Duty of Care in Esports: Organizational Support for Esports Players' Mental Wellbeing and Physical Health

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Abstract

This paper examines the perspectives of esports players on organizational support for enhancing their mental wellbeing and physical health throughout their esports careers. Drawing on one of the most extensive datasets in the field, to the author's knowledge, a total of 33 participants – professional (n = 21), semi-professional (n = 6), amateur (n = 4), and retired players (n = 2) – were recruited for the study. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis was conducted, identifying three key themes: (a) Limited organizational support available, (b) Demand for psychological and mental support, and (c) Importance of maintaining fitness and addressing physical health issues. The results indicate that organizational support was limited, necessitating further attention from stakeholders to establish structured support systems for players. The findings also highlight the significance of providing support to enhance esports players' performance and overall wellbeing, emphasizing the promotion of mental wellbeing and physical health.

Keywords: available resources, career and wellbeing support, support scheme development, support systems for esports players.

1. Introduction

Esports, the competitive and organized domain of video gaming (Jenny et al., 2017), has experienced rapid growth in recent years (Himmelstein et al., 2017), attracting increasing scholarly attention (Bányai et al., 2019; Pedraza-Ramirez et al., 2020). Universities worldwide now offer academic courses on esports, such as the University of South Carolina's program within its sport and entertainment management department (Funk et al., 2018). The University of Roehampton London provides esports scholarships, including one exclusively for women (University of Roehampton London, n.d.),

akin to those for high-performance athletes like the Talented Athlete Scholar Scheme (TASS) and Winning Students in the UK. Taylor (2012) posits that esports events' rules and structures resemble traditional sports, and professional esports players can be compared to high-performance athletes in terms of training, performance, and mental and physical states. Therefore, it is crucial to consider both the emerging esports literature and existing traditional sport research when exploring esports as an academic subject.

Research on esports encompasses various aspects, such as economics (e.g., Scelles et al., 2021), business management (e.g., Hedlund et al., 2020), and spectator motivation (e.g., Qian et al., 2020). While many studies offer insights into esports' diverse aspects, specific research explored the industry's unique challenges. Johnson and Woodcock (2021) discuss the industry's evolving work dynamics and profit opportunities. Witkowski and Manning (2019) examined the collaborative aspects, emphasizing expert gameplay, ownership, and networking. Regarding career aspect, Salo (2021) proposes a framework for esports athletes' transitions, while Meng-Lewis et al. (2022) suggested the Chaos Theory in Careers fits the esports scene, particularly in talent management. Given the industry's rapid evolution, it is critical for academic pursuits to remain current and aligned with its innovations and trends.

Studies on players' health and wellbeing have also increased (e.g., Hong, 2022; Wattanapisit et al., 2020). DiFrancisco-Donoghue et al. (2019) found that esports players train for three to 10 hours daily, often sitting for extended periods, resulting in physical and cognitive challenges. Martin-Niedecken and Schättin (2020) identified increased heart rate and muscle tension as common challenges, suggesting that optimal physical and cognitive health can improve tournament success. Kari et al. (2019) reported that 55.6% of surveyed esports players believed physical exercise improved their performance, but DiFrancisco-Donoghue et al. (2019) found that 40% did not engage in daily exercise.

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DiFrancisco-Donoghue et al. (2019) also observed a high prevalence of hand pain, eye fatigue, back/neck pain, and wrist pain among players. Psychological aspects, such as stressors and coping strategies, have also been studied (Smith et al., 2019; Leis & Lautenbach, 2020), with some professional players experiencing panic attacks or depression during their careers (Starkey, 2020). While gaming can be a coping mechanism for some (Kardefelt-Winther, 2017), researchers have identified potential negative effects, including aggression, addiction, and depression (Anderson et al., 2010; Ferguson, 2013; Lemola et al., 2011). Pereira et al. (2019) emphasized the need for medical attention to esports players, noting the unknown psychological and physiological demands and their short or long-term impacts. They advocated for the development of health care and prevention strategies addressing screen time, physical activity, injuries, and training environments.

Investigating organizational support for esports players is crucial for developing healthcare and prevention strategies. Greenleaf et al. (2001) suggested that a lack of support could negatively impact high-performance athletes' performance, emphasizing the importance of organizational support from National Governing Bodies (NGBs), National Olympic Committees (NOCs), sports psychologists, and social support. However, research on organizational support in high-performance sports remains limited (Hong & Coffee, 2018). While studies have measured organizational support for high-performance athletes through various factors (Maier et al., 2016; Nicholson et al., 2011), there is a lack of research on support systems addressing esports players' mental and physical health issues (Hong, 2022). Trotter et al. (2021) identified a positive link between esports players' social support, self-regulation, and in-game rank, noting esports' lacking organizational structure might cause these scores to fall behind traditional athletes. They, thus, urged research on enhancing esports programs to boost player performance and wellbeing. Hong (2022) highlighted the necessity for a collective support system for players, emphasizing the role of stakeholders such as game publishers and national esports associations in ensuring player health and wellbeing. Despite recognizing the significance of support in esports, there is limited research on organizational support. Establishing these initiatives might evolve similarly to traditional sports (Hong & Coffee, 2018). In this respect, it is critical to investigate the concept of "Duty of Care" in esports, as traditional sports have developed. "Duty of Care" can be defined as covering everything from personal safety and injury to mental health issues and support for elite-level individuals (Grey-Thompson, 2017). Seven priority areas have been identified: (a)

Education; (b) Transition; (c) Representation of the participant's voice; (d) Equality, diversity, and inclusion; (e) Safeguarding; (f) Mental welfare; (g) Safety, injury, and medical issues (Grey-Thompson, 2017). While the present study does not cover all priority areas and it might be challenging for the esports industry to address all given its infancy stage of development, this study addresses two important areas of mental welfare (i.e., mental wellbeing) and safety, injury, and medical issues (i.e., physical health). These areas can serve as a starting point for establishing the concept of duty of care in esports.

1.1. Theoretical background

To gain insights into the esports industry, it is essential to understand the stakeholders involved. Freeman (1984, p. 46) defines stakeholders as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organization's objectives." Stakeholder-based research has primarily focused on identifying various stakeholders and their influence (Rowley, 1997). A stakeholder approach (Freeman, 1984) suggests examining the interests of these groups to evaluate threats and opportunities for change, strategic planning, and selection of strategic options, as well as the successful implementation and management of change (Mason & Mitroff, 1981). In a rapidly evolving industry like esports, understanding stakeholder behavior is crucial (Brugha & Varvasovszky, 2000). Rowley (1997) employs social network analysis to describe how organizations are embedded within a relational network of stakeholders. The nature of this network and each organization's power within it influences their response to stakeholder demands. Network centrality (i.e., the position of actors in a network relative to others) and network density (i.e., the level of connectedness between them) are the two key factors used to describe an organization's resistance to stakeholder demands. Darnell et al. (2010) divided stakeholders into primary (directly impacting the value chain) and secondary categories (indirect influence). In this respect, Scholz (2020) outlined the esports ecosystem's key stakeholders, underscoring players as central, and emphasizing primary contributors such as game developers, professional teams, and tournament organizers as illustrated in Figure 1.

Primary stakeholders are crucial in creating suitable infrastructures for esports titles, with around 400 game titles played competitively (Scholz, 2020). Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory urges organizations to acknowledge stakeholders and their needs when devising strategies to improve performance. The central concept of stakeholder theory is that an organization's success relies on effective management

of stakeholder relationships (Freeman & Phillips, 2002). Although the esports ecosystem is not an organization, it can be viewed as a stakeholder network—a collection of actors or stakeholders linked by a set of connections (Morrow & Idle, 2008). Stakeholder theory has evolved from being organization-centric (Friedman & Miles, 2002) to focusing on how organizations situate themselves within a stakeholder network and how their positions, along with the network's nature, influence their reactions to stakeholder demands (Morrow & Idle, 2008; Rowley, 1997). As a result, the establishment of strong networks and relationships among stakeholders within the ecosystem is vital for the industry's sustainable growth and the success of each affiliated organization. Scholz (2020) also emphasizes the importance of the stakeholder network in forming a foundation for amateur and grassroots levels, fostering further industry growth.
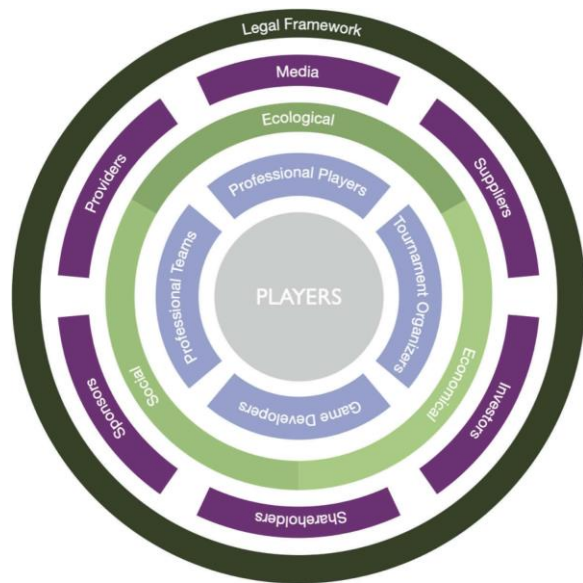

Figure 1. Categorization of the eSports ecosystem (Scholz, 2020).

This research project centers on players who are critical to the esports ecosystem, especially focusing on the experiences of professional players, as highlighted by Scholz (2020). Given that these players often dedicate themselves to a single esports title during their careers due to the competitive nature of the industry, their insights are particularly valuable. Their insights are especially valuable given that a significant portion of our participants are active professional players. This uniquely positions our study within the larger body of esports research, as the breadth and depth of our participant pool is considered significant. When compared to similar studies in the field, the considerable volume of our data, largely from current professionals,

offers a comprehensive lens through which to view organizational support structures. Through this substantial, interview-driven endeavor, our study captures detailed esports players' perspectives on organizational support for their mental wellbeing and physical health. This exploratory research, thus, seeks to provide empirical evidence on organizational support, addressing the gap in the existing literature.

2. Method

The present study utilized a qualitative approach to gain a deeper understanding of esports players' perspectives on organizational support for promoting their mental wellbeing and physical health, aligns with the interpretivist paradigm, in which the investigator seeks to comprehend and identify how esports players interpret their experiences related to their circumstances (Mallett & Tinning, 2014). Accordingly, a relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology were adopted, supporting the notion that societies are shaped by individuals' "subjectivities, interests, emotions, and values" (Sparkes, 1992, p. 5). These philosophical approaches were deemed appropriate for exploring and comprehending in-depth insights into esports players' perspectives on organizational support for enhancing their mental wellbeing and physical health. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to capture participants' subjective experiences (McArdle et al., 2012). The author, experienced in interviewing high-performance athletes about career transitions and well-being, leveraged her background as a female researcher in male-dominated spheres to quickly establish rapport with participants.

2.1. Participants

A total of 33 esports players at various career stages participated, including professional ($n = 21$), semi-professional ($n = 6$), amateur ($n = 4$), and retired players ($n = 2$). In qualitative studies, saturation guides sample adequacy, which is met when no new insights arise (Morse, 2015). Our sample size was selected to reach saturation, ensuring comprehensive representation of the subject and content validity (Francis et al., 2010). All participants have competed internationally, with two having won world championships in their respective games. To classify professional, semi-professional, and amateur esports players, the author collaborated with five industry stakeholders and two transitional sports academics. Due to industry and literature ambiguities, classifications were formed through team consensus. Semi-professional and amateur players identified themselves based on their ranking and the tier/league they participated in. However, due to the varying tier

and league systems across different games, defining these levels proved challenging. Following Hong's (2022) study on the roles and responsibilities of esports stakeholders in ensuring players' health and wellbeing, professional players were defined as full-time players competing in top-tier leagues and affiliated with professional teams. Semi-professional players were defined as part-time players competing in lower-tier leagues than professional players and holding other paid employment. Amateur players were part-time players competing in lower-tier leagues than semi-professional players, with their international tournament experience distinguishing them from casual players who primarily seek social connections and enjoyment from esports (Hedlund, 2020). Participants were from various countries and played both individual and team-based games. The study's 33 participants consisted of 32 males and one female. While only 13 participants provided their ages (see Table 1), the others indicated they were over 18 or in their 20s. Informed consent was obtained from 32 participants over 18, with one player under 18 providing informed consent through their team manager, who acted as their guardian. Code names were used to maintain participants' anonymity: 'Pro' for professional players, 'Semi-pro' for semi-professional players, 'Amateur' for amateur players, and 'Retired' for retired players. Participant information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants Information.

Code Name	Gender	Nationality	Level
Pro 1	Male	U.S.	Professional
Pro 2	Male	Finland	Professional
Pro 3	Male	Italy	Professional
Pro 4	Male	Italy	Professional
Pro 5	Male	Sweden	Professional
Pro 6	Male	Japan	Professional
Pro 7	Male	Japan	Professional
Pro 8	Male	Japan	Professional
Pro 9	Male	China	Professional
Pro 10	Male	Philippines	Professional
Pro 11	Male	Philippines	Professional
Pro 12	Male	Sweden	Professional
Pro 13	Male	Germany	Professional
Pro 14	Male	Japan	Professional
Pro 15	Male	Singapore	Professional
Pro 16	Male	Singapore	Professional
Pro 17	Male	Bulgaria	Professional
Pro 18	Male	Singapore	Professional
Pro 19	Male	Japan	Professional
Pro 20	Male	South Korea	Professional
Pro 21	Male	South Korea	Professional
Semi 1	Male	Slovakia	Semi-professional
Semi 2	Male	Thailand	Semi-professional
Semi 3	Male	Georgia	Semi-professional
Semi 4	Male	Saudi Arabia	Semi-professional
Semi 5	Female	South Africa	Semi-professional
Semi 6	Male	U.S.	Semi-professional
Amateur 1	Male	South Africa	Amateur
Amateur 2	Male	Georgia	Amateur
Amateur 3	Male	Australia	Amateur
Amateur 4	Male	South Korea	Amateur
Retired 1	Male	China	Professional
Retired 2	Male	China	Professional

2.2. Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were employed to explore participants' insights into organizational support for esports players (Pezalla et al., 2012). The interview questions were developed by reviewing relevant literature and reflecting on the research questions of this study (Mason, 2004). An esports expert working for an international sports organization and collaborating with key stakeholders in the esports industry reviewed these questions. The interview topics included: (1) background of participants' esports careers (e.g., can you tell me about your esports game and your current performance level? how long have you played the game?); (2) general experiences competing as esports players (e.g., can you share your overall

experience as an esports player, including any positive and negative aspects you have encountered?); (3) challenges and difficulties related to their esports careers (e.g., can you describe any challenges or difficulties you have faced during your esports career?); and (4) experiences or thoughts on organizational support addressing challenges and difficulties concerning mental wellbeing and physical health (e.g., can you tell me about your experiences of receiving organizational support to enhance your mental wellbeing and physical health alongside your esports career? If you haven't received any support, could you please share your thoughts on it?).

After obtaining institutional ethical approval, key stakeholders such as game publishers, sponsors, national esports associations, and event organizers were contacted to recruit participants across different levels. Some stakeholders invited the author to international esports tournaments featuring only professional players, while others featured players from various levels. Some facilitated access to international tournaments featuring top-tier professionals, such as ESL ONE 2019 in Hamburg and the League of Legend Final 2019 in Paris. Additionally, the IESF World Championship 2019 in Seoul included players of various levels. Interviews, conducted from October to December 2019, were held in discreet locations such as gaming houses or conference rooms. Given the U.K. base of the researcher, video calls were used for interviewing two retired players and a professional from China.

A total of 27 interview sessions were conducted, with most taking place in English. Several participants chose to be interviewed together based on their convenience and preference. These grouped interviews included: Pros 3 and 4; Pros 10 and 11; Pros 15, 16, and 18; and Pro 9 with Retired 1 and 2. Professional translators assisted with interviews involving players from China ($n = 3$) and Japan ($n = 5$), while the bilingual author conducted interviews with South Korean players ($n = 3$) in Korean. Each interview ranged from seven to 61 minutes, with a total interview duration of 547 minutes (approximately 9 hours) and an average time of 17 minutes. Some interviews during competitions had to be shorter than 10 minutes as they took place during brief breaks. However, the author ensured that all key questions were addressed within the time frame. Short interviews, also known as "brief" or "micro-interviews," are effective in time-sensitive situations like sporting mega events. They allow efficient data collection without burdening busy athletes and staff, while minimizing fatigue and maintaining engagement for higher-quality data. In high-stress environments, these interviews ensure reliable and useful data, capturing immediate reactions and experiences for valuable insights (Flick, 2022).

2.3. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was utilized to examine the collected data. This method is regarded as a flexible and valuable tool for qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, enabling the author to gain a deeper understanding of each participant's responses and the overall flow of their answers. The author read each interview transcript multiple times to become familiar with the participants' narratives, which is part of the first phase of thematic analysis. The thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was then implemented. Initially, the author identified initial codes while thoroughly reviewing the transcripts. Next, these initial codes were gathered to form themes. Subsequently, the themes were reviewed, and a thematic map of the analysis was created. Finally, each theme was refined, defined, and named. In describing the results, it was avoided to use specific counts (e.g., seven participants noted, five participants claimed, etc.) and instead used terms like "most" or "some" to provide a general idea, in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) suggestion. They argued that such descriptors serve rhetorically to imply the existence of a theme in the data and to persuade readers that the findings are truthful. To ensure methodological rigor and trustworthiness of the qualitative data analysis, the author used Braun et al.'s (2016) checklist, fostering a systematic approach and recognizing the researcher's active role. A research journal was kept for reflexivity, and an audit trail detailing analytical procedures was reviewed by an experienced researcher as a critical friend (Brown et al., 2018).

3. Results

Three main themes were identified from the data: (a) Limited Organizational Support Available, (b) Demand for Psychological and Mental Support, and (c) Importance of Maintaining Fitness and Addressing Physical Health Issues.

3.1. Limited organizational support available

While the majority of participants were professional players (n = 21), only one U.S. professional player (Pro 1) reported receiving psychological/mental support from his sponsor, which also sponsored traditional sport athletes. He emphasized that he had access to the same support as athletes in conventional sports:

We have at [the name of the sponsor], something called High Performance and it is a kind of like, department where they have trainer for physical, neurologists, mental coach, sports coach, everything pretty much outside of your sport to help support the athletes. Now that the gaming athletes have the access.

The rest of players (*n* = 32) indicated that they did not receive external support from their teams, federations, or sponsors. Some mentioned that their teams occasionally offered mental health support through mental coaches, but they chose not to use these services, believing they could manage their mental health independently. As Professional 4 said, "Actually, there is a mental coach from my club. Yeah, there is a mental coach, but in my case, since I've been playing for so many years, I didn't ask for it." Others acknowledged that top-level professional teams provided such support when they could afford it but highlighted the lack of support for players at lower levels. Semi-pro 3 remarked, "I don't think we're on that level yet to actually consider players as sportsmen." However, it is worth noting that even some top-level participants did not have mental health support, though they received other types of support, such as financial assistance. Pro 6 mentioned that his team once provided a sports psychologist for a brief period: "In this team right now, we don't have a sports psychologist or anything. […] We have had some sports psychologists to help us with mental health, how to deal with stress."

The findings related to physical health mirrored those for mental wellbeing. Pro 1 was the only participant who mentioned receiving support for his physical health from his sponsor, stating, "meeting doctors and physical therapists, they know that I sit down too much after checking my body, and they were able to tell me so many things, and that was very eye-opening for me." Interestingly, many players recognized the importance of maintaining fitness and physical health to perform better, but they did not engage in physical activity as much as they acknowledged its significance. Pro 6 remarked, "I haven't been to the gym for a long time actually, but I think exercising is really important. Like you don't need to lift a lot of weights but doing something." The main reasons for this lack of engagement were frequent travel for competitions, heavy training loads, and lack of motivation. Some professional players noted that their teams provided some support for physical health and fitness, such as offering gym memberships, but they did not participate as they lacked specific guidelines or instructions for workouts. While some players suggested personal training to address these issues, others did not see any benefits. For example, Pro 19 commented, "I believe

having a physical trainer would be - I think it would be good because like I said earlier, they will burn out faster, so having physical training maybe in the morning I believe is the best." On the other hand, Pro 18 argued, "For me personally, I don't think a personal trainer really helps because just looking at my schedule and it's going to be tough to have a personal trainer do training every day, because I would not have the time."

Although the absence of organizational support was apparent, it is important to note that some support was provided temporarily, rather than regularly or long-term. It appears that some players were hesitant to utilize the available support due to their busy schedules, frequent travel, time constraints, and doubts about the potential benefits of the support: "We haven't had much time to ask for this support because we've been travelling that much" (Pro 12).

3.2. Demand for psychological and mental support

While most players had no experience receiving psychological and mental support, they emphasized its necessity and importance for their performance. "I would say the team with the mental coach has a better edge compared to the other team" (Pro 18). For team games, some players noted that support in understanding team dynamics and developing cohesion among teammates would be beneficial, as they occasionally had conflicts with their teammates due to poor communication and a lack of teamwork skills. In this context, Pro 23, who won the championship in 2019, remarked, "We can't avoid arguments between teammates. Communication between us is very important in my games. I would like to learn how to effectively communicate with my teammates from some experts." Particularly, Pro 20 and Amateur 2 from different competitions suggested that players in a specific team game, consisting of four other teammates, are likely to become emotional during competitions when their performance is poor. They may need support in managing their emotions and feelings for better performance.

Yeah, depends on the game. If Dota players are more moody for me, I can feel in their mood the differences. Tekken players also they're moody I can feel, but PES players, me, I'm absolutely normal. My friends who play the PES, I cannot see any difference, and with Dota players I can see, I know many Dota players and I can see the difference, because they have changed their life because they play this game so long time (Amateur 2).

Pro 20, who previously held a high-level position as a team sport athlete, commented,

> If you want to do – like if you want to improve alone, you don't need it. As a team, I would say that you would need a psychologist, just so you can have kind of a neutral point of view, that can help you with arguments or things like this. But in general I don't think it's…not too necessary.

Interestingly, Pro 20 stated that psychological support was not essential, except for facilitating team dynamics and team building. Pro 8 shared the view saying, "there is a mental coach but, in my case, since I've been playing for so many years, I didn't ask for it." This perspective aligns with the previous section on Limited Organizational Support Available, where some players chose not to utilize available psychological assistance, believing they could manage their mental wellbeing independently. However, as Pro 18 emphasized, numerous other players recognized the potential advantages of psychological and mental support for both their mental wellbeing and performance improvement.

3.3. Importance of maintaining fitness and addressing physical health issues

The majority of players recognize the significance of maintaining physical health and fitness for both their wellbeing and performance. Pro 8, who previously competed as a high-level individual sport athlete, claimed his sports background provided him with confidence in his physical strength. However, he has been inactive since starting his career as a professional player. Understanding the importance of physical activity for optimal performance, he expressed his intention to focus more on physical maintenance. Similarly, Semi-pro 2, who used to exercise frequently, found limited time to do so due to his esports career: "I have very little time to do such things". Pro 21, a former champion in his game, noted that exercising helped him achieve a better mental state during performances:

> I do cardio exercises just in the hotel room or the gym. I usually like to do cardio because it's short and effective, but I don't want to spend a lot of time. Yes, because I like gaming so gaming 10 hours a day feels like an hour but exercising 15 minutes a day feels like 10 hours. […] I'm doing it because I want to improve my mental state in the game.

He also claimed that spending excessive time on exercise for improved physical appearance is not essential, but rather focusing on maintaining fitness and

mental health is vital for better performance. His insights into physical health and fitness suggest that physical health is closely connected to one's mental wellbeing, which influences both their careers and overall health. Interestingly, Pro 2 raised a point related to physical appearance:

> When an esports player is out there more and you're going to be displayed a lot, but you're like not in shape you're kind of sloppy looking, it doesn't look good for even the brand themselves. […] That kind of matters with the business side of things where it doesn't look as clean as for someone to be fit than for someone who is sloppy.

He also mentioned a professional player in his game as a role model who positively influenced his perspective on maintaining physical health and fitness. He emphasized that professional players should act as good role models to promote the importance of physical fitness within the gaming communities and among their followers.

Many players, particularly professional ones, discussed significant issues related to physical health. Injuries and sleeping problems were identified as the most common. They noted that poor management of physical health could result in injuries. Professional 15 remarked, "I actually took a break because I had an injury. In my arm. […] I wasn't playing at my 100 per cent because I was very distracted by my injury." Pro 20 also supported Pro 15's insight,

> I had an injury myself and I think a lot of gamers are uneducated about ergonomics and the way they're supposed to sit properly, the correct set-up that they're supposed to have. Because for many years, I had a very bad set-up and I ended up injuring myself and it took me a very long time to research it myself to see what's correct… […] …and how to heal.

Concerning sleep issues, Pro 11 commented, "I have a sleeping problem, and I am not feeling as energetic as before, which negatively affects my performance." Pro 18 argued that physical fitness helps esports players sleep better: "I think fitness does help because many pro players have poor sleeping schedules, where they stay awake even until 6:00 in the morning." While it is crucial for esports players to recognize the importance of maintaining their physical health and fitness, this significance may also need to be emphasized in relation to preventing potential physical issues such as injuries and sleep problems (e.g., lack of sleep, poor sleep cycles).

4. Discussion

The findings of this study offer in-depth perspectives from esports players on organizational support for mental wellbeing and physical health. These insights contribute not only to the literature but also have practical implications. Regrettably, the majority of players reported limited organizational support in terms of mental wellbeing and physical health. Although one professional player shared his experience of receiving structured support from his sponsor, which offers a range of services typically provided to traditional sports athletes, most players have not received any organizational support during their careers. Some players observed temporary support being available but did not utilize it. This could be because they developed their coping skills or strategies throughout their esports practice and careers. In this context, Hong and Connolly (2022) discovered that esports players employed various coping strategies to manage their mental wellbeing and physical health, such as maintaining a life balance, employing time management skills, seeking social support, and ensuring proper sleep. Concerning sleep management, the current study reveals that some players experienced sleep problems that negatively impacted their overall physical health and potentially their mental wellbeing. Sleep provides crucial psychological and physiological functions that aid in recovery (Nédélec et al., 2015). In traditional sports settings, restorative sleep is considered essential for successful training and performance (Chennaoui et al., 2015). Therefore, establishing good sleep habits should be a priority when developing organizational support schemes and initiatives.

It is noteworthy that while many players recognize the importance of maintaining physical health and fitness for both their performance and wellbeing, they often do not engage in physical activities or sports as much as they acknowledge their significance. Even when resources and support are available, players might not utilize them due to busy schedules, frequent travels, time constraints, lack of motivation, or uncertainty about the benefits of the support. This finding aligns with DiFrancisco-Donoghue et al.'s (2019) discovery that 40% of esports players in their study did not participate in daily physical activity despite understanding its advantages. Interestingly, one professional player emphasized the importance of having a role model for maintaining physical fitness and health, who can advocate for engagement in physical activities and sports. Given that individuals can be inspired by role models to identify and adopt patterns of behavior (Biskup & Pfister, 1999), role models can play a crucial role in promoting participation in physical activities among esports players.

Although only one professional demonstrated adequate psychological and mental support for his career, most players emphasized the need and importance of such assistance for their performance. Smith et al. (2019) also discovered that teams were recruiting staff, such as sports psychologists, to help players cope with the psychological demands of esports careers and practice. This finding aligns with Hong (2022) regarding the need for psychological and mental health support. In the context of team games, participants stressed the importance of developing psychological skills for a more robust team dynamic, as poor communication and teamwork skills among team members can negatively impact performance. Poulus et al. (2022) also asserted that major challenges in working with esports teams were related to cohesion, with players reporting active engagement in strategies to improve it. Although various psychological skills (e.g., goal-setting, imagery, positive self-talk, etc.) can be developed by esports players, it is recommended that stakeholders in the esports industry consider providing support to enhance team dynamics and cohesion. This assistance will also help players develop communication skills as valuable life and transferable skills.

Whilst all participants competed at an international level, some semi-professional and amateur players lacked professional teams to provide support and did not have full-time esports careers. Thus, the absence of support for players at lower levels should be further emphasized to raise awareness among stakeholders and the esports industry about the importance of providing support to a wider range of players for their wellbeing and the sustained growth of the esports industry. Establishing a structured support system for players at all levels will ensure their long-term health and wellbeing (Hong, 2022) and further enable the implementation of duty of care in esports, fostering a healthy environment within the industry (Grey-Thompson, 2017). As the stakeholder approach suggests, those with interests in the esports ecosystem (Scholz, 2020) should explore and examine both opportunities and challenges for change while developing strategic plans and exploring options, as well as successfully implementing and managing such changes.

Esports, a global phenomenon, intersects with traditional sports in its growing psychological needs. The various cultural backgrounds of players bring additional layers of complexity, emphasizing the necessity for a nuanced understanding of their experiences. The present study highlights the immediate need for tailored psychological support in esports. Players' hesitation to embrace health-conscious habits indicates a critical area for esports/sports psychologists

to intervene. The influence of prominent figures in advocating for health reflects the potential of role models in shaping cross-cultural behavior. Strong team dynamics are critical, and esports/sports psychologists can establish strategies to enhance performance and interpersonal skills broadly. While foundational support is crucial across all esports tiers, an emphasis on the experiences of female players and those from diverse cultural backgrounds ensures a comprehensive and inclusive approach to mental well-being.

4.1. Limitations of the study and future research direction

While the present study offers valuable implications and contributions, it has some limitations. Although each interview was insightful, the duration of some interviews was quite brief compared to others (e.g., 1 hour). Future studies should aim for more in-depth interviews across the board to gather more comprehensive insights from esports players. The current study did not compare the perspectives of players at different levels; since their commitments and expectations can vary, future research could investigate their differing views on organizational support. The male-dominated sample may not fully represent female players' experiences. Future research should include female perspectives for a balanced view. Though participants come from various countries, a comparative analysis was not conducted. Recognizing the nuances in players' experiences across cultures is critical for targeted support. Lastly, with only one professional player confirming sufficient organizational support for both mental wellbeing and physical health, future studies should identify more professional players who enjoy such robust support and investigate their views on organizational assistance.

5. References

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