Abstract

The aim of this research is to assess the existence or absence of differences in brand perceptions of users of an esports mobile app according to gender. In addition, it intends to discover the explanatory capacity of brand variables for the prediction of user loyalty, to understand how these variables influence perceptions according to gender, and to contribute to the creation of strategies more aligned with the interests and needs of each target audience.

The study involved 1,668 users of an esports tournament mobile app. An online questionnaire created for this purpose was used to discover users’ perceptions of brand awareness, corporate image, perceived quality, and loyalty. The data were analyzed by creating structural equation models according to gender.

The study shows the absence of significant gender differences in the values of the brand variables, with higher means in the case of men. In addition, the important role of brand awareness, corporate image and perceived quality in understanding the loyalty of users of an esports app is confirmed for both genders, with differential aspects in the explanatory weight of some variables according to gender.

This study analyses brand perception in mobile sports apps and its relationship to user loyalty, a context that has been little analyzed so far at the brand level. In addition, it does so from a gender perspective, contributing to elimination of existing barriers and stereotypes in the context of esports events by discovering possible differences that allow managers to address each target audience more effectively.

Keywords: esports, gender equality, branding, consumer behaviour, sport management

Introduction

The phenomenon of esports has experienced rapid expansion and had a significant impact on the culture of generations Y and Z (Dilek, 2019; Freeman & Wohn, 2017). Over the years, various definitions have been proposed for esports (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017) and they have been classified into categories according to their

genre (Llorens, 2017) and modality (Amor et al., 2022a). Recently, Formosa et al. (2022) have suggested a definition that includes nine different dimensions, which were drawn from the review of previous definitions of esports: competitive play, leisure, organisation, professionalism, spectators and fans, skills and training, esports as an extension of the game, esports as a sport, and the game itself. In this way, Formosa et al. (2022) have defined esports as...
competitive and organised digital games that are played under a spectrum of professionalism. Its elements include spectators and fans; tournaments and leagues; training and skill development; and sponsorship and commercial partnerships and prize money.

Over the last decade, there has been a significant increase in esports viewership, driven in large part by the global pandemic and the popularity of online streaming platforms (Carter & Egliston, 2021; Orús, 2022). Esports currently has a global audience of over 500 million viewers and generates revenues of US$1.38 billion worldwide and is forecast to reach 680 million in 2025, of which 322 million will be occasional spectators and 318 million enthusiasts (Newzoo, 2022). This growth has also led to an increase in the number of research studies on esports in recent years (Chiu et al., 2021; Ke et al., 2022), including studies on gender (Fisher & Foust, 2022; Jang & Byon, 2021).

Esports have the context to mitigate gender inequalities present in traditional sports, which has been argued as a reason for their inclusion in the Olympic movement (Hayday & Collison, 2022). However, the most popular games often have a focus on male preferences (Kovács et al., 2022), generating a sexualisation of female players (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018), and leading women to play games other than those played by men (Schelfhout et al., 2021). To avoid this toxicity and harassment, many female gamers choose to maintain anonymity by playing male characters or adopting their identity (Gray & Huang, 2015). These inequalities can be addressed through inclusive education in schools by introducing esports as a complementary activity (Kovács et al., 2022).

Despite the general observation of equitable or similar distribution between men and women as players in video games (Jakob & Meehan, 2023), there exists a pronounced inequality in the realm of esports concerning gender representation in professional teams, sponsorship opportunities, and media visibility. This disparity may lead to lower participation and recognition of women in esports compared to men, a trend supported by previous research on esports (Jeong et al., 2024; Ke & Wagner, 2024; Kordyaka et al., 2023), where controls have been implemented to achieve identical values between men and women (Pizzo et al., 2023). Additionally, it is important to note that the esports audience represents only around 27% of the total video game audience, and, of this, only approximately half is considered truly enthusiastic (Jakob & Meehan, 2023). This distinction further underscores the need to differentiate between esports and conventional video games, as it demonstrates that interest and participation in esports are not necessarily representative of the entire gaming community.

Therefore, the objective of the study is to assess whether there are gender inequalities in the perception of the brand of a mobile app that organises online tournaments and esports events through an explanatory model of loyalty. The results of this study can be useful in marketing to assess whether there are gender differences in brand perception and to better understand their target audience to develop personalised strategies. In this way, it can contribute to the reduction of gender inequalities in the esports environment.

### Theoretical Framework

In the field of esports, the study of brand perception is a crucial aspect in understanding the level of consumer loyalty (Lee & Kim, 2020). In this sense, understanding how a brand is perceived in this dynamic digital environment becomes more relevant as it significantly influences fan preference and continued engagement, especially considering the young age of many fans (Herreruela, 2022; Jang et al., 2024; Pizzo et al., 2023).

To make progress in this area, the construction of an explanatory model of loyalty has been contemplated. In this context, key brand variables such as brand awareness, corporate image, and quality have been taken into consideration. These elements constitute fundamental pillars, and their importance has been validated in the model proposed by Aaker (1992). This model, previously applied and analysed in conventional sports (Alonso-Dos Santos et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2023), is now expanded to include esports.

By considering these variables, we seek to map in detail the underlying dynamics that influence esports fans’ loyalty to a specific brand. This multi-dimensional approach allows us not only to understand consumer loyalty, but also to identify areas of opportunity to strengthen the bond between the brand and its audience.

### Brand Awareness

Brand awareness is a concept that addresses how a consumer associates a brand with the product they intend to own or use (Sasmita & Suki, 2015). This brand awareness affects consumer decision-making (Keller, 1993), as well as affecting consumer perceptions and attitudes (Aaker, 1996). Cultural differences must also be considered, as they can affect consumers’ perception of the brand (Garza et al., 2024). Likewise, it has been demonstrated that brands in esports can be characterized by personality traits such as youthfulness and technological prowess (Hernández-Gil et al., 2018). The components of brand awareness are brand recall and brand awareness (Zhao et al., 2022). Previous studies find that there is a correlation between brand awareness and corporate image (Lee, 2014). Furthermore, a study by Romaní et al. (2017) explains that awareness also has a strong
relationship with quality. Therefore, within this context, it is proposed that brand awareness is positively related to corporate image (H1) and overall quality (H2).

**Corporate Image**

The corporate image of a brand is defined as the set of associations, both internal and external, that consumers retain about a brand (Chang et al., 2015; Chi et al., 2020; Keller, 1993). This image is related to consumers’ use of a brand to reflect its symbolic meaning (Lau & Phau, 2007), which is commonly confused with brand image in the field of sports (Martínez-Cevallos et al., 2020). This corporate image allows for awareness of a brand’s products or services from competitors (Lin et al., 2015). The literature has established that corporate image has an indirect effect on loyalty (Martínez & Nishiyama, 2019) and is also related to determining quality (Brucks et al., 2000). Therefore, within this context, the following research hypotheses are proposed: corporate image is positively related to overall quality (H3), and corporate image is positively related to brand loyalty (H4).

**Perceived Quality**

The perception of quality emerges as a fundamental factor when considering the effectiveness of a service (García-Fernández et al., 2018), highlighting the need to meticulously address user expectations, while avoiding the generation of unfounded promises that may lead to dissatisfaction (Alonso-Dos Santos et al., 2023). In this context, perceived quality is understood as consumers’ perception of the quality of a given product or service (Shin, 2017). This quality always involves a comparison between two or more brands (Aaker, 1996) and has an impact on customer relational outcomes (Markovic et al., 2018). The literature establishes that quality affects consumers’ purchase intention (Calvo-Porral & Lévy-Mangin, 2017) as it depends on the difference between expectations and perceptions held by customers (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Recent studies demonstrate the importance of quality on brand loyalty due to its direct positive impact (Akoglu & Özbek, 2022; Park & Kim, 2022). Therefore, the hypothesis is proposed that quality is positively related to brand loyalty (H5).

**Brand Loyalty**

Brand loyalty plays a crucial role as it is instrumental in retaining consumers. This is particularly significant in the realm of esports, given the youthful demographic profile of this sector and the promising prospects it holds for the future. Brand loyalty is defined as the connection between a customer and a brand (Coelho et al., 2018), demonstrating the consumer’s intention to purchase or use the service (Atulkar, 2020; Ogunnaike et al., 2017). This loyalty is also defined as the total commitment that consumers have to a brand (Buil et al., 2013), causing them to recommend this product (Yulisetiarini & Mawarni, 2021). This connection can also be understood as a feeling of attachment (Kotler, 1989) that helps companies to grow (Keller & Swaminathan, 2020).

**Method**

**Sample**

The study sample consisted of 1,668 users participating in an esports tournament via a mobile application. In the gender distribution of the sample, 94% perceived themselves as male (n=1563) and 6% as female (n=105). No other genders were indicated. This distribution clearly reveals the low participation of women in this type of event. The age distribution showed that 51% (n=850) were 18 years old or younger, 38% (n=634) were between 19 and 25 years old, 7% (n=117) were between 26 and 32 years old and only 4% (n=67) were above 32 years old. Regarding the use of the application, 28.9% (n=482) used it every day, while 8.3% (n=138) used it only one day a week. In terms of employment status, 71.3% (n=1190) were students, 5.3% (n=87) were unemployed, 12.8% (n=215) were working part-time, and 10.6% (n=176) were working full-time. Seventy-one percent of the participants (n=1184) indicated that they do some kind of physical activity, while 29% (n=484) did not do so. Finally, the sample’s geographical distribution consisted of 212 respondents from Europe, 1 from Asia, and 1,455 from America. It is important to note that all participants were Spanish speakers, as the questionnaire was presented in Spanish. The countries included in the sample with a significant number of participants where Mexico (n=324), Spain (n=205), Colombia (n=280), Peru (n=183), Ecuador (n=133), and Argentina (n=104).

**Instrument**

In this study, a questionnaire was used as the research instrument, with a total of four variables: brand awareness, corporate image, quality, and loyalty (see Table 1). This questionnaire was developed from instruments validated in the existing scientific literature. Each variable was assessed using a Likert scale from 1 to 5, where 1 represented strongly disagree and 5 represented strongly agree. The brand awareness variable was based on Tong and Hawley (2009), corporate image on Souiden et al. (2006), quality on Hightower et al. (2002), and loyalty on Yoo and Donthu (2001). These instruments belong to scientific literature that is widely referenced in the study of these variables, obtained from the Web of Science database. The scales were adapted specifically for their application in the esports sector and translated into Spanish, the language used for the data analysis. Notably, the decision to incorporate these scales was influenced by their widespread use and acceptance in the sports industry.
Procedure
The questionnaires were distributed anonymously online through a banner located at the center of the screen upon entering the application. The LimeSurvey platform was employed for questionnaire administration. The company collaborated by granting access to its user database solely for the purpose of this research, ensuring the confidentiality of the information. The estimated time to complete the questionnaire was approximately seven minutes. Data collection through the banner within the application remained available for one week. It is worth noting that, to guarantee participant anonymity and confidentiality, only a few socio-demographic details were collected.

Statistical Analysis
Collected data were analyzed using the IBM SPSS Statistics version 25 statistical package and the EQS 6.4 structural equation software. With SPSS, the descriptive values of the variables were obtained, as well as the correlations between them and the linear regressions. On the other hand, the structural model was constructed with EQS to evaluate the relationships between the variables and the hypotheses.

Results
First, the reliability of the variables used was tested. It is observed in Table 2 that all values in Cronbach’s Alpha are greater than .70 (Hair et al., 2006). The values range from .80 for the awareness variable to .93 for the corporate image variable. Furthermore, high mean values were obtained for each variable, with the lowest value for awareness (4.08±1.02) and the highest value for corporate image (4.25±.95).

Table 1. Instrument

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>Some characteristics of X come to mind quickly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I can recognise this brand quickly among other competing brands.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I am familiar with brand X.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate image</td>
<td>X is innovative and pioneering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This brand is successful and self-confident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This brand is persuasive and astute.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>X does business in an ethical manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>X is open and responsive to users.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>Overall, I have received a high-quality service at X.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Generally, the service offered at X is excellent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Generally speaking, the service offered at X is superior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty</td>
<td>I consider myself loyal to X.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using this application would be my first choice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I will not use any other application as long as I can access X.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Descriptive values and reliability of scales.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate Image</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: SD=Standard deviation

To determine the possible differences in brand perception between men and women, we first checked whether the data were parametric or nonparametric due to the difference in sample size between men (1,563) and women (105). To do this, a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was performed, since the sample was larger than 50 and asymptotic significance was obtained (p<.001), meaning that the alternative hypothesis was accepted and it was, therefore, a non-parametric sample.

To identify possible differences in brand perception between men and women, the Mann-Whitney U test was performed. As can be seen in Table 3, there are no statistically significant differences between women and men in the brand variables used in the study.
Table 3. Comparison between women and men

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Male Mean</th>
<th>Female Mean</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>78341</td>
<td>.425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate Image</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>74605</td>
<td>.107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>78253</td>
<td>.405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>75972</td>
<td>.181</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: U=Man Mann-Whitney U; p= Significance value

Once the reliability of the scales of the different variables had been checked and the descriptive results had been analysed, a Pearson correlation analysis was performed, among both men and women (see Tables 4 and 5). As can be seen, all the variables used in the study are significantly correlated with each other. The highest value of these correlations corresponds to that between the image variable and quality in both cases. This value is below the limit established for considering two variables to be highly correlated, which is .85 (Kline, 1998).

Table 4. Pearson correlation (men)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Awareness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Corporate Image</td>
<td>.76**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Quality</td>
<td>.73**</td>
<td>.83**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Loyalty</td>
<td>.72**</td>
<td>.79**</td>
<td>.76**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: **=p<.01

Table 5. Pearson correlation (women)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Awareness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Corporate Image</td>
<td>.62**</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Quality</td>
<td>.62**</td>
<td>.80**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Loyalty</td>
<td>.65**</td>
<td>.67**</td>
<td>.67**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: **=p<.01

Next, for the structural model of loyalty, an analysis of the reliability and convergent validity of the variables used for the model was conducted (see Table 6). For this analysis, we considered the composite reliability (CR), average variance extracted (AVE), the factor weights of each item (β), the t-statistic values and the explanatory values (R2). The results were as follows: awareness (Men: CR=.96; AVE=.55; Women: CR=.90; AVE=.51), corporate image (Men: CR=.98; AVE=.70; Women: CR=.98; AVE=.65), quality (Men: CR=.95; AVE=.70; Women: CR=.96; AVE=.71), loyalty (Men: CR=.95; AVE=.65; Women: CR=.94; AVE=.59). Based on these results, it is confirmed that the reliability values of the scales are adequate, since in all cases the composite reliability values were higher than .70 (Hair et al., 2006), and the AVE values were higher than .50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As for convergent validity, the factor loadings of all items are higher than .60 (Hair et al., 2006) and the t-statistic values are also higher than 1.96 (Veasna et al., 2013), thus confirming convergent validity.

Table 6. Indicators of reliability and convergent validity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension (F1)</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td></td>
<td>β</td>
<td>T value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>13.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>13.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>18.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>13.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>12.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate Image</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>.79</td>
<td>12.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F2</td>
<td></td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>12.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>14.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality (F3)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>11.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>12.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>11.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty (F4)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>12.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>11.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>12.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>12.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: CR=composite reliability; AVE=average extracted variance; β=beta values
After determining that all values were appropriate, a structural model was constructed from the set of five hypotheses that make up the study differentiating by gender. All data from the confirmatory factor analysis were found to be correct for both males (χ²/gl=3.92; RMSEA=0.04; NFI=0.99; NNFI=0.99; CFI=0.99; IFI=0.99) and females (χ²/gl=2.39; RMSEA=0.09; NFI=0.91; NNFI=0.93; CFI=0.94; IFI=0.95).

In terms of explanatory capacity, in the case of men (see Figure 1) corporate image is explained up to 82% by brand awareness (B=0.90; T=28.87*); perceived quality is explained up to 84% by the corporate image (B=0.68; T=8.57*) and awareness (B=0.26; T=3.28*); and loyalty is explained up to 80% by the corporate image (B=0.60; T=8.50*) and quality (B=0.31; T=4.57*).

![Figure 1. Structural Model Men](image)

In the case of women (see Figure 2), corporate image is explained up to 53% by brand awareness (B=0.73; T=7.26*); quality is explained up to 77% by corporate image (B=0.71; T=5.87*) and brand awareness (B=0.22; T=2.08*); and loyalty is explained up to 61% by quality (B=0.43; T=2.07*) and corporate image (B=0.39; T=1.64*).

![Figure 2. Structural Model Women](image)

Therefore, as can be seen in Table 7 below, the five hypotheses proposed in the study, which arise from the proposed relationships between the different variables, have been supported in all genders.
Table 7. Summary of hypotheses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypotheses</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1: Awareness → Corporate Image</td>
<td>.90 (28.87*)</td>
<td>.73 (7.26*)</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2: Awareness → Quality</td>
<td>.26 (3.28*)</td>
<td>.22 (2.08*)</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3: Corporate Image → Quality</td>
<td>.68 (8.57*)</td>
<td>.71 (5.87*)</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4: Corporate Image → Loyalty</td>
<td>.60 (8.50*)</td>
<td>.39 (1.64*)</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5: Quality → Loyalty</td>
<td>.31 (4.57*)</td>
<td>.43 (2.07*)</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: β=beta values

Discussion

A review of the existing literature reveals very few studies dealing with brand perception in esports, but even fewer if we focus on gender. Branding is a particularly important asset for esports (Gawrysiak et al., 2020) as it provides the attraction of sponsors, the main source of this ecosystem (Giakoni-Ramírez et al., 2021).

The study by Amor et al. (2022b) analyses different brand variables to see if they are predictors of recommendation by differentiating the sample by gender in an esports event. As in this study, it obtains differences in terms of the gender distinction, obtaining similar results between the general calculation and the sample of men, and differences with the sample of women. In addition, it concludes that there are no significant differences between the overall ratings of women and men, the same result as in this study. Continuing with brand studies in relation to gender, Xue et al. (2020) proposed a structural model for purchase intention in which the loyalty variable would function as a mediator, adding gender as a mediator as well. In the results they obtained, the model was generally supported, but when including gender, they found that the perceived warmth variable only influenced women and not men, causing it to mediate purchase intention, unlike perceived competence which was not influenced by gender. Again, in the study by Gilal et al. (2022) they propose gender as a mediator in a model that sought to examine the relationships between types of congruence and consumers’ passion for service brands. Again, they found that gender is a differentiator in determining the weight of the variables, as in this study.

Regarding recent studies on brand awareness in esports, the focus has largely been on the profile of sponsors, the primary source of funding for these events. For instance, research conducted by Calapez et al. (2024) concluded that users who identify more closely with competition organizers exhibit a greater predisposition towards sponsor brands. Another noteworthy study is that of De Zoeten and Könecke (2023), which examines viewers’ perception of static sponsors introduced within esports, depending on their screen position.

Regarding the proposed hypotheses, hypothesis H1 was corroborated, indicating that brand awareness has a positive influence on the corporate image. These results are in line with recent research (Chatterjee et al., 2021; Saydan & Dülek, 2019). Hypothesis H2 was also corroborated, so brand awareness has a positive influence on overall quality. In the research by Zhao et al. (2022), they use the variable of overall quality as a mediator between awareness and loyalty, also corroborating hypothesis H5 put forward in this study, although studies can also be found that consider that it is quality that influences brand awareness (Dabbous & Barakat, 2020). Hypothesis H3 was also corroborated, so the corporate image has a positive influence on overall quality. This result is consistent with the study by Lin and Yin (2022) and Kim et al. (2015), which analyses it on an online video game which is the closest to this study on an app. There are also other previous studies suggesting that it is quality that influences the image (Wu et al., 2011). Hypothesis H4 was also corroborated, so the corporate image has a positive influence on brand loyalty. These results are consistent with previous research (Chen & Wu, 2022; Xu et al., 2022) and recent ones where it can be observed how the image, besides increasing user loyalty, also affects their preferences and purchasing decisions (Philip et al., 2024). In studies such as Safirda and Salim (2024), it is demonstrated that corporate image exerts a directly positive influence on loyalty. Although this study does not explicitly examine the relationship between corporate image and quality, it also establishes a connection between the latter and loyalty, once again demonstrating a positive influence. These findings support our hypotheses H4 and H5. Additionally, hypothesis H5 has been confirmed by additional research, such as the study by Yulisetiarini and Mawarni (2021), where it is evidenced that quality has a positive impact on loyalty.

Conclusions

The results of the study allow us to conclude, firstly, that there are no significant differences in the assessments
related to the perceptions of the variables of awareness, corporate image, quality and loyalty between genders. Despite this, it can be seen that the average rating of men is slightly higher in the last three variables mentioned. On the other hand, after checking the results of the structural models, they demonstrate the importance of brand awareness in improving perceptions of corporate image and the perceived quality of the brand. Likewise, the influence of the corporate image on the quality perceived by the users has been supported, as well as the influence of the corporate image and the perceived quality on the loyalty of the users of the esports tournament application.

Looking at the comparison of the structural model for men and women, the hypotheses have been supported in all cases for both genders. However, in terms of the weight of the variables and the percentage of explanation, there are differences that may be of interest to management. In the case of the structural model for men, all the variables are explained to a greater extent than in the case of women, with an explanatory minimum of 80% and 53%, respectively. For this reason, the variables proposed seem to be more useful in explaining male perceptions and loyalty. If we look at the explanatory weights of the hypotheses, brand awareness in explaining corporate image weighs more in the case of men than in women.

On the other hand, the weight of corporate image to explain quality is greater in the case of women, while in the explanation of loyalty, quality weighs more in women while corporate image weighs more in men. Although in both men and women, quality and corporate image significantly predict loyalty, these differences could be explained precisely by the subject matter of the study: gender. Women seem to value more the experience that the service is provided properly. On the other hand, men seem to be more sensitive to the perception of the event as a whole, valuing more the corporate part of the organizing entity. In the case of women, the model has less explanatory capacity in relation to the variables of interest. This may be due precisely to the different situation they have in the field, which may lead them to have different opinions or value other aspects. This shows that although all the relationships have been supported in both cases, the variables do not behave equally between genders, so the information may be relevant to propose more personalized marketing strategies that can be more effective in attracting and retaining users.

Implications for Research, Management, and Society

The implications of the study appear at diverse levels. First, the study has implications for research, since analysis of esports branding is scarce, even more if we want to include the results considering gender. Fortunately, this field continues to grow and more publications are appearing to help the agents involved in these types of brands and events by providing literature and tools that can be useful.

On the other hand, the study has practical implications for management. The study of branding has been shown to be influential in understanding consumer behaviour in the context of sports, and the data show that in the esports environment as well. Studies such as this one allow us to understand how brand variables are perceived and how they influence loyalty based on gender. This benefits, on the one hand, managers, who with this information can plan more effective marketing strategies. Managers can know which variables are relevant to understand the variables of interest and highlight what differences exist based on gender. In this way, they can propose more specific strategies that better address the interests and needs of each gender. On the other hand, it is also beneficial for esports users, who will receive better services adapted to their interests and needs, so they will find in this virtual space more alternatives that can satisfy them. This is interesting especially in trying to attract and retain female users, who are the least likely to participate, partly due to perceived barriers and gender stereotypes.

Finally, the study also has social implications. Esports is a context in which gender gaps still exist, with considerable differences in participation. In fact, in this study only 6% of respondents were female. Moreover, it is an area where gender stereotypes are still visible and where there have even been cases of bullying or verbal violence against women participating in competitions. Studies such as this one help to understand these situations of inequality. The intention is to be able to improve and create virtual sports spaces where there can be greater participation of all genders, or at least that those who are interested do not feel limited by these perceived barriers. If we can understand gender differences in consumer behaviour in this context, we will be able to create more inclusive apps, generate more diverse content, and, in the end, everyone will be able to find their place and receive a better user experience in the virtual environment. In addition, studies such as this one highlight the problems of inequality that exist in the field of sports, raising awareness and encouraging debate about these situations, which contributes to improving these deficiencies in the sports industry by implementing more equitable practices.

Limitations and Future Lines of Research

Although our study provides valuable insights into brand perception in esports, it is essential to recognize its limitations to interpret the findings accurately and
guide future research directions. Firstly, it is important to note that our analysis focused on a single esports application, which may limit the generalization of our findings. To enhance the robustness and applicability of our conclusions, future research should aim to analyze multiple applications across different contexts and in non-Spanish-speaking countries. By broadening the scope of our investigation, we can better understand how brand perception varies across different cultural and regional settings. Moreover, our study emphasizes the need to consider longitudinal data and conduct follow-up studies to assess whether the identified issues evolve over time.

Monitoring trends and changes in brand perception can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of strategies implemented by esports applications and sponsors. Furthermore, while our study examined several brand variables, there may be other factors influencing brand loyalty that were not explored in this study. Future research should consider incorporating additional variables, such as consumer attitudes, brand personality, or social media presence, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of brand loyalty within the esports industry.

**References**


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