. Through comparison with existing research, it has been found that there are certain differences in the characteristics of events, platforms, and the social status of participants. This indicates that this tripartite relationship is not stable and is influenced by specific contexts. However, previous studies have often focused on samples from a single event or platform, which may overlook the diverse ecological environment of esports and limit the feasibility of research.

Based on this, this study will systematically review and summarize existing relevant literature, and compare the tripartite research on audience participation, audience psychology, and sponsor brand interaction, aiming to clarify the tripartite relationship and provide practical suggestions and inspirations for future research and practical practice.

2 Conceptual Background of Audience and Sponsor Brand Engagement in Esports

2.1 Audience Engagement in Esports

According to previous research on esports, audience participation typically refers not only to direct behaviors such as whether the audience is watching the game or watching related content on social media, but also to a psychological and behavioral state formed during the participation process [1,3]. Electronic sports are built on a digital background and heavily rely on digital platforms. Compared to traditional sports events, esports places more emphasis on digital platforms for promotion and interaction, such as live streaming platforms, social media networks, and interactive community forums. This feature also creates the advantage of esports audiences being co-creators of the gaming experience. On live streaming platforms, real-time bullet comments and social media interactions present audience interaction as direct communication [4,5]. Based on this, existing research typically regards audience participation as a multidimensional structure that typically includes cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels, reflecting the audience's attention and understanding of event information, emotional experience and

immersion, as well as behavioral manifestations such as interaction and sustained participation [3,6].

As the commercialization of sponsoring esports events becomes increasingly mature, esports platforms, as one of the main sources of funding for esports, have also provided high digital platforms for sponsoring brands. This trend is largely due to the highly dependent and commercialized nature of electronic sports on digital platforms. Related studies have shown that brands can naturally integrate themselves into the content of esports events and maintain long-term interactive relationships with audiences by leveraging the sustained participation of audiences in esports events and relying on highly digital platforms. For example, establishing sustained connections through event content, platform interaction, and fan community interaction also avoids the drawbacks of sponsoring brands relying solely on explicit advertising. Related studies have shown that brand engagement in the esports industry is mainly reflected in the audience's attention to sponsored brands, emotional reactions, and willingness to further interact during the viewing and interaction process. It is worth mentioning that although this kind of audience participation cannot be directly converted into instant consumption behavior, due to the brand's natural roots in the event, after a long period of accumulation, the audience is constantly exposed to repeated information, repeatedly exposed to it to cultivate brand familiarity, deepen emotional resonance, and achieve the goal of maintaining the brand's presence in the hearts of the audience in the long term.

2.2 Sponsor Brand Engagement

Based on previous research and case studies, esports fans often view the team, event, and sponsor brand as a whole, representing a symbolic symbol during the viewing process. This also indicates that sponsor brands can integrate into fan communities in this way, deepen brand identity, and thus affect fan engagement [7]. At the same time, sponsoring a brand can also gain emotional and symbolic significance. Viewers will have a deep emotional investment in the process of watching the event, which will deepen their brand awareness, not just a commercial brand [8]. Therefore, sponsoring brands will become a meaningful element in participating in esports in this regard. In the field of electronic sports in China, professional leagues represented by KPL have created conditions for establishing sustained interactive relationships between brands and audiences through multi platform dissemination and interactive mechanisms [2]. In the context of digital network environment, it naturally integrates sponsor brands into live streaming platforms, social media channels, and related communities, creating a sustained atmosphere of audience interaction.

More broadly, the expansion of the esports industry is embedded in specific socio-economic structures that shape its commercial feasibility and audience structure [9].

3 Audience Engagement and Sponsor Brand Engagement

3.1 A Study on the Relationship between Audience Engagement and Brand Engagement

Firstly, based on previous research on esports and the increasing emphasis on the commercial value of esports in society, the relationship between audience engagement and brand related outcomes has received deeper attention. Looking back at existing research, audience interaction in esports events can affect their attitudes towards related brands, and this relationship is not limited to the event experience, but is constructed through continuous interaction between event content, digital platforms, and sponsored brands [1,3]. With the integration of sponsoring brands into the esports environment, this also provides more practical evidence for research on the relationship between audience engagement and brand exposure.

From a research perspective, most literature does not view audience engagement and brand interaction as a simple direct causal relationship, but rather as a correlation. Firstly, research has found that the higher the audience engagement, the stronger their perception of the brand during viewing, making it easier for the brand to integrate into their viewing experience and thus improve the level of brand interaction [1]. Secondly, some studies have shown that the impact of audience participation on brand interaction can vary in different contexts. For example, different types of activities and platform functions will provide different ways of interaction and opportunities for participation; Meanwhile, different platform environments and audience characteristics can also have an impact on the effectiveness [4].

In addition, based on previous literature analysis, from the perspective of fan research, the identity recognition and emotional investment formed by audiences during participation in events will affect their attitudes and willingness to participate in related brands. The study also pointed out that in the process of audience participation in esports activities, sponsored brands are often integrated into the overall meaning construction of fans towards esports teams and events, adding richer emotional colors to sponsored brands, thus establishing a closer connection between audience participation and brand participation [8,9]. In the research of Chinese esports events, some scholars have also found that multi platform communication and interaction mechanisms provide conditions for establishing long-term interactive relationships between brands and audiences [2].

It is worth noting that although most studies have found a correlation between audience engagement and brand interaction, the specific results and ways of action obtained from different studies are not entirely the same. These differences stem from different research backgrounds, research subjects, or research designs. For example, different esports events may produce different results, which also indicates that the relationship between audience participation and brand interaction has a certain degree of scene dependence [3,4]. Therefore, in the research process, further empirical research is usually conducted, such as conducting multi-dimensional and diversified investigations, to analyze how audience participation is related to sponsor brand participation in different

contexts. The next section will provide a systematic review of relevant empirical research and demonstrate the specific manifestations of this relationship in existing studies.

3.2 Empirical Studies on Sponsor Brand Engagement

Comparison and Analysis on Research Object Sponsor Brand–Focused Studies. Currently, many studies on esports sponsorship are based on the perspective of sponsoring brands. These studies mainly focus on sponsors or official partner brands in competitions, analyzing audience attitudes and interactive reactions towards these brands while watching the competition [1,3]. In some studies, sponsored brands are used as outcome variables to measure whether esports sponsorship is effective and whether it enhances brand communication effectiveness [1].

Content wise, this methodology mainly emphasizes on brand oriented consequences of viewer participation like brand favorability, emotive attitudes or intent to engage [3,7]. The literature on the topic mostly concludes that a highly immersive setting is offered by esports where brands may form emotional connections and engage with their audience, and a greater engagement of the audience helps build more influence on their awareness and perceptions towards the brand that sponsors them [4,5]. This is why sponsor brand interaction is typically a primary indicator to estimate the success of esports event sponsorship [2].

Nevertheless, focusing on brand outcomes, even in these studies, sponsor brand engagement is typically considered to be the outcome of the audience involvement into the event, with low emphasis on the dynamic process between brand engagement and audience involvement. Differently put, the study is rather on the effect of the event participation on the brand, as opposed to examining how the brand is built and perceived over time in the process of event participation [8]. This method to a certain degree limits a full comprehension of the psychological processes involved in the establishment of the sponsor brand engagement, and reflects the inadequacy of the current research in the area of the process perspective [3,4].

Comparison of Research Methodologies in Sponsor Brand Engagement Studies. Questionnaire surveys are the main research methodology, in case of research in regard to esports event sponsorship. The type of audience data that is commonly gathered by the researchers is characterized by structured questionnaires and the validated scale that allows the researcher to gauge such indicators as the attitude towards the brand, brand favorability, and curiosity to interact and subsequently examine the connection between the participation of the viewers in the event and the engagement with the brand [1,5]. The method has received substantial application in esports studies primarily due to its capacity to be effective in capturing any variation in the subjective perceptions and attitudes of audiences in the course of viewing and enabling quantitative comparisons and statistical analysis [10].

Specifically, regarding the research design, the majority of the studies assume retrospective questionnaires viewing as the primary source of data and forego statistical

models to examine the relevance of event attendance on the brand-related variables [1]. Other studies state the methods of mature marketing and consumer behavior research in decision-making of questionnaire structure and analysis of the data to increase the reliability and validity of the levels of measurements [10]. Nevertheless, due to the numerous studies based on self-reported information, the outcome is somewhat affected by the personal opinion of respondents and is thus likely to introduce respondent bias and context mention [5]. On the whole, the current studies demonstrate the high level of uniformity in their methodology, which creates the grounds of comparing the findings of various studies on the basis of measurement logics.

So, the following part will examine and contrast the key findings of the existing empirical studies and their disparities in the light of research findings.

3.3 Empirical Findings on Sponsor Brand Engagement and Comparison Across Studies

Similar studies have determined that the greater the psychological involvement of the audience in the events, the emotional involvement, and interactive action, the greater the chances of the audience developing favorable ratings of sponsoring brands and enhancing their desire to engage. This finding is congruous with various esports researches [1,3,5].

Nevertheless some aspects of differences in particular findings can be found in the existing research. On the one hand, varied contexts of events and platform settings could influence the conversion by influencing the frequency and level of immersion of interactions. There are studies that have reported that the extent of audience participation and their psychological outcome obtained under the context of esports depends on the way the event is presented, the type of interaction, and the digital technology setting, which results in varied brand-related outcomes of various studies [4,11]. Conversely, the nature of sponsoring brand and the means by which it was embedded in the event might have similar effect on the audience perception of the brand itself and the tendencies to which the audience is inclined to make. The variety of research findings is only aggravated by differences in the scope of the brand engagement measurement used in other studies [7].

In addition, pertinent studies in the Chinese setting also indicate that the kind of relationship between audience participation and sponsor brand participation is not a single and permanent effect, but instead is affected by several variables including viewing motive, affective investment as well as the event dissemination mode [2,6,8]. The empirical conclusions should be interpreted alongside the definite research design when compared because of sample composition, the context of the research, and the settings of variables are different in various studies.

Generally, currently enabled empirical researches tend towards a favourable correlation between event attendance and the sponsor brand attendance, but, again, exhibits various manifestation in the varying event contexts, the objects of research study, and the study context. It furnishes the scenario of further elaboration of the incorporation of psychological, behavioral, and branding strategies into the study on esports in the

context of the audience participation, audience psychology, and sponsor brand participation under a more systematic and comprehensive perspective.

4 Audience Psychology in Esports Events: A Review of Empirical Research

4.1 Discussion on Research Objects Audience-Psychological Characteristics

Present research concerning the esports viewers is mainly concentrated around viewing and playing esports by the participants of the event or the players themselves and their psychology. However, unlike the view of esports consumption in the exclusively behavioral sense, the literature related is inclined to suspect that events related to the esports are unique in immersion and engagement where the viewers experience a set of the psychological reactions that they undergo throughout the process. It is the cognitive mechanisms which create a considerable foundation of esports spectator behavior [12].

With regard to content of research, the existing literature has the predisposition to outline the psychological characteristics of esports spectators in three basic dimensions that encompass emotional reaction, sense of immersion, and cognition involvement. Primarily, emotional response may be described as the level of emotion that viewers receive upon viewing e.g., excitement, pleasure, emotional involvement, immersive experience may be characterized by the degree of involvement in viewing an event, and cognitive engagement by viewers may be characterized by the distribution of attention, level of comprehension and information processing towards viewing an event [6,12]. These are all the psychological elements that reveal the subjective experiences of the audience of esports events.

All in all, emotional response, immersive response, and cognitive response are viewed as primary psychological features of the esports viewer experience that offers a valuable psychological perspective against which the viewer engagement behavior and its consequences can be further analyzed [6,12].

4.2 Discussion on Methodologies Used in Audience Psychological Research

Questionnaire surveys are the most prevalent piece of research in studies of the psychology of esports viewers. Current literature typically gathers the viewer information with the help of structured questionnaires and by means of psychological scales to determine the emotional experience, immersion, and cognitive engagement of viewers during the viewing process. [5,6,8]. This approach can capture the subjective perception of the viewers and their psychological responses and can be thus used extensively in the research on esports.

Regarding the particular research design, the similar studies consistently identify extensive measurement frameworks in psychology and consumer behavior study to quantitatively measure the viewing motivation, emotional involvement as well as participation experience of viewers in a systematic manner to guarantee reliability and validity of research findings [5,6]. Moreover, there is also a line of research that has gone on to

deepen the knowledge on the variations in the psychology of viewers through comparisons of various types of events or viewing conditions, and the effects of contextual variables on psychological interest [4].

In this paradigm of research, the current studies have also developed the empirical investigation of the particular expressions and disparities in the psychological features of the audience that follows esports.

4.3 Empirical Findings on Audience Psychology and Comparison across Studies

There is consensus in existing literature that esports events may have a positive emotional effect and promote the high degree of psychological involvement in the spectators. Similar research shows that the audience is usually extremely excited, pleasured and emotionally involved in the viewing process accompanied by a high sense of immersion and mental involvement. This indicates that esports events may be considered as sources of both entertainment consumption and an interactive setting that is able to prompt profound psychological experiences [5,6,8].

Nevertheless, there are still certain differences in particular empirical conclusions in different studies. On the one hand, the choice of psychological variables can differ: some of the studies are concentrated on emotional experiences, some on the immersion or cognitive engagements and the differences in emphases result in the inconsistency of results in these studies. Conversely, variations in the research design and the circumstances, including the type of event, the platform on which the event is viewed or the composition of the sample, can equally influence the measures of the psychological reactions of the viewers, including the variances in the above studies could influence the legitimacy of the result[4].

On the whole, regardless of the variations in the specifics of the current research conclusions, the vast majority of the studies concur on the fact that esports events may provoke high rates of psychological involvement of the spectators. This agreement gives a significant empirical foundation to the subsequent investigation of the role of the psychological characteristics of the audiences in the participation in esports.

5 Discussion and Suggestion

In the field of esports, audience participation, audience psychology, and sponsorship brand interaction are not independent of each other, but rather interdependent. Related studies have shown that audiences typically indirectly influence their perception and engagement with sponsored brands through psychological mechanisms such as emotional experience, immersion, and cognitive investment, rather than directly translating into brand benefits [1,3]. From the perspective of audience emotional psychology, viewers will form emotional investment and identity recognition during the viewing process, and at the same time, the repeated appearance of sponsoring brands will further integrate them into the meaning of the event and team, thereby strengthening the brand's construction of emotional value and symbolic significance in the audience's psychology [7,8]. In practical social practice, e-sports events should focus on emotional connection

and psychological investment of the audience. Based on previous analysis, interactive design and immersive presentation should be emphasized to enhance the audience's sense of interaction. Sponsorship brands should also pay more attention to establishing long-term connections with fans and integrating their own brands into the special emotional significance of e-sports events. Future research needs to start from a process perspective, combining various research methods such as experimental design and longitudinal studies, and paying attention to differences in different platforms and cultural backgrounds, in order to further deepen the understanding of brand participation mechanisms in electronic sports events [4,9].

6 Conclusion

This study provides an overall review and summary of the correlation analysis between audience engagement, audience psychology, and sponsor brand interaction in the context of digitalization and gradual commercialization of esports.

For the president, audience participation in esports projects is mainly a multidimensional engagement that involves digital participation and emotional investment, rather than simply watching. It can be inferred that the audience's attitude and interaction towards sponsor brands mainly come from psychological mechanisms such as emotional mapping, immersion, and cognitive participation in esports events. This process also explains the impact of participation on sponsor brands. However, combining different events, platform features, and audience demographics, this relationship can also vary and change.

From the perspective of social practice, esports event organizers should deepen the emotional connection and psychological participation of the audience, enhance immersion and interaction. For sponsors, they should avoid direct and simple exposure, but seize the opportunity to delve into esports teams and fan communities, form symbolic symbols, and deepen emotional connections.

Future research should adopt a more process oriented perspective and use multiple research methods to analyze the correlation between audience participation and sponsor brands in different esports events and electronic environments, in order to preserve the diversity of the esports ecosystem as much as possible.

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