

An Analysis of Sponsorship Strategies in Esports

by

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ABSTRACT

Esports, while originating decades ago, have become exponentially more popular in the last decade. Because of this, businesses are tempted to enter the industry in the form of sponsorships to promote their brands. While well-known companies already have esports sponsorship deals, there is still hesitation from many others. This study examines the sponsorship practices of one endemic and one non-endemic brand. The endemic brand that was analyzed is Razer, a company that manufactures and sells gaming peripherals and has been in esports since the company's beginnings in 1998. The non-endemic brand was State Farm, an insurance provider that started in 1922. This company entered the esports industry in 2018 but had a deep history with traditional sports sponsorships that influenced their strategies in esports.

This study includes a literature review of the beginnings of esports and gives definitions and explanations of sponsorships. This is provided to give the reader context as to why these brands wish to sponsor in esports. There is background given for each company for their general history, as well as esports background for Razer and traditional sports background for State Farm. Then, the strategies of each company are analyzed and then made into advice for other brands wishing to enter esports sponsorships.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, gaming has become a common pastime for many people. While the term esports may be new for the public, the industry has been around for longer than most expect, and it is rapidly growing. While the earliest reports of esports date back to the 1970s, its modern popularity took off in the 2010s, and will soon become a mainstream pastime similar to traditional sports. The term traditional sports refers to what most people think of when the word “sports” is brought up. Examples include basketball, football, and soccer.

Esports rise to nearly mainstream status is largely due to how accessible they are—person competitions take place. However, viewers who watch esports competitions at home have a different medium to watch than traditional sports fans. Esports competitions are typically broadcasted through free livestreaming services, like Twitch or YouTube Gaming. Easy accessibility to esports is one of the main reasons the industry has exploded in the past ten years. Another reason for the success is that anyone can play video games. While not everyone has the skill set to play at the top level, just like traditional sports, gaming is easier to pick up as a hobby or pastime than traditional sports.

Since esports has become very popular, naturally businesses flocked towards it. Esports sponsorship has become a hot topic in the industry. According to Newzoo, a gaming research firm, 77% of revenue for esports in 2018 came directly from sponsorships (Pannekeet, 2019). Even though esports relies heavily on sponsorships for a profit, companies are still hesitant to enter due to how new or how quickly esports has

grown. Companies want to make sure that sponsoring in esports will be a worthwhile investment and would prefer more time to enter the industry.

When brands sponsor any sort of entity, they wish to connect with a target market, which is a group of consumers at which a product or service is aimed. Brands must make sure that there will be a worthwhile return on investment through any sponsorship deal, and that does not always come as a monetary value. Another metric for return on investment could be through things like brand awareness or just getting more people talking about their brand. In sponsorship, brands are typically divided into two sections. The first is endemic, which creates a product or service within the industry it sponsors. The second is non-endemic, which creates a product or service outside of the industry it sponsors.

The goal of this case study is to take examples of successful esports sponsorships for one endemic and one non-endemic brand, analyze the strategies, and compare the findings. From there, the findings will be presented as advice for other companies who wish to enter the esports sponsorship market. The endemic brand for this study will be Razer, a company that creates gaming peripherals, and has been involved in esports since its very inception. The non-endemic brand will be State Farm. The reason for this is that State Farm has received positive feedback from the esports community since their entrance in 2018. State Farm also has a rich history in traditional sports sponsorship, which will give insight on their strategies within esports.

CHAPTER I

REASEACH ON ESPORTS AND SPONSORSHIP: LITERATURE REVIEW

Esports

Esports is defined as a form of competition with the medium being video games (*Esports definition, 2017*). From this definition, it can be gathered that esports has not been around for a very long time. The first esport event from most accounts was a tournament held at Stanford University on October 19, 1972, with the space combat game Spacewar. Five students competed in this tournament for a grand prize, which was a year subscription to Rolling Stones magazine. Spacewar was an arcade-style game, as well as one of the first commercially available video games. This game, as well as similar arcade-style games that came after, had competitions that were centered around obtaining the highest score possible, so competition in game had not been established at this point. The first ever large-scale video game tournament took place in 1980 and was set up with 10,000 players attempting to set the highest score obtained in Space Invaders (*History of esports, 2021*).

Instances of modern esports began to appear during the 1990s when fighting games and first-person shooters entered the competitive scene. A Street Fighter II tournament held in 1991 was the first ever instance of a face-to-face competition in esports, rather than high score being the main goal. In 1993, Doom was a first-person shooter that released with a four player deathmatch mode, which is said to be one of the first inspirations for modern online multiplayer games. One of the first ever esports events with set teams took place in 1997 on the game Quake Red Annihilation (American

Esports Publisher, 2020). This was an online tournament that consisted of 2000 players from across the entire United States.

In the 2000s, esports events had begun to be televised in several different countries. South Korea, Germany, France, United Kingdom, and the United States all had television stations that were entirely dedicated to esports. While this may have been the biggest stage for esports, its tremendous growth did not take place until the 2010s when livestreaming platforms hit the forefront of online entertainment. Twitch is a livestreaming platform that launched in 2011, and immediately gained 3.2 million unique viewers every month according to CNBC (Geeter, 2019). The following year, the website had reached 20 million viewers per month and was not seeming to slow down. Twitch allowed individual players to livestream themselves playing video games for audiences to watch. Several platforms emerged after the success of Twitch, like YouTube Gaming, Facebook Gaming, and Microsoft's former platform, Mixer. The emergence of these streaming platforms had finally given professional gaming a centralized hub to produce and distribute video game content.

Esports has developed to a point that some games now have leagues with franchised teams, similar to how traditional sports leagues work. In 2016, Blizzard, the creators of the popular video game Overwatch, started the Overwatch League (OWL). The OWL consists of twenty franchised teams that are stationed across the world. Activision has also set up a franchised league with Call of Duty called the Call of Duty League (CDL). Another form of tournaments that are in esports are open invitation, or qualifier type tournaments. This is where groups sign up to compete in a large tournament and the top players are left to battle it out in the final series that decides a

winner. One of the tournaments that had this sort of style was the Fortnite World Cup. In 2019, a sixteen-year-old named Kyle “Bugha” Giersdorf won the Fortnite World Cup along with \$3 million in winnings, which was the highest individual prize purse in esports history (Taylor, Chokshi, 2019).

These examples of esports tournaments and formats should show how serious esports is becoming. Esports is beginning to rival the viewership numbers of established sports leagues and is expected to be on par with the NFL with 300 million viewers in 2022 (Merwin, 2018). The massive increase in esports viewership is a reason why many companies are trying to start sponsorship deals within the esports industry.

Sponsorship

Sponsorship has been a major factor in not only esports, but traditional sports as well. BBC defines sports sponsorships as the financial support for a sport (whether this is an event, organization, or performer) by an outside body (be it a person or organization) for the mutual benefit of both parties (BBC, n.d.). Sponsorships originally began as being selected based on a manager’s personal interests in companies but has now evolved into a top method of funding for sports leagues, teams, and events (Fetchko, Roy, Clow, 2019). Having this extra funding allows sports events, venues, teams, or leagues to be able to operate at their highest ability. This could bring more viewers to the event, as a more completed item would be more attractive to viewers. Sponsors are willing to spend large amounts of money on these entities for a great way to push their brand to a large audience. Sponsors could use commercials, logo placement in arenas, special events, and many other methods to interact with the audience of the party they sponsor. Sponsorships are seen as a two-way street. If the sponsor is not receiving any sort of benefit from the

deal, there is no reason to have a sponsorship deal. The efficiency of sponsorships is shown tremendously through revenue gains. The North American sports sponsorship market was estimated to be over \$17 billion in 2018 and expected to go over \$20 billion by 2022 (Gough, 2021).

What Brands Sponsor

When sponsors look for potential deals, they need to decide who they wish to sponsor. There are several forms of entities that companies may wish to sponsor and choosing which category to pick depends on what they wish to achieve with the sponsorship. The first category is leagues. Sports leagues tend to have a wider scope, which would reach a much larger audience. Leagues tend to have larger sponsorship inventories, meaning that they have more space for sponsorship opportunities. The second option is sports teams. Compared to leagues, teams tend to have a smaller geographical scope, lower cost, but a higher level of involvement. Sponsoring teams is also a way to possibly get around exclusivity issues that might be present in the league. If two competing companies want space in the NBA, but one has an exclusive deal with the league, the second company can sponsor a team with no trouble.

Another way to sponsor in sports is through events. Companies can sponsor events that last for one day, multiple days, or events that are off the field. Some companies that sponsor sports leagues and teams also have opportunities to sponsor events, which will be shown later in this study. Companies can also sponsor venues, which are the arenas or spaces that a team holds their matches. Typically, these sponsorships come through naming rights, which allows a company to have the arena named after their brand. There may also be branded spaces in the arenas which may serve

as some sort of VIP lounge or an area for a special service. The last way to sponsor sports is through individual athletes. Sponsoring high tier athletes in team sports have the potential to be more beneficial than league or team sponsorships but may also be one of the only options in non-team sports like golf or tennis. Individual sponsorships tend to be the riskiest, as athletes are more prone to fall into scandals or public relations situations that may reflect a negative brand image back to the sponsor.

Why Brands Sponsor

Sponsors are interested in marketing their companies through sports because of the amount of brand recognition they can receive. Across all five major sports leagues in North America, there were 150 million individuals attending matches in person in 2018 (*The impact of sports on the travel industry, 2019*). It can also be assumed from here that this reach would greatly increase if broadcasting on television was also counted. An Australian study also shows that sports fans tend to be very loyal, with 22.2% of fans attending at least six games, with this average increasing to 33.3% for soccer (*Sponsoring Sports in Today's Digital Age*, n.d.). This shows that there is a section of the sports fan population this is likely to see a brand's advertisement multiple times, thus increasing an individual's brand recognition.

In sponsorship, there are six main objectives that are constantly set by sponsors for what they wish to achieve with the partnership. These six objectives are creating brand awareness, influencing brand image or personality, increase sales, strengthen client relationships, stimulate product trials, and generate media exposure (Fetchko, Roy, Clow, 2019).

When a company wants to create brand awareness through sponsorships it is typically done through placement of a brand name, logo, or another recognized piece representing the sponsor. Part of sponsorship deals may require the sponsored party to add a sponsor's name to an arena, event, jersey, etc. This is an effective strategy for sponsorships, as it allows a brand's image to be recognizable to the common consumer of the sport being sponsored. It helps publicize a brand's image through whatever entity with whom they have partnered. An example of creating brand awareness can be shown with the FedEx Forum in Memphis, Tennessee. The naming rights to the arena were bought by FedEx, allowing their name to be plastered across the building to be seen in the Memphis streets. FedEx also has a sponsorship with the Memphis Grizzlies that placed their logos onto the NBA team's jerseys. Whenever a player on the Grizzlies was seen wearing a jersey in a game, the FedEx logo would be easily shown on their right shoulder. David J. Bronczek, who is the FedEx president and chief operation officer, said that the reason for placing their logo onto the team's jerseys is that it "provides another unique way for our brand to reach new audiences around the globe while strengthening our connection to the Grizzlies and the Memphis community," (Bassam, 2018). This placement of the logo, which was adopted by the entire NBA, is set in an obvious spot, allowing for brands to have easy logo placement for more brand awareness.

The second objective of influencing brand image or personality is a common objective for sponsors. The idea behind influencing a brand image is to either create brand association in a new market or to repair or change current brand perceptions. When a brand enters a new market, it may not have any notoriety or image there. Creating a

sponsorship that is within that market can help attract new customers, increasing the brand's competitiveness.

Another objective that sponsors use when considering sponsorships is the potential to increase sales. Sponsors believe that consumers would be motivated to pick up a new product, or change from a competing brand, if a sports property they were linked to endorses that product. This can be done through deals like pouring and serving rights within sports arenas or through promotional deals. In pouring and serving rights, the goal is to provide the fans of arenas with certain beverages that they may enjoy. This would eventually cause a portion of the fans to go to stores and purchase the beverages for their own consumption outside of the sports arenas. Promotion deals may involve situations where an athlete or team is advocating for a product, either in person or through any medium of advertisement.

When sponsors reach deals with sports entities, there are typically extra benefits that come with the deal. A common benefit might be box seats in sports arenas along with free tickets for every home game. This would represent a way that sponsors can use sponsorships to help strengthen client relationships. Sponsors would use these benefits from the sports entity to be hospitable to new or existing clients. Sponsors can also use their partnership to stimulate product trials. Since sports arenas attract large crowds, sponsors can give out samples of their products, or give coupons or other promotional material. The last objective is to generate media exposure. Sponsors may want to see how impactful their sponsorship message is through any medium. This is typically done through impressions. Impressions is defined as the total number of exposures of an audience to a brand message (Fetchko, Roy, Clow, 2019). Impressions can then be easily

converted to a dollar amount that would represent how much a traditional media deal could have cost a sponsor.

Benefits of Esports Sponsorships

Moving into nontraditional sports can seem risky to many companies, but there are situations where there can be a massive payoff. Companies once took a risk on sponsoring action sports events like skateboarding, snowboarding, bungee jumping, and many more. The companies that have delved into the action sports world of sponsorships have seen that it harbors a tighter knit community. For example, in snowboarding, many of the fans are millennials that share a similar lifestyle. The closeness of age and lifestyle provide an almost homogenous audience that can be easily targeted with marketing campaigns, instead of trying to cast a wider net to appease many different types of people. This idea in marketing is called targeted reach. Companies typically use targeted reach to advertise to an audience that fits a certain niche for their product or service (Fetchko, Roy, Clow, 2019).

Esports is a perfect vehicle for targeted reach in sponsorships. While esports does have a large total viewing, many games have smaller subsections of viewers, and those subsections can have very similar interests and ways of life. Targeted reach is defined as the number of persons or percentage of a population exposed to a brand message who are also part of the target market for the brand (Fetchko, Roy, Clow, 2019). In many situations, sponsors will value a smaller total reach that contains consumers within the target market over the largest total reach possible. This is because there could be little to no interest in areas that do not have that specific target market. The desire for targeted reach is so that sponsors can cast a net over a group that has as many homogenous traits

as possible. For esports specifically, seven out of ten fans are males in the age range of 18-34, and the average age of an esports fan is 26 years old (Long, Dabricky, Rhodes, 2018). Any brands that have a target market that lines up with this esports demographic would benefit greatly from esports sponsorships.

Endemic vs. Non-Endemic Sponsors

In sports sponsorships, there are two kinds of sponsors. The first are endemic sponsors. These are the types of sponsorships related to or are in the industry of the team or league sponsored. An example would be Nike sponsoring the NBA. Since Nike is a company that makes and sells apparel and gear related to basketball and the NBA, they are an endemic sponsor. The second type of sponsor is non-endemic, which are sponsors that are not related to or in the industry of the team or league they sponsor. An example of a non-endemic sponsorship pertaining to the NBA would be Mountain Dew. Mountain Dew is a soft drink that does not have a use in sports, making it non-endemic.

Endemic sponsors typically have a more natural fit than non-endemic sponsors. Since endemic sponsors are a part of the industry to which they are marketing, their sponsorships will focus specifically on the sport's audience, as that is where their interests clearly lie. Non-endemic sponsors do not have as easy of a task as endemic sponsors do. Since there is no relation of the sponsor to the industry they are sponsoring, there is a need to be relatable to the audience.

CHAPTER II

RAZER: SPONSORSHIP STRATEGIES OF AN ENDEMIC BRAND

Company Background

Razer is a technology company that creates and sells gaming hardware and software, various electronics, gaming accessories, and offers a gaming payment service and loyalty rewards program. In 1998, Razer was established as a subsidiary of Karna LLC. Karna had ceased operations in 2000, but Razer's history kept going. The current iteration of the company was founded in 2005 by Min-Liang Tan and Robert Krakoff, with its two headquarters located in Singapore and San Diego, California at the time. Today, they are a multinational company with headquarters stationed across the globe. Razer's flagship product was the Razer Diamondback gaming mouse, and from then on Razer had been mainly known for their gaming hardware. The company's hardware is almost inseparable from RGB lighting, which allows their products to have a combination of 16 million different colored glows. This has been an attractive feature for many gamers, and it is safe to say that Razer popularized this. Razer boasts that its software platforms have over 150 million users (Razer Inc, n.d.).

Razer has been a top seller of gaming products, and their reign does not seem to be slowing down anytime soon. In 2020, the company reached a record-breaking annual revenue of \$1.2 billion, which was a 48% increase from the prior year (Costelloe, 2021). Razer executives attribute this growth to an increase in demand for their products, as well as new growth in market shares. Razer sells their products on their own website, has several brick-and-mortar Razer stores, and has shelf space in many major retailers.

Razer in Esports

Razer has a deep history in esports which dates to the early days of the company. Razer's first movements in the esports scene were sponsoring the Cyber Athlete Professional League with \$100,000, and partnering with Johnathan "Fatal1ty" Wendel, who was one of the first professional esports players (*Razer and esports*, n.d.). From here on, Razer began to sponsor a multitude of esports teams and players that spanned across different games and countries. Some of the most notable are Team Liquid, Counter Logic Gaming, LDG Gaming, and Evil Geniuses. By 2012, Razer had been sponsoring fifty different esports teams, comprising of around 400 total players. Razer then created the title "Team Razer," which served as a banner for these players to fly to represent their partnership.

Team Razer is used as a medium to promote partnered teams and players. Razer's website has an esports tab that lists many of the teams and players that they sponsor, including a sponsorship with the esports team of University of California, Los Angeles. There are social media accounts under the name Team Razer that are used to promote tournament games and wins of the groups that are sponsored. Team Razer has 560,000 followers on Twitter, 790,000 followers on Instagram, 1.95 million subscribers on YouTube, and 1.65 million likes on Facebook.

One of the esports organizations that Razer sponsors is Alliance. Razer helped found Alliance back in 2013 and have been partnered with the organization ever since. In March of 2019, the two companies reupped their contracts to continue doing work together for another two years. While many of Razer's deals with esports organizations make them the exclusive gaming peripheral sponsor, this deal also made Alliance the

official ambassadors of one of Razer's newest product, a gaming chair dubbed the "Iskur." This was a deal that fit well with Alliance because during the season prior the team had players out due to back injuries. This allowed Razer to promote their chair as one of the safest and best gaming chairs through the credibility of an organization that had experience with back issues that affected gaming.

Razer recently began a unique collaboration with an esports player named Lee "Faker" Sang-hyeok. Faker is a Korean League of Legends player for the esports team T1. The sponsorship will include giving Faker the license to create and sell his own line of Razer products, including mice, keyboards, and phone cases (Steiner, 2021). Razer has been sponsoring Faker's team, T1, since 2017, and Faker has long used Razer products. Because of this, Razer executives believed that this partnership is on brand for both Faker and his team.

Razer does not only support teams and players. The company has put on gaming tournaments in the past and has now started its own series of tournaments. In 2020, Razer launched the Razer Invitational. This was an open invite tournament set in three different regions during its inaugural season, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Europe, with North America and Middle East being introduced in 2021. The games that are played vary from each region, but some of the biggest titles are Call of Duty, Valorant, Counter Strike: Global Offensive, Fortnite, and Player Unknown: Battlegrounds. The tournament winnings included cash prizes as well as various Razer products. Razer's reason for setting up this tournament is stated by Khang Thai, the Senior Global Esports Lead at Razer. Thai says, "Razer Invitational was founded on the simple idea of creating a pure and competitive platform where every athlete has a chance to compete regardless of their

in-game rank, their sponsorship status, or their team affiliations. It has now grown into a global phenomenon that represents inclusivity within the esports community,” (Razer Inc., 2021). Razer has said that during the inaugural season of the Razer invitational, there were 60,000 participants and 23 million views across the three regions.

Razer does not seem to want to end their esports presence anytime soon. While the company wishes to expand Team Razer, they are also making strides in new esports categories. Their website lists what is next for their ventures. “Team Razer continues to grow in mobile esports with Tribe Gaming, and signed Hanwha Life Esports, MAD Lions, and JD gaming for a stronger presence in League of Legends,” (*Razer and esports*, n.d.). This represents their focus on a new industry, like mobile esports, as well as making strides within well-established categories.

Razer’s sponsorships described in this section have been formatted into *Table 1*. This table shows the sponsored party, the type of entity that was sponsored, and the sponsorship rights obtained. The table also includes the sponsorship objectives, which will be described in the next section.

Table 1. Summary of Razer’s Esports Sponsorships

Sponsored Party	Type of Esports Entity	Sponsorship Rights	Objective
Team Razer	A collection of teams/individuals	Exclusivity, (other benefits change per each sponsor)	Create brand awareness, increase sales
Alliance	Team	Iskur chair promotion	Increase sales
Faker	Individual	Faker inspired product line	Increase sales
Razer Invitational	Event	Tournament is set up by Razer, N/A	Create brand awareness, influence image

Analysis of Razer's Esports Sponsorship Strategies

Razer's history in esports is robust, but they are very focused on what their brand can gain through sponsoring teams, athletes, and events. The company is well known in the gaming community, and that can clearly be represented by the record-breaking revenue numbers that came in 2020, a year that was tough on many businesses. Even though Razer has staying power in gaming and esports, they continue to hold their place in the industry as well as creating new opportunities in the newer and developing sections of esports. Razer's main objectives in esports sponsorship seems to be to create more brand awareness and influence brand image, which in turn would increase sales.

Team Razer is something that has been consistently expanding since its creation in 2012. Because of this, Razer seems to be trying to get as many teams as possible to lock down exclusivity deals, making sure that their competitors cannot get an edge over them in the esports industry. With expansions into different countries and games, Razer is aiming to reach the biggest gaming audience possible. If there is someone in gaming that has yet to hear about Razer, they will soon be very familiar.

Razer does have sponsorships that are more focused on promoting and selling certain products, and that is made very clear with the examples from Alliance and Faker. The partnership with Alliance is being used to promote the Iskur gaming chair. While Razer, at that point in time, had only been known for gaming hardware, the gaming chair was a big step in the direction for accessories and lifestyle products. Finding a team like Alliance who has had issues with gaming chairs and back issues before to promote this new chair adds credibility to the promotion, giving Razer the potential to increase sales.

The deal with Faker has potential to be a game changer in esports sponsorships. Allowing Faker to create his own line of gaming products resembles how athletes in traditional sports have shoe deals with major sports apparel brands. While shoes are arguably the most important piece of gear in traditional sports, mice, keyboards, and headsets are possibly the most important pieces in esports. This deal with Faker closely resembles shoe deals in traditional sports, and this could set a precedent that may be present in esports forever. League of Legends is one of the biggest esports globally. During the 2018 League of Legends World Championship Series, there were 200 million viewers, along with 40,000 attending the event in person (Wokosin, 2020). Since Faker is a massive League of Legends star, this is a great way to test the waters for an esports player's own line of products and sell products to gamers with an interest in Faker.

Razer starting their own tournament series in 2020 was a great way for them to potentially reach new audiences and improve their brand image. Razer has had the motto "For Gamers, By Gamers," and this tournament is a great representation of that. Allowing competitors to play, no matter what their status in esports is, is a great way of promoting their brand. It shows that even though Razer has such a rich history with the high skilled players and teams within esports, they still are looking out for the casual gamers, and want to create a way for people to be discovered in a very competitive industry. Having tournaments across the globe allows Razer to increase brand awareness among gamers as well as creating a positive brand image to potential newcomers watching the tournaments.

CHAPTER III

STATE FARM: SPONSORSHIP STRATEGIES OF A NON-ENDEMIC BRAND

Company Background

State Farm is a major insurance provider based in the United States that was founded in 1922 by George Jacob “G.J.” Mecherle. State Farm’s services include insurance policies for homes and vehicles, banking options, as well as investment options. State Farm boasts many impressive numbers: number one company in auto and home insurance, number two in life insurance, ranked thirty-six on the 2020 Fortune 500 list, approximately 55,000 employees with 19,200 agents, and around 85 million active policies and accounts (*Fast Facts*, 2021). In 2020, State Farm brought in \$3.7 billion in revenue (State Farm, 2021).

History in Traditional Sports

State Farm is a company that is heavily invested in sports sponsorship. One of the company’s early sponsorship deals was with the National Football League in 2006. The deal was to last three years, and it gave State Farm the first ever presenting sponsorship of the NFL Pro Bowl Game, broadcast and trademark rights, and title rights to the “NFL Match Up,” which was a weekly program that had analyses over football games from the previous week. Mark Gibson, State Farm’s assistant vice president at the time, said about this partnership, “With this alliance, State Farm is able to leverage the power of the NFL, and effectively reinforce its message that it is committed to being customers’ first and best choice,” (Jazo-Harris, Hill, 2006). State Farm also had a multiyear deal with Major League Baseball that started in 2007. In this deal, State Farm would receive the title “Official Insurance Company of the MLB,” as well as title rights to the State Farm Home

Run Derby and the State Farm Mascot Home Run Derby at the 2007 MLB All Star Week (MLB, 2007).

In 2016, the company spent somewhere between \$55-60 million on sponsorship deals, and 67% of that went to sports deals (IEG, 2017). State Farm has deals within the NBA, which lists them as a league sponsor and gives them ad space on ESPN, TNT, and NBATV. They also have deals in college basketball, which gave them backboard signage opportunities for over 100 universities. State Farm also has naming rights to three arenas, the State Farm Center (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign basketball), State Farm Arena (NBA – Atlanta Hawks), and the State Farm Stadium (NFL – Arizona Cardinals). The company has also ventured into sponsoring individual athletes, the biggest of which being Patrick Mahomes, Aaron Rodgers, and Chris Paul. With these athletes, State Farm has created some very memorable commercials that premiere during sports games.

State Farm has changed their strategy ever since they entered sports sponsorship. State Farm has dropped the NFL and MLB sponsorships and invested more into the NBA and other more ownable aspects in other sports, like their sponsorships with specific athletes. When asked about the change, State Farm's former director of advertising, Edward Gold, said, "Our strategy has evolved. There are partnerships we are no longer involved with such as Major League Baseball. And then there are partnerships that we have put more focus on, such as the NBA. It's about how you stand out in this extremely crowded category. In the past it was about acquiring properties to keep our competitors out. Now it's about making our involvement unmistakable," (IEG, 2013). State Farm has succeeded at this task. They have created commercials with characters based off certain

athletes that are entertaining and memorable. An example would be the National Bureau of Assists commercial campaign. This campaign was a salute to the NBA along with some of the most notable basketball personalities including Chris Paul, John Stockton, Stephen Curry, Damian Lillard, and Sue Bird.

State Farm in Esports

It makes sense for State Farm, a company so heavily invested into traditional sports, to begin testing the waters in esports sponsorships. In 2018, State Farm's potential entrance into esports was getting close, as they signed a deal with ReKTGlobal, which is a company that focuses on getting sponsors into the realm of esports. The company was founded in 2017 by David Bialek and Amish Shah. ReKTGlobal also has had its own foot in the door for esports as they own two different teams, Team Rogue and the London Royal Raiders. The news of this deal between State Farm and ReKTGlobal let the esports industry know that State Farm is taking this opportunity seriously and would be making its first moves very soon.

State Farm's first venture into esports came in 2018, sponsoring the North American League of Legends Championship Series. State Farm had become one of the first non-endemic brands to enter League of Legends sponsorships, and they did not stop there as they renewed their contracts with the tournament through 2021. This partnership allowed State Farm to sponsor three professional League of Legends series, the World Championship, Mid-Season Invitational, and All-Star Event, as well as the League of Legends College Championship. Pat Culligan, Assistant Vice President of Marketing at State Farm, spoke about this sponsorship, saying, "League of Legends, along with Riot Games, are a leader and innovator in the esports community," (Lolesports, 2019). State

Farm also received naming rights to an analyst desk in the North American League Championship series, which brought in gameplay experts to breakdown matches that took place during the series.

League of Legends was not the only game State Farm had invested in during 2018. One other deal came during the fifth season of the Rocket League Championship Series. This deal allowed State Farm to receive naming rights to the analyst desk on the RLCS broadcast, dubbing it the State Farm Skybox, as well as a weekly segment that analyzed gameplay called “Rocket Science.” State Farm also became a sponsor of the NBA 2K League, which made them the first non-endemic sponsor for the league. This deal allowed State Farm to have the rights to present a pregame event called “Game Mode,” which would interview players and learn their insights. They also received rights to present a weekly highlight segment called “Game Time” on the NBA 2K League website (Li, 2018).

In 2019, State Farm started a multi-year sponsorship deal with the Overwatch League, which was in its sophomore season at the time. This made State Farm the official North American insurance provider for the league. This deal made State Farm branding visible during OWL events, gave State Farm presenting rights to a weekly segment called “Assist of the Week,” and held tournaments where players were only allowed to use one popular character in a one-on-one situation (Duran, 2021). State Farm also received naming rights to a pregame broadcast called “Watch Point.”

State Farm’s most recent esports deal came in 2021 with Twitch Rivals. Twitch Rivals is a collection of tournaments that takes place on a variety of games on the streaming platform of Twitch. This event is for Twitch affiliates and partners to go head-

to-head on a live broadcast for cash prizes. This deal named State Farm as the official insurance provider of Twitch Rivals North America. It also created the “State Farm Spotlight” which had broadcast hosts analyze gameplay strategies of the previous matches.

While State Farm has mainly sponsored leagues and events, they have sponsored one individual player. In January of 2019, Benjamin “DrLupo” Lupo became the first esports player to be signed by State Farm. DrLupo, at the time, was one of the biggest creators on Fortnite. He has 4.5 million followers on Twitch, 1.8 million subscribers on YouTube, and 1.9 million followers on Twitter. DrLupo is very active in setting up fundraisers for St. Jude as well. In 2018, he managed to raise \$600,000 for charity. The very next year he smashed his previous numbers and raised \$2.3 million in a twenty-four hour live stream. These acts are part of the reason why State Farm was so attracted to DrLupo. Ed Gold stated, “His philanthropic efforts and massive fanbase make him an ideal partner as we continue to amplify our esports programming and efforts with the gaming community,” (State Farm, 2019). In an interview with Cheddar News, DrLupo stated that during the negotiation he made sure that State Farm would be a supporter of St. Jude. Part of that deal meant that State Farm would donate \$19,000 to DrLupo’s “Build Against Cancer” fundraising stream. In the interview, DrLupo said “The stuff that we do with the stream to support St. Jude is big, and I wanted to bring [State Farm] in on that. That was one of the things I made sure was clear when the contract was set up,” (Bhansali, 2019). Another reason why State Farm chose DrLupo for a sponsorship was because he is a member of Team Rogue, which is the daughter company of ReKTGlobal. Since ReKTGlobal has essentially been the middleman for all of State

Farm’s esports deals, they were able to use their connections to allow State Farm to obtain their first player sponsorship.

During this partnership, DrLupo has gone to the State Farm headquarters and live streamed himself playing Fortnite. He also had a stream where he played the game Fall Guys with the popular “Jake from State Farm” character that appears in many State Farm commercials. DrLupo also has a series of videos that he posted on Twitter that served as ads for State Farm. Typically, the videos centered around a joke from his own content that he was able to relate back to State Farm, where he would sometimes insert a scripted ad read.

State Farm’s sponsorships described in this section have been formatted into *Table 2*. This table shows the sponsored party, the type of entity that was sponsored, and the sponsorship rights obtained. The table also includes the sponsorship objectives, which will be described in the next section.

Table 2. Summary of State Farm’s Esports Sponsorships

Sponsored Party	Type of Esports Entity	Sponsorship Rights	Objective
League of Legends Championship Series	League	Sponsored three series, analyst desk naming rights	Create brand awareness, influence image
Rocket League Championship Series	League	Analyst desk naming rights, weekly gameplay segment	Create brand awareness, influence image
NBA 2K League	League	Pregame event, weekly highlight segment	Create brand awareness, influence image
Overwatch League	League	Exclusivity, weekly segment, pregame broadcast	Create brand awareness, influence image
Twitch Rivals	League/event	Exclusivity, State Farm Spotlight segment	Create brand awareness, influence image
DrLupo	Individual	Live streams from State Farm HQ, ad reads	Create brand awareness, influence image

Analysis of State Farm's Esports Sponsorship Strategies

State Farm's position in traditional sports has no doubt been a great influence on how the company has interacted and sponsored within esports. An interview with Ed Gold from the IEG Sponsorship Report has a quote that gives reasoning behind why State Farm is active in sponsoring the NBA. Gold says, "We want to reach a younger, more multicultural audience, and that is what the NBA provides," (IEG, 2017). This same idea is applied in esports. The audience in esports is much younger than any traditional sport, and because of how esports' medium of delivery is through free live streaming platforms, like Twitch and YouTube Gaming, esports can be viewed by many different countries and cultures.

Most of the esports entities that State Farm sponsors are leagues, but there are events that they sponsor through their deals with leagues as well. Typically, this is being used to create brand awareness for State Farm, but also influence a brand image, as there may not be one already established in the esports industry for their brand.

State Farm seems to have wanted to go big on their first esports sponsorship, which is why they started off sponsoring League of Legends tournaments. In 2018, the year State Farm began sponsoring the League of Legends Championship Series, the tournament peaked at over 2 million concurrent viewers, nearly 100 million total views, with around 82.4 million hours watched (Escharts, n.d.). This gave State Farm a perfect way to test the waters of esports to see how audiences would react to them entering the industry, as well as how well their brand could work in these sponsorships. According to Ed Gold, there was overwhelmingly positive reception to their entrance. He said, "when it was announced that we were partnering with League of Legends last year, the

community has only embraced State Farm. They see a major, traditional regular sports advertiser getting involved in their sport and bringing legitimacy to what they're doing..." (Hultgren, 2019). This quote shows that State Farm entered esports with a positive brand image. Esports has seen lots of hesitancy from companies entering the industry, so seeing a major name like State Farm start sponsoring some of the biggest titles in esports made fans and competitors feel acknowledged.

State Farm's sponsorships with more esports leagues like the Rocket League Championship Series, NBA 2K League, and Overwatch League is mainly for a larger reach in the esports industry. They saw their own success the year prior in League of Legends and felt like the same strategy could be implemented in other games. At this point, State Farm was involved with four different game leagues, and in each of those, State Farm had received naming rights to an analyst desk or a broadcast segment. Gold goes on to explain why they chose this strategy. In an interview with Event Marketer, Gold draws comparisons to ESPN's College Game Day segment to the Overwatch League's Watch Point segment, along with other naming rights opportunities. Gold says, "As the esports leagues have become more modeled on traditional sports leagues, we've taken what we've learned from traditional sports and brought it into esports..." (Hultgren, 2019). With State Farm's implementation of their strategies from traditional sports, they were able to create sponsorship opportunities that felt natural to esports leagues and viewers. They were also able to reach into these new categories and create a brand image that was not there before.

It should be noted that in August of 2021, State Farm pulled out of their sponsorship deal with the Overwatch League. This decision was due to a series of

workplace harassment allegations towards Activision Blizzard, the publisher and studio combination that created Overwatch and runs the league. State Farm pulled out of this deal because they did not want the brand image of Activision Blizzard to transfer to their own brand through association. Continued association with Activation Blizzard could have tarnished State Farm's overwhelmingly positive image that it has maintained since its entrance into esports.

State Farm's most recent deal with Twitch Rivals is another way to increase their reach and to create more brand awareness. The tournaments in Twitch Rivals typically have less gaming professionals and more streamers and entertainers, meaning that these tournaments reach a different audience. This partnership allows State Farm to have access to an audience in gaming that may not be interested in the high level esports, and allows them to cover a large area, as Twitch Rivals consists of a plethora of games broadcasted over 200 days during 2021.

DrLupo remains as the only individual player that has a sponsorship deal with State Farm. This may be a way for State Farm to test the waters with sponsoring individuals. If they believe this is a successful partnership, they should expand to other players. However, DrLupo is not an esports professional, he is a streamer and an entertainer. DrLupo does not compete within the top tier tournaments like the ones State Farm sponsors. However, streamers with a large viewer base tend to have more notoriety than esports professionals, so that could explain why DrLupo has been their first and only pickup so far. A sponsorship with DrLupo provides a reach into a similar audience that Twitch Rivals attracts. These audiences are casual viewers who watch for the personality of streamers, not for gaming at its highest level.

Another reason for sponsoring DrLupo is for the potential of transferring his brand image to State Farm. DrLupo's history with setting up fundraisers has given him a positive brand image of giving back to the community. State Farm wants to take that reputation and try to apply that to themselves for DrLupo's audience. Since part of DrLupo's negotiations were to have State Farm donate to these fundraisers, it not only helped satisfy their new partner, but it also allowed them to create a positive brand image in the eyes of DrLupo's viewers.

State Farm's entire strategy through esports is to boost the public's image of their brand and increase recognition within the industry. Even though State Farm's principal product is insurance, it is difficult to sell that type of product through advertising alone, especially since a vast amount of esports viewers may be too young to have to worry about insurance. Through their sponsorships, State Farm's main goal is to create more brand awareness and influence the esports audience's view of them, as there may not have been any sentiment with that audience before.

CONCLUSION

Razer and State Farm both have very influential positions in esports. The main idea for this study is to take the successful sponsorship strategies of one endemic and one non-endemic company and provide information for other brands that are wanting to enter the esports industry. While these strategies may not be applicable for every single business out there, they can still give helpful context for those who may be hesitant entering into a new sponsorship market.

The examples of Razer and State Farm need to be compared to show the difference in strategies from an endemic and non-endemic perspective. Throughout all of Razer's history, the company has sponsored teams, individuals, and events, and has made their own league out of the Razer Invitational. Razer has set itself up as one of the top gaming peripheral companies, and they do not want to give that up whatsoever. Since they sell these gaming products, sponsoring within the gaming industry will always provide a natural link to esports audiences. People who watch esports clearly have an interest in gaming, which would cause them to be interested with the products Razer creates. This can be said for almost every endemic brand. Esports will always be a safe place to advertise for endemic brands if a worthwhile product is presented.

Razer also has a product that is easier to sell. Buying a new keyboard, controller, chair, or any other gaming product is something that will not take much deliberation for a normal consumer. However, this is not the same for State Farm. Insurance, for the average consumer, is a product that will take a long time to consider and will be a deliberate decision. Because it sells an intangible product that consumers have difficulty evaluating until they own/use it, State Farm's return on investment for esports

sponsorships, and sponsorships in general, is difficult to measure. This characteristic of marketing an intangible product shows the difference in objectives between these two companies. Razer can logically make one of their objectives to be to increase sales, either directly or indirectly through another objective. State Farm cannot make this an objective. Instead, they need to lean heavily into creating brand awareness and influencing their image. This is done through the massive amount of brand placement they create with their sponsorship of leagues, events, and the only individual signing of DrLupo.

Since State Farm is not trying to sell a product with their sponsorships, they do not have to go through the trouble of creating a link between their brand and esports viewers. This may not be the same for every non-endemic sponsor. Some sponsors may enter esports with a physical product that they wish to promote or sell and taking State Farm's strategies may not be the best option. However, one thing every non-endemic brand should learn from State Farm is how similar their strategies are to their sponsorships in traditional sports. If there are companies that know how to promote their brand in a traditional sports setting, they will be able to succeed in the esports industry. Since esports has been formatting their tournaments similar to traditional sports, there will be sponsorship opportunities that are very similar to the NBA, NFL, MLB, and any other traditional sports league. The only thing that non-endemic brands need to worry about is making a way in which the sponsorship seems like a natural fit. State Farm showed that their involvement in esports helped the esports community feel legitimized in the eyes of the world, and any other non-endemic brand is going to have to hold up that reputation to succeed in esports sponsorships.

While the strategies of State Farm may not be adopted by every single non-endemic brand that enters esports, most endemic brands can learn from Razer's strategies. Most endemic brands are going to sell products that gamers have interests in. Endemic brands know how to market to gamers; otherwise, the company would not survive. Moving into esports sponsorship should not cause too much trouble, as long as they take care of and nurture the relationship they have with their partners.

While the examples of Razer and State Farm represent successful sponsorships for endemic and non-endemic brands in esports, this does not mean that every company should follow the exact same strategy these two industry leaders have produced. Razer's strategy may be easier to reproduce for endemic brands compared to State Farm's strategy for non-endemic brands mainly based on Razer's product being like most endemic brands in esports. Non-endemic brands can take inspiration from State Farm's strategy of learning from traditional sports sponsorships and applying what they have learned to esports to promote their specific brand.

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