

FAN IDENTIFICATION ACROSS GENDERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR ESPORTS MARKETING STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

This study provides an extended analysis of the sports sponsorship landscape, focusing on fan identification levels and gender differences in the perceptions, attitudes and purchasing behaviour of Todak fans, a prominent entity in the Malaysia Esports sector. The study shows a high degree of fan identification among Esports enthusiasts, regardless of gender. The analysis of the responses from male and female participants shows that there is no significant gender-based differences. Specifically, the data shows comparable results across genders regarding perceptions (Males: Mean=3.96, SD=0.76; Females: Mean=3.83, SD=0.72; $t=1.52$, $p=0.06$), attitudes (Male: M=4.03, SD=0.73; Female: M=3.90, SD=0.70; $t=1.57$, $p=0.06$), and purchasing decisions (Male: M=4.04, SD=0.59; Females: M=3.95, SD=0.58; $t=1.50$, $p=0.07$). These results contribute toward more context on established gender-based marketing theories in sports sponsorship, indicating the necessity for more nuanced and gender-inclusive marketing strategies. This study significantly enhances further understanding of consumer behavior in the context of sports sponsorship and underscores the importance of reassessing traditional gender roles in marketing approaches.

Keywords: *Esports, sports sponsorship, sponsorship attitudes, brand perception, purchase decision*

INTRODUCTION

As a blooming to the unconventional sports market, Esports has probably seen the most significant growth in recent years. By 2020, Esports ' commercial operations and scientific interest will increase. This new phenomenon has developed over the last decade. People are using electronic media to play sports or participate in online games with other from around the world. Furthermore, Esports have increased in popularity worldwide, making them accessible to individuals of all ages, including those in Malaysia. It allows young people, parents, and children to play together, unlike internet-based games which are typically played alone (Lim, Goh, Isa, Thurasamy & Suki, 2022).

Nowadays, online games such as Counter-Strike, FIFA, DOTA, Mobile Legends, and others are classified as Esports, despite their differences from traditional sports such as football and volleyball. This sort of game has grown popular among youngsters of all ages and genders. Simultaneously, Esports is rising coherently with usage of social media especially towards younger generations (Apandi et.al, 2023).

To provide more context, Esports are fast expanding and the Malaysian Electronic Sports Association (ESM) was first registered and sanctioned by the Malaysian Sports Commissioner. According to the former minister of Youth and Sports, Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman, Malaysia is the 21st largest e-sports market in the world with a value of US \$586.7 million (RM2.4 billion), and as of 2017, Malaysia already has more than 14 million participants (Yusoff & Basri, 2021).

Esports has established itself as a competitive game in the industry, which has led to a rapid development of apps and rules by regulating organizations. The growing number of athletes and spectators demonstrates Esports' popularity. Nonetheless, this phenomenon has captured the media's attention, resulting in an increase in Esports events organized by public and commercial entities (Khir, Maon, & Demong, 2022). In recent years, Esports has become increasingly important in the field of sports sponsorship. One of the reasons for this rise is that Esports has reached a large part of the population, especially young people, who participate in it and watch it through various social networks (Elasri, Rodríguez & Aparicio, 2020).

The characteristics of these fans have enabled esports sponsors to generate a large proportion of revenue. The bidirectional communication capacity of Esport broadcasting technology has created a unique potential to build a continuous and contagious connection between the sponsored professional players and their fan base. This allows sponsored firms to maintain continual touch with their target demographic and increase engagement. As professional players are seen as celebrities, they are key influencers and advocates for the brand. Fans will follow and purchase the product of a company if professional athletes endorse it (Frias, Contreras-Espinosa, & Correia, 2019). According to Social Identity Theory (SIT), fans who are heavily wrapped tend to behave in ways that reinforce their bonds with other members of the group. As a result, it appears that purchase intention might manifest itself in the form of support for corporations who sponsor their favorite sports team. Several research support this understanding of fan identification with a sports team and its impact on inclinations to purchase sponsor items (Silva, 2020).

Furthermore, with the increasing popularity of new sports, there is a growing interest in understanding how fans embrace these new sports (Salam et.al, 2019). Positive feelings towards sponsors increase both the willingness to attend sporting events and the desirability of sponsors' branded merchandise. By identifying and analyzing fans feeling toward a sports sponsor, we can gain a deeper understanding of their spending behaviour. Individual with a high level of identification have more positive attitude toward their peers.

The top brand of Esports namely Todak, possess high level of identification among its fans, whereby it views sponsors as separate people and desire to identify with them more intimately. Fans tend to have more positive feelings toward the team's sponsor when they see them as part of their team. Previous studies have highlighted that financial support improves consumers' perceptions of sponsor and their products. This suggests that spectators and participants in a sporting event may view a sports sponsor as supporting a well-known team, fostering a positive perception. Additionally, there is a need to anticipate how specific esports brand influences its consumers (Jaberi & Barkhordar, 2022). Thus, this study is focussed to answer the following research questions:

- I. What is the level of fan identification of Todak fans?
- II. What is the difference of perception, attitude and purchasing decision among gender of Todak fans?

METHODOLOGY

Survey and Quantitative Study

This case study research design was utilized to simultaneously evaluate the respondent' outcomes and exposures. It is frequently applied to evaluate the prevalence of sports sponsorship perceptions, attitudes towards sports sponsorship, purchasing decision, fan identification and define demographic characteristics.

Research Respondent

This study focuses on Todak fans of the Mobile Legends Professional League (MPL). A questionnaire was randomly distributed to 450 Todak fans using a probability technique in sample random sampling. The fans reported for 2022 initially averaged 42,620. Referring to Bukhari's (2020) table, the minimum sample size required is 380. To account for potential dropout, a further 20% (76) was added, resulting in a final proposed sample size of 456. However, the final number resulting from this data collection was n=450.

Instrument

In this study, a questionnaire was used as a data collection tool. The researcher adapted and adopted the fan identification questionnaire for section A, which consists of fan identification questions (Theodorakis et. Al, 2017). Section B deals with the sports sponsorship perception, attitude towards sponsor and purchasing decision (Melovic et. Al, 2019). The questionnaire is response in the Likert Scale 5 points ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree") and was distributed to the respondent in dual language which is English and Malay.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection for the study took place at the Mobile Legend Professional League (MPL) in November 2013. Respondents received a self-distributed questionnaire explaining the objective of the study and handed a hard copy of the questionnaire. The questionnaire design was strictly adhered to during data collection to prevent bias, ensuring a sufficient number of respondents for the study. The researcher personally met with respondents, spending approximately 10 minutes to complete the questionnaires. To maintain confidentiality and anonymity, no personal data such as names and contacts were collected.

Statistical analysis

The statistical analyses were carried out using IBM SPSS Statistic 25 software. Descriptive statistics were used to determine the level of fan identification among Todak fans of different genders. A T-Test analysis was then conducted to compare the difference in perception and attitudes of Todak fans according to gender. It's worth noting that only the first research objective was measured descriptively, while T-test analysis was used for the subsequent objectives.

Pilot Study

The reliability of the scale used in the pilot study (Table 1) was assessed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient value, which is a measure of internal consistency, or how closely related a set of items are as a group. The result of the pilot test of the reliability of the variable fell into the "excellent" category. The results of the reliability test indicated a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.98, which exceeds the commonly accepted threshold of 0.7, suggesting that the scale exhibits high internal consistency among the 4 items tested (Bonett et.al, 2014). Given that no cases were excluded from the analysis, the full dataset contributed to establishing the reliability of the scale. This comprehensive inclusion ensures that the reliability assessment is reflective of the entire sample population used in the pilot study.

Table 1. The result of the pilot study

Variables	No. of Item	Cronbach's Alpha	Level
Fan Identification	46	0.96	Excellent
Sport Sponsorship perception	7	0.94	Excellent
Attitudes toward sport sponsorship	3	0.98	Excellent
Purchasing decisions	8	0.93	Excellent
Overall variable	23	0.99	Excellent

Data analysis

Based on the research question, the researcher opted for a descriptive analysis for RO1. Next for the RO2, the researcher using T-test analysis as in this study, to compare the means of the differences of perception between males and females (Huang, 2020). Thus, T-Test is an appropriate analysis in this study to analyze the result (Tonidandel & LeBreton, 2013).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION*Level of fan Identification*

The variable “fan identification” in Table 2. ranges from a low value of 1.43 to a high value of 5.00 for the 450 respondents, with a mean value of 4.32 and a standard deviation of 0.69. The mean value, which is close to the upper limit, shows a relatively high level of fan identification in the sample.

Table 2. The mean score (M) and Std. Deviation (SD) of Todak fans

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Fan Identification	450	1.43	5.00	4.32	0.69

Difference on variable based on gender

The study aimed to examine the differences in perception, attitude, and purchasing decisions between male and female Todak fans. An independent sample t-test (Table 3) was conducted to analyze these variables. The results indicated that there were no statistically significant differences between genders in terms of perception (Male: M=3.96, SD=0.76; Female: M=3.83, SD=0.72; $t=1.52$, $p=0.06$), attitude (Male: M=4.03, SD=0.73; Female: M=3.90, SD=0.70; $t=1.57$, $p=0.06$), and purchasing decision (Male: M=4.04, SD=0.59; Female: M=3.95, SD=0.58; $t=1.50$, $p=0.07$). These results indicate that the gender of Todak fans has no significant influence on these aspects.

Table 3. The difference of perception, attitude and purchasing decision among gender of Todak fans ($p = 0.05$)

Variable	Male		Female		t-value	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD		
Perception	3.96	0.76	3.83	0.72	1.52	0.06
Attitude	4.03	0.73	3.90	0.70	1.57	0.06
Purchasing Decision	4.04	0.59	3.95	0.58	1.50	0.07

DISCUSSION

The study's findings highlight a noteworthy level of fan identification among participants, evident in the mean score of 4.32, indicating a strong connection with the subject and a vigorous fan base. Despite a standard deviation of 0.69 suggesting some variability, overall affinity remains high across the sample of 450. The substantial sample size reinforces these conclusions, signifying a significant segment of the fan population. Such strong fan identification holds profound implications for the subject's branding and marketing strategies, emphasizing deep engagement and loyalty. This attachment is pivotal for comprehending fan engagement dynamics and its potential impact on the subject's broader cultural and economic influence.

This research contributes to the evolving discourse on gender dynamics in the perception of sports sponsorship and challenges some traditional views. Research finding, which reveal no statistically significant differences in perception, attitude, and purchasing decisions are contrary to the notion that male participants are inherently more aware of and engaged in sports sponsorship (Levine et. Al, 2021). The marginal differences observed in perceptions ($t=1.52$, $p=0.06$), attitudes ($t=1.57$, $p=0.06$), and purchasing decisions ($t=1.50$, $p=0.07$) suggest a more subtle reality. While these differences are not statistically significant, they invite reconsideration of the assumed gender-based perceptual differences in sports sponsorship. The results indicate that the traditional gender-based marketing approaches might need to be re-evaluated considering the evolving gender roles and perceptions.

In terms of attitudes and perceptions, the researcher highlights that the gender gap may be narrower than previously thought. The slight mean differences observed suggest that both men and women have a relatively similar viewpoint toward sports sponsorship. This finding is consistent with the work of Prati et. al. (2019) in relation to cycling, which also found that gender differences in attitudes are complex and not always significant. It suggests that while gender may be a factor shaping attitudes and perceptions towards sports sponsorship, it may not be as crucial as previously thought.

Finally, our exploration into gender differences in purchasing decisions reveals a trend similar to that of perceptions and attitudes. The slight difference in mean value (0.09) suggests that gender may not be a significant determinant in purchasing decisions related to sports sponsorship. This observation is consistent with findings from Putri, Robiansyah, and Rahmawati (2022), who noted a negligible gender moderation in the impact of internet marketing on purchasing decisions. These results collectively underscore the need for a more complex understanding of consumer behaviour in sports sponsorship. Marketers should consider these subtle gender nuances when developing strategies, ensuring they cater to a diverse audience without overemphasizing traditional gender roles.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of this study, focusing on gender dynamics in sports sponsorship among Todak fans, reveals insightful yet nuanced findings. Contrary to some existing literature, researcher analysis demonstrates no significant differences between male and female fans in their perceptions, attitudes, and purchasing decisions. These results suggest a more complex and less gender-polarized view of sports sponsorship than previously thought.

The negligible variations in perception, attitude, and purchasing decisions underscore a potential shift in traditional gender roles and interests in sports sponsorship. This implies that gender-based marketing strategies may need to adapt to these changing dynamics. Our findings challenge the notion of a distinct gender difference in sports sponsorship engagement, advocating for a more inclusive and less gender-specific approach in marketing strategies.

In conclusion, while gender may still play a role in sports sponsorship dynamics, its impact is less pronounced and more nuanced than traditionally perceived. This study contributes to a deeper

understanding of consumer behavior in sports sponsorship, emphasizing the need for more comprehensive and less gender-stereotyped marketing approaches. Future research should continue to explore these trends, especially in the context of evolving societal norms and the increasing importance of gender inclusivity in marketing and consumer behavior.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

All authors contribute in this research.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors wish to confirm there is no known conflict of interest associated with this publication.

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