

Conceptual Paper

Post Covid-19 Pandemic And The Rise Of eSports In Malaysia

Chee-Ngee Lim¹, Yen-Nee Goh^{1,*}, Salmi Mohd Isa¹, Ramayah Thurasamy² & Norazah Mohd Suki³

¹ Graduate School of Business, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800, USM Penang, Malaysia.

² School of Management, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800, USM Penang, Malaysia.

³ Othman Yeop Abdullah Graduate School of Business, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia.

*Corresponding author: yngoh@usm.my

Abstract: This conceptual paper explored the COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020 and rapidly spread to nations due to its strong transmissibility. The Covid-19 pandemic brought about the demise of several businesses, including the sports industry. Thus, the eSports industry has become a feasible alternative and requirement for sporting competitions. This study aims to analyse existing research on the history and growth of eSports in Malaysia to give better insights into its sustainable development, even post-pandemic. This study also covers a detailed assessment of gamers, marketers, and earnings. The study used a literature review strategy and conducted a thorough electronic search for relevant literature using Google Scholar, indexed databases and newspapers. Malaysian governments develop eSports training centres, fund allocations and academies to nurture the athletes and the eSports industry. Many gamers and audiences adapt to the new normal and technologies, particularly during the movement control order. Many Malaysians shift their behaviour and rely on the internet for home entertainment and activities. Covid-19 has enhanced eSports consumption, and the viewership will grow post-pandemic. Game developers invest more money to develop the eSports sector with innovative marketing strategies. This paper focuses on the rise of eSports and the chances for marketers to connect with customers. Many people believe eSports will continue growing, even post-pandemic, as many people have already adapted to it, and cutting-edge technologies also propel many people to accept this unique field.

Keywords: eSports; live stream; marketing strategy; post-pandemic; eSports market

Introduction

With the discovery of SARS-CoV2, which causes Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19), the World Health Organization (WHO) has declared an emergency to curb the transmission of novel Covid-19 (Marta et al., 2021). It has rapidly spread to every corner of the world due to its high transmission character (Ratten, 2020). The Coronavirus pandemic, often known as the Covid 19 pandemic, has caused worldwide sickness pandemics and substantial disruption since it began in early 2020 (Davies & Dunbar, 2022). The Covid-19 epidemic has wide-ranging, profound repercussions on every area of the economy. During the initial phase of the Covid-19 outbreak, Hirsch (2020) discussed in his study that the world has changed dramatically since the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic, and impossible to leave anything unchanged. Dealing with the unanticipated obstacles offered by the COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on everyone worldwide (Marta et al., 2021). Rojas-Valverde et al. (2022) reported that several circumstances had challenged global health and economic stability aside from the rapid increase in instances worldwide. Due to the possible risk of viral exposure and spread, one of these measures was isolation to inhibit virus transmission and thereby reduce the impact of exponential growth in new cases. In the meanwhile, most industries cooperated with the limits on large gatherings. As a result of these limits, new behavioural norms have emerged, such as substituting traditional

social activities with home-based alternatives. The prohibition of all forms of social engagement and work activities happened throughout the pandemic (Marta et al., 2021).

In 2022, Ke and Wagner saw the COVID-19 pandemic as profoundly altering our everyday routines in a short period. Every country on the planet has been affected by this pandemic. The Covid-19 epidemic has wide-ranging, profound repercussions on every area of the economy (Kemi & Chijioke, 2021). Sectors like education, health, society, culture, and tourism significantly impact. Recent evidence suggests that the virus's consequences include social isolation, travel limitations, school closures, job losses, and increased demand for medical supplies (Ke & Wagner, 2022). In the same year, Tang (2022) pointed out that the Malaysian government has been monitoring Covid-19 since January 2020, when three Chinese people tested positive for the virus. Following it, the public and private sectors have taken several actions to curb the spread of the pandemic. The measures included limiting admission of certain foreign nationals into Malaysia, self-quarantine for Malaysians and non-Malaysians returning from Covid-19 hotspots, and the passage and implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO). As a result, the constraint of the Malaysian populace to a protracted period of social isolation due to the MCO (bin Nasharuddin & Wong, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance of people adopting.

Sports are one aspect of life that the pandemic impacts (Marta et al., 2021). In a study into the sport during a pandemic, Westmattmann et al. (2021) discovered that the function of sports in this “new normal” remains ambiguous. While keeping active during COVID-19 is commonly emphasised, the risk of viral dissemination increases during vigorous activities such as running, cycling, fitness courses, or contact sports. Based on these findings, Westmattmann and colleagues highlighted that mass-attended sporting events represent an even more significant concern. People routinely identified them as sources of contagious diseases spreading globally.

Similarly, Tumijan et al. (2021) found that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted athletes and coaches due to the unclear situation and the continual suspension or delay of other local and national level tournaments. Communication between the coach and the athlete may contribute to their growing relationship because good communication between every coach and player is essential to the success of the team (Aznan et al., 2018), which might disrupt them during Covid-19. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly influenced sports scheduling (Rojas-Valverde et al., 2022), including organised group sports (Davies & Dunbar, 2022). Numerous critical league titles and activities have been suspended, cancelled (Rojas-Valverde et al., 2022), or reduced attendance (Davies & Dunbar, 2022). However, such determinations were sensible, precise, and promptly, lowering the risk of contagion among competitors, personnel, and viewers (Rojas-Valverde et al., 2022). Along the same line, Davies and Dunbar (2022) discovered the considerable impacts of COVID-19 on European football. The Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), the governing body of European football, is one of many sporting entities obliged to change tournament dates, postpone tournaments, or perform without audiences. The NBA, European professional football leagues (Ke & Wagner, 2022), the Tour de France, and the Olympic Games in Tokyo were all postponed, while events like Wimbledon and Paris-Roubaix 2020 were also cancelled (Westmattmann et al., 2021).

In the paper of Ke and Wagner (2022), compulsory isolation limits access to sports centres, closes public sports facilities, and restricts outdoor activity. So far, they have identified ineffective vaccinations as one of the most hotly debated topics. High infectivity limits the probability of a quick return to normal sports event operations. eSports then have repercussions as a viable option when “play apart together” becomes a prerequisite for sporting events. In a study examining eSports, Rosell Llorens (2017) reported that eSports could be done over large distances because matches and championships are online. Its popularity has exploded recently because of the proliferation of high-speed broadband (Rahmawati et al., 2019). As a result, the number of eSports has increased significantly. With the global COVID-19 pandemic, eSports has emerged as the sole sport unaffected. Javid et al. (2020, cited in López-Cabarcos et al., 2020) pointed out that innovative platforms such as social media have used ICTs as a part of other virtual-reality tools directed to video games and eSports during the COVID-19 outbreak. Subsequently, Marta et al. (2021) supported this view that gamers will not need to be physically available to start a tournament if they use ICT to communicate, which works excellent for the COVID-19 physical distance protocol. Virtual platforms are particularly valuable for amateur

and professional athletes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering the increased digital possibilities accessible, this has become a global trend in social media.

What is eSports

eSports is a collective word for video games. Game publishers and tournament organisers dominate the eSports sector. In America, video game contests have existed since the 1980s (Holden & Baker, 2019). The video game Othello, created by Nintendo of Japan, was released in this country. Consequently, technological advancements have enabled video games to improve over time (Liang, 2022). Brisbane was Australia's leading video gaming centre back in 1993 (Darchen, 2017). The evolution of eSports may be divided into three significant phases (Kim & Kim, 2022). Online gaming contests were "games" during the first wave (the 1970s and 1980s) when a tiny fraction of fans participated and watched others play in arcades or on gaming consoles (Kim & Kim, 2022). Subsequently, eSports gained popularity in the late 2010s when gamers usually played games on a computer or device (Migliore, 2021). Numerous connected participants played internet games between the 1990s and 2010. As a result, the recognition of internet games as "Sports (eSports)" happened (Kim & Kim, 2022). The rise of the cybercafe, often known as computer gaming hubs or PC Bangs, arose the eSports culture in South Korea (Billings & Hou, 2019). Furthermore, in the late 1990s, South Korea cemented Seoul as the eSports capital (Dal Yong, 2020). eSports now stand out as "entertainment media" in the third wave (from about 2010), when live games and eSports broadcasting have been in the limelight as amusement items (Kim & Kim, 2022). The first multiplayer flight in the Air Warrior games with modelled combat produced by Kesmai in Genie internet access debuted in 1986. Following that, many other eSports games surfaced, including GemStone and Neverwinter Nights in the early 1990s (Yusoff & Basri, 2021).

In the exciting study of eSports, Yusoff and Basri (2021) drew our attention to eSports, a rapidly rising digital sport that attracts millions of fans worldwide. Likewise, the British Medical Journal defines eSports as professional or competitive video gaming that has become a trend and a critical aspect of today's digital youth culture. The eSports sector is one of the latest technological breakthroughs in sports and shares many similar attributes to traditional sports. In 2021, Westmattmann et al. published a paper that described eSports as professional competitions in video games (e.g., sports simulators, such as FIFA) that have evolved at the junction of gaming and sporting events. Mainly, professional athletes compete solo or in groups (Ghazali et al., 2021) to see who is the greatest in a particular match. Players engage in tournaments, fights, and other events (Lehnert et al., 2022) using an electronic system (Yusoff & Yunus, 2021) facilitated by digital technologies (Ke & Wagner, 2022). A study of eSports conducted by Pluss et al. (2019) notes that human-computer interfaces (HCI) enable player and team input and system output in eSports systems. As a result, the interface makes it easier for individuals to get information, and an electronic system facilitates eSports media (Marta et al., 2021). The objective of this study was to review the literature on eSports development in Malaysia for the present and post-Covid-19 era. Furthermore, the study assessed how eSports would evolve in the future, beyond the epidemic, since eSports are an essential replacement for current sports. Similar to how traditional sports predominate, eSports are the monopolistic sports that follow.

Methodology

This study examined the development of eSports in Malaysia, the trend of eSports live-streaming, and market strategies using an integrative literature review methodology. A literature review is a methodical strategy to compile and summarise earlier studies (Synder, 2019). Torraco (2005) established an integrated literature review that combines the present body of information to produce new knowledge. In 2016, Torraco further explained that an integrative literature review evaluates new developing subjects that create a growing body of literature that may contain inconsistencies or discrepancies. Empirical studies utilised integrative literature review in the domain of eSports, such as sponsoring in eSports (Freitas et al., 2019) and eSports scholarship (Pizzo et al., 2022).

The researchers began their work by categorising the material, looking for eSports, and developing themes on several degrees. Then, the authors deployed a newspaper search using Google and a thorough electronic search using Google Scholar and indexed databases to find several research publications. The

indexed databases used were Era, MyCite, Scopus, SpringerLink and WoS. The authors searched the relevant articles by looking up the title and a few of its keywords, such as "history and development of eSports," "eSports live stream," "eSports market and marketing strategies," and "eSports post-pandemic." These publications were dispersed among several periodicals and reviewed. The writers looked at a total of 55 papers. These articles were published from 2017 to 2022.

Findings/Literature Review

This section discussed the rising of eSports in Malaysia, live streaming in eSports, the eSports markets and marketing strategies.

1. Rising of eSports in Malaysia

In recent years, eSports are undoubtedly the most significant change in sports, a newcomer in the unconventional sports market. By 2020, eSports' economic activity and scientific interest will accelerate (Rojas-Valverde et al., 2022). This new phenomenon has emerged over the last decade. People use electronic media to work out or play online games against anyone globally. Further, eSports have exploded globally and opened to all ages, including in Malaysia (Rasdi & Rusli, 2021). It can be played co-operatively by young people, parents, and children, unlike internet-based games, typically played alone (Rahmawati et al., 2019).

Malaysia has recently recognised eSports as a sport. More recent attention has focused on eSports, emphasised in the study by Yusoff and Yunus (2021); eSports training centres have sprung up throughout Malaysia in the last five years, including the Academy of eSports and eSports training centres elsewhere in Malaysia. In their review, eSports Malaysia (eSM) is the Malaysian Sports Commission's governing body for eSports. The establishment of eSM is to serve eSports athletes better, promote eSports in Malaysia (MIDA, 2020), and promote electronic sports competitions on May 1, 2015. Along the same line, Yusoff and Basri (2021) stated that the Malaysian Sports Commissioner authorised the association's registration and approval as eSports are growing vividly.

Furthermore, the Malaysian Ministry of Communications and Multimedia has recognised eSports as one of the ten major classifications in the Innovative Sector (MIDA, 2020). One of the most striking developments in Rasdi and Rusli's (2021) study is that universities also offer eSport programmes and modules. For example, Asia Pacific University (APU) and eSports Malaysia launched Malaysia's first eSports Academy; Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) added eSports as a co-curricular programme in 2020.

eSports are gaining popularity in Malaysia after decades of neglect. The Malaysian government has started to pay attention to eSports by allocating RM10 million to the Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC) to encourage eSports (Tariq, 2018). Later, Gomes (2020) identified Syed Saddiq Syed Abdul Rahman, Minister of Youth and Sports, who launched the Strategic Plan for eSports Development 2020-2025 in November 2019. The initiative aims to make Malaysia an eSports hub in Southeast Asia. Highlights of the programme include improving athlete welfare, addressing gaming addictions and stigma, holding regional conferences and summits, creating a national eSports League, and establishing accredited training centres. Later, the government allocated another RM20 million for eSports development and support under Budget 2020. In addition, the budget includes RM 5 million to build a Drone Sports Centre of Excellence (The Star, 2021). On top of it, the eSports business was also given RM15 million for 2021, up from RM10 million in the 2020 budget (Ragu, 2021). Due to the massive popularity of eSports, the government has committed RM45 million for the growth of eSports from 2019 to 2021. Recently, the Malaysian government announced to allocate RM 20 million in the Budget 2022 to develop and encourage and nurture young athletes (The Sun Daily, 2022).

Many professional eSports competitors have created and triumphed in global or Asian championships. In 2021, scholars Rasdi and Rusli stated that the first time the Southeast Asian Games (SEA Games) featured eSports in the game was in 2019. Philippines organised the SEA Games in its country, and Malaysia sent 24 participants (The Sun Daily, 2022). Malaysian athlete Dr Yew Weng Keng was the determined champion in the Hearthstone game. In the Mobile Legends: Bang Bang competition at the SEA Games, the Malaysia team also won the third position, with credit to Ahmad Ali Huzaif Abdullah, Abdul Wandu Abdul Kadir, Jamil

Nurolla, Izme Haqem Hamsjid, and Muhammad Hazeem Onn. Additionally, the team Orange Sphynx, previously known as Sphynx, won the Southeast Asian Rise of Legion CSGO: Lady (Online). Likewise, they managed to represent Malaysia and earned a third position for the Southeast Asian level of the Electronic Sports World Championship (WESG) (Yusoff & Basri, 2021). Furthermore, Malaysian eSports legends like 'Mushi' Chai Yee Fung, 'Ohaiyo' Khoo Chong Xin, 'MidOne' Cheng Yeik Nai, and 'Ah Fu' Tue Soon Chuan have been instrumental in boosting the nation's reputation abroad (Yusoff & Yunus, 2021). Recently, Malaysia won three gold medals at the 2022 Commonwealth Esports Championships in Birmingham, England. Malaysia's athletes who triumphed in the 2022 Commonwealth Esports Championships are Mohamad "Haikal" Md Noh, the female team Grills Gaming, which consists of Stephanie Lim Yuen Lii, Bette Chia Hooi Ping, Tan Lyn Xhin, Nadrah Saufi, Wong Wei Sian, and Lim Chern Tze, and the male team Dota 2, which consists of William Yeoh Kwok Teong, Denise Danial Abdul (Wee, 2022; Yeoh, 2022).

On the other hand, the Asian Olympic Council announced that eSports would be a competitive sport in the 2022 Asian Games (News Straits Time, 2018), with seven individual eSports events. As a result of significant participation from players and event organisers, Selangor has emerged as a national leader in eSports (Lim, 2021). Selangor Esports City is an eSports development hub established in Shah Alam. It is a cooperation between the Esports Selangor Association (ESS), Malaysia Electronic Sports Federation (MESF) and Universiti Malaysia of Computer Science and Engineering (UNIMY), with technical partner Serba Dinamik Group Bhd., which focuses on growing the local eSports segment. In April 2021, the agreement of an MOU to transform a hotel near the Darul Ehsan Aquatic Centre in Shah Alam into Selangor Esports City. Selangor Esports City provides e-games, academic, caster, entertainment-based and virtual competitive gaming training (Lim, 2021). Furthermore, the opening of the largest eSports facility in Southeast Asia in 2021 in Quill City Mall, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, aims to generate a continuous eSports ecosystem (Malay Mail, 2022).

2. eSports and Live Stream

In a comprehensive study of eSports, Lehnert et al. (2020) stated that eSports events are frequently staged in stadiums or arenas, giving fans a typical sporting experience. However, COVID-19 has forced the cancellation, delay, or alteration of live sports, including the closure of huge stadiums. Updating live events has often practically vanished (Ke & Wagner, 2022). In recent years, streaming systems have grown in popularity, allowing spectators to watch games and eSports in real-time. As a result, new players, eSports, and the live broadcasting of video games are emerging, despite the revival of live sports (Lehnert et al., 2020). It has also been observed by Nauright et al. (2020) earlier that there are numerous eSports competitions based on the various video game genres streamed globally. With the current condition of the pandemic COVID-19, practising eSports is one approach to being safe at home. A recent study by Marta et al. (2021) highlighted that the competition could conduct through cell phones, and competitors can practise physical separation by following COVID-19 regulations. Smartphones and desktop PCs conveniently provide access to live and recorded sporting events. Thus, fans can still go into Facebook's live-streaming service to watch the tournaments. Various eSports events have been created for participants and spectators to achieve this aim (Rasdi & Rusli, 2021).

Ling et al. (2021) drew on the work of Tanha (2020), who identified that people are increasingly turning to social media as it has played a crucial role in the continuing COVID-19 pandemic and continues to do so. These studies indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has proven the need for humans to adapt to new circumstances, which has imposed a technological effect on our daily lives. Undisputedly, the digital transformations will accelerate, changing our society's future. Subsequently, the gaming and eSports industries have experienced rapid technology advancements and the emergence of video games, which have thrived during the COVID-19 outbreak to outperform Covid-19. In addition, Salman (2021) believed that social isolation poses severe challenges to one's well-being, emotional health, psychological and social wellness, and overall mental health. In times like these, people require the social and emotional intimacy of their family members, friends, and peers. As a result, the gamers feel more connected to the gaming community and have more companionship with their fellow players (Rahmawati et al., 2019). Therefore, eSports connect many

individuals, including group members, supporters, funders, and officials of gaming businesses during and post-pandemic (Kim et al., 2020). Although in Ke and Wagner's paper, the global pandemic compels sports to move to eSports (2022), they believe that people have more incredible spare time during the stay-at-home policy, which requires amusement. As a result, audiences tend to choose eSports content over sports content due to the global pandemic, making it more attractive and acceptable. Supporting this view, Hong et al. (2022) wrote that digital games are often relaxing for families during lockdown constraints and connections with friends and relatives. As a result, audiences crave new competitive entertainment content, which eSports may deliver. A previous study by López-Cabarcos et al. (2020) to investigate the rise of gaming in the Covid-19 pandemic also noted that eSports is a method to relieve stress and live experiences like those they would have had before the pandemic. Therefore, many people believe eSports will continue to flourish in the content of the gaming industry post-pandemic.

This finding also accords with Salman's (2021) earlier observation, which showed that most Malaysians' behavioural changes and rely on internet media for entertainment and activities at home during the movement control order. The findings of a study conducted by Pu et al. (2021) significant implicated that the renowned video game streaming site, Twitch, set new milestones in 2020 by having its members watch a total of 17 billion hours of gameplay, which is an increase of 83% from the previous year. Pu and colleagues asserted that the highly dynamic nature and community-based streaming formats represent a famous avenue for esports consumption and a vital component of gaming culture. Another exciting analysis by Marta et al. (2021) also found that Covid-19 has increased the consumption of eSports, especially the viewership on live-streaming sites such as YouTube Gaming and Twitch. The viewership had surpassed 10 million. Due to the convenience of inter-device communication, watching eSports competitions is as simple as watching traditional sports live on television. This phenomenon indicates an increasing trend of consumers using live-streaming sites to watch games whenever and wherever they choose. A total of 42.5 million people tended to watch eSports in SEA by the end of 2021. Surprisingly, the anticipation of Malaysia has the fifth greatest audience at 4.1 million, which shows that pandemic drives more people to watch eSports live (Tariq, 2021). This exciting development occurred after Media Prima Group broadcasted a FIFA Online 3 National Championship in Malaysia in late 2017; the country's interest in gaming sports grew. At the same time, it was revealed on television and lived streamed to an audience of 300,000 (Toh, 2019). A survey conducted by Newzoo revealed that the worldwide eSports audience would reach 474 million in 2021, up from 435.9 million in 2020 and 397.8 million in 2019. The eSports community has grown to roughly 500 million spectators and will grow even more. As a result, a more significant audience results in more revenue and future growth (Kim et al., 2020). Additionally, insiders believe hybrid events with online and offline components will become increasingly popular after the outbreak, sustaining the new fans earned during the pandemic (Tariq, 2021).

One significant study by Lehnert et al. (2020) examined the trend of eSports streaming and found that streaming is available on many platforms, including Twitch, YouTube Gaming, Facebook Gaming, and Dailymotion. Organisers often stream events live and on-demand via digital platforms like Twitch.tv, Mixer, and YouTube, enabling eSports to persist in the face of the 2020 global pandemic. In 2021, Yunus and Basri once published their major survey of eSports streaming and discovered that successful streamers have over one million followers. They can attract thousands of followers regularly. Additionally, subscriptions from the audience can offer cash. Therefore, participants will use the opportunity to perform a live broadcast on social media such as Facebook. A vast audience that gives them stars allows them to make thousands of Ringgits, as Facebook will pay them 0.01 USD per star. This phenomenon also attracts many eSports players in Malaysia to have live streaming on Facebook and other social networking sites. Along the same line, Lehnert (2020) reported 2.4 million viewers per second in the second quarter of 2020; Twitch is the industry's busiest platform for hours watched and broadcasted. On track to generate \$3 billion yearly and reach 300 million global viewers by 2022. A year later, Yusoff and Yunus (2021) also pointed out that the audience can comment while the player is playing, and then the player can respond to the audience. Therefore, hundreds of thousands of people will see a player's game online because YouTube is an excellent platform for live streaming online games. The evidence reviewed here suggests growing investor and international brand support, the power and hazards

of eSports personalities, the expansion of social networks and shifting spectator demographics amidst the pandemic.

3. eSports Market and Marketing Strategies

An eSports event involves not just participants but also organisers and sponsorships, broadcasters, and spectators (Marta et al., 2021). In a previous study of global sport, Chanavat (2017) observed that eSports grew in popularity and the worldwide eSports audience would exceed 385 million, with 191 million fans in 2017. Three years later, Gomes (2020) identified that the worldwide eSports sector has risen, gaining investors and media attention. With China leading the way, Asia will continue to be the driving force behind eSports' rise. Globally, Newzoo claimed that South-East Asia earned gaming revenues of USD4.4 billion (RM18.64 billion) in 2019/2020, representing a 16% year-on-year growth. Subsequently, in another significant study, the 2021 Global Esports and Streaming Market Report conducted by Newzoo reviewed that global eSports income would reach USD947 million (RM4 billion) with 663 million spectators. Advertisements, sponsorship deals, and broadcasting rights account for 90% of the revenue in the eSports industry. The eSports sector will develop at 14.5 %, generating US\$1.6 billion in revenue by 2024, making eSports one of the world's fastest-growing industries (The Sun Daily, 2022). Malaysia is the world's 21st largest eSports market, valued at \$586.7 million (RM2.4 billion), with over 14 million participants (Yusoff & Basri, 2021) and expected revenue of RM2 billion in 2017 (Malay Mail, 2022). Yusoff and Basri (2021) examined the detailed study of eSports and demonstrated that from June to December 2019, 87% of Malaysia's 20.1 million players spent money on in-game virtual items. According to another business news source, in 2019, Malaysians spent RM2.7 billion on gaming alone. In 2020, various event organisers rented venues at EBN Esports City to stream their events online. In addition, online eSports tournaments and events will continue to organise after the pandemic (Lim, 2021). These studies indicate that Malaysia is one of Southeast Asia's largest gaming markets, with an astonishing amount spent in the eSports sector (The Sun Daily, 2022).

Thus far, several studies have attempted to evaluate eSports and emphasised that eSports' increasing substitutability for traditional sports. Hence, people should not view eSports as merely a brand extension of conventional sports but as a significant source of disruption that can compel sports organisations to innovate their brands (Ke & Wagner, 2022; López-Cabarcos et al., 2020). Research on eSports gaming often can find one of the well-known early studies by Rosell Llorens (2017), and reported that the games industry has evolved into a hugely lucrative business over the past few decades. The digitalisation of society has substantially impacted various economic sectors, including the gaming industry. Based on the opportunities that internet gaming has brought and aided the expansion of the mentioned business model, which is now known as eSports. Subsequently, in a detailed analysis conducted by Ratten (2020), the conventional sports sector has dramatically changed since the pandemic. It is impossible to go back to how the sports sector was before the pandemic, as the behaviours and routines have altered. The potential of eSports to grow post-pandemic formed the central focus of a study by Kim et al. (2020), in which the authors found that marketing accounts for more than half of the revenues generated. As a result, numerous conventional sports businesses are investing extensively in eSports properties, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Kim and colleagues stressed that the eSports sector would grow and generate millions of dollars in income yearly; the esports sector would increase yearly. Although the eSports sector's expansion significantly influences profit growth rather than viewership increase, the researchers assume that the ability to commercialise the audience's interest will be crucial to the industry's future.

New marketing tactics have emerged, and streaming may help professional teams promote sponsors and meet contractual requirements. eSports have been an excellent alternative for clubs and content-generating enterprises to mitigate the losses caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (López-Cabarcos et al., 2020). In the preliminary study of brand marketing by Hirsch (2020), sports sponsorship is not new in marketing as it was a popular strategy in the 1930s when sports were gaining popularity in other sectors. Undeniably, sponsorships and advertising still generate most eSports revenue and are estimated to account for over half of SEA revenue by 2024. Therefore, more eSports organisations, tournament organisers, broadcasters, and marketing agencies will emerge. The industry's income will skyrocket from US\$39.2mil (RM162.78mil) in 2021 to US\$72.5mil

(RM300.76mil) in 2024. Insiders predict that hybrid events with online and offline components will become increasingly widespread (Tariq, 2021).

Those game developers invest more money, better broadcasts, and higher production quality follow. With the explosion of the creative industries, Malaysians are flocking to the virtual world to become game developers. It also encourages other young technology entrepreneurs to enter the game development sector. As a result, several local universities, and colleges, such as Limkokwing University of Creative Technology, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, and Management and Science University (MSU), provide game design, software development, art, and programming courses. Malaysian firms are also making waves in gaming. With MIDA's help, Passion Republic Sdn. Bhd., a Malaysian animation company, will expand its animation studio and R&D capacities and grow domestically and globally by producing new online content in the game sector (MIDA, 2020).

Almost two years ago, Gomes (2020) showed that investors could take numerous ways advantage of the rising eSports market. For example, private markets like venture capital and private equity can invest in teams directly. Tencent Holdings Ltd. and SEA Ltd. are the parent companies of Garena, a digital services firm involved in gaming, eSports, e-commerce, and digital finance. The Garena platform offers popular mobile and PC online games tailored to its seven markets: Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines, and Taiwan. Several authors have explained the eSports market and stated that this market's valuation best illustrates the characteristics of eSports development. It was \$655 million in 2017 and over \$1 billion in 2019. By 2022, this fast-expanding sector will be worth about \$1.8 billion, generate \$3 billion yearly and reach 300 million global viewers. Global pandemic 2020, eSports celebrity power and risks, social media, and changing demographics contribute to the rising of eSports. Streaming celebrities generate money through endorsements and fan donations or subscriptions. Partnered streamers can also get a share of the advertising income generated by Twitch. The broadcast is free to watch because the streams are ad-supported. The digital aspect of eSports material also offers new media technology prospects for content creation (Ke & Wagner, 2022; Lehnert et al., 2020). With the advancement of technology, esports has the potential to become the next major sport, and towns and governments will need to begin investing in the business (Kim et al., 2020).

A critical study from Lehnert (2020) also showed that the growing popularity of eSports has increased sponsor interest and team professionalism. Sports organisations frequently invite well-known athletes to compete in today's eSports world. The presence of these recognised individuals may enhance the sports brand's image and appeal, positively affecting the eSports extension of these sports organisations. The prize money comes from game developers, brand endorsements, advertising, and ticket sales. As a result, Malaysia's government has highlighted eSports as a future economic driver. Among the most prestigious sporting events is the Fifa World Cup. Fifa declared in 2017 that the Fifa eWorld Cup 2018 would be a gaming recreation of one of the world's most extraordinary sporting events (The Sun Daily, 2022). Malaysia has also hosted LEVEL UP KL, where Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC) has conducted an annual Southeast Asia games industry event since 2015. Researchers attempted to evaluate the potential of eSports in Malaysia, and Yusoff and Basri (2021) realised many eSports pro athletes had won world or Asian titles. Malaysia even hosted its first national eSports championship for disabled people in September 2021. This incident symbolises the spirit of eSports for all. Enabling event organisers and eSports players to arrange professional and grassroots leagues, Esukan.gg hosted the Para MEL21, the National Esports Platform, developed by Impact Integrated and Techninier based in Malaysia (New Straits Time, 2021). Techninier remains committed to helping the government build the eSports sector and make Malaysia an Esports Hub in Southeast Asia (New Straits Times, 2021). Skinner and Smith (2021, citing Grix et al., 2020) pointed out that the phenomenal rise of esports during the pandemic, and its utilisation by major sports to augment their traditional offering with a new layer, should continue and mounting of its rapid growth post-pandemic. Taken together, Kim et al. (2020) supported the view of prosperity in the eSports market. They draw on Lee and Schoenstedt's (2011) analysis that an increasing number of businesses are beginning to support eSports competitions and establishing eSports leagues.

Conclusion

This paper is the first study to investigate the rising of eSports post-pandemic. Overall, eSports research is in its nascency. eSports is a sport in Malaysia, as gamers require many skills and strategies to compete in tournaments. Additionally, eSports also share similar features to sports, which encourages the growing eSports market, with the allocation of funds from the government to nurture the eSports athletes and set up eSports training and an academy in Malaysia to develop the growth of the eSports sector. Generally, the eSports sector generates sales and revenues from selling tickets and viewership of tournaments. Besides, streamers earn from advertisements and subscriptions, whilst top streamers make from sponsorships and partnerships. The facts show that eSports and their economic significance are becoming increasingly well-known worldwide.

Additionally, the forthcoming eSports will vividly develop beyond the pandemic because eSports play a crucial role as a substitute for modern sports. Likewise, eSports are part of the predominance of sports; and eSports are the subsequent monopolistic sports. In content development and dissemination, eSports has shown to be a unique and sustainable replacement for traditional sports.

COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on society due to the economic and social implications it has caused, which have had a significant impact on the sports business. Many communities have experienced lockdown times, resulting in higher levels of isolation and decreased levels of economic activity. Consequently, the adjustments would lead to a fundamental shift in the sports industry. A crisis always brings with it some unexpected and unwelcome surprise. The low chance of a crisis happening makes it hard to plan and implement strategies to deal with the change. However, it becomes swiftly growing amid Covid-19. eSports are on the edge of mainstream recognition in most countries as their popularity rises. The success of eSports as a sports extension amid the Covid-19 and the extension will continue after the pandemic. The evidence suggests that eSports is the only sport sustained throughout the outbreak of pandemics. Players do not need to attend physically, but they can communicate using ICT, which is ideal for maintaining social distancing in curbing the transmission of Covid-19. With the popularity of eSports, it successfully gained considerable attention from marketers, sponsors, streamers, and players to enter the mainstream of sports. Last but not least, experts in sports administration should be entirely prepared for all chances and obstacles, as the discourse of contemporary sports is subject to ongoing change.

Acknowledgement: This work was supported by the “Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia for Fundamental Research Grant Scheme with Project Code: FRGS/1/2021/SS01/USM/02/11”.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Aznan, E. A. M., Baseri, M. F., & Ali, M. N. S. (2018). The relationships between communication management and coach-athlete relationship among sport team athletes in Perlis. *e-BANGI*, 13(1), 1-9.
- Billings, A. C., & Hou, J. (2019). The origins of esports. *Understanding esports: An Introduction to the global phenomenon*, 31.
- bin Nasharuddin, A. N., & Wong, W. Y. (2021). Covid-19 and household financial: A study among UKM undergraduate. *e-BANGI*, 18(7), 41-53.
- Chanavat, N. (2017). French football, foreign investors: global sports as country branding. *Journal of Business Strategy*, 38(6), 3-10. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JBS-04-2017-0053>
- Dal Yong, J. (2020). Historiography of Korean esports: Perspectives on spectatorship. *International Journal of Communication*, 14, 3727-3745.
- Darchen, S. (2017). Creative clusters? Analysis of the video game industry in Brisbane, Australia (1980s-2014). *International Journal of Knowledge-Based Development*, 8(2), 168-182.
- Davies, C., & Dunbar, N. (2022). European football and the Covid-19 pandemic—its impact on competition, clubs and player contracts. *Malaysian Journal of Sport Science and Recreation (MJSSR)*, 18(1), 66-75. <https://ir.uitm.edu.my/id/eprint/60695>

- Freitas, B. D. A., Contreras-Espinosa, R. S., & Correia, P. Á. P. (2019). How society's negative view of videogames can discourage brands from sponsoring eSports. In *International Conference on Videogame Sciences and Arts* (pp. 136-149). Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-37983-4_11
- Ghazali, N. F., Sanat, N., & As' ari, M. A. (2021). Esports Analytics on PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds Player Placement Prediction using Machine Learning. *International Journal of Human and Technology Interaction (IJHaTI)*, 5(1), 17-28.
- Gomes, V. (2020). The cover story: the esports boom. *The Edge Markets*. <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/cover-story-esports-boom>
- Grix, J., Brannagan, P. M., Grimes, H., & Neville, R. (2020). The impact of Covid-19 on sport. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 13(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2020.1851285>
- Hirsch, P. B. (2020). A breakfast of champions: brand marketing lessons from the Great Depression. *Journal of Business Strategy*, 41(4), 63-67. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JBS-04-2020-0081>
- Holden, J. T., & Baker III, T. A. (2019). The econtractor? Defining the esports employment relationship. *American Business Law Journal*, 56(2), 391-440. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ablj.12141>
- Hong, J. C., Juan, H. C., & Hung, W. C. (2022). The role of family intimacy in playing collaborative e-sports with a Switch device to predict the experience of flow and anxiety during COVID-19 lockdown. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 132, 107244. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2022.107244>
- Javaid, M., Haleem, A., Vaishya, R., Bahl, S., Suman, R., & Vaish, A. (2020). Industry4.0 technologies and their applications in fighting COVID-19 pandemic. *Diabetes and Metabolic Syndrome Clinical Research and Reviews*, 14(4), 419–422. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dsx.2020.04.032>
- Ke, X., & Wagner, C. (2022). Global pandemic compels sport to move to esports: understanding from brand extension perspective. *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 27(1-2), 152-157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2020.1792801>
- Kemi, M. F., & Chijioke, U. (2021). Personal study, peer engagement and learning infrastructure access during Covid-19 shock: Implication for rural based-university students' in 4IR. *e-BANGI*, 18(5), 230-243.
- Kim, H. M., & Kim, S. (2022). The show must go on: Why Korea lost its first-mover advantage in Esports and how it can become a major player again. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 179, 121649. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2022.121649>
- Kim, Y. H., Nauright, J., & Suveatwatanakul, C. (2020). The rise of E-Sports and potential for post-Covid continued growth. *Sport in Society*, 23(11), 1861-1871. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2020.1819695>
- Lee, D., & L. J. Schoenstedt. (2011). Comparison of eSports and traditional sports consumption motives. *ICHPER-SD Journal of Research*, 6(2), 39–44.
- Lehnert, K., Walz, A., & Christianson, R. (2020). The booming eSports market: a field day for fans. *Journal of Business Strategy*, 43(2), 122-128. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JBS-07-2020-0159>
- Liang, Y. (2022). Analysis of the video gaming industry. In *2022 2nd International Conference on Enterprise Management and Economic Development (ICEMED 2022)* (pp. 1146-1150). Atlantis Press. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2991/aebmr.k.220603.185>
- Lim, J. (2021). Leveling up to stay competitive. *The Star*. <https://www.thestar.com.my/metro/metro-news/2021/09/11/levelling-up-to-stay-competitive>
- Ling, G. J., Yaacob, A., & Latif, R. A. (2021). A bibliometric analysis on the influence of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. *SEARCH Journal of Media and Communication Research*, 13(3), 35-55.
- López-Cabarcos, M. Á., Ribeiro-Soriano, D., & Piñeiro-Chousa, J. (2020). All that glitters is not gold. The rise of gaming in the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Innovation & Knowledge*, 5(4), 289-296. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jik.2020.10.004>
- Malay Mail. (2022, March 7). Hanoi SEA games: Malaysia Esports Federation ask FAM to name players selected through qualifiers for Fifa Online 4 event. *Malay Mail*. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/sports/2022/03/07/hanoi-sea-games-malaysia-esports-federation-ask-fam-to-name-players-selecte/2046015>

- Marta, R. F., Syarnubi, K. L., Wang, C., Cahyanto, I. P., Briandana, R., & Isnaini, M. (2021). Gaining public support: framing of esports news content in the Covid-19 pandemic. *SEARCH Journal of Media and Communication Research*, 13(2), 71-86.
- MIDA. (2020). The gaming industry: a new game of growth. MIDA. <https://www.mida.gov.my/the-gaming-industry-a-new-game-of-growth/>
- Nauright, J., Zipp, S., & Kim, Y. H. (2020). The sports world in the era of Covid-19. *Sport in Society*, 23(11), 1703-1706. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2020.1834196>
- New Straits Times. (2021, November 1). #TECH: new milestone for Malaysia's para e-sports league. *New Straits Times*. <https://www.nst.com.my/lifestyle/bots/2021/11/741836/tech-new-milestone-malaysias-para-e-sports-league>
- Pizzo, A. D., Su, Y., Scholz, T., Baker, B. J., Hamari, J., & Ndanga, L. (2022). eSports scholarship review: synthesis, contributions, and future research. *Journal of Sport Management*, 36(3), 228-239. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2021-0228>
- Pluss, M. A., Bennett, K. J., Novak, A. R., Panchuk, D., Coutts, A. J., & Fransen, J. (2019). Esports: The chess of the 21st century. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 156. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00156>
- Pu, H., Kim, J., & Daprano, C. (2021). Can esports substitute traditional sports? The convergence of sports and video gaming during the pandemic and beyond. *Societies*, 11(4), 129. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc11040129>
- Ragu, D. (2021). Be transparent in spending budget for esports industry, govt told. *Free Malaysia Today*. <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2021/11/05/be-transparent-in-spending-budget-for-esports-industry-govt-told/>
- Rahmawati, D., Mulyana, D., & Safitri, D. (2019). Knowledge sharing dynamics among Dota 2 online gamers at Indonesian internet cafes. *SEARCH Journal of Media and Communication Research*, 11(3), 41-53.
- Rasdi, N. N., & Rusli, A. N. (2021). Playing e-sport among university students: benefits and disadvantages. *Journal Voice of Academia*, 17(1), 73-80. <https://ir.uitm.edu.my/id/eprint/46792>
- Ratten, V. (2020). Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and sport entrepreneurship. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research*, 26(6), 1379-1388. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEBR-06-2020-0387>
- Rojas-Valverde, D., Córdoba-Blanco, J. M., & González-Salazar, L. (2022). Cyclists or avatars: is virtual cycling filling a short-term void during Covid-19 lockdown?". *Managing Sport and Leisure*, 27(1-2), 158-162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23750472.2021.1879665>
- Rosell Llorens, M. (2017). eSport gaming: the rise of a new sports practice. *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, 11(4), 464-476. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2017.1318947>
- Salman, A. (2021). Media dependency, interpersonal communication and panic during the Covid-19 movement control order. *SEARCH Journal of Media and Communication Research*, 13(1), 79-92.
- Skinner, J., & Smith, A. C. (2021). Introduction: sport and COVID-19: impacts and challenges for the future (Volume 1). *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 21(3), 323-332. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2021.1925725>
- Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. *Journal of Business Research*, 104, 333-339. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039>
- Summerley, R. K. (2021). The future of esports institutions. *Global eSports: Transformation of Cultural Perceptions of Competitive Gaming*, 15.
- Tang, K. H. D. (2022). Movement control as an effective measure against Covid-19 spread in Malaysia: an overview. *Journal of Public Health*, 30(3), 583-586. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10389-020-01316-w>
- Tanha, M. A. (2020). Exploring the credibility and self-presentation of Insta micro-celebrities in influencing the purchasing decisions of Bangladeshi users. *SEARCH Journal of Media and Communication Research*, 12(2), 1-20.
- Tariq, Q. (2018). Investments still pouring in for Malaysian eSports. *The Star*. <https://www.thestar.com.my/tech/tech-news/2018/11/16/more-money-for-esports/>

- Tariq, Q. (2021). Report: South-East Asia's eSports gamers and viewers prefer a mobile-first experience. *The Star*. <https://www.thestar.com.my/tech/tech-news/2021/09/13/report-south-east-asias-esports-gamers-and-viewers-prefer-a-mobile-first-experience>
- The Star. (2021). Budget 2022: RM20mil set aside to develop emerging eSports talents. *The Star*. <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/nation/2021/10/29/budget-2022-rm20mil-set-aside-to-develop-emerging-esports-talents>
- The Sun Daily. (2022, January 24). Should esports be regarded as a sport?. *The Sun Daily*. <https://www.thesundaily.my/opinion/should-esports-be-regarded-as-a-sport-KN8791905#:~:text=Despite%20the%20positive%20growth%20and,widely%20accepted%20as%20a%20sport>
- Toh, B. (2019). Can Malaysia's eSports go mainstream?. *The Edge Markets*. <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/can-malysias-esports-go-mainstream>
- Torraco, R. J. (2005). Writing integrative literature reviews: Guidelines and examples. *Human Resource Development Review*, 4(3), 356-367. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484305278283>
- Torraco, R. J. (2016). Writing integrative literature reviews: Using the past and present to explore the future. *Human Resource Development Review*, 15(4), 404-428. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484316671606>
- Tumijan, W., Puad, S. M. S. M., Ismail, M., Nor, M. A. M., Halim, N. A. A., Amri, H. F. H., & Mujail, M. (2021). Gender and type of sports difference on perceived coaches' behavior during Covid-19 pandemic: a case study of Federal Territory Sports Council Sukma 2021 athletes. *Malaysian Journal of Sport Science and Recreation (MJSSR)*, 17(2), 315-327.
- Wee, J. (2022). Malaysia wins three gold medals at Commonwealth Esports Championships 2022 (VIDEO). *Malay Mail*. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/life/2022/08/08/malaysia-wins-three-gold-medals-at-commonwealth-esports-championships-2022-video/21704>
- Westmattmann, D., Grotenhermen, J. G., Sprenger, M., & Schewe, G. (2021). The show must go on- virtualisation of sport events during the Covid-19 pandemic. *European Journal of Information Systems*, 30(2), 119-136.
- Yeoh, A. (2022). Malaysia wins 3 gold medals at Commonwealth Esports Championships. *The Star*. <https://www.thestar.com.my/tech/tech-news/2022/08/08/malaysia-wins-3-gold-medals-at-commonwealth-esports-championships>
- Yusoff, N. H., & Basri, S. (2021). The role of socialisation towards participation of Malaysia Female players in e-sport. *International Journal of Social Science Research*, 3(1), 132-145.
- Yusoff, N. H., & Yunus, Y. H. M. (2021). Male dominant sport: the challenges of esports female athletes. *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, 29(2), 1415-1429.