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Beyond the screen: exploring player wellbeing in Esports through a gendered lens

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ABSTRACT

Esports has emerged as a global industry with millions of players and spectators fuelling revenues for companies and sponsors. While this growth offers opportunities for personal and professional development, concerns about the wellbeing of those who participate have received scant attention. This study adopts a gendered, constructionist stance in addressing issues concerning wellbeing from the vantage point of competitive Esports players. Twelve (6 male, 5 female and 1 trans-female) competitive gamers participated in this study, with data gathered via semi-structured interviews. Reflexive thematic analysis captured interpretive and social constructionist gendered accounts of the Esports players. The participants experienced negative physical and psychological health outcomes synonymous with adopting a sedentary lifestyle. Conversely, participants reported benefitting from enhanced hand-eye coordination and reaction times. The high-pressure environment of competitive gaming was felt to contribute to stress, burnout and anxiety, while the short career span and public scrutiny intensified these effects. From a gendered perspective, experiences of marginalization, sexism and negative stereotypic beliefs were directly experienced by the female players and reported as vicariously witnessed by the males. This study provides evidence of a need to urgently revisit policy around inclusion and wellbeing to safeguard those who engage in Esports.

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Introduction

Despite its growth as both a competitive pursuit and as a professional industry, there is currently no universally accepted classification of what constitutes Electronic Sports (Esports) (Bousquet & Ertz, 2021; Saiz-Alvarez et al., 2021). Cranmer et al. (2021) have proposed, however, that Esports comprise four realms: (1) Esports as a traditional gaming experience, (2) Esports as a representation of current physical sports, (3) Esports that mirror established sports with modified rules and set-ups and (4) Esports based on

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the integration of emerging technologies, including virtual and augmented reality. The global popularity of Esports has led to the creation of a significant number of grassroots and professional entities, driving exponential year-on-year growth across the wider Esports industry. This has led to an increase in participation from 474 million participants in 2021 to an estimated 640 million by the end of 2025, representing growth of approximately 35% over four years (López-Cabarcos et al., 2024). This growth has not, however, been evenly distributed across gender, with females constituting approximately 30-35% of recreational gamers (Rogstad, 2021), whilst accounting for fewer than 5% of professional Esports players (Darvin et al., 2021; Tang et al., 2025). The data therefore suggest the existence of underlying processes that perpetuate gender disparities across the Esports ecosystem. However, this area remains underexplored, with relatively little research seeking to understand or highlight the nature and causes of these inequalities.

The nature of Esports means that males do not benefit from a physical advantage over their female counterparts. However, in a similar fashion to other "gender-neutral sports", such as horse racing (Roberts & MacLean, 2012) and motorsport (Howe, 2022), gender differences remain in terms of the gaming (or sporting) experience (Choi et al., 2017). For example, in examining the tactical first-person shooter Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO) Balakina et al. (2022) found that the challenge of finding teams to join, a lack of support from female peers due to scarcity and the lack of training opportunities were felt to put females at a disadvantage. Women are underrepresented in professional and recreational gaming, and when they do participate, they often face backlash and scepticism from the community (Taylor, 2012). Safety concerns, particularly related to online harassment and real-life threats, significantly impact the overall experience and participation of females in Esports (Hilvert-Bruce & Neill, 2020). Ruvalcaba et al. (2018) found that on streaming platforms like Twitch, which are often geared towards gaming, females receive more sexual and negative comments than male streamers. Visibility and representation continue to pose significant challenges for female gamers, as they often struggle to gain recognition within the field and must navigate an unwelcoming or hostile landscape (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). Concomitantly, female gamers are often judged more harshly than their male counterparts, facing scepticism about their skills and legitimacy as gamers (Rogstad, 2021; Tang et al., 2025).

Irrespective of one's gender, engaging in sport has been shown to correlate with a range of positive health and wellbeing outcomes, such as enhanced self-esteem (Eather et al., 2023), improved cardiorespiratory health (Oja et al., 2024), and the development of interpersonal skills (Eather et al., 2023). However, gendered health disparities exist over the life course, with females reporting higher rates of poor mental health, being exposed to risks and health concerns associated with childbirth, and having lower levels of engagement in physical activity. Conversely, men are at greater risk of suicide, are more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviours (drug and alcohol consumption), and display higher rates of obesity (OECD, 2025). Given the worldwide popularity of Esports, it is surprising that, to this point, little is known about gendered health inequities in Esports with respect to the demands associated with training and competing (Kegelaers et al., 2024). Like conventional athletes, Esports players accumulate a substantial amount of time in practice, with competitive players typically engaging in between 5-10 h of practice per day, largely in seated and sedentary gameplay contexts (DiFrancisco-Donoghue et al., 2019; Nagorsky & Wiemeyer, 2020; Ketelhut et al., 2021). With widely

accepted negative health outcomes associated with being sedentary, it appears that Esports players may be at an elevated risk of experiencing ill health (Yin et al., 2020; Puolitaival et al., 2020). Compounding this problem, excessive amounts of gameplay can lead to a "gaming disorder" which shares many of the same characteristics as other more recognized forms of addiction (Holden et al., 2018). Esports practice often takes place in physical isolation, occurs late in the evening, and is carried out sitting in chairs that are not ergonomically designed or used appropriately, leading to musculoskeletal complaints (Hattenstone, 2017). Prolonged exposure to video games can hinder psychosocial development, resulting in the manifestation of aggressive cognitions and behaviour (Anderson et al., 2010). Furthermore, online gaming environments have been shown to be places susceptible to toxic behaviour, harassment, exclusionary practices, and other forms of targeted abuse (Leis et al., 2024; Shulze et al., 2021). This body of evidence suggests that Esports players may be at an increased risk of experiencing adverse health outcomes, with these risks not being distributed equally across genders due to disproportionate exposure to psychosocial risk factors Conversely participation in Esports may facilitate a strengths based approach to youth development by tapping in to Lerner et al.'s (2003) principles of "Positive Youth Development" fostering competence, confidence, connection, character and caring. In this light, Esports offers opportunities to experience success, to work in groups and to support other players. Building on this position, Adachi and Willoughby (2012) suggest that gaming can serve as a platform for fostering healthy behaviours and lifestyle habits among children and adolescents. The work of Zhong et al. (2022) and Kaczmarek and Drążkowski (2025) shows Esports participation to be associated with improved problem-solving skills, enhanced social interaction, increased self-esteem and greater resilience in the face of challenges. The immersive nature of many games also offers an escape from stressors, promoting relaxation and opportunities to practice emotional regulation strategies (Desai et al., 2021; Pallavicini et al., 2021). Online gaming spaces also provide opportunities for individuals to connect and make friends and develop "social" skills in a different (i.e. virtual) context, particularly useful for those who may struggle with face-to-face communication (Ryan et al., 2006). Many video games offer players the opportunity to develop prosocial behaviour and improve social connections through working as part of an interdependent group (Granic et al., 2014). Multiplayer games can encourage the promotion of teamwork and cooperation and promote empathy and mutual support among players (Ferguson, 2017). This sense of social acceptance, integration and contribution can provide opportunities for any player to connect with like-minded individuals, form friendships and develop a sense of belonging within the Esports ecosystem, potentially enhancing wellbeing (Hayday et al., 2023). Currently, the existing literature presents a mixed picture regarding the positive and negative effects of Esports participation on wellbeing. In particular, there is limited understanding of the lived experiences of Esports players and how they perceive and describe the impact of participation on their wellbeing. Furthermore, little is known about whether and how these wellbeing experiences differ between male and female players.

According to Bányai et al. (2019), Esports has reached a point at which there needs to be an increased focus on participant wellbeing, as organizations, teams and potentially game manufacturers have a duty of care for the players who engage with their products. In this light Esports organizations have begun to implement strict regulations around the practice hours of their athletes, ensuring that they take regular breaks to prevent them

from suffering from burnout through being overworked (Ahn & Kim, 2024). In response, organizations have started to implement educational programmes to help inform and teach players about the dangers of video game addiction and provide resources for those who are struggling with it (Youngminds, n.d.). The androcentric nature of Esports research to date means that, at this critical stage, there is a risk in potentially formulating policy and best practice guidelines having marginalized or even omitted other gendered perspectives. Given the worldwide appeal of Esports and the speed with which the industry continues to expand, it appears timely to understand more about the well-being experiences of those who take part and specifically shine a light on females as an under-represented group in the Esports space.

Research methodology

Researcher positionality

The individual (male) carrying out the interviews was previously employed as a consultant by a UK-based sports management organization to develop a strategy for sustainable growth of Esports in England with a view to creating a grassroots sports league in the United Kingdom. This positioning as an "insider" in the Esports space directs attention to the embodiment of researcher reflexivity and, as a male, required reflection on personal framing of gendered encounters, experiences and expressions in Esports. Reflexivity was achieved through note-taking, challenge and check discussions with critical friends (second author on the project), and woven into the analysis of the data by member checking and third-party cross-checking of emerging themes.

The research team occupied an insider position within the competitive Esports community, providing contextual knowledge that facilitated rapport with participants and a nuanced understanding of the language, practices and cultural norms underpinning competitive gaming. Insider status can facilitate enhanced access, trust and the interpretation of context-specific experiences. However, it also presents challenges, including the potential for assumptions, over-familiarity and the inadvertent privileging of shared understandings during data collection, analysis and interpretation (Berger, 2015; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Recognizing these tensions, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process to critically examine how prior knowledge and experiences may have influenced methodological decisions and the interpretation of participants' accounts. This approach sought to ensure that insider knowledge informed, rather than constrained, the analysis and that interpretations remained grounded in participants' lived experiences and attentive to alternative perspectives (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002).

Philosophical positioning

The research study is conducted utilizing a social constructionist lens, enabling the nuanced examination of how individuals understand and give meaning to things in the world around them (Burr, 2003; Galbin, 2014). Often, social constructionism and social constructivism are used interchangeably (Andrews, 2012; Charmaz, 2006), but not in this research, as there is an empirical difference between the two. It has been noted that social constructionism examines how societal norms and realities are

collectively created and maintained, and social constructivism focuses on individual learning through social interactions (Gergen, 2015). Staunch social constructivists, like von Glasersfeld (1991), contend that the formation of one's reality is an internal process developed within the individual mind (Hardy, 1997). However, social constructionists extend this notion by positing that reality is also a product of social processes and interactions (Gergen, 2001), and as such is multi-faceted and actively seeks out diverse perspectives. As individual perceptions of wellbeing in Esports are underpinned by various gendered interpretations that emphasize the contextual nature of reality, social constructionism was deemed suitable for the research.

Social constructionists maintain that reality, while independent of knowledge, is constructed through various processes, struggles and daily interactions among social actors (Burr, 2003; Karataş-Özkan & Murphy, 2010; Weinberg, 2014). Consequently, individual experiences and contexts result in diverse perspectives, which play a key role in shaping one's realities (Andrews, 2012; Misra et al., 2012). Epistemologically, the social constructionist lens facilitates the interpretation of gendered interactions within Esports in the construction of different and diverse realities and worldviews that can impact experiences of inclusion as they relate to wellbeing. The social constructionist approach not only enriches understandings of gender in Esports but also highlights the intricate relationship between Esports and the maintenance of physical and mental health across the recreational to professional spectrum to foster inclusive and supportive environments for wellbeing.

The social constructionist approach in this research study is framed within an interpretivist philosophy, as collective interactions and, respectively, individual meanings are both central to a gendered analysis of player wellbeing in Esports as rooted in this work. Interpretivist philosophy is essential in the inspection of the construction of meanings because "experiences of others can be grasped through the apprehension of their inner meaning" (Hughes, 1990, p. 89). The epistemological value of interpretivism lends itself to taking from the work of Geertz (1973) on *The Interpretation of Cultures*, "thick descriptions" of human behaviours as "one peels layer after layer" (Geertz, 1973, p. 37). In this context, Esports can be considered a form of sub-culture transmitted in a virtual space where multiple layers of gendered realities are "played" out. Moreover, interpretivism and social constructionism are inherently "interpretative" in nature (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Holliday, 2002), from which rich qualitative data surface in naturalistic settings.

Interpretivist and social constructionist research have deep-seated qualitative roots, which use techniques such as interviews, observations and textual analysis with the aim of "understanding subjective meanings" (Goldkuhl, 2012, p. 4). This study, therefore, applies the principles and practices of the qualitative research paradigm as it offers in-depth, context-specific insights, allows for the prioritization of participant voice, and provides a nuanced comprehension of human behaviours (Silverman, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). By operating within a qualitative paradigm, this facilitates the deeper exploration of individual meanings and collective interactions associated with gender and wellbeing in Esports. There is space here for the expression of varied perspectives that recognize the multiple socially constructed encounters (Creswell & Poth, 2018) that are a product of one's interpretations (Crotty, 1998) within a particular state of being. These endeavours posit that qualitative research arms the user with the ability

to explore multiple, subjective, complex, constructed, varied realities and experiences of humans (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Participants

Recruitment to the study was based on the following criteria: (i) players should regularly attend online and offline Esports events between 2022 and 2025; (ii) players can be recreational or elite players; and (iii) players should be 18 years or older and based in England. Convenience sampling facilitates quick initial recruitment of players to the study, while snowball sampling expands the sample through referrals from initial participants (Etikan et al., 2016). Taking this approach increases reach and efficiency, which potentially enables access to a broader and more diverse participant pool (Noy, 2008; Shaghaghi et al., 2011). Convenience sampling is often utilized during exploratory research where the primary goal is to gain insights and understand phenomena rather than to generalize findings to a larger population (Abbott & McKinney, 2013; Dörnyei, 2007), therefore lending itself to qualitative inquiry. Snowball sampling relies on social networks, namely of participants, to identify and facilitate access or contact with potential players, often "hidden" populations (Heckathorn, 2011; Shaghaghi et al., 2011). Combining convenience sampling and snowball sampling can offer researchers significant advantages when accessing "hard-to-reach" populations, in this case in online spaces or virtual worlds. Gamers frequently interact within close-knit, online communities and social networks where trust and "insider" status could potentially be crucial for access.

The resultant twelve participants played a cross-section of Esports titles, including Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) games like Riot Games League of Legends (LoL), and Valve's Defense of the Ancients 2 (Dota 2), First-Person Shooters (FPS) like Valorant, CSGO, Apex Legends and Overwatch and football sports simulation titles FIFA (by EA Sports), eFootball (formerly known as Pro Evolution Soccer, or PES, by Konami) and Rocket League (Psyonix). According to previous work by Reid (2019), which sought to develop a strategy for sustainable growth in England for Esports, the predominant games within the competitive video gaming scene in England are League of Legends (LoL), Defence of the Ancients 2 (DoTA 2) and Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CSGO). Additionally, the players believed that games such as Overwatch, Rocket League and Street Fighter VI were also very popular. These beliefs coincided with the Newzoo (2022) report, which found that LoL, CSGO and DoTA 2 are indeed three of the most popular Esports games in England from a spectator standpoint. These beliefs are also consistent with more recent esports scholarship, which continues to identify League of Legends, Counter-Strike and Dota 2 as central titles within the global Esports spectator ecosystem (Ryu et al., 2025; Zhu et al., 2025). Additionally, the other games mentioned all featured heavily in the top 10 on the same list, therefore being presented with participants that are representative of the Esports title listings in England.

The participants averaged 6.5 years of engagement with the Esports ecosystem, ranging from moderate to considerable levels of experience, spending, on average, 34 h per week engaging in online competitive gaming or play, subsequently reflecting a significant commitment to their involvement. Ethnicity/Race of the twelve interviewees

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Code	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Role
Dakota	Well001	24	Male	Asian British	Professional/Streamer
Atlas	Well002	27	Female	White British	Recreational
Echo	Well003	25	Trans Female	White British	Professional
Hope	Well004	28	Female	Black British	Recreational /Streamer
Santiago	Well005	30	Male	Black British	Recreational
Savannah	Well006	25	Female	White British	Recreational
Balrog	Well007	30	Male	Black British	Recreational
Sydney	Well008	27	Male	White British	Recreational
Pulse	Well009	22	Female	White British	Recreational
Terra	Well010	31	Female	White British	Recreational
Shadow	Well011	23	Male	White British	Recreational
Blitz	Well012	27	Male	Asian British	Recreational

ranged from seven White-British, three Black British (African/Caribbean), and two Asian-British, representing a range of gendered characteristics consisting of five females, six males and one trans-female participant. The age of players ranged from 24 to 31 years of age, resulting in a mean of 30 years and 3 months. The participant group is homogenized to the extent that they all commit a lot of time to Esports each week, have done so for many years, are of a similar age, all live in England, and have extensive experience competing both online and offline across a range of games including League of Legends, Street Fighter V, CSGO, Rocket League and Overwatch. All but one of the participants were recreational players, and upon inspection there was nothing in the "professionals" transcript that suggested a divergence in experience, and so this individual was retained in the study. Gender was self-reported and was evenly reflected across the group (6M, 5F, 1 T), which supported the intention of the study to gain broad insight as to perceived gender determined inequalities that may exist within the Esports space.

Table 1 presents an overview of the players' characteristics, and to preserve anonymity, real names have been replaced with pseudonyms and codes.

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were selected using two sampling techniques: convenience sampling and snowball sampling. The interviews were divided into three parts: Part 1 centred on experiences of inclusion and exclusion in Esports, Part 2 concentrated on factors impacting initial and continued engagement with Esports, and Part 3 focused on the physical, psychological and social impacts of Esports on gamers' wellbeing. These three areas were qualified by probing questions which sought to capture a nuance that may point towards gender based inequalities in experience and outcomes. Semi-structured interviews lasted between 90 and 120 min and took place face-to-face in various locations in England, United Kingdom. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis by the researcher and lead co-author.

To attain a comprehensive gendered analysis of player wellbeing in Esports, the research utilized both a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) and "traditional" thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to capture reflexive, interpretive and social constructionist gendered accounts. Reflexive thematic analysis enhanced researcher reflexivity in the study and placed the subjective encounters of participants

at the core of the interpretations; it focuses on using the stories and experiences shared by people in the identification of themes (Nowell et al., 2017). Reflective thematic analysis encourages researchers to reflect on the potential influence they can have on the research, which can lead to deeper, more nuanced insights (Terry et al., 2017). The "traditional" thematic analysis offered consistency and structure to the inspection of rich or "thick" descriptions of data, and thematic analysis was conducted using a six-phase approach as set out by Braun and Clarke (2006) in their earlier work. This thematic analysis comprised (1) Familiarization, (2) Initial Coding, (3) Identification of Themes, (4) Review of Themes, (5) Theme Refinement and (6) Write-up. NVivo Software was used to facilitate coding and theme development and regular debriefing sessions with participants helped ensure analytical rigour and theme credibility.

Findings

Psychological wellbeing: anxiety and burnout

A distinction was made regarding how anxiety manifests within Esports, with particular emphasis placed on the heightened challenges faced by women. Atlas, a female player, described how women often enter competitive spaces with elevated levels of anxiety due to both performance expectations and gendered scrutiny:

> You find that a lot of women are more nervous in the lead-up to an event. This is because there is a lot of pressure to not just perform at the expected level, but exceed it, otherwise, people will think negatively of you because you are a woman.

These feelings of anxiety were frequently linked to experiences of harassment and misogyny encountered during participation. Hope, a female player, described how gendered abuse directly contributed to acute emotional distress:

> I have received a lot of misogynistic comments, I've had people telling me I shouldn't be playing Dota, I should be playing Mario or be in the kitchen […]and I turned off my PC, because I was genuinely shaking.

Anxiety was also embedded in states of burnout, which emerged as a multifaceted phenomenon that is of significant concern within Esports, with players describing its impact on mental wellbeing, physical performance and sustained engagement. Experiences of burnout were perceived to differ between recreational and elite levels, though common contributing factors were identified across contexts. Dakota described burnout as more closely linked to the level of play rather than his gender, highlighting how increasing skill demands can reduce enjoyment and sustainability:

> I feel that burnout is less about gender and more about the level of play. For me, the mental strain of competitive play limits how long I can engage before it impacts my wellbeing, whereas casual play is more sustainable and enjoyable because it's about having fun, not meeting incremental goals. However, I do feel like men tend to take gaming more seriously, which may contribute to their higher levels of burnout, whereas women appear to maintain a more balanced engagement.

Conversely, Atlas described burnout from the perspective of gender prevalent among women due to pressures linked to visibility, legitimacy and persistent scrutiny:

> I think burnout is something I've noticed to be a bit more common among women because they often enter these situations trying to be more visible, whether by playing their games publicly on stream or aiming to go professional and reach a high level. Even for women who stream and later become talent for major tournaments, the turnover rate in those positions is significantly higher than it is for men. This is largely due to additional barriers they must overcome, which can be more challenging to deal with than those encountered by men.

Hope and Pulse, respectively, further provided further insight into gendered differences in how burnout is experienced and disclosed:

> Even though there are more males in our field, I'd say females still talk about it more […] and when women talk about burnout, they tend to discuss depression or depressive episodes. I think, in general, males don't really talk about their mental problems because they are afraid of being called unmanly or something similar. I feel like I see more female Esports players opening up about burnout than male players. Even though female players are in the minority, they seem to talk about these kinds of problems more often, perhaps because they are not attacked as much for being vulnerable.

Santiago described how male participants may avoid explicitly naming burnout due to concerns about credibility:

> I've noticed that if someone has a genuine issue, they often hesitate. […] This hesitation stems from the fear that their credibility might suffer, and people might stop taking them seriously. […] Instead, I've observed that when burnout occurs, men tend to say they're stepping away for a while to recalibrate, citing the need to take a new approach to things with a different mindset instead of explicitly stating that they are burnt out or fatigued.

Echo provided a personal account of burnout at an elite level, linking it to poor self-care and imbalance:

> When I was burnt out, it was because all I was doing was practising for hours on end and not necessarily doing all the things I needed to do to maintain myself. I wasn't eating great, and I wasn't doing much.

The responses indicate that women often experience anxiety and burnout due to performance demands and the need to counter negative stereotypes surrounding gender and gaming competence. These findings also demonstrate how, in Esports, anxiety and burnout are shaped not only by competitive demands but also by embedded societal biases, with women reporting increased psychological strain due to persistent scrutiny, harassment and visibility pressures to legitimize their presence. In addition, gendered dynamics influenced both exposure to burnout and willingness to disclose mental health challenges. Poor work-life balance, prolonged gameplay and neglect of physical wellbeing further intensified risk, underscoring the need for more sustainable participation structures within Esports.

Psychological wellbeing: gendered expectations and stressful performativity

Several players highlighted a distinction between assumed capability and actual performance, noting that gendered expectations frequently intensified pressure for women. Atlas described how female participants often feel compelled to demonstrate exceptional ability to justify their participation:

> A lot of women […] feel like they have to be the best player in the world to prove that they have a right to be at tournaments […] so that nobody can make comments that they've taken a spot from somebody else.

This pressure was attributed to assumptions within male-dominated Esports ecosystems, where men are often presumed to have superior gaming ability. Pulse, a female Esports player, described how this stereotype contributes to persistent pressure to overperform:

> There is a prevailing stereotype that men are naturally better at video games, which leads to the assumption that women in gaming lobbies are automatically the worst players. I have experienced situations where I felt the need to outperform my peers to be taken seriously or considered equal in gaming.

Savannah, a female Esports player, further illustrated how external expectations regarding behaviour and presentation heightened anxiety and undermined confidence:

> Societal expectations about how I should present myself are a source of undue pressure for me. […] Additionally, external judgments create added stress, as I constantly strive to conform, meet professional expectations, and satisfy key individuals within the community.

Blitz, a male Esports player, expands on this topic, noting that even confident and highly skilled women experience elevated stress surrounding competition:

> I think women tend to be a little bit more stressed when competing. Even if they are very good and can be confident in their abilities, they tend to experience higher levels of stress.

Beyond gameplay itself, gendered performance for women was also linked to aesthetics and appearance. Hope described how expectations surrounding physical presentation created an additional burden that male counterparts rarely encountered:

> The additional public scrutiny and pressure placed on female participants to conform to societal beauty standards and maintain aesthetic expectations exacerbate stress levels and create challenges that male counterparts are unlikely to encounter. Addressing these unfair pressures and expectations is crucial for fostering a more equitable and supportive environment within the Esports community.

In addition, several players reported that self-perception was a key factor influencing performance anxiety. Atlas highlighted how women are often more attuned to how they are perceived by others, while also acknowledging that external judgements can affect participants of all genders:

> Women often focus more on aspects like confidence and self-perception, emphasising how they believe others view them, whereas men may concentrate more on the technical aspects of the game itself.

Echo described how her identity as a trans-woman intensified gendered perceptions and reinforced the value of solidarity among women within the space:

> As a trans-woman, I've definitely felt the need to work much harder to achieve the same level of success as my male peers, largely due to how I perceive others view me. There's also a noticeable sense of connection when working with other women, as if we share an understanding of being in a similar situation, facing comparable challenges related to self-perception and societal expectations, which can influence performance pressure.

Overall, the findings suggest that experiences in Esports are often shaped by a combination of self-perception, external judgement and perceptions consistent with gender norms. Women and gender-diverse players described the need to manage additional demands related to aesthetics, appearance and attitudes to legitimize their presence. These dynamics highlight how gendered perceptions, performativity and pressure intersect to intensify anxiety, burnout and stress within competitive video gaming environments.

Psychological wellbeing: providing support

Players discussed the provision of mental health and wellbeing support within Esports, with accounts revealing substantial variation in both availability and visibility. Experiences ranged from a complete absence of proactive organizational support to more structured approaches that embedded mental health professionals within teams. This inconsistency was perceived to exacerbate challenges within an already high-pressure environment.

Savannah highlighted the lack of meaningful organizational engagement with mental health, noting that wellbeing was often acknowledged only superficially:

> I don't really see companies addressing mental health directly, […] unless someone explicitly says they're stepping away due to mental health concerns, nothing substantial seems to happen in terms of preventative measures.

Pulse similarly identified a lack of formalized, system-wide approaches to wellbeing within the ecosystem:

> I'm not aware of any specific official policies or guidelines that have been implemented to address wellbeing in esports at a systemic level.

However, some players did provide examples of organizations adopting more proactive approaches. Sydney, a male Esports player, described how certain professional teams had integrated psychological support into their structures:

> Organisations like Evil Geniuses have been utilising sports psychologists on the team for quite a while […] who provide players with help to improve their mental as well as their physical wellbeing.

Alongside formal provision, the importance of informal support networks was consistently emphasized. Atlas highlighted the protective role of peer relationships:

> Having a network of support is extremely important […]whether they are your friends, teammates or peers, having a good support network can benefit you when you are feeling low mentally.

Expanding on this, Atlas described how shared identity and experience within team environments and the wider Esports community could foster a greater level of resilience and mitigate negative experiences:

> Having networks of support is crucial for ensuring participant wellbeing. This may include people you play with regularly or teammates you compete alongside in tournaments, as these relationships form reliable support systems. This is especially important in groups where members share similar backgrounds, such as ethnicity, as racism can be a significant

> issue in some communities. Sharing experiences can make it easier to manage negative or disruptive behaviour […] and provide a valuable foundation of support.

Pulse and Hope, respectively, also referenced formal initiatives aimed at improving well-being, while noting that greater visibility and accessibility were still required:

> There are several measures being taken to address mental health challenges and promote wellbeing in Esports. For instance, various organisations like Women in Esports focus on, amongst other things, mental health and provide support for gamers. […] Also, there has been a notable effort to create spaces tailored for women.

Overall, these findings illustrate that while both formal and informal support structures exist within Esports, access remains uneven and poorly standardized. Players identified peer-based support as particularly valuable, especially for participants from marginalized backgrounds, while also highlighting a need for clearer organizational policies and proactive mental health provision across the ecosystem.

Physical wellbeing: health impacts

Players consistently acknowledged the need to maintain physical health, regardless of whether they participated in conventional sports or competitive video gaming. Proper nutrition, injury prevention and balanced routines were viewed as essential for sustaining performance and long-term participation. However, participants also identified challenges unique to Esports, particularly those linked to prolonged sedentary behaviour.

Pulse described how extended periods of gameplay can lead to physical strain:

> Much of what goes into playing video games in Esports involves sitting at a PC for extended hours and practising intensively. This sedentary lifestyle can lead to various health issues, such as eye strain, repetitive strain injuries, or carpal tunnel syndrome. If players do not prioritise their physical health outside of gaming, the impact can be quite negative.

Blitz shared a more severe example to highlight the potential consequences of neglecting physical wellbeing:

> I remember one player […] who revealed he had a hernia caused by sitting too long. He had to undergo surgery and now encourages others to be more mindful of their health […] while emphasising the importance of regular stretching and taking breaks.

In addition, gender-specific health concerns were also discussed. Terra**,** a female Esports player, highlighted how certain conditions may disproportionately affect some female participants:

> Some female players may struggle with conditions like PCOS (Polycystic Ovary Syndrome) or experience extreme physical pain during their menstrual cycle. While not everyone faces these issues, there are extreme cases with severe symptoms that can significantly affect a player's physical health and, consequently, their participation in Esports.

Conversely, several players argued that gender had little or no direct impact on physical wellbeing, instead emphasizing broader cultural shifts within Esports. Santiago, a male Esports player, described how increasing attention to fitness is challenging traditional stereotypes of gamers:

> Traditionally, gamers have been associated with not exercising or being slightly overweight, but this stereotype is changing. The emerging focus on physical fitness not only improves physical health but also contributes to mental clarity, better decision-making, and a reduction in physical discomfort […] and taking care of yourself both physically and mentally can enhance your overall performance. (Santiago)

Similar perspectives were offered by Echo a trans-female participant:

> I don't think gender is particularly important in this regard. I believe it's more about having a routine, and as I mentioned, going outside, doing activities with others, meeting up with people, and just living life, rather than spending 10 h a day on the computer every day. (Echo)

In summary, players collectively emphasized the importance of maintaining physical health across all levels of Esports participation. While gender-specific issues were acknowledged by some, there was broad agreement that physical fitness, balanced routines and injury prevention strategies benefit all participants. The increasing visibility of fitness-oriented role models within Esports was viewed as a positive cultural shift that supports both physical and psychological wellbeing.

Physical and psychological wellbeing: recovery strategies

Players provided insight into a range of strategies used to support recovery from prolonged or intensive gameplay, though discussion of recovery was less extensive than other wellbeing domains. The demanding nature of Esports was recognized as necessitating deliberate practices to sustain both physical and psychological health. These strategies largely reflected individual and peer-led responses to managing stress, fatigue and burnout within high-pressure gaming environments; several players emphasized the importance of incorporating regular breaks and physical movement into training routines. Terra described how stepping away from gameplay and engaging in light activity supported recovery and focus:

> I've learned that taking short breaks every couple of hours is key to avoiding burnout. I also make sure to stretch regularly and stay active, whether it's a short walk or some light exercise. It helps me feel more refreshed and focused when I get back to the game.

Recovery was also framed as an emotional and social process. Hope highlighted the role of communication and peer support in managing mental strain:

> For me, recovery isn't just physical, it's emotional too. I talk with my teammates about how I'm feeling, and we support each other when stress builds up. Having that emotional support from the team helps me manage the mental strain.

In addition, some players described the value of psychological detachment from competitive play. Pulse explained how engaging in alternative activities facilitated mental recovery:

> Sometimes the best recovery comes from completely stepping away from the game. I enjoy reading or playing a completely different genre of game for a few hours. This mental shift allows me to recharge and return with a clearer mind.

In summary, recovery was understood as a multidimensional process involving physical rest, emotional support and psychological detachment from competition. While these

strategies align with existing research on wellbeing, burnout prevention and social support in Esports, they also highlight that recovery is primarily managed at an individual and peer level, reinforcing the need for greater structural and organizational support to promote sustainable participation.

Discussion

Through a social constructionist lens, we seek to integrate players' experiences with existing theoretical frameworks and empirical studies to highlight key themes and propose practical implications. This study contributes new insights into how, within Esports, wellbeing is socially constructed. It demonstrates how participants' experiences are formed not only by individual performance but also by the cultural norms, expectations and interactions that personify the competitive gaming environment. For example, the findings highlight a correlation between the normalization of certain behaviours and the internalization of performance expectations, which influences players' perceptions of wellbeing. Rather than viewing wellbeing solely as an individual outcome, the data show that it is continually negotiated through participants' relationships with teammates, opponents, organizations and the wider Esports community. Familiarity with the competitive Esports environment enabled recognition of the contextual nuances described by participants, including the normalization of behaviours that may otherwise appear exceptional to those unfamiliar with the environment. Additionally, maintaining reflexivity throughout the analytical process was essential to ensure that any previous knowledge of the sport informed, rather than constrained, the interpretation of participants' accounts. The interpretations presented remain rooted in the participants' lived experiences while noting the influence of the wider social and cultural context in which those experiences occur.

The research findings, based on interviews with twelve Esports players based in England, as shown above, illustrate how participation in Esports impacts the mental wellbeing of participants. Mental health has emerged as a critical area of concern, with the players in this study frequently noting stress, anxiety and burnout as major contributing factors to adverse wellbeing. Within competitive video gaming, these issues stem mainly from pressure to perform, excessive practice and scrutiny from peers and the wider community. Through a social constructionist lens, participants' accounts suggest that psychological wellbeing is produced through ongoing interaction with the competitive culture, including norms around constant improvement, public evaluation and legitimacy. These social expectations become internalized over time and can determine how players understand both success and failure. Importantly, these accounts suggest that psychological wellbeing in Esports cannot be understood simply as a consequence of individual resilience or coping ability. The participants who were interviewed for this study also acknowledge the existence of a culture in which high performance, continual self-improvement and external validation are often normalized, creating social expectations that guide how individuals experience success, failure and ultimately their own wellbeing. Together, these findings indicate that psychological wellbeing is continually negotiated through players' interactions with competitive cultures rather than existing solely as an individual attribute.

The lack of knowledge about preventive measures was noted, underscoring the need for more training and information on physical activity to support participants in the

Esports ecosystem. In addition, the experiences of the participants show how the heightened pressure to perform, compounded by public scrutiny and fear of failure, aligns with the concept of performance anxiety prevalent in sports psychology – and our study highlights the role gender identity plays in shaping certain mental health outcomes. While previous research has acknowledged performance anxiety as a feature of competitive sport, the interviews suggest that, within Esports, these pressures are further intensified by the visibility afforded through online platforms and the constant evaluation of performance by teammates, opponents and wider gaming communities. Concerns about legitimacy and acceptance further amplify the psychological demands placed on women and gender-diverse participants in particular, underscoring that the intersection of social identities and physical health influences wellbeing. This emphasizes the importance of considering social identities and online visibility in developing support policies to enhance and sustain mental wellbeing amongst Esports participants.

The dichotomy of physical wellbeing in Esports, where high performance coexists alongside significant health risks, underscores the need for a paradigm shift. Moreover, a deep-rooted passion for competitive video gaming often leads to heightened negative emotions during periods of underperformance. This finding further illustrates how identity (for example, being a straight white cis-male or a Black trans-female) can serve as both a protective and a risk factor in the individual experience of positive or negative wellbeing. Rather than highlighting contradictory experiences, these findings show the complex ways in which participants negotiate their identities within competitive gaming environments. The same commitment that motivates sustained engagement and skill development may also leave those who engage with the sport more emotionally vulnerable when performance falls short of personal or community expectations. This reinforces the notion that identity within Esports is not fixed but is continually shaped and reshaped through social interaction, competition and recognition from others.

Therefore, mental health interventions within the ecosystem should not only address performance-related stress but also help participants establish a greater sense of self that extends beyond competitive video gaming (Kegelaers et al., 2024). The present study extends current understandings of wellbeing in Esports by demonstrating that interventions must address both individual resilience and the social environments in which competitive participation takes place. Rather than treating stress solely as an individual issue, the interviewed participants' accounts indicate that psychological wellbeing is determined by the competitive cultures, organizational practices and interpersonal relationships that characterize everyday Esports participation. Our findings, therefore, extend existing understandings of athlete wellbeing by suggesting that interventions ought to move beyond treating stress as an individual problem and instead recognize the wider cultural conditions that contribute to psychological strain. Striking the balance between the demands of high-performance outcomes whilst maintaining health and wellbeing in Esports was seen as challenging for the participants. This balance emerged as a recurring source of tension throughout participants' narratives, illustrating that wellbeing should be viewed as an ongoing process rather than a fixed outcome.

Additionally, standardizing mental health initiatives, including counselling and establishing more peer support networks could play a pivotal role in fostering resilience and adaptability among participants. Supported by pre-existing research, peer-based support networks in online gaming spaces can promote a sense of belonging. In addition, these

networks can serve as protective factors that buffer participants from the adverse effects of intense, often exclusionary or hostile environments (Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Granic et al., 2014; Hayday et al., 2023). Cultivating inclusive community cultures that promote belonging, psychological safety and sustainable participation can help participants feel valued and supported in their journey.

The players frequently described the demands placed upon those who participate in the sport, which aligned with prior research identifying the maintenance of physical health as an essential factor in overall wellbeing (Aditya et al., 2023). This study found that the impact on players' physical wellbeing was pronounced, with the lack of recovery strategies placing significant strain on both physical performance and mental wellbeing, which could ultimately affect long-term engagement in competitive Esports. Rather than viewing physical health as separate from competitive performance, participants consistently described the two as being closely interconnected. Their accounts suggest that sustaining high levels of performance frequently came at the expense of recovery and self-care, reflecting a culture in which physical sacrifice has become normalized as part of competitive commitment. Viewed through a social constructionist perspective, these behaviours are not simply individual choices but are determined by the expectations, values and practices that characterize competitive Esports environments.

Lifestyle and associated health issues such as eye strain, musculoskeletal injuries (including repetitive strain injury) and carpal tunnel syndrome are among the sedentary ailments associated with engagement in Esports (DiFrancisco-Donoghue et al., 2019; *Exercise and Sport Sciences Reviews*, 2023; Holden et al., 2018). In addition, burnout and fatigue resulting from excessive play were identified by participants as prevalent issues within the broader context of stress and anxiety. These findings are consistent with the work of Lee et al. (2021), who highlighted the psychological consequences of competitive gaming for athletes' sleep and mood. One possible explanation is that competitive Esports continues to reward intensive practice cultures, leading players to normalize behaviours that would be problematic in other sporting contexts. This interpretation extends previous research by suggesting that physical and psychological strain is not simply an unintended consequence of competition but is reinforced by shared expectations surrounding commitment, dedication and competitive success. However, the present findings broaden this work by illustrating that participants frequently regarded these health consequences as an accepted component of pursuing competitive success. This normalization suggests that physical and psychological strain has become embedded within the culture of high-performance Esports rather than being viewed as an unintended consequence of participation.

Moreover, like existing policy-level literature, the findings acknowledge the need for regulated practice hours and mandated breaks to mitigate burnout among athletes (Ahn & Kim, 2024). Participants' narratives indicate that organizational responsibility extends beyond regulating practice timetables to fostering environments in which recovery and wellbeing are viewed as legitimate components of performance preparation rather than indicators of reduced commitment. This interpretation suggests that wellbeing initiatives should focus not only on individual behaviour change but also on reshaping the wider performance culture within Esports organizations.

It is also important to note that gender-specific health conditions, such as Polycystic Ovary Syndrome, were raised as issues affecting participants with particular

characteristics (female and trans male participants in this study). This finding further illustrates that experiences of physical wellbeing are not uniform across the Esports community. Instead, participants' health experiences were determined by intersecting identities, reinforcing the importance of moving beyond universal approaches to athlete wellbeing. From a social constructionist perspective, these accounts demonstrate how health is experienced within wider social contexts that affect both access to support and the visibility of some health ailments.

Conversely, some participants highlighted the physical benefits associated with Esports participation, including enhanced reflexes and hand-eye coordination, echoing the findings of Kim et al. (2023). Despite these perceived benefits, many participants expressed limited knowledge of preventive measures, reflecting a broader lack of ergonomic education and guidance on physical activity within the Esports community. The coexistence of perceived physical benefits alongside recognized health risks illustrates the complex nature of wellbeing in competitive Esports. Rather than reflecting contradictory experiences, these results indicate that participants continually negotiated the benefits of performance enhancement against the long-term costs of sustained competitive participation.

The dichotomy of physical wellbeing in Esports, where high performance coexists alongside significant health risks, underscores the need for a paradigm shift. By normalizing proactive health practices, organizations can better support athletes' longevity in the field. Our insider familiarity with competitive Esports reinforced the extent to which recovery practices were frequently viewed as secondary to performance development. Throughout the analytical process, maintaining a reflexive stance was essential when ensuring that these observations informed interpretation without impeding the various participants' narratives that emerged. Taken together, these findings suggest that promoting sustainable participation requires both cultural change and individual education. Encouraging proactive health practices, embedding robust player development programmes and recognizing recovery as an integral component of high performance may better support both athlete wellbeing and career longevity within competitive Esports.

Collectively, the findings demonstrate that wellbeing within competitive Esports is socially constructed through the interaction of competitive expectations, organizational cultures and gendered power relations. Rather than existing solely as an individual psychological outcome, wellbeing emerged as a socially negotiated phenomenon formed by participants' routine interactions and experiences within competitive gaming environments. Also, by foregrounding the experiences of women and gender-diverse participants, this study extends existing conceptualizations of wellbeing within Esports beyond individual performance outcomes. It provides an important foundation for future policy, organizational practice and research seeking to create more inclusive and sustainable competitive gaming environments.

Conclusion

This study acknowledges, without making any broad generalizations, the multifaceted effect that Esports participation can have on players' mental, physical and social wellbeing. It is noted throughout the study that engagement with competitive video

gaming can have a pronounced impact on the wellbeing, including anxiety, burnout and stress, of Esports participants – as shown through the insights that the twelve interviewed players, all based in England, shared We also recognize the additional pressure faced by women and other marginalized groups due to societal biases, gendered expectations and heightened performativity due to these biases. The absence of consistent and, at times, visible support can intensify the challenges faced by participants in an already high-pressure environment, albeit it must be noted that some organizations are adopting more structured support interventions at an organizational and interpersonal level. These interventions include the introduction of dedicated support staff and mentorship systems designed to provide additional help and guidance to support players' mental health and stress management. However, continuing to address these barriers is essential to fostering equitable participation and improving overall player wellbeing and also contributing to a more supportive and sustainable Esports industry. Effectively addressing the barriers that can restrict engagement with the Esports ecosystem requires a multifaceted approach.

The research underscores how structural and systemic barriers affect participants from marginalized groups, impacting opportunities, experiences and long-term engagement in the sport. Moreover, responses highlight the need for systemic change in the Esports ecosystem, such as better inclusion policies, improved moderation systems and cultural shifts towards greater diversity and equity. There is an emphasis on the importance of challenging gender stereotypes that persist in competitive video gaming and the wider gaming culture. By normalizing the presence of diverse players, commentators and industry professionals, Esports can contribute to broader societal efforts to address gender inequalities. Schools, media outlets and gaming communities should actively promote positive role models to influence public perceptions of who belongs in Esports. Furthermore, initiatives that empower women and marginalized groups in gaming can translate into greater digital literacy and technology engagement, providing pathways into careers in gaming, streaming, game development and broader technology fields. Ensuring that offline gaming events and online platforms are universally accessible to all is fundamental to addressing participation issues in Esports. This can be achieved through the further integration of adaptive technologies and making existing and future gaming venues more accessible, enhancing inclusivity in the sport (Anderson & Schrier, 2022; Kartal, 2023).

Moving forward, collaboration among stakeholders such as policymakers, organizations and teams is required so that the community can implement a holistic approach that prioritizes participants' overall health, not just their performance. Initiatives such as mandatory breaks, reduced tournament schedules and mentorship programmes can help players maintain a healthier work-life balance. The creation of policies geared to increasing unilateral engagement will be vital in ensuring equal opportunities for all who wish to enter the space. One potential strategy to encourage interest and participation is the continued implementation of more female-only competitions, which would run parallel to gender-neutral tournaments (Nolla et al., 2023). Fostering a positive and inclusive community culture is critical to combating toxicity and ensuring that all players feel supported. Emphasizing the achievements of individuals from various backgrounds with a view to inspiring existing participants, while continuing to increase the levels of representation amongst females and other minority groups through things like the

implementation of industry-wide mentorship programmes can provide guidance and support to those who are new to the discipline (Kim & Kim, 2022). In addition, workshops and seminars can help to underscore the various challenges faced by underrepresented groups and offer strategies to overcome them (Long et al., 2005). Subsequently, raising awareness of discriminatory and potentially exclusionary issues facing various groups is crucial, and the provision of anti-discrimination training programmes to educate the sports stakeholders on diversity and inclusivity is integral to removing these barriers.

Future research could investigate the impact of targeted interventions, such as structured mental health programmes, physical activity integration and coaching strategies, on the well-being and performance of esports participants. Economic impact analysis is also needed to assess how investments in player health and support initiatives influence industry sustainability and profitability. Additionally, research studies should evaluate the effectiveness of existing support programmes, including peer mentorship, counselling services and career transition assistance, to determine their role in fostering long-term success and well-being in competitive gaming. With the limitations of this study being confined to a gendered analysis of mostly cisgender Esports players, future studies could extend to capture a range of intersectionalities by examining age, disability, ethnicity, race, LGBTQ + identities and orientations. These inquiries can be conducted using both qualitative and quantitative research philosophies, principles and practices, and capture global variations beyond England (UK) in Esports and wellbeing. Longitudinal studies are also proposed which monitor and track the impact of Esports on the health and wellbeing of players, from amateur level to professional. In parallel to this, measuring, throughout the players' Esports journey, the effectiveness of initiatives and interventions on psychological and physical wellbeing as it relates to performance.

Overall, this research highlights the multifaceted nature of wellbeing in competitive video gaming and how intersecting aspects of identity shape physical, mental and social experiences that influence participation. In closing, while significant challenges remain, particularly for participants with marginalized identities, there are clear opportunities to create a more inclusive and supportive ecosystem within Esports. Therefore, by adopting a holistic approach, this study contributes to the existing literature by emphasizing the importance of identity, community dynamics and comprehensive strategies for player development. By addressing the identified barriers, Esports can become a more inclusive and supportive space, improving both individual well-being and equitable participation across the board.

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