

Gender influence on brand recommendation at an esports event

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Abstract

Esports events are a mainstay of the esports industry and have become increasingly popular among the younger population. The purpose of this study was to use a predictive model to determine whether the variables of congruence, commitment and trust could be predictors of brand recommendation of an esports event and, if so, to what extent they did so and whether they were influenced by gender. To obtain the required information, a questionnaire was provided, validated and made up of scales adapted from previous studies at a national esports event organised in Sevilla, Spain. The SPSS version 25 statistical software was used for the analysis of all results. First, a descriptive analysis of the results and a t-test for independent samples were performed, followed by a Pearson correlation analysis to test the independence of the three predictor variables of the recommendation. Finally, a linear regression was performed to test whether the proposed variables predicted the recommendation and, if so, to what extent they did so. The obtained results indicate that, in general, the variables significantly predicted the recommendation, with congruence being the most important predictor. The model as a whole was able to explain 51% of the variance of the recommendation. When distinguishing users by gender, the same analysis showed that the predictor variables for the recommendation remained significant in men, explaining 53% of the variance. In contrast, in the analysis of women, there were no variables that showed significant values for predicting the recommendation. These data demonstrated gender differences in the esports sector, which suggests that esports event companies should change their branding strategies to avoid gender differences.

Keywords: video games, esports, gender differences, congruence, commitment, trust.

Introduction

Esports (also known as e-sports) are an evolution that video games have undergone over the years, adapting to the demands of new generations (Jenson & de Castell, 2007) and are the results of an attempt to professionalise their competitive side (Antón & García, 2014). Wagner (2006) initially defined esports as an area of sporting activities in which people develop and train physical and mental skills in the use of information and communication. Years later, the definition of esports was further specified by defining as individual or team sports competitions carried out with an electronic system in an organised and structured environment such as leagues and competitions (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017; Lee et al., 2014). It is important to have a good understanding of the term, due to ambiguity it has for people who are not familiar with the esports sector (Skubida, 2016). In recent years, esports have experienced a growth that is expected to exceed 280 million enthusiasts by 2024 (Newzoo, 2021), a growth that has also been spurred by the Covid19 situation around the world (Cranmer et al., 2021). This growth has also been reflected in the research towards them, leading to increased interest from researchers and an increase in the number of papers published in different subject areas such as technology, psychology or sport management (Chiu et al., 2021; Jang et al., 2020). In terms of sport management, esports events have become an essential pillar of the sector and have been growing in popularity to a greater extent among the younger population compared to traditional sports events (Dilek, 2019). This is why the sector is starting to need sports managers with previous experience in the world of events in order to bring about an improvement in events (Funk et al., 2018). Although some authors contemplate the possibility of esports not being included as a sport (Jenny et al., 2017; Jonasson & Thiborg, 2010), recent studies have qualified esports as a part of sport and sport management (Cunningham et al., 2018). Furthermore, the International Olympic Committee has created a department for the development of virtual sport as a recommendation of the Olympic Agenda 2020+5 in which it includes the planning of the Olympic Virtual Series that already debuted in Tokyo 2020 (IOC, 2021).

As for esports events, Hindin et al. (2020) describe them as organised video game competitions in which individuals and teams gather in stadiums to compete in real-time tournaments. In the sports industry, face-to-face events play a key role, as attendance at these events is critical to fan participation and loyalty (Hill & Green, 2000). Furthermore, Pu et al. (2021) reveal that spectators at esports events have a strong involvement towards the esports products and activities of the event and that it is important for their personal lives as it

provides them with the opportunity to express themselves and evoke a sense of enjoyment. This information increases the interest of brands and sponsors to enter the sector and that is why they invest energy, time and capital (Rogers et al., 2020). Previous traditional sport literature provides sufficient information to know the priorities are a function of brand perception and consumer behaviour through the use of brand-related variables (Alguacil et al., 2016).

In terms of the role of women in esports, studies find that they are in the minority and if we talk about them at the professional level they barely reach 5% of the total number of players (Hilbert, 2019). This may be because widespread gender disparities in computer access, use and behaviours have contributed to the perception that computing is a male practice (Abbiss, 2008). Furthermore, studies argue that the construction of masculinity in esports, inherited from video games, has real and strong negative consequences for women's access (Xue et al., 2019), placing them in a precarious position where they frequently encounter general and sexual harassment from other players (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). Even so, the number of women in esports has been increasing in recent years (Cullen, 2018), although gender inequalities remain or even worsen due to rivalry (Jenson & de Castell, 2018). All these negative behaviours towards women cause them to feel disaffected, as they see the esports industry as organised by and for men (Rogstad, 2021). Therefore, it makes sense to make a distinction when analysing brand-related variables between men and women in order to determine whether such gender differences exist in esports.

The study of brand attachment variables, after what has been explained above, becomes an essential pillar to be able to know the levels of congruence, trust, commitment and future intentions that generate so much interest in the event brand and in the sponsors. As for the variable of congruence between the user and the brand, it refers to the degree of identification of users with the brand (Alguacil et al., 2020). Bajac et al. (2018) summarise it as a description of how physical products contribute to the psychological definition of the consumer's self-concept, developing a positive attitude towards the product and incentivising purchase intentions (Keller, 1993). The study by Martínez-Cevallos et al. (2020b) confirms that event brand congruence influences trust and commitment variables. These significantly explain the recommendation of the event by participants. Also, good levels of congruence make attendees feel more identified with the brand causing a tendency towards greater loyalty (He & Li, 2011). In addition, the similarity between the user and the brand allows the consumer to identify with the brand on a more personal level, contributing to the establishment of trust (Coulter & Coulter, 2002).

As for the trust variable towards the brand, it is understood as the sense of security that the user has when interacting with the brand (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2003). In addition, the experiences that users attending the event have with other people or organisations will also be important for generating trust (Hur et al., 2014). Trust leads to lower perceived risks, thus weakening possible negative effects towards the event (Carnevale et al., 2018), as well as influencing a positive attitude towards the brand (Kim et al., 2019). Research is needed in esports on this variable, as it can be used to predict both loyalty and recommendation as has already been done in the field of sports services (Alguacil et al., 2020) and brands in social networks (Kamboj, 2020).

Brand commitment is the process of maintaining a valuable, lasting and positive bond between a person and a brand (Moorman et al., 1992). This concept has also been understood as the desire to maintain a long-term relationship with the brand (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). There are two ways of understanding commitment: one emotional, considered as affective commitment, and the other economic, considered as calculative (Evanschitzky et al., 2006). Moreover, there are studies, such as Teo and Soutar (2012) or Purnasari and Yuliando (2015), which show that commitment is a driver of recommendation..

Finally, the Word of Mouth (WOM) variable refers to the recommendations made by users about a product or service used (Brown et al., 2005). Recommendation is a variable that is studied with great interest in sporting events (Calabuig et al., 2012; Du et al., 2020; Prado-Gascó et al., 2017) and which, due to its great importance, should also be studied in esports events. Furthermore, as it is a sector that is closely linked to social networks, it is common for these recommendations to be disseminated through these channels (Wakefield & Bennett, 2018).

Therefore, the aim of this study is to analyse whether the variables of congruence, trust and commitment are significant predictors of the recommendation of users who attend esports events and, if so, to what extent they are. In addition, the aim is to test whether there are significant differences depending on whether the attendee is a woman or a man.

Material and Methods

Sample

For the research, quantitative investigation was carried out using a survey with a sample of 407 attendees of the national esports event DreamHack Seville, Spain. Of the total, 358 were male (87.96%) and 49 female (12.04%). 320 users (78.72%) did engage in some kind of physical activity (290 men; 90.63% and 30 women; 9.37%) and only 87 (21.38%) did not engage in any (68 men; 78.16% and 19 women; 21.84%). As for the typology of the attendees, 296 (72.73%) did play video games (269 men; 90.88% and 27 women; 9.12%) and 111 (27.27%) did not play video games (89 men; 80.18% and 22 women; 19.82%).

Regarding men, 183 are students (51.1%), 113 are full-time workers (31.5%), 28 are part-time workers (7.9%) and 34 are retired or unemployed (9.5%). In terms of education, 7 reported having no education at all (1.9%), 7 also reported having only primary education (1.9%), 227 reported having secondary education (63.5%), and 117 had university education (32.7%).

Among women, 24 are students (48.9%), 14 are full-time workers (28.6%), 6 are part-time workers (12.3%) and 5 are retired or unemployed (10.2%). In terms of education, 2 reported primary education (4.1%), 18 reported secondary education (36.7%), and 29 reported university education (59.2%).

Instrument

For data collection, a structured questionnaire was used, which was provided on paper to be completed in person for the duration of the event. As for the scales of the variables used in the study, standardised scales adapted from previous studies were used. For the assessment of recommendation, the 3-item scale of Hightower et al. (2002) was used. For the study of congruence, the 3-item scale of Grace and O’Cass (2005) was used. To assess commitment, the 3-item scale by Tuškej et al. (2013) was used. Finally, for the study of trust, the 3-item scale by Hur et al. (2014) was used. The scales were Likert-type and were measured with a rating from 1 to 5, where 1 was strongly disagree and 5 was strongly agree. Table 1 below shows the different items used in relation to the variables previously mentioned.

Table 1. Instrument

Scale	Item
Recommendation (WOM) (Hightower et al., 2002)	I will recommend attendance at X to my friends and relatives.
	I will put in a good word for X to other people if they ask me.
	I will encourage others to come to X.
Congruence (Grace & O’Cass, 2005)	The image of this brand is in accordance (congruent) with my own image.
	People like me attend X.
	Attending X reflects who I am.
Commitment (Tuškej et al., 2013)	I feel rewarded when I attend this event.
	I get excited when I think about attending X.
	I feel personally satisfied attending X.
Trust (Hur et al., 2014)	I trust brand X.
	X is an honest brand.
	Brand X gives me a sense of security.

Procedure

The questionnaires were administered on paper to users attending the DreamHack esports event held in December 2019 in Seville, Spain. The time required to complete the questionnaire was about 10 minutes.

Statistical analysis

The information collected through the questionnaires was analysed with SPSS statistical software version 25. First, a descriptive analysis of the results obtained in the variables and a T-test for independent samples was performed to compare whether there was a difference in means due to gender. Subsequently, a linear regression analysis was performed to find out whether the variables of congruence, trust and commitment could significantly predict the recommendation, and if so, to what extent they did so. Finally, this prediction was analysed by segmenting the sample according to gender, to see if the variables significantly predicted event recommendation for both men and women.

Results

Firstly, we show the mean scores offered by the results obtained in relation to the different variables analysed (see table 2). As can be seen, the scale with the highest mean score is WOM (4.09 ±.84). On the other hand, those with the lowest mean scores are congruence (3.57 ±.93) and commitment (3.57 ±1.02).

Table 2. Descriptive of the scales.

	N	Mean	SD
WOM	407	4.09	.84
Congruence	407	3.57	.93
Commitment	407	3.57	1.02
Trust	407	3.79	.84

Note: N= participants; SD= Standard deviation.

Regarding the T-test for independent samples (see table 3), after comparing the means between men and women, we found that there are no statistically significant differences between men and women. Women obtain

a higher mean rating on the variables of recommendation (4.20 ±.79), congruence (3.60 ±.99) and trust (3.86 ±.88). And men have a higher rating on the commitment variable (3.59 ±.97).

Table 3. Gender comparison.

		N	Mean	SD
WOM	Man	358	4.09	.84
	Woman	49	4.20	.79
Congruence	Man	358	3.57	.92
	Woman	49	3.60	.99
Commitment	Man	358	3.59	.97
	Woman	49	3.49	1.25
Trust	Man	358	3.80	.83
	Woman	49	3.86	.88

Note: N= participants; SD= Standard deviation.

Once the descriptive results were obtained and the T-test for independent samples was performed, a Pearson correlation was made, which can be seen in table 4. In this table it can be seen that the variables of congruence, commitment and trust have a significant correlation, but that the highest value of these is .67, which is found in the relationship between trust and commitment. This value is lower than the value considered as a criterion to confirm that both variables are overly correlated .85 (Kline, 1998).

Table 4. Pearson correlation.

	WOM	Congruence	Commitment	Trust
WOM	1			
Congruence	.630***	1		
Commitment	.604***	.608***	1	
Trust	.637***	.618***	.670***	1

Note: ***p<.001.

Finally, a linear regression analysis was performed to test whether congruence, commitment and trust can significantly predict the recommendation of event attendees. For this purpose, an analysis of the independent variables has been performed to check that the values of inflation and tolerance are appropriate, confirming the absence of collinearity. Furthermore, the value of the Durbin-Watson index marks a value that demonstrates the independence of the predictor variables with respect to the variable to be predicted (1.85). As for the WOM predictive model, as shown in table 5, the results indicate that the three proposed variables significantly predict that users who have attended recommend the event (F=141.9; p<.001). The proposed model explains up to 51% of user recommendation (R2=.52; R2adj=.51). Likewise, it can be observed how congruence is the variable with the highest predictive weight (β=.32; p<.001), followed by trust (β=.30; p<.001) and commitment (β=.21; p<.001).

Table 5. WOM predictive model.

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		T	Tol.	VIF
	B	Std. Error	Beta				
Congruence	.29	.04	.32***		6.75	.55	1.82
Commitment	.17	.04	.21***		4.22	.49	2.04
Trust	.30	.05	.30***		5.96	.48	2.08

Note: ***p<.001; Tol.= Tolerance; VIF=variance inflation factor; Durbin-Watson=1.85.

Differentiating the effectiveness of the model between men and women, as shown in table 6, which shows the analysis for men, the results indicate that the three proposed variables significantly predict the recommendation to attend the event. (F=129.5; p<.001). The proposed model explains up to 53% of users' recommendation, improving the effectiveness of the general model (R2=.53; R2adj =.53). As in the general model, the variable with the highest predictive weight is congruence (β=.33; p<.001), followed by trust (β=.28; p<.001) and commitment (β=.24; p<.001).

Table 6. WOM predictive model (men).

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Tol.	VIF
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
Congruence	.30	.05	.33***	6.46	.54	1.87
Commitment	.20	.05	.24***	4.54	.51	1.97
Trust	.28	.05	.28***	5.20	.48	2.07

Note: *** $p < .001$; Tol. = Tolerance; VIF = variance inflation factor; Durbin-Watson = 1.83.

On the other hand, in relation to the results of the women's model, as shown in table 7, none of the proposed variables is able to significantly predict the recommendation ($F = 10.22$; $p > .05$).

Table 7. WOM predictive model (women).

	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Tol.	VIF
	B	Std. Error	Beta			B
Congruence	.23	.12	.28	1.90	.62	1.62
Commitment	.09	.12	.14	0.74	.38	2.61
Trust	.29	.17	.32	1.74	.40	2.49

Note: *** $p < .001$; Tol. = Tolerance; VIF = variance inflation factor; Durbin-Watson = 1.72.

Discussion

The research on branding is an area that has hardly been studied in the esports sector, although we can find the work of Amor et al. (2020), which analyses the perception of the brand of esports events by users who are video game players and those who are not, without finding statistically significant differences in most of the variables used. Furthermore, in relation to esports events, we can also find the study by Zhu et al., (2021), which proposes a conceptual model for service quality using four dimensions to analyse: event quality, quality of the physical environment, quality of event execution and quality of interaction. Or the study by Rogers et al. (2020) which explains how users who attend events value the sponsoring brands more positively if they are endemic. As for the rest of the research related to esports, most of it is related to media studies, followed by IT and business (Reitman et al., 2020). Therefore, this study can be considered pioneering in using brand variables to determine whether there are differences in user behaviour when recommending an esports event by gender. On the other hand, if we talk about sporting events, it is not a context that has been studied very much either, as the studies related to this subject are mainly focused on marketing in general. In this case we find the study by Martínez-Cevallos et al. (2020a), in which they analyse the variables of congruence, trust, commitment and recommendation in a marathon. The results obtained indicate that recommendation is the most highly valued element and that the variable that contributes the most weight to its prediction is commitment. In the present study, it has also been demonstrated that recommendation is the most highly valued element, but the variable that has contributed the most weight in this case has been congruence. In terms of research on sports services or sports facilities, the regression model used in this study is widely used to try to predict management variables, as in the case of Kim and Lee (2018) and Molina-García et al. (2016). Therefore, the relationships studied in marketing for other areas, such as sport, can also be transferred to the context of esports and more specifically to esports events. This research is a contribution that helps the esports sector in the study of the brand and the behaviour of its consumers in the context of events.

Conclusions and Implications

The conclusions of this study determine firstly that, of the four brand variables used, recommendation is the element that is most highly valued by users who have attended the event, both in general distinguishing by gender. Furthermore, it is also concluded that there are no significant differences between the overall ratings of woman and men.

As for the analysis of the variables of congruence, commitment and trust to determine whether they predict recommendation, it was found that, in the overall sample, they do so significantly. The variable of congruence between the user and the brand was found to have the greatest predictive weight, followed by trust and commitment.

Subsequently, in terms of the regression analysis to determine whether the variables are capable of predicting recommendation only with the sample of men. Once again, it was found that they significantly predict it, with congruence between the user and the brand being the variable with the greatest predictive weight, followed once again by trust and commitment. In this case, explaining the joint model with a higher percentage than in the analysis of the variables in general.

Finally, the regression analysis to determine whether the congruence, commitment and trust are capable of predicting recommendation in the case of women did not give significant results. Thus, it can be affirmed that there are gender differences when it comes to predicting brand recommendation of an esports event.

Therefore, with all these results, if the event organiser wants its users to recommend the event so that new participant attend in future editions, they must maintain high levels of congruence between the user and the brand, commitment and trust. But they should also look for new brand line to make them more identifiable for women and thus break down the barrier that exists in esports with the gender difference.

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