

# Brand Equity, Purchase Intention, E-Wom, Sponsorship Type, and Endemic in The Esports Industry: A Study on Mediating and Moderating Effects

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## ABSTRACT

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This study explores the interplay between esports sponsorship, brand equity, purchase intentions, and electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM). Utilizing a model built on three established scales, data were collected from 507 respondents via an online survey. The participants were gamers who spend 1–4 hours per week playing online games and watching esports streams. The analysis reveals that esports sponsorship significantly enhances brand equity, which, in turn, plays a pivotal role in shaping purchase intentions. Although a direct link between esports sponsorship and purchase intention was not observed, brand equity mediates this relationship, establishing an indirect connection. This research emphasizes the dynamic growth of esports and identifies sponsorship as a critical tool in marketing strategies. It also provides important insights into the preferences, behaviors, and purchase patterns of digital gamers, offering organizations a deeper understanding of how esports sponsorship can elevate brand equity and indirectly influence purchasing behavior.

**Keywords:** E-sports, Sponsorship, Brand Equity, Purchase Intention, E-Word-of-Mouth

## INTRODUCTION

Electronic sports (eSports), involve organized video game tournaments where elite players compete for prizes (Himmelstein & Liu, 2015). Closely associated with digital gaming culture, esports are often viewed as an extension of this digital gaming phenomenon (Karhulahti, 2017). Over the past decade, advancements in high-speed internet, social media platforms, and broadcasting technology have significantly boosted the visibility and popularity of esports, resulting in the rapid expansion of the industry (Carter & Gibbs, 2013). By 2023, the global number of digital gamers exceeded 3.3 billion, with gaming revenues surpassing \$180 billion USD (Newzoo, 2023). Additionally, esports viewership reached record highs, while the industry's global revenue exceeded \$1.4 billion (Statista, 2023).

The remarkable expansion of esports has drawn the attention of both local and international organizations. Businesses leverage diverse marketing strategies to build brand value and enhance purchasing intentions among the gaming and esports audience. Among these strategies, sponsorship has emerged as a dominant approach. Sponsorship involves the financial or resource-based support of an activity by a commercial entity with the aim of achieving business objectives (Meenaghan, 1983). Moreover, studies suggest that sponsorship in both esports and traditional sports can directly or indirectly influence consumer purchasing behavior.

Global corporations like Intel and Coca-Cola actively sponsor and support esports tournaments and events across numerous countries worldwide (Stroh, 2017). Gucci has collaborated with a gaming platform, Audi serves as an official sponsor of professional esports teams, BMW supports esports streamers, and Red Bull sponsors both national and international esports leagues. In several European and Asian nations, esports have even been formally recognized as an official sport (Hiltscher & Scholz, 2017). With its rapid development, esports have captured the interest of many

companies, being labeled as breakneck (Sylvester & Rennie, 2017) and among rapidly expanding markets globally (Winnan, 2016). Certain digital competitive games have achieved viewership figures that surpass those of some widely followed traditional sports (Winnan, 2016).

At its core, sponsorship represents a symbiotic association between the the sponsor and the entity being sponsored, where both parties derive benefits (Amoako et al., 2012). Sponsors aim to fulfill specific objectives through their investments. Five primary goals of sponsorship include enhancing brand or company awareness, improving brand or company image, showcasing a product, maintaining communication with the target audience, and boosting sales (Saarnisto, 2017).

Like other sports, esports include different leagues, teams and tournament types for different game formats. As a result of the esports sponsorship of these tournaments, and teams planned to have an impact on the perspectives and purchasing tendencies of fans and viewers towards the brand (Cranmer et al. 2021). Three primary types of sponsorships exist, sponsorship of individual players, sponsorship of teams and sponsorship of organizations (Tarakcı and Bas, 2018). Researches show that the marketing strategy used in esports is very similar to the marketing strategy phases in traditional sports. Particularly cooperation with famous players and broadcasters, team sponsorship and organizing events are common sponsorship types in both athletic sports and esports (Kalynets & Krykavskyy, 2022).

Esports sponsorship is often credited with enhancing a brand's image, yet it also carries the potential risk of harming it (Freitas et al., 2020). Media narratives frequently depict gamers as socially isolated and unhealthy individuals who spend excessive time staring at screens (Shabir, 2017). Research by Stroh (2017) suggests that gaming in society is sometimes linked to poor academic performance and violent behavior, with a perception that it might even encourage school shootings. Additionally, toxic behaviors are prevalent in esports, with verbal altercations becoming commonplace, especially during offline events (Kwak & Blackburn, 2015). Women in esports face significant challenges, including devaluation, sexist attitudes, and prejudice (Menti & Araújo, 2017). They also encounter bigotry, gender disparity (Winnan, 2016), offensive behavior (Cunningham et al., 2018), insulting (Menti & Araújo, 2017), and persecution (Mooney, 2018).

Like traditional sports, esports has seen its share of betting activity, with fans gambling on match outcomes (Winnan, 2016; Mooney, 2018). It is also plagued by unethical practices such as cheating (Winnan, 2016; Mooney, 2018). Both sponsors and esports organizations are impacted by various disreputable behaviors, including performance-enhancing drug use, digital assaults, game manipulation, illegal betting, chauvinism, sexism, harassment, and toxicity (Stroh, 2017). Despite these challenges, researchers maintain that esports generally fosters a positive environment, and sponsors actively work to capitalize on this optimism (Shabir, 2017).

The literature on esports remains relatively limited compared to the extensive research dedicated to traditional sports. However, existing studies suggest that esports sponsorship plays a role in enhancing brand equity (BE). The BE conception was first proposed in the 1980s, with the pioneering research by Srinivasan (1979) demonstrating how a brand adds value to a product. David Aaker (1991) characterized BE as the intangible assets and consumer perceptions that contribute to a brand's strength and market influence. In BE Model of Aaker's (1991), key components of consumer-based BE include brand's associations, loyalty, awareness and also perceived quality. For businesses, managing and measuring BE is crucial, as its creation is central to marketing efforts and holds strategic significance (Beig & Nika, 2019).

The upcoming chapters will provide a detailed overview of the research objectives, design and methodology, results from the hierarchical regression analysis and hypothesis testing, as well as the conclusion.

## OBJECTIVES

This research is driven by a strong interest in understanding the intricate dynamics of BE and purchase intentions (PI) among online gamers and esports enthusiasts. Our study specifically seeks to clarify the link between esports sponsorship, BE, PI, and electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM). The primary aim is to contribute meaningful academic insights within the context of Türkiye, where esports and gaming are particularly popular. By focusing on this specific cultural and commercial environment, we hope to provide a comprehensive analysis of these interconnections.

Building on the insights derived from existing literature, this study now focuses on formulating hypotheses that explore the connections between esports sponsorship, BE, E-WOM, and PI. As the fan base for esports continues to

grow, there has been an increase in customer satisfaction and integrity (Taylor, 2012; Stroh, 2017), which enhances brand image and the purchasing behaviors of fans. Fans often show genuine loyalty and affection toward esports sponsors (Taylor, 2012). Consequently, researchers such as Chawki (2016), Franke (2015), and Stroh (2017) argue that companies aiming to positively affect their brands' perception must consider investing in esports sponsorship. Sports are regarded as highly effective platforms for improving brand image, a key element of BE (Winnan, 2016). In particular, some scholars suggest that esports sponsorship offers an opportunity to build a corporate image similar to traditional sports sponsorship, but at a relatively lower cost (Shabir, 2017). Research by Freitas et al. (2020) supports this, finding that esports sponsorship significantly enhances the sponsor brand's image. The study reveals that nearly one-third of the fan base holds a more positive view of the brand as a result of its involvement in esports sponsorship (Freitas et al., 2020). Therefore, we hypothesize as follow;

*H1. There is a relationship between esports sponsorship and brand equity.*

According to a report by Nielsen (2019), brands aim to engage more deeply with fans through sponsorship, ultimately increasing the likelihood that fans will purchase their products. As a result, PI is considered a crucial indicator of how sponsorship influences future sales (Crompton, 1995). PI is defined as a conscious intent of customer to buy a particular brand (Spears & Singh, 2004). Morinez describes it as the propensity of a consumer to acquire a certain product under certain conditions (Khan & Sriram, 2019). The process of forming PI involves several stages. Consumers initially seek information about the products they are interested in, then assess the features of the brands they have chosen. Afterward, they experience the brand and gather greater specificity about the it. If they are satisfied with their purchase, consumers become more interested in the brand and its offerings, which increases their likelihood of making repeat purchases. Eventually, this led a way to the formation of a "PI" towards the product. Ghosh (1990) observes that marketers use PI as a powerful tool to effectively predict future purchasing behavior. Determinants such as cost and the perceived value of the brand can impact PI (Gogoi, 2013).

Previous studies indicate that sports sponsorship has a direct impact on PI. For example, spectators of the Olympic Games often express their willingness to buy products from sponsors (Meenaghan, 2001). Similarly, fans of NASCAR (National Stock Car Auto Racing Association) tend to favor the products of brands sponsoring NASCAR events. Research on sports sponsorship frequently highlights that such sponsorships affect consumers' PIs, including their perspectives towards the event, sponsors, and the sponsored initiatives (Tsiotsou & Alexandris, 2009). Sponsorship of esports teams and players can also improve consumer attitudes and enhance the perceived goodwill of sponsors, which in turn boosts consumer PIs (Huettermann et al., 2020). Therefore, the following hypothesis was put forward.

*H2. There is a relationship between esports sponsorship and purchase intention*

Research by Ashil and Sinha (2004), as well as Chang and Liu (2009), shows that BE has a confident influence on PI, aligning with the findings of Aaker (1991). Moreover, studies by Senthilnathan and Tharmi (2012) concluded that brand value also exerts a decisive effect on PI. Moses et al. (2016) further argue that sub-dimensions of BE, such as brand image and brand awareness (Chi et al., 2009), influence consumer purchasing behavior and PI (Moses et al., 2016). Based on this, the following hypothesis has been formulated to explore the relationship between brand value and PI.

*H3. There is a relationship between brand equity and purchase intention.*

Building on the established association between esports sponsorship, BE, and PI, and acknowledging the well-documented connection between BE and PI, we propose that BE may play a mediating role in the link between esports sponsorship and PI. Based on this reasoning, we hypothesize the following:

*H4. Brand equity has a mediating role in the relationship between esports sponsorship and purchase intention.*

If the success of brands like Marvel and Red Bull are considered in boosting brand loyalty through their esports sponsorship collaborations with streamers and teams, it becomes crucial to understand which type of sponsorship should take priority (Collins, 2021). Collins' research suggests that sponsorships involving professional players and streamers are more effective than those with esports teams or leagues (tournaments). This finding encourages both endemic brands—companies whose products or services are directly related to a specific market—and non-endemic brands—companies whose products or services are not associated with a particular market (Cornwell, 2020)—to explore sponsorship opportunities with prominent esports players and streamers (Collins, 2021). Based on the given insights, H5 is formed:

*H5. Esports sponsorship type has a moderating role in the relationship between esports sponsorship and brand equity.*

E-WOM refers to information sharing, such as a firm's products and services, from one individual to another via the internet or social media platforms. E-WOM serves as a form of customer expression and is a robust tool in persuasion of purchasing decisions (Severi et al., 2014). E-WOM marketing is recognized as a crucial communication strategy for promoting brands and products (López & Sicilia, 2014). Both positive and negative online reviews about certain products or services have a considerable effect on brand equity and consumer purchase choices (Reza Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). Correspondingly, Khammash and Griffiths (2011) emphasize that managers must consider the amount of negative feedback on online digital platforms, as they can damage the brand's reputation. Research also shows that online brand value plays a key role in encouraging customers to engage more actively in purchasing activities (Syahrivar & Ichlas, 2018). Proceeding from these findings, H6 is proposed:

*H6. Electronic word of mouth communication has a mediating role in the relationship between esports sponsorship and purchase intention.*

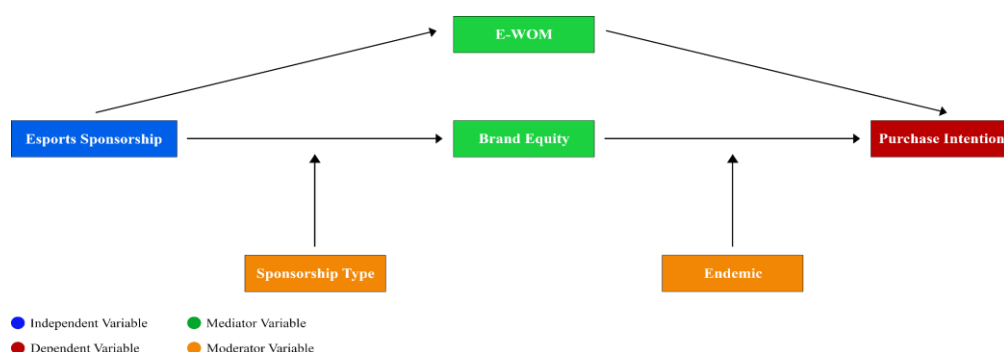
Non-endemic sponsorships tend to result in lower perceptions of fit, which can negatively impact PIs (Huettermann et al., 2020). Rogers et al. (2020) provides evidence that endemic sponsors generate more positive attitudes and higher perceptions of credibility among audiences. Endemic sponsors are viewed more favorably by the esports audience, meaning the more closely tied a sponsor is to the esports industry, the more positively the audience perceives the brand (Rogers et al., 2020). Similarly, Freitas et al. (2020) found that esports enthusiasts do not discern non-endemic sponsors as invaluable when in relation to endemic sponsors. Based on these insights, the succeeding hypothesis was developed:

*H7. The endemic brand has a moderating role in the relationship between esports sponsorship and purchase intention.*

The methodology of the study, along with the research model, sample information, and instrument for data collection, will be discussed in **Methods**.

## METHODS

Our study provides a thorough examination of the relationships between esports sponsorship as the independent variable, BE and E-WOM as mediating variables, and PI as the dependent variable, while also considering moderator variables like sponsorship type and endemic brand, all within a cohesive model. While literature has explored the association between esports sponsorship and PI, these studies lack sufficient evidence to establish a direct link between the two. In contrast, our research shifts away from focusing solely on a direct relationship and instead investigates the indirect influence through the mediating roles of BE and E-WOM. According to our literature review and the hypotheses we have developed; we propose our model in **Figure 1** below.



**Figure 1.** Research Model for the Relationship between Esports Sponsorship, Brand Equity, Purchase Intention, and E-WOM

## Sample Selection

In Türkiye, the gaming landscape is diverse, with 42 million mobile gamers, 24-25 million PC gamers, and 15 million console gamers. The age distribution of players is as follows: 18-24 years old constitute 27%, 25-34 years old make up 38%, 35-44 years old comprise 30%, 45-54 years old represent 4%, and 55-64 years old constitute 1%. In terms of gender, the gaming community is fairly balanced, with 48% female gamers and 52% male gamers. Additionally, in

Türkiye, there are more than 175 licensed esports teams and 15,350 licensed esports players. (Gaming in Turkey, 2022).

Data were collected from gaming enthusiasts based in Türkiye. Contrary to prevailing academic researches which commonly target North America and Europe, whereas our study stands as a pioneering contribution by closely examining Türkiye. We used Qualtrics survey tool to create and publish our online survey. We provided two screening questions to make sure participants are familiar with esports and digital games. The questions are as follow, “How often do you play digital games?”, “How often do you watch digital gaming or esports stream?”, and anyone who answered “Never” for either question, was eliminated from the survey. The survey had a total of 507 participants. 17 people answered “Never” to the first question and 117 people answered “Never” to the second question, and the other questions of the survey were not asked to these participants and were not covered in the survey. 94 of the participants who started the survey closed the survey without completing the survey. There are 279 people who completed the survey completely.

### Data Collection

To scale the BE, we used a multidimensional consumer-based BE scale, which was proposed by Yoo and Donthu (2001). The scale consists of 4 dimensions and 12 questions. The translation of the survey into Turkish was conducted by Yeniçeri Alemdar and Dirik (2016) in their paper. To scale the PI, we used Cornwell and Coote’s (2005) sponsorship-related PI scale, which benefited from the studies of Kahle (1988), Jacoby and Chestnut (1978) and Basu (1994). To scale E-WOM we used the PI scale associated with E-WOM communication, which was developed by Coyle and Thorson (2001).

The research survey consisted of a total of 35 questions. These included 21 questions related to the consumer-based BE scale, the sponsorship-related PI scale, and the E-WOM communication PI scale. Additionally, the survey contained one open-ended comment question, two elimination questions, five questions focused on esports sponsorship, and six demographic questions. The consumer-based BE scale had 12 questions, the sponsorship-related PI scale contained 5 questions, and the E-WOM communication PI scale included 4 questions. A 5-point Likert scale was employed, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), with 3 representing a neutral stance (Neither Agree nor Disagree) for the scale items, while ratio and nominal scales were applied to the demographic questions. Initially, the survey questions were tested on pilot groups. To ensure proper translation from English to Turkish, feedback was collected from a sample of 8-10 individuals, and adjustments were made based on their suggestions.

In the data analysis process, the average rating for each scale was calculated for every participant, followed by factor analysis to assess the validity and reliability of the scales. Lastly, hypotheses were tested using hierarchical regression analysis.

## RESULTS

The details will be presented by first outlining the characteristics of the participants, followed by the findings from the hierarchical regression analysis.

### Participants’ Characteristics

In this study, a total of 279 respondents from Türkiye were involved in the survey, with 239 males and 40 females. The age distribution is as follows: 24 participants are under 18, 153 are between the ages of 18-22, 74 fall within the 23-27 range, 24 participants are between 28-32, and 4 participants are over 33 years old. In terms of education, 138 participants are high school graduates, 123 are undergraduates, 15 have completed postgraduate studies, and 3 hold doctoral degrees. The demographic characteristics based on gender, age, and education level are shown in **Table 1** below.

**Table 1.** Socio-demographic Characteristics

Characteristics		Frequency(n)	Percentage(%)
Gender	Female	40	14.34
	Male	239	85.66
Age Group	18<	24	8.6
	18-22	153	54.84

<b>Education Level</b>	23-27	74	26.52
	28-32	24	8.6
	33>	4	1.43
	High School	138	49.46
	Undergraduate	123	44.09
	Graduate	15	5.38
	PhD	3	1.08
<b>Total</b>		<b>279</b>	<b>100</b>

About 8.24% of participants engage in gaming for 1-4 hours per week, 18.64% spend 4-8 hours weekly gaming, 14.34% dedicate 8-12 hours to gaming, and the largest group, approximately 58.78%, invest over 12 hours per week in gaming.

Regarding the time spent watching digital games and esports, the participants exhibited diverse levels of engagement. Around 54.12% of participants watch digital games or esports for 1-4 hours per week, 22.58% allocate 4-8 hours weekly, 9.32% spend 8-12 hours, and 13.98% dedicate more than 12 hours per week to watching digital games or esports. The characteristics of gaming and esports engagement are depicted in **Table 2** below.

**Table 2.** Gaming and Esports Engagement Characteristics

<b>Engagement</b>		<b>Frequency(n)</b>	<b>Percentage(%)</b>
<b>Weekly Gaming Hours</b>	1-4	23	8.24
	4-8	52	18.64
	8-12	40	14.34
	More than 12	164	58.78
<b>Weekly Viewing Hours</b>	1-4	151	54.12
	4-8	63	22.58
	8-12	26	9.32
	More than 12	39	13.98
<b>Total</b>		<b>279</b>	<b>100</b>

We selected ten of the most actively involved brands in esports sponsorship, alongside data reflecting whether participants recognize these brands as sponsors in the esports scene. These brands were chosen based on their high recognition in the Gaming in Turkey (2022) Report. As shown in **Table 3**, the top two most recognized brands among participants are Red Bull and Logitech, with 248 and 212 recognitions, respectively. SteelSeries, HyperX, and Corsair are recognized by 194, 193, and 164 participants as esports sponsors. Yemeksepeti is identified by 98 individuals, Türknet by 86, and Migros by 82 as esports sponsors. Coca-Cola, the most recognized among them, is seen as an esports sponsor by 106 participants, while Getir, with the lowest number, is acknowledged by 33 participants. In total, participants recognize 849 instances of endemic brands and 567 instances of non-endemic brands as esports sponsors.

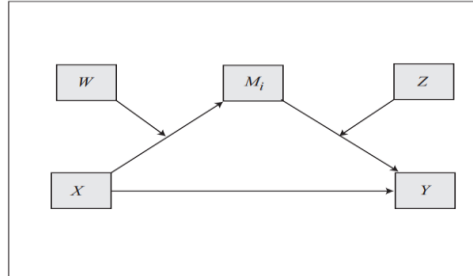
**Table 3.** Recognition of Brands as Esports Sponsors

<b>Brands</b>	<b>Frequency(n)</b>	<b>Percentage(%)</b>
Red Bull	248	89
Coca-Cola	106	38
Corsair	164	59
Getir	33	12
HyperX	193	69
SteelSeries	194	70
Migros	82	29
Türknet	86	31
Yemeksepeti	98	35
Logitech	212	76



## Data Analysis

This study employed hierarchical regression analysis to assess all variables, utilizing the process analysis tool developed by Hayes (2018) and integrated into SPSS. The variables were entered into the process extension in the order specified in the code column of **Table 4**, and Model 21, as depicted in **Figure 2**, was used for the hierarchical regression analysis. A 95% confidence level was used for all analyses ( $\alpha=0.05$ ).



**Figure 2.** Hierarchical Regression Analysis - Hayes Model 21

**Table 4.** Details on Hierarchical Regression Analysis and Hayes Process Test

Variables	Abbreviation	Variable Type	Code
Esports Sponsorship	ESPONSOR	Independent	X
Purchase Intention	PINTENTION	Dependent	Y
Brand Equity	BEQUITY	Mediator	M1
Electronic Word of Mouth	EWOM	Mediator	M2
Sponsorship Type	SPONSORT	Moderator	W
Endemic Brand	ENDEMIC	Moderator	Z

To test the hypotheses, the process analysis method was employed, which incorporated the bootstrap technique with 5000 resampling iterations. The significance of the mediating variable's effect was evaluated in the "Indirect Effect" row, where a mediating effect is considered significant if the zero value does not fall within the confidence interval between the lower limit (LLCI) and upper limit (ULCI). Furthermore, the significance of the moderating variable's impact on the relationships between the independent, dependent, or mediating variables was assessed. A moderating effect is confirmed if the significance value of *Int\_1* is  $p < 0.05$  and zero does not lie within the LLCI and ULCI (Hayes, 2018).

**Table 5.** Brand Equity and Esports Sponsorship Process Analysis Results

Variables	$\beta$	SH	p	t	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	0.0053	0.0382	0.8894	0.1391	-0.0699	0.0805
ESPONSOR	0.0337	0.0161	0.0374	2.0915	0.0020	0.0653

The results of the BE and Esports Sponsorship process analysis are presented in Table 5. Given that  $p$  is  $0.0374 < 0.05$ , the first requirement for establishing a significant impact of esports sponsorship on BE at a 95% confidence level has been met. Therefore, H1 is rejected, and a statistically significant relationship between esports sponsorship and BE is observed.

**Table 6.** Purchase Intention and Esports Sponsorship Process Analysis Results

Variables	$\beta$	SH	p	t	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	2.4048	0.0473	0.0000	50.8527	0.23117	2.4979
ESPONSOR	-0.0250	0.0201	0.2148	-1.2435	-0.0647	0.0146

Table 6 presents the results of the PI and Esports Sponsorship Process Analysis. Since the significance level is  $p=0.2148$ , which exceeds the threshold of 0.05, the initial criterion for establishing a significant effect of esports

sponsorship on PI is not fulfilled. Therefore, H2 is rejected, implying that there is no statistically significant relationship between esports sponsorship and PI.

**Table 7.** Brand Equity and Purchase Intention Process Analysis Results

Variables	$\beta$	SH	p	t	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	2.4048	0.0473	0.0000	50.8527	0.2312	2.4979
BEQUITY	0.4636	0.0837	0.0000	5.5386	0.2988	0.6284

The process analysis results examining the relationship between BE and PI are detailed in **Table 7**. The significance value for this relationship is  $p=0.00<0.05$ , indicating a statistically significant connection. Therefore, H3 is supported, confirming a meaningful relationship between BE and PI. BE explains 25.49% of the variance in changes to PI ( $R^2=0.2549$ ). These findings align with our literature review, which suggests that sponsorship is vital in enhancing brand awareness, improving brand image, promoting products, maintaining communication with the target audience, and boosting overall BE (Saarnisto, 2017).

**Table 8.** Direct and Indirect Relationships Between Esports Sponsorship and Purchase Intention

Effects	St. $\beta$	SE	LLCI	ULCI
Esports Sponsorship $\rightarrow$ Purchase Intention	-0.025	0.0201	-0.067	0.1460
Esports Sponsorship $\rightarrow$ Brand Equity	0.0337	0.0161	0.0020	0.0653
Brand Equity $\rightarrow$ Purchase Intention	0.4636	0.0837	0.2988	0.6284
Indirect Effect Esports Sponsorship $\rightarrow$ Brand Equity $\rightarrow$ Purchase Intention	0.0231	0.0119	0.0015	0.0480

Table 8 presents the results of the direct and indirect relationship test between esports sponsorship and PI. The confidence interval for the direct relationship between esports sponsorship and PI (LLCI=-0.0647 and ULCI=0.1460) includes zero, indicating that the effect is not significant. In contrast, the confidence interval for the relationship between esports sponsorship and brand intention (LLCI=0.0020 and ULCI=0.0653) does not include zero, signifying a significant effect. Similarly, the confidence interval for the relationship between BE and PI (LLCI=0.2988 and ULCI=0.6284) does not contain zero, suggesting a significant effect.

Upon analyzing the data in Table 8, it is clear that esports sponsorship ( $\beta=-0.0250$ , 95% CI= [-0.0647, 0.0146],  $t=-1.2435$ ,  $p>0.05$ ) have no direct and statistically significant positive effect on PI. However, the indirect effect of esports sponsorship on PI is significant, with BE mediating the relationship between esports sponsorship and PI ( $\beta=0.0231$ , SE= 0.0119,  $p<0.05$ , 95% BCA CI [0.0015, 0.0480]). This indicates that H4 is accepted, and BE plays a mediating role in the relationship between esports sponsorship and PI. This finding is particularly noteworthy as it contrasts with many studies that fail to provide substantial evidence of a direct link between esports sponsorship and PI. Our results suggest that while esports sponsorship may not directly affect PI, it indirectly influences it through the mediating role of BE.

**Table 9.** Brand Equity and Sponsorship Type Process Analysis Results

Variables	$\beta$	SH	p	t	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	0.0053	0.0382	0.8894	0.1391	-0.0699	0.0805
ESPONSOR	0.0337	0.0161	0.0374	2.0915	0.0020	0.0653
STYPE	0.0726	0.0306	0.0183	2.3746	0.0124	0.1328
Int_1= ESPORTS x STYPE	-0.0080	0.0122	0.5148	-0.6523	-0.0320	0.0161

As shown in Table 9, the significance of sponsorship type's (Int\_1) moderating effect on the relationship between esports sponsorship and BE is evaluated. The p-value for Int\_1 (ESPORTS x STYPE) is 0.515, which is greater than the 0.05 threshold. Therefore, H5 is rejected, indicating that the type of esports sponsorship does not significantly support the relationship between esports sponsorship and BE.



**Table 10.** Mediating Role of E-WOM in the Relationship Between Esports Sponsorship and Purchase Intention

Effects	St. $\beta$	SE	LLCI	ULCI
Esports Sponsorship $\rightarrow$ Purchase Intention	-.0250	0.0201	-.0647	0.1460
Esports Sponsorship $\rightarrow$ E-WOM	-.0037	0.0219	-.0469	0.0394
E-WOM $\rightarrow$ Purchase Intention	0.2595	0.0621	0.1372	0.3819
Indirect Effect Esports Sponsorship $\rightarrow$ E-WOM $\rightarrow$ Purchase Intention	-.0012	0.0041	-.0110	0.0068

As presented in **Table 10**, the confidence interval for the association of esports sponsorship and PI, with LLCI=-0.0647 and ULCI=0.1460 containing zero, suggests that the effect is insignificant. Likewise, the confidence interval for the relationship between esports sponsorship and E-WOM, with LLCI=-0.0469 and ULCI=0.0394 containing zero, indicates no significant effect. However, the confidence interval for the link between E-WOM and PI, with LLCI=0.1372 and ULCI=0.3819 excluding zero, shows a significant effect. Based on these results, while a relationship between E-WOM and PI exists, H6 is rejected, meaning that E-WOM does not serve as a mediator in the relationship between esports sponsorship and PI.

**Table 11.** Results of Process Analysis on the Moderating Role of Endemic Brand in the Relationship Between Brand Equity and Purchase Intention

Variables	$\beta$	SH	p	t	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	2.4048	0.0473	0.0000	50.8527	0.23117	2.4979
BEQUITY	0.4636	0.0837	0.0000	5.5386	0.2988	0.6284
Int_1= BEQUITY x ENDEMIC	-0.1474	0.1687	0.3832	-0.8735	-0.4795	0.1848

The outcomes of the process analysis investigating the moderating effect of endemic brands on the relationship between BE and PI are presented in **Table 11**. This analysis evaluated the significance of the relationship between BE and PI based on whether the brand was endemic. According to the hierarchical regression analysis, brand endemicity's p is 0.3832 > 0.05, indicating that the first condition for significance is not met. Consequently, no significant effect is established. Furthermore, when checking the lower and upper confidence intervals for the value of 0, as shown in the table, both intervals include 0, confirming that the effect is insignificant. Therefore, H7 is not supported, means that there is not a significant contribution of endemic brand status to the relationship between BE and PI, nor does it moderate the relationship between esports sponsorship and PI.

The summary of the hypothesis test results related to the hypotheses is provided below in **Table 12**.

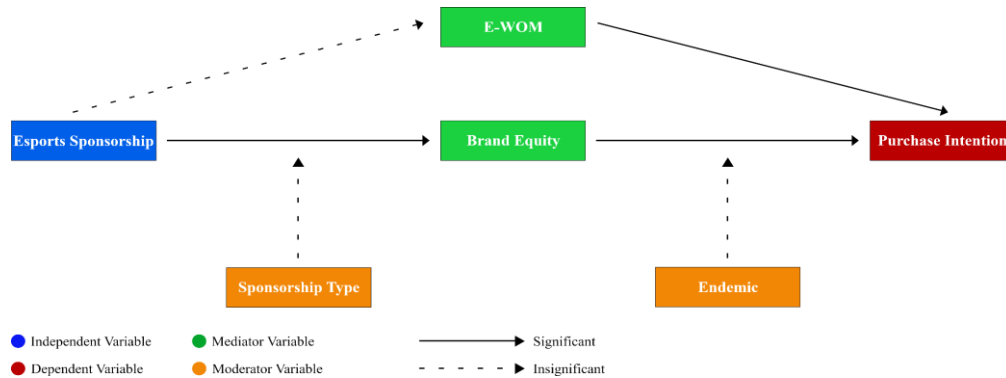
**Table 12.** Summary of Hypothesis Tests

	Hypotheses	Result
H1	There is a relationship between esports sponsorship and brand equity.	Accepted
H2	There is a relationship between esports sponsorship and purchase intention	Rejected
H3	There is a relationship between brand equity and purchase intention.	Accepted
H4	Brand equity has a mediating role in the relationship between esports sponsorship and purchase intention.	Accepted
H5	Esports sponsorship type has a moderating role in the relationship between esports sponsorship and brand equity.	Rejected
H6	Electronic word of mouth communication has a mediating role in the relationship between esports sponsorship and purchase intention.	Rejected
H7	The endemic brand has a moderating role in the relationship between esports sponsorship and purchase intention.	Rejected

## DISCUSSION

The number of participants and viewers in gaming and esports continues to rise every year, reaching unprecedented global audiences in 2023. A significant portion of global esports revenue is generated through sponsorships and advertising. Major international brands such as Red Bull, Coca-Cola, and Logitech are prominent sponsors in the

esports industry. Research indicates that sponsorship is vital in leveraging organizational brand value, awareness, image, and overall revenue. This study investigates the relationship between esports sponsorship by organizations and BE, along with its influence on PI. Our findings are expected to offer invaluable insights into the interplay between esports sponsorship, BE, E-WOM, and PI, offering useful information for both future research and companies looking to actively engage in the esports sector.



**Figure 3.** Depiction of the Significance of Relationships Between Variables Based on the Results Achieved

According to the results of our research, as summarized over the proposed model in **Figure 3**, a relationship exists between esports sponsorship and BE, indicating that esports sponsorship enhances BE. This output aligns with Freitas et al. (2020), who suggested that sponsoring esports can improve a sponsor's brand image. Therefore, companies in Türkiye should consider esports sponsorship to boost their brand awareness and image among gamers and esports fans. Furthermore, consistent with the findings of Ashil and Sinha (2004), Chang and Liu (2009), and Moses et al. (2016), our data also reveals a statistically significant association between BE and PI. However, contrary to Tsotsos and Alexandris (2009), we did not observe a direct link between esports sponsorship and PI. Instead, we found an indirect relationship, with BE playing a mediating role in the connection between esports sponsorship and PI. Therefore, for companies aiming to increase gamers' PI, sponsoring esports appears to be an effective strategy, as it enhances BE, which in turn boosts PI among Turkish gamers.

As presented in **Table 13** in the **Appendix**, participants qualitatively indicated that esports sponsorships positively impact both PIs and BE. Sponsored brands, such as Red Bull, which invests in esports, are seen by players as high-quality and genuinely invested in the field, which encourages participants to purchase their products. The association of professional players with sponsored equipment further boosts perceptions of product quality and fosters a sense of closeness to the brand. Additionally, participants expressed a preference for brands supporting esports, perceiving them as more trustworthy and indicating a willingness to purchase to support their favorite teams or players.

In contrast to Rogers et al. (2020), we found that being an endemic brand does not significantly influence PI. Red Bull, a non-endemic brand, was the most recognized esports sponsor among the survey respondents. Endemic brands such as SteelSeries, HyperX, and Logitech were also highly recognized as esports sponsors, following Red Bull. Some gamers noted that Red Bull's sponsorship of streamers on platforms like Twitch motivates them to buy the product. In other words, we did not observe a moderating role of endemic brands in the relationship between BE and PI. This advocates that both endemic and non-endemic brands should consider esports sponsorship to enhance their BE and influence PI.

Contrary to Collins (2021), we found that the type of sponsorship does not significantly impact the relationship between esports sponsorship and BE. Whether the sponsorship is directed at an esports team, streamer, or tournament, respondents did not perceive any substantial difference in how they viewed the sponsor's BE. This indicates that sponsorship type does not serve as a moderator in this relationship. Therefore, brands should focus on selecting the most suitable sponsorship opportunity, as the type of sponsorship does not significantly affect the relationship with BE. Companies should consider factors like the scale of the event, viewership of esports streamers, and the fanbase of esports teams when determining the best sponsorship approach.

Parallel to Severi et al. (2014), we found that E-WOM has a beneficial impact on PI. However our results revealed no statistically significant relationship between esports sponsorship and E-WOM. Therefore, we cannot conclude that esports sponsorship directly increases E-WOM. As a result, E-WOM does not serve as a mediating factor in the

relationship between esports sponsorship and PI. Brands seeking to leverage E-WOM to boost PI should explore strategies for fostering E-WOM through esports sponsorship.

### Limitations and Future Research

This paper examined the regulatory role of game genre and platform type; however, future research may find variations in how these factors influence players' values, particularly when comparing players of Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) to those with less involvement in esports-related digital games. Survey participants highlighted the importance of economic factors in shaping purchasing intentions, suggesting that income levels may play a moderating role in the relationship between esports sponsorship and brand value. This assumption, however, remains speculative and requires further empirical investigation. Additionally, the predominantly male demographic in this study suggests potential gender bias, and future research focusing on female digital gamers may provide valuable insights into gender-specific behaviors.

Cultural differences in purchasing intentions, as noted in the literature, could also influence the applicability of the findings. Since this study was conducted in Türkiye, results may vary in other cultural contexts. Furthermore, previous studies suggest that consumers respond differently to foreign and domestic sponsorships, emphasizing a nuanced differentiation in their attitudes (Meng-Lewis et al., 2014). Therefore, future studies could explore the impact of the nationality of esports sponsors and whether this factor plays a moderating role.

Moreover, researchers could investigate the regulatory role of game type and platform in more depth. Differences in values might emerge between MMORPG players and those engaged in less esports-centric digital games. The potential moderating effect of income levels in the relationship between esports sponsorship, brand value, and purchasing intentions also warrants further exploration. Some participants mentioned in **Appendix Table 13** that while they would like to purchase products from esports sponsors, economic conditions in Türkiye, coupled with inflation, lead them to prioritize more affordable options.

A gender-specific analysis focusing on female digital gamers could provide a deeper understanding of consumer behavior in esports sponsorship. Additionally, given the growing role of E-WOM and social media, researchers should explore whether esports sponsorship influences E-WOM through social media channels and if E-WOM serves as a mediating factor between esports sponsorship and PI, using scales that specifically assess social media influences. Lastly, conducting similar studies in diverse cultural settings outside of Türkiye may yield different results, offering valuable insights to guide brands in their esports sponsorship decisions and shaping more effective marketing strategies.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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## APPENDIX

**Table 13.** Participants' Feedback on the Influence of Esports Sponsorship on Brand Equity and Purchase Intentions

No	Subject	Quotes agreeing
1	Incentive	Sponsored brands encourage people to buy more
2		I was buying Red Bull before it became a sponsor. Having a sponsor is just a nice plus.
3		To give an example, Monster and Red Bull drinks are two products that I consume a lot. Red Bull's investments in esports and the sponsorship agreements it makes with broadcasters on platforms such as Twitch encourage me more to buy Red Bull.
4	High Quality	Since it is a sponsor, I think the brand is of high quality and is interested in its field.
5		Computer players want to further improve their gaming experience by choosing equipment generally used in Esports. The reason for this is that professional players use that equipment and believe that it is good.
6		Players generally think that if an esports player also uses a product, it is a product of high enough quality and therefore they feel closer to that brand, and will take this into consideration in their own shopping. Every esports broadcaster is frequently asked what equipment they use.
7		If a professional player uses the product of an esports sponsor, that brand's product is probably of high quality.
8		Seeing a brand that is an esports sponsor advertised at the event or used by all players during the event because it is sponsored does not help me choose that brand, but it only creates brand awareness. What impresses me the most are the products that the player I support in the match uses in his/her private life. If the headset, mouse, keyboard, etc. used outside of esports events are sponsored, if the player does not constantly talk about the brand in a way that I believe is insincere, I will go and research the product. If I watch a lot of videos about the product and see in many comments that it is high quality & ergonomic, only then can I buy it.
9	Build Trust	To give an example from Red Bull, I marked the neutral option in most of them since I do not consume energy drinks, but as someone with an esports background, Red Bull is always one step ahead in that category. A more concrete example is the issue of gaming chairs. Since they are expensive products, whether they are an esports sponsor or not is an important criterion for trust when making a purchase.
10		Esports sponsor brands are more reliable
11	Being Related	I want more League of Legends coke!
12		If it sponsors the game I'm playing, I'll buy it. Normally, I wasn't a person who drank a lot of coke in my daily life, but years ago, Coca Cola sponsored LOL, it had lol characters on the box, so I bought Ahri Coke.
13	Feeling of Admiration	When people I trust promote the product, it may cause me to choose the product. Since the esports team seems too commercial to me, no matter which company sponsors them, it cannot affect my choice of that product. My perspective on the products introduced by digital publishers is more positive. It could definitely influence my choice.
14		My primary preference is to buy from companies that support esports.
15	High Awareness	As a computer gamer, I think that hearing its name a lot in esports tournaments and seeing it very often in broadcasters contributed to my choosing Steelseries for my equipment. Likewise, there may be the same reasons why Red Bull distinguishes it from other energy drinks and makes it higher quality in my opinion.
16	Aspirational	Most of the brands are well-known and we use them, but among them, I would like to buy and try the HyperX brand, which I know and have not used, and it is already a sponsor for many content producers.
17	Arousing Curiosity	If it's a brand I don't know, I'll take a look at its products.



18	Sense of Support	I can make purchases to support my team or my favorite player.
<b>No</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Quotes indicating that it depends</b>
19	Promotion Condition	The methods followed by sponsor companies are generally simple. They have ideas such as having our name on the jersey. Instead, I believe that if Coca-Cola's "it's a bear"-it's a jersey-it'll open's a glass" promotions are somehow adapted, brands, especially those that produce player peripherals, should localize their products if necessary and open a "limited product line" specifically for the teams of the target country.
20		If I am given an in-game item, reward, skin, etc., my probability of purchasing that product increases.
21		The reason why I want to benefit from the sponsor is that I take advantage of the opportunities provided to me by broadcasters and e-athletes thanks to discounts with codes. Other than that, I don't make any purchases other than necessity.
22		Discount codes given by teams/players
23	Loving the Product	The product is the best drink in the world, I love it very much and I cannot find a rival to compete against Red Bull.
24		Red Bull is a brand I love. I always prefer Red Bull for energy.
25	Price and Quality Priority	Although their sponsorship of esports motivates me to buy, I prioritize prices and quality
26		If it fits, I'll buy it
27		If it is has a better price/performance than its competitors, I will buy it
28	Being Needed	If it's a product I need, I'll buy it
29	Depends on the Situation	I think it's a risky move, but one that can also be done well.
30	Economical situation	Even though I intend to buy sponsored products, I cannot afford the price.
31	Brand Value Creation	The Hyperx brand is valuable to me, I am thinking of buying it as a mouse.
32	Offering Options	Even if it does not directly cause me to buy, I think esports sponsorships have an effect on adding some products to my purchasing options.
33	WOM	I prefer to buy the product based on what other players generally recommend, not because the brand sponsors esports.
34	Purchase Request	I want to buy KDA Logitech headset, logitech mechanical keyboard and mouse
35	Giving Confidence	I have no such intention at the moment. If the sites I will only buy OEM products from are sponsoring a team, I can buy them more easily.
36	Can Raise Awareness	Even if awareness and sponsorship situations increase my purchasing interest in the brand, I do not change my consumption habits easily.
37	Formation of Sympathy	Since it is an esports sponsor, I do not feel the need to support it in particular, but I think it will inevitably create sympathy as I will be exposed to this content regularly.
38	Lack of Brand Value	The brand values of companies in the gaming equipment sector are not where they deserve
<b>No</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Quotes disagreeing</b>
39	Price and Quality Priority	Esports products etc. Of course, I am more interested in the market because it is an area I am interested in, but for me, the quality and price of competing companies always come to the fore.
40		The only thing that matters to me is how good it is in terms of price and performance. Frankly, I don't care who supported it or what they did.
41		As a conscious consumer, I do not only consider sponsorship of esports, but I make my choice based on its features, performance and price.

42		As a person who has worked in the field of esports, I know that sponsorships are largely marketing-oriented, so I prefer to consider the quality and price/performance balance of the product I will purchase. (Unless the sponsorship is for the team/event I am a part of or for myself)
43	Price Priority	Price is a more important factor for me than brand recognition.
44	Economical situation	Unfortunately, in this economy, regardless of the brand, even if it is an esports sponsor, I prefer the cheap one.
45		It is always my priority to look at Türkiye's economic conditions with a focus on price. thanks
46		In the current economic situation, people think more about their pockets than fanaticism. The choices I make are choices made with this in mind.
47	No Effect	Doesn't make much difference in purchase intention for me
48		Being an esports sponsor is not a factor that affects my consumption!
49		Sponsorship is not an important criterion for purchasing
50		Advertising a product does not affect my purchasing habits. I try to choose products that I use and like.
51		Nope and I hate coke, I never drink it.
52		I don't think sponsorship can affect my purchases.
53		I consume the product because it creates a fresh feeling in hot weather, and I generally prefer this product because of its variety.
54	WOM	Esports sponsor is not very important to me, I usually make my choice by experimenting based on the advice of acquaintances.