



Review Paper

Transforming Mental Wellness: Approaches Through Esports

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Abstract	Manuscript Information
<p>The growing field of esports and its entry into professional players have, for the most part, created unique challenges to their mental well-being. This paper highlights psychological vulnerabilities and stressors experienced by athletes in a bid to shed light on cognitive demands, a sedentary lifestyle, performance pressure, and poor habits. Including comprehensive wellness programs on mental health, physical well-being, sleep hygiene, life skills training, and peer support networks; building a supporting culture; industry policies; specialist mental health access; collaboration between stakeholders for the psychological well-being of e'athletes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ISSN No: 2583-7397 ▪ Received: 29-05-2024 ▪ Accepted: 01-07-2024 ▪ Published: 06-07-2024 ▪ IJCRM:3(4); 2024: 14-18 ▪ ©2024, All Rights Reserved ▪ Plagiarism Checked: Yes ▪ Peer Review Process: Yes
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INTRODUCTION

Esports, or electronic sports, encompasses all forms of competitions held digitally in which players compete through digital games using computerized interfaces. Conventional sports and electronic sports are pretty similar to each other. Both kinds of competitions captivate the audience by showcasing the abilities and competitive spirit of athletes or gamers. The underlying frameworks of these events are also parallel to a certain extent, in a way that both are designed to offer a platform for the participants to showcase their skills and, at the same time, to structure an attractive spectacle for the onlookers. Team-based sporting activities such as rowing, ice hockey, and football

cultivate individual social skills. Traditionally, elements such as dedicated fans, monetary prizes, physical excellence, and practice routines have all characterized various traditional sports. Today, in tandem with other cooperative and adversarial games played globally, competitive video gaming is increasingly popular and garnering an increasingly large audience. Athletes are defined as "individuals who compete in any esports to achieve an in-game ranking or who compete in a formalized competition" (Bubna *et al.*, 2023) ^[3]. They could experience several domain-specific demands along with health challenges (Monteiro Pereira *et al.*, 2022) ^[14] (Schary *et al.*, 2022) ^[16]. The

paper reflects a view on e-athletes' psychological well-being. Most likely, most importantly, the majority of professional video game players are in their adolescence or early adulthood, wherein most of the significant prevalent mental health conditions first present (Kessler *et al.*, 2007)^[7]. Their youth, combined with the atypical stresses of the competitive gaming experience, may turn out to have made these players particularly vulnerable to poor mental health. However, even at this stage of realization, a research line on psychological well-being in esports studies is still conspicuously missing. The aim of this paper, then, is to be a catalyst for this type of investigation in esports studies and to put forth some practical, research-based measures related to this critical but neglected issue.^[21]

Psychiatric vulnerabilities in e-sports

In the dynamic world of competitive gaming, concerns about mental health are increasingly prominent. These arenas, once viewed as harmless electronic competition venues, are now seen as potentially affecting the psychological state of top players. Recent studies by Leis and Ghin (2023)^[10] highlight the unique mental and emotional challenges faced by professional gamers, revealing complex links between environmental pressures, brain factors, and psychological well-being. The traits that make professional gamers exceptional—intense focus, long hours of stationary play, irregular sleep, and high-performance expectations—can lead to various psychological issues. These players, like modern-day oracles deciphering intricate gameplay strategies, often blur the lines between virtual and physical realities. Beneath the spectacular displays and cheering crowds lies a layer of mental strain impacting these competitors. Their demanding practice schedules, relentless as the digital flow they navigate, can erode their psychological resilience.^[5] They endure intense public scrutiny, amplified by online communities, and face the constant threat of obsolescence in a rapidly evolving field. In this high-stakes environment, mental strength becomes both their greatest asset and potential weakness, as noted in research by Froreich and colleagues (2022). Given the fast-paced evolution of competitive gaming, it's crucial to explore the hidden psychological aspects of e-sports. These virtual battlegrounds are largely uncharted in terms of their impact on players' mental states. It's time for scientific inquiry to deeply examine how cognitive challenges, environmental pressures, and individual vulnerabilities interact in this unique setting. As technology continues to expand human capabilities, a new challenge arises: enhancing mental health support and equipping e-sports athletes with both tactical skills and psychological resilience. True success in these digital arenas is not just about defeating on-screen opponents, but also overcoming personal mental challenges. By doing so, we can protect and nurture the minds driving this digital revolution.

Stressors in Esports

Exploring mental health in esports requires careful consideration of the unique pressures and challenges inherent to competitive gaming. These factors can significantly affect players' psychological and overall wellness. Research on conventional

sports has shown that stressors specific to a particular athletic field can deeply influence competitors' mental states. Similarly, we must recognize and investigate the unique mental health landscape of esports (Kuettel & Larsen, 2020)^[8].

Recent studies have begun to highlight some of the unique stressors faced by e-athletes (Smith *et al.*, 2019; Leis & Lautenbach, 2020)^{[18][10]}. For example, competitive gamers often face performance demands, such as dealing with performance pressure and expectations, managing in-game performances, and coping with defeat. Within esports teams, players frequently encounter challenges stemming from communication breakdowns, personal disagreements, and negative team dynamics, including hostile or disruptive behavior. The impact of these issues may be intensified by the limited social support that many esports' competitors report receiving. This combination of team-related stressors and lack of support creates a unique set of mental health challenges in the esports environment (Mg *et al.*, 2021)^[12].

On a broader scale, esports players often face increasing public attention and critique from fans and media outlets. They may also struggle with inadequate organizational support and unprofessional management structures. Female competitors in esports face additional challenges, including heightened prejudice, gender-based discrimination, and social obstacles. These issues arise from male-dominated environments, traditional gender expectations, and online abuse, creating a more complex and potentially hostile landscape for women in competitive gaming (Scholz & Nothelfer, 2022)^[17].

Esports Competitors' Personal Challenges

Esports competitors often grapple with personal challenges related to poor lifestyle habits, difficulties balancing their professional and personal lives, and excessive training schedules. A qualitative research project examining practice routines of League of Legends players revealed a pervasive culture of intense, prolonged training sessions. This "grind" mentality was found to exact both physical and emotional costs on players, potentially compromising their overall well-being (Abbott *et al.*, 2022)^[1].

Professional gaming's inherently inactive nature, characterized by extended periods of sitting and repeating the same motions, has been associated with various physical health issues. In particular, players are at risk of developing musculoskeletal disorders, with persistent lower back pain being a common complaint among esports athletes (Lam *et al.*, 2022)^[9], which has in turn been associated with anxiety and depression symptoms, as well as insomnia complaints, especially within a young demographic (T *et al.*, 2021)^[19].

Irregular sleep schedules and exposure to digital screens late at night can exacerbate sleep-related issues for esports players. These factors often contribute to disrupted sleep patterns, potentially worsening existing sleep problems (Goulart *et al.*, 2023)^[4]. The combination of unhealthy lifestyle choices, reinforced by gaming culture norms and misconceptions about sleep, can result in poor sleep hygiene among esports competitors. This often leads to disrupted sleep patterns and may

contribute to various mental health issues in professional gamers. The interplay between gaming habits, sleep quality, and psychological well-being creates a complex challenge for those in the esports industry (Bonnar *et al.*, 2019) ^[2].

While there's increasing recognition of the common pressures and challenges in esports, their effects on players' mental health remain largely unexplored. So far, only one research study has directly examined how esports-specific stressors affect competitors psychologically. This study found that factors like game unpredictability, personal worries, in-game stress, and sleep quality were significant predictors of anxiety and depression symptoms among esports athletes. This limited research highlights the need for more comprehensive investigation into the mental health impacts of professional gaming (M *et al.*, 2022) ^[11].

Expanding on the existing research, there's a pressing need for more studies to identify the specific risk factors within esports that affect players' mental well-being. It's also important to investigate how these stressors may vary based on a player's status or the particular game they compete in. Future investigations should also adopt a developmental approach, examining how esports-related pressures and demands might change or intensify at different stages of a player's career or during key transitions. This comprehensive research approach would provide a more nuanced understanding of mental health challenges in the esports landscape (Wylleman *et al.*, 2015) ^[20].

Fostering Psychological Well-being in Esports

The esports arena has exploded, captivating millions and generating billions. Yet beneath this digital spectacle lurks a silent crisis: the mental toll on its gladiators. These cyber-athletes face a perfect storm of stressors - relentless performance pressure, grueling schedules, and a lifestyle that defies human biology. Unlike traditional sports, esports demand constant cognitive peak performance. Players must make split-second decisions under the unforgiving gaze of global audiences, where a single misstep can cost everything. This pressure cooker environment breeds anxiety, burnout, and despair. The physical toll is equally insidious. Marathon gaming sessions leave players with aching bodies, strained eyes, and disrupted sleep patterns. This physical deterioration feeds a vicious cycle, further eroding mental resilience. The esports industry stands at a crossroads. To secure its future, it must prioritize the psychological well-being of its most valuable asset: the players. This calls for a paradigm shift - implementing robust, tailored wellness programs that address the unique challenges of professional gaming. The time for action is now, before the human cost of this digital gold rush becomes too high to bear.

To address the unique challenges faced by esports athletes, comprehensive wellness initiatives should be developed, encompassing:

1. **Psychological Care:** Ensuring players have access to qualified mental health experts who can provide counseling, therapy, and teach stress management techniques tailored to the esports environment.

2. **Physical Fitness:** Promoting active lifestyles through customized exercise plans and nutritional guidance to counteract the sedentary nature of gaming and boost overall health.
3. **Rest Optimization:** Educating players on the critical role of quality sleep and providing strategies to improve sleep patterns, enhancing cognitive performance and recovery.
4. **Essential Life Skills:** Conducting workshops on crucial topics like time and financial management, effective communication, and stress coping mechanisms to empower players in their professional and personal lives.
5. **Athlete Support Circles:** Creating a culture of openness and mutual support among players, encouraging them to share experiences and challenges, thereby normalizing conversations about mental health in the esports world.

These multifaceted programs aim to nurture well-rounded, resilient athletes capable of thriving in the high-pressure esports landscape while maintaining their overall well-being.

Esports organizations must foster an environment where mental health is openly discussed and prioritized. This cultural shift should reframe seeking help as a sign of strength, not weakness, encouraging athletes to address their well-being without fear of stigma or career repercussions. Regulatory bodies in esports should take a proactive stance by implementing policies that safeguard player welfare. This could include mandatory rest periods, balanced tournament schedules, and industry-wide standards for athlete care. A united front involving esports entities, mental health experts, and the gaming community is crucial to building a supportive ecosystem. Public awareness campaigns can highlight the unique pressures faced by esports professionals while promoting healthy practices and available resources. Leadership within esports organizations should set the tone by prioritizing their own mental health and serving as positive examples. When influential figures openly address personal challenges and seek support, it normalizes these conversations and encourages others to follow suit. Investing in player well-being is not just an ethical imperative; it's a strategic move. Mentally and physically healthy athletes are likely to perform better, enjoy longer careers, and contribute to the industry's sustained growth and success. As esports continues its rapid evolution, maintaining focus on player psychological health is paramount. By implementing holistic wellness programs, nurturing a supportive culture, and championing open dialogue, the esports community can create a future where excellence and well-being are perfectly balanced, ensuring the long-term vitality of the industry and its athletes. Ultimately, a comprehensive mental health framework in esports must include pathways to specialized, multi-faceted professional care for athletes facing serious psychological issues or diagnosed mental health conditions. This advanced level of support is crucial to address complex cases that go beyond routine wellness strategies (Purcell *et al.*, 2019; Kegelaers *et al.*, 2024) ^{[15][6]}.

Esports organizations must develop robust systems for early detection and intervention of mental health issues. This involves both informal and formal approaches. On the informal side, coaches and team staff should be trained to recognize warning

signs of psychological distress, enabling them to guide players towards appropriate support resources. Formally, organizations should implement structured mental health screenings at strategic intervals throughout the competitive season. These assessments can provide valuable insights into players' psychological well-being and facilitate prompt interventions when needed. By combining these approaches, esports teams can create a comprehensive safety net that catches potential mental health concerns before they escalate, ensuring timely access to appropriate care and support for their athletes (Purcell *et al.*, 2019)^[15]. Esports organizations must establish clear pathways to expert mental health care, whether through in-house specialists or external partnerships with accredited professionals like clinical psychologists and psychiatrists. These experts should ideally possess a deep understanding of the unique pressures and lifestyle demands inherent to competitive gaming. This specialized knowledge allows them to tailor traditional therapeutic approaches to the esports context, addressing game-related stressors, unconventional schedules, and the specific psychological challenges faced by digital athletes. To meet this need, there's a pressing demand for educational programs that allow mental health professionals to develop expertise in esports-specific issues. These programs would equip therapists with the tools to effectively adapt their practices to the digital sports arena, ensuring that esports athletes receive care that truly addresses their unique circumstances. By fostering the development of esports-savvy mental health specialists and creating robust referral systems, the industry can ensure its athletes have access to highly targeted, effective psychological support when they need it most.

CONCLUSION

The mental health of esports athletes is a critical issue demanding urgent action. These digital competitors face unique psychological challenges that can significantly impact their well-being. To address this, a multi-faceted approach is essential. First, comprehensive wellness initiatives must be implemented, encompassing mental and physical health support. Equally important is the cultivation of an environment where open discussions about mental health are encouraged and destigmatized. Beyond these foundational steps, the industry must establish robust systems for early detection of mental health issues. This includes both informal observation by coaches and staff, and formal screening processes. When concerns are identified, clear pathways to specialized care are crucial. These should connect athletes with mental health professionals who understand the unique demands of esports. By prioritizing these measures, the esports industry can create a sustainable future where peak performance and psychological well-being coexist. This approach not only protects athletes but also ensures the long-term viability and growth of competitive gaming.

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