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Player Perspectives on Mental Health in Esports: Identifying Challenges, Barriers, and Pathways to Support

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Abstract

Background

Esports has rapidly evolved into a globally prominent competitive activity, yet mental health support structures within the ecosystem lag significantly behind those in traditional sports. Despite growing evidence of psychological distress among players, limited research has directly explored how players themselves experience and interpret mental health challenges or evaluate existing support structures. This study aimed to examine player perspectives on mental health in competitive esports, including perceived challenges, barriers to support, and recommendations for improvement.

Results

Nine semi-structured focus groups were conducted with 40 esports players (mean age = 27.5 ± 5.3 years; 11 women, 29 men) from five countries, representing various levels of experience. Data were analysed using a realist approach to thematic analysis, grounded in a critical realist philosophical position. Five themes were generated: (1) competitive esports as a psychologically demanding environment, (2) unequal and stigmatised access to mental health support, (3) esports participation as a conditional protective factor, (4) shared responsibility across an uncoordinated ecosystem, and (5) the need for contextually grounded mental health support. Players described substantial psychological demands associated with competitive play, including performance pressure, toxic online environments, and burnout, alongside a ‘grind culture’ that normalised emotional suppression and discouraged help-seeking, sustained in part by the precarity of competitive opportunity and the visibility of performance to fans and sponsors. Access to support was described as uneven, shaped by competitive level, geography, and financial resources. Participants frequently stated that support needs to be informed, context-specific, and tailored to the digital and online demands of esports. Despite these challenges, participants identified esports participation as a source of social connection, skill development, and psychological resilience when environments were structured and supportive.

Conclusions

Findings highlight the need for coordinated, context-specific mental health frameworks developed in collaboration with players and distributed across multiple stakeholders within the esports ecosystem.

Key points

• Esports players often concealed mental health struggles not because of personal beliefs, but because disclosure was seen as a threat to team standing, sponsorships, and public reputation.

• Access to mental health support was uneven: more experienced players described having greater access to tailored professional support, while less experienced players relied on generic, inconsistent resources.

• Players called for mental health support that is esports-specific, delivered by trusted professionals, and built into everyday team culture rather than reserved for crisis moments.

Introduction

In a packed stadium lit by LED screens, tens of thousands of fans cheer as players battle in virtual arenas for multimillion-dollar prizes. Esports has emerged as a globally prominent form of organised digital competition, consisting of professional teams, structured leagues, corporate sponsorship, and international audiences (1). While esports participation spans amateur to elite levels, the rapid professionalisation and commercialisation of the competitive ecosystem have not been matched by the development of coherent, accessible mental health support structures for players (2,3). With professional teams operating like elite sports franchises, staffed with coaches, analysts, and mental performance consultants, esports has cemented its place as a serious and rapidly growing domain of athletic competition (4,5). However, this professional tier represents only the visible apex of a much broader competitive ecosystem. Esports titles such as League of Legends report player bases exceeding 180 million monthly active users, the vast majority of whom participate in ranked or organised competitive play outside of professional structures (6). Across this ecosystem, millions of amateur and aspiring professional players engage in sustained, performance-driven competition shaped by the norms, pressures, and aspirational pathways of elite esports (7). Understanding how these competitive environments influence player well-being has therefore become an important area of inquiry.

Defined by Keyes (8) dual-continua model, mental health can be treated as a dynamic state reflecting the presence of positive psychological functioning and the absence of mental ill-health symptoms. Mental well-being comprises the emotional (e.g., life satisfaction, positive affect), psychological (e.g., personal growth, purpose in life), and social functioning (e.g., sense of belonging, social contribution), whereas mental ill-health relates to the symptoms associated with diagnosable conditions such as anxiety or depression (9). The model can be viewed as a spectrum, spanning from no symptoms to the emergence of mild to severe mental health challenges. Relevant to an esports context, where players are required to sustain high levels of competitive performance despite underlying psychological distress, or report symptoms of mental ill-health without necessarily experiencing broader functional impairment (10).

Recent progress has been made addressing mental health concerns in esports. A recent scoping review synthesising 89 studies identified consistent mental health risk factors across competitive esports, alongside substantial methodological inconsistency in the literature (11). Across both elite and amateur levels, there is a high prevalence of players reporting psychological distress, anxiety, and burnout (12–14). Despite these concerns, access to mental health support remains limited and fragmented, with few coordinated initiatives or industry-wide frameworks guiding player welfare (12,15–17). These challenges

are commonly linked to intense performance pressure, disrupted sleep and irregular routines, and exposure to toxic or hostile online environments, which together compound the psychological demands placed on players (18,19). This evidence points to a competitive ecosystem that places substantial psychological demands on players, with few systematic tools in place to identify, monitor, or support their mental health (20). This absence of coordinated support contrasts sharply with the structured welfare frameworks that have developed in traditional sport.

Governing bodies such as the International Olympic Committee have implemented evidence-based mental health guidelines, performance psychology services, and recovery protocols to support athlete well-being (21–23). The IOC consensus statement identified a high prevalence of mental health symptoms in elite traditional sporting athletes, and called for evidence-based guidelines to manage these symptoms, given the close relationship between physical and mental health (22). In response, the IOC recently published mental health guidelines, guided by direct stakeholder engagement, that recommend pre-event planning, stigma reduction, dedicated spaces, qualified support staff, mental health surveillance, and post-event support (24). Wang and colleagues (23) highlighted that psychological skills training, positive psychology, and mindfulness interventions are effective in elite athletes, yet interventions need to account for unique scheduling constraints and contexts across athletes. More recently, attention has expanded beyond elite athletes to include community-level participants, with a set of nine actionable guidelines designed to protect and promote mental health and well-being within organised community sports organisations in Australia (25). The guidelines emphasise mental health literacy, establishing clear crisis protocols, appointing dedicated well-being champions, and training coaches to provide a psychologically safe environment. Traditional sport has therefore developed a coordinated infrastructure spanning both elite and community levels, treating athlete mental health as a shared institutional responsibility

In esports, no comparable support structures or cultural norms have been established to safeguard player mental health (26). Concerns about psychological and physical well-being in esports have grown, yet existing initiatives remain fragmented and inconsistently implemented, with no unified frameworks guiding support across the ecosystem (17). Although recent commentaries have called for greater attention to player mental health, empirical research directly engaging players themselves remains limited (15). Mental health interventions in esports fall into four categories: mindsets and stress appraisal; coping and psychological skills; communication and team processes; and delivery formats (27). Despite growing documentation of mental health risks in esports, limited research has explored how players themselves interpret these challenges or evaluate existing support structures (11,14). Research has identified stressors such as performance pressure, disrupted routines, and public scrutiny; however, few studies have examined how these demands are experienced in practice or how players believe mental health support should be designed within the esports context (13,15). In the absence of player-centred perspectives, efforts to develop mental health interventions risk misalignment with the lived realities of competitive esports.

Building on a recently published protocol outlining a multi-stage, evidence-informed approach to co-designing mental health support for esports players (17), the present study adopts a qualitative, player-centred approach to explore these issues. Specifically, the study looked to answer the following research questions: (1) how do esports players perceive the primary psychological challenges, and any protective factors, associated with competitive play; (2) what mental health support structures currently exist within the esports ecosystem and where players perceive gaps to remain; and (3) how do players believe mental health support should be designed and delivered to be relevant, accessible, and effective within the context of esports. To address these research questions, focus groups were conducted with players from various experience levels to explore shared experiences, collective reflections, and practical insights relevant to the co-design of mental health support (28–30). Existing esports mental health research has established that players experience stigma, burnout, and toxic environments, but has offered less insight into why these patterns persist despite growing awareness of the risks they pose (11,13,31). This study aims not only to describe these experiences from players' own perspectives, but to examine some of the mechanisms that sustain them, in line with calls for explanatory, rather than solely descriptive, qualitative research in sport and exercise psychology (32).

Methods

Philosophical Position and Approach

This study was underpinned by critical realism, holding that the psychological pressures, structural inequalities, and cultural dynamics shaping players' mental health in competitive esports are real and consequential, even as players' accounts of them are always mediated by language, positioning, and context (33,34). Critical realism navigates between naive realism, the view that reality can be known directly and objectively through observation, and radical constructionism, the view that reality is produced entirely through language and social interaction, with no meaningful reference beyond these constructions (35–37). Instead, critical realism combines ontological realism, the view that a world exists independently of our knowledge of it, with epistemological constructionism, the view that our knowledge of that world is always theory-laden, fallible, and socially produced (38). This position is well-suited to qualitative research seeking to develop explanatory accounts of lived experience, accounts that move beyond description to identify the structures and mechanisms generating that experience, while still treating rich, detailed description as a necessary foundation for this further interpretive work.

A realist approach to thematic analysis (37, 38) is a suitable philosophical position, as it is explicitly grounded in critical realist assumptions rather than the relativist paradigm that underpins reflexive thematic analysis. Whereas reflexive thematic analysis treats themes as researcher-constructed interpretations grounded in participants' meanings of their experience, realist thematic analysis treats themes as attempts to describe, infer, and theorise phenomena that exist independently of researchers' constructions of them (38). The procedural steps of analysis nonetheless draw on Braun and Clarke (40,41) and Braun et al. (42), as the mechanics of coding and theme development are compatible with a realist framework, even when the underlying epistemological assumptions differ.

These commitments shaped every stage of the research. Ontologically, they lead us to treat burnout, stigma, and structural barriers to support as real phenomena with causal force in players' lives, existing independently of any single account of them, while still being shaped, expressed, and made sense of through language and social interaction. Epistemologically, they required us to account for our role in producing knowledge rather than presenting the analysis as objective discovery, and informed our selection of focus groups as a method well suited to exploring how shared norms and competitive cultures shape individual experience (43).

Researcher Positioning

The research team comprised authors with varying levels of familiarity with the esports ecosystem, high performance sport, and clinical psychology, shaping the co-construction of meaning throughout the study. Braun et al., (42) define reflexivity as a researcher critically reflecting on their values, assumptions, expectations, choices, and actions throughout the research process. The first, fifth, and last authors had direct research or applied experience in esports, positioning them as cultural “insiders” (44). The first author [*removed for review*] brought experience working with esports stakeholders through postdoctoral research, which facilitated rapport during focus groups, alongside a decade in high-performance traditional sport that provided contextual grounding for the support systems already established in that setting. Similarly, the senior author's [*removed for peer-review*] well-established research program in esports psychology required reflexive awareness of potential assumptions that could shape interpretation. Familiarity with esports terminology and culture also supported contextualised analysis. In contrast, the third author had limited direct involvement in esports and identified as a cultural “outsider” (44). As a clinical psychologist and mental health academic, this author acted as a critical friend (38), challenging assumptions and interpretations throughout the analytic process. In early phases of coding, for example, the first author initially interpreted descriptions of pushing through stress and competing despite experiencing distress as evidence of adaptive coping. Discussions with the critical friend challenged these accounts as expressions of internalised stigma and cultural pressure to suppress legitimate mental health concerns. Reframing moved the analysis from a description of player behaviour to an interpretation of cultural constraints, substantially shaping how Theme 2 was developed. From a realist perspective, researcher positionality shapes the knowledge produced without determining it; our interpretations are theory-laden and fallible, but they nonetheless refer to real phenomena that exist beyond our constructions of them (32). The third author operationalised this principle by bringing an outsider's scepticism to bear on readings that the insider researchers had treated as self-evident, thereby strengthening the ontological plausibility of the analytic account.

Participants

We employed a maximum variation sampling approach (45) to recruit esports players with diverse competitive experiences. Gender, rather than biological sex, was collected and reported throughout this study, consistent with our socioecological and critical realist positioning, in which mental health

experiences are understood as shaped by social, cultural, and relational structures rather than by biological categorisation alone. Participants were given the option to self-describe their gender, including non-binary or another option; all forty participants identified as either a man or a woman. Forty esports players participated (Mean Age = 27.5 ± 5.3 years of age; Table 1), with 11 women (27.5%) and 29 men (72.5%), from five different countries, including the United States of America (n = 21; 52.5%), Australia (n = 15; 37.5%), the United Kingdom (n = 2; 5.0%), Canada (n = 1; 2.5%), and Nigeria (n = 1; 2.5%). Participants played across thirteen esports titles, with various self-reported in-game ranks, with the top four titles being League of Legends (n = 11; 27.5%), Street Fighter (n = 6; 15.0%), Mortal Kombat (n = 4; 10.0%), and Call of Duty: Mobile (n = 4; 10.0%). The average weekly playing time across participants was M = 32.7; SD = 13.9 hours. The sample represented a range of in-game expertise, measured by self-reported in-game ranks, outlined in Table 1 (7). Recruitment was facilitated through industry networks, direct outreach on social media platforms, and existing connections with esports organisations. Interested participants received an information sheet and provided written informed consent prior to participation. All participants received an AUD $30 Amazon gift voucher as compensation for their time. Participants were organised into focus groups based on their geographic location, ensuring that groups met at similar times for convenience. Each focus group included three to five participants, and a total of nine focus groups were conducted. The final number of sessions was guided by information power (46), whereby the sample is deemed sufficient when the data are rich enough to address the study aims. Data collection ceased once new focus groups no longer generated novel insights

Table 1
Participant Demographics and Gaming Experience

Characteristic	**Mean ± SD**		
Age (years), mean ± SD	27.5 ± 5.3		
Range (min–max)	18–40		
Gender, n (%)	**N**	**%**	
Men	29	72.5	
Women	11	27.5	
Hours played per week, mean ± SD	32.7 ± 14.0		
Range (min–max)	3–69		
Country, n (%)	N	%	
United States	21	52.5%	
Australia	15	37.5%	
United Kingdom	2	5.0%	
Canada	1	2.5%	
Nigeria	1	2.5%	
Total	**40**	**100.0%**	
Game title, n (%)	N	%	**In-game rank (range)**
League of Legends	11	28.2%	Bronze – Challenger
Street Fighter	6	15.4%	Master
Call of Duty: Mobile	4	10.3%	Grand Master – Legendary
Mortal Kombat	4	10.3%	Master – Elder God
Team Fortress 2	4	10.3%	Civilian – Elite
eFootball	2	5.1%	Division 5 / World Class
FIFA / EA Sports	2	5.1%	
Call of Duty: Warzone	1	2.6%	
Counter-Strike 2	1	2.6%	Global Elite

Note. N = 40 participants; n = 39 reported gaming data (1 participant did not report game title, rank, age, or hours). Game title percentages are based on the 39 respondents. In-game rank is self-reported and game-specific; ranges are ordered by each game's standard tier system.

Characteristic	Mean ± SD		
iRacing	1	2.6%	Class C
Marvel Rivals	1	2.6%	Celestial II
PES	1	2.6%	Amateur
World of Warcraft	1	2.6%	Rank 1
Total	**39**	**100.0%**	

Note. N = 40 participants; n = 39 reported gaming data (1 participant did not report game title, rank, age, or hours). Game title percentages are based on the 39 respondents. In-game rank is self-reported and game-specific; ranges are ordered by each game's standard tier system.

Procedure

Ethical approval

for the study was granted by [*removed for peer-review*]. Focus groups were conducted via Zoom to accommodate participants from geographically dispersed locations while ensuring confidentiality and accessibility. Zoom was selected given the geographically dispersed sample, spanning five countries, and its established use for qualitative data collection (47). While video-based collection can reduce non-verbal cues and depends on participants' technical setup, it also allowed participants to join from familiar, private settings, which may have supported candid discussion of a sensitive topic. As Zoom is a United States-based platform operating outside some regional data protection frameworks (e.g., the General Data Protection Regulation), sessions were password-protected via institutional Zoom licences, recordings were stored locally on encrypted university servers rather than Zoom's cloud, and transcripts were de-identified.

Each session was facilitated by the lead author (*initials removed for peer-review*). A semi-structured discussion guide was used to explore players' experiences of mental health and their support needs (Supplementary Material 1). Participants were encouraged to speak openly, challenge ideas, and build on one another's responses in line with best practices for qualitative group interviews (29,43). Sessions were held between March and August 2025 and lasted approximately 40 to 55 minutes (Mean duration = 48:47 ± 16:15 minutes). Participants received study information prior to each session and were reminded of their voluntary participation at the outset. Sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Aliases were used to maintain confidentiality in transcripts and quotations (e.g., FG1P1). Participants were debriefed and offered the opportunity to provide additional comments.

Discussion Guide

A discussion guide (Supplementary Material 1) was developed to ensure consistency across focus groups. The guide was informed by literature on mental health in esports and refined through consultation with field experts (11). It explored participants' experiences and perceptions of mental health in esports, perceived gaps in support structures, and recommendations for improving mental health support and guideline development (3,17). The discussion guide was split into four main sections: (a) introduction and welcome, (b) understanding and awareness of mental health in esports, (c) mental health challenges experienced and protective factors in esports, and (d) the mental health needs and recommendations. For example, participants were asked, "*What mental health challenges do esports players face?"*, with follow-up questions providing a flexible structure that allowed participants to expand on emergent topics.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using a realist approach to thematic analysis (38), grounded in the critical realist philosophical position described above. This approach uses Bhaskar's (35,48) stratified ontology to structure analysis across three types of themes: experiential themes, which describe participants' subjective viewpoints in lay terms close to the data; inferential themes, which redescribe those patterns in more abstract conceptual terms through inductive and abductive reasoning; and, where the data and reflexive engagement supported it, dispositional themes theorise the underlying mechanisms and structural conditions producing the phenomena through retroductive reasoning (38). This framework explicitly values descriptive experiential themes as a necessary analytic layer rather than a limitation. The procedural steps followed Braun and Clarke (40,41) and Braun et al. (42), as demonstrated by Byrne (49). In this realist approach, thematic analysis is an iterative process in which themes are actively constructed by the analyst rather than discovered within data (50). *NVivo* (Version 15; QSR International Pty Ltd, 2023) was used as an organisational tool for storing transcripts and managing coded extracts; all analytic and interpretive work remained with the first author.

The analytic process began with repeated reading of transcripts to develop deep familiarity with the data, followed by inductive coding that evolved iteratively as understanding deepened (42). Codes were then explored for patterns of shared meaning united by a central concept, consistent with Braun and Clarke's (50) distinction between fully realised themes and domain summaries that organise data around a topic without an interpretive claim. Codes were organised into lower-order themes (e.g., "*Stress and Exhaustion*" and "*Burnout*" combined into "*Mental Health Symptoms Experienced in Esports*"), which were then clustered into broader higher-order themes (e.g., "Competitive Esports as a Psychologically Demanding Environment"). Within the realist thematic analysis framework, these lower-order subthemes function as experiential themes that describe participants' accounts, while the higher-order themes function as inferential themes that redescribe those accounts in more conceptually abstract terms. Theme names were treated as analytic acts, produced to convey the interpretive claim at the heart of each theme rather than label its topic area. The themes created here represent our interpreted story of the data (50), shaped by the reflexive process described in the Researcher Positioning section above.

Trustworthiness and Rigour

To enhance validity, we adopted strategies consistent with critical realist research quality (32,39). Ontological plausibility was supported through the involvement of the third author as a critical friend, who challenged coding decisions, theme development, and underlying assumptions throughout the analytic process (38). For example, the sub-theme 'Cultural and Structural Barriers' was renamed 'Cultural Mental Health Stigma,' and codes discussing stigma were moved to this sub-theme, as stigma and cultural beliefs about mental health are related. Empirical adequacy was supported through verbatim transcription of all focus groups, with transcripts checked for accuracy prior to analysis. NVivo was used solely to organise coded extracts, with all analytic decisions documented as an audit trail. Practical utility was supported through detailed reporting of recruitment, data collection, and analysis. Data extracts and contextual information are provided to ground interpretation and support transferability to similar esports contexts.

Results

A realist thematic analysis of the focus group transcripts yielded five themes and nine subthemes (Table 2). At the experiential level, subthemes describe players' reported challenges, perceptions, and preferences in lay terms that closely align with the data. At the inferential level, main themes redescribe these patterns in conceptually abstract terms. For Theme 2, a dispositional level of interpretation was also developed, identifying an underlying mechanism that generates the described pattern of stigma and concealment, consistent with a critical realist commitment to identifying generative structures beneath observed and inferred patterns (35,38,48).

Table 2
Thematic Analysis Codes, Subthemes, and Example Quotes, Organised by Research Questions

RQ1: Mental Health Challenges in Esports			
Theme	**Sub-Theme**	**Description**	**Example Quotes**
1. **Competitive Esports as a Psychologically Demanding Environment**	1.1 Experiences of Mental Ill-Health	Players frequently reported experiencing stress and exhaustion, with some also identifying burnout, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and reduced self-esteem. Reports described symptoms that fluctuate daily, shift across esports contexts, or directly influence in-game performance. Participants reported that poor mental health was linked to decreased performance, suggesting a cyclical relationship between psychological well-being and competitive outcome.	• *"..pro players are expected to win or rank high and entertain. So this constant demand can lead to stress."* • *"..elite players may experience burnout and poor work-life balance, while non-elite players get social isolation and then gaming overuse.."* • *"Solo gaming or excessive gaming can lead to social isolation, loneliness, and depression, as well as long hours of practice, which can be exacerbated by lack of sleep, which can contribute to physical and mental health issues."* • *"..mental health can influence esports performance. I think when a player's mental health is poor, it can reduce focus and reaction time. And as a result of anxiety. And let's say, maybe depression, for instance, could affect how that person relates to other team members.."*
	1.2 Toxic Environments and Harassment	The esports setting was described as a hostile or pressurised environment, with players noting the constant expectation to perform, experiences of discrimination and harassment, and the negative impact of toxic team dynamics.	• *"...I feel pressure in a competitive game, you know. Sometimes I feel these constant drives to improve"* • *"Women and players with minority backgrounds may face more harassment or exclusion, which adds extra stress"*

RQ1: Mental Health Challenges in Esports			
Theme	**Sub-Theme**	**Description**	**Example Quotes**
			• *"…ethnicity and gender are the major contributors to discrimination; they are the key things that affect the community and our society."*
RQ2: Current Supports and Gaps of Mental Health Support in Esports			
Theme	**Sub-Theme**	**Description**	**Example Quotes**
2. **Unequal and Stigmatised Access to Mental Health Support**	2.1 Accessibility and Structural Barriers	Support varied by geography, socioeconomic status, and rank. Lower-tier players often had no access, while higher-tier players had staff-provided services.	• *"Some of the Western countries, such as the UK, have better access to psychologists, to wellness coaches, and unions that could just help you manage your mental health."* • *"I think access could be better. Some of these apps, personally, I have tried some of them, and some of them are even paid, and some tend not to get adequate access to the resource materials that could help boost mental health"* • *"I think overall assistance to mental health is getting better. Yeah. But still, it isn't enough, especially for players outside top teams or in less developed regions"*
	2.2 Cultural Mental Health Stigma	Grind culture and stigma where mental health was deprioritised and help-seeking discouraged. Gaps in understanding and decreased awareness among players, coaches, and organisations were highlighted as a key area of action and a contributor to stigma.	• *"due to maybe stigma around males, expressing vulnerability again, maybe underreport, mental health struggles, for fear of looking weak"* • *"In many cultures, mental health is still misunderstood or linked to shame. So some communities don't believe in therapy or*

RQ1: Mental Health Challenges in Esports			
Theme	**Sub-Theme**	**Description**	**Example Quotes**
			emotional openness, especially for boys" • *"Players from certain regions might also have less access to support or face cultural stigma around mental health"* • *"More needs to be done to make mental health a consistent priority across all levels of play and to create a safer, more supportive environment."*
3. **Esports Participation as a Conditional Protective Factor**		Esports was described to help foster psychological and social skills to improve mental well-being, supporting personal growth and social connectedness. Supporting mental well-being was also reported to improve in-game performance and career longevity.	• *"I think, for recreational players, esport is often more of a hobby or social outlet. So, it can support mental health by helping people relax, connect with friends and others"* • *"I would say it actually helps when it comes to stress management. So it provides that relief. Yeah, like, when it comes to playing video games, it tries to release you from the stress of the day"* • *"Esports can improve mental health by providing connection and purpose."* • *"Okay, for me, I will say, mental health actually affects how I play and enjoy esport. And I think, when I'm also in good headspace, I can focus better"* • *"If you aren't in the right state of mind, your decision-making, and I guess the processes that go into it, are all haywire, and they're all influenced*

RQ1: Mental Health Challenges in Esports			
Theme	**Sub-Theme**	**Description**	**Example Quotes**
			by whatever's going on in your head"
RQ3: Preferred Supports for Mental Health			
Theme	**Sub-Theme**	**Description**	**Example Quotes**
4. **Shared Responsibility Across an Uncoordinated Ecosystem**	4.1 Team and Organisational Supports	Participants viewed teams and organisations as central to fostering positive team dynamics and communication, providing formal organisational support, and establishing peer-support networks, for early intervention and everyday well-being.	• *"Esport organisations and Leagues. I think their role is now to develop policies that enforce mental health breaks, fair scheduling, and a safe competition environment, which include maybe mental health workshops at maybe boot camps, tournaments or training camps."* • *"…players actually need safe space to talk, we actually need access to professional support and also organisations that actually care about well-being. Not just our performance…"* • *"Another thing is a team support system, designated mental health ambassadors or support personnel within teams, for their support"*
	4.2 Publisher Responsibilities	Participants believed that publishers should build support into games, provide mental health training, fund or promote well-being initiatives, and that in-game reporting systems and awareness campaigns were a proactive step toward reducing toxicity and normalising care across the industry.	• *" I think now is the time to build these tools into games, to help the players manage play time, maybe take breaks or access mental health information, or invest in a moderation system that fights toxicity, hate speech, and maybe online abuse"* • *"…to create this safe, inclusive environment and game publishers should also help by promoting positive in-game behaviour and*

RQ1: Mental Health Challenges in Esports			
Theme	**Sub-Theme**	**Description**	**Example Quotes**
			funding mental health programs…" • *"…they have a powerful role in shaping safe mental health environments…they should build tools to reduce online toxicity or better reporting system..."*
5. **The Need for Contextually Grounded Mental Health Support**	5.1 Esports Specific and Trusted Professional Support	Participants stressed that mental-health systems must reflect the unique demands of esports rather than rely on models borrowed from traditional sports. Esports-specific guidelines or policies, and health practitioners are informed on a clear understanding of competition structures, online environments, and player culture.	• *"Esport community is still diverse, and not everyone is fully aware of the complexity, especially when it comes to stigma, discrimination, or long-term impacts of stress"* • *"…more mental health professionals who understand gaming, who are confidential and who have regular check-ins and open conversations that reduce stigma"* • *"…it felt like just a lot of basic concepts that weren't, yeah, weren't targeted to esports, and I feel like it was just, it's coming from people that don't really understand the space, or the competition"* • *"…mental health professionals, whereby the players will be able to access therapists or counsellors familiar with esports pressures"*
	5.2 Lifestyle and Balance Support	Participants described work–life balance, structured routines, and recovery strategies as vital for long-term mental well-being. They viewed rest, healthy habits, and mindfulness as key features of an effective and sustainable support system.	• *"work-life balance, as in guidance on balancing, gaming, commitment, personal life and social interactions. It's essential for overall mental health"* • *"…having access also to physical training to*

RQ1: Mental Health Challenges in Esports			
Theme	**Sub-Theme**	**Description**	**Example Quotes**
			physical fitness, having a good routine, eating properly…" • *"building healthy schedules with breaks and not just grinding all the time and majorly providing assisted therapy or awareness program"*
	5.3 Education and Training	Players emphasised the need for stronger mental health literacy across esports. This included educating the community, investing in staff training to provide appropriate support, and embedding regular monitoring and check-ins. Frequent engagement with support was seen as valuable for normalising conversations about mental health.	• *"So for the broader community, we need more education, focusing on more education around mental health, such as workshops, or social media campaigns"* • *"more investment can be made to train coaches and moderators, not just for not just for the in-game play or logistics, but in spots and mental distress. If we have more professionals whose needs are tailored in that facet, it will help. I think it would help clear or prevent the early signs of burnout, depression or abuse"*

INSERT Table 2 **HERE**

Theme 1: Competitive Esports as a Psychologically Demanding Environment

Players described a range of psychological, social, and contextual pressures that shaped their mental health and well-being in esports. Two sub-themes captured these challenges: experiences of mental ill-health, and toxic environments and harassment. One participant's account illustrated how these pressures often compounded and cascaded:

"...burnout from intense schedules, then pressure to win, then public scrutiny and online abuse, and then again, when someone wins, there will be gaming addiction or overuse. And then there's identity and self-

worth tied into the game performance, and then there is again, social isolation" (*League of Legends*, Female, Age: 29).

1.1 Experiences of Mental Ill-Health

Players reported stress, anxiety, burnout, and reduced self-esteem as common consequences of competitive esports. These symptoms were associated with sustained performance pressure, high expectations, and difficulty coping with losses. One participant explained; *"One of the mental problems can be stress, from higher targets or expectations. Your expectations are too high, and as a result, you end up being discouraged"* (*League of Legends*, Male, Age: 26*).* Burnout was described as a prominent outcome of prolonged stress and irregular training demands: "*…the stress and anxiety is what everyone wants to say… and [players] burn out from stress*" (Call of Duty: Warzone, Female, Age: 33). Players framed mental ill-health as emerging not from a single cause, but from the demands of performance, scrutiny, and sustained competitive engagement, with pressures experienced and interpreted differently across individuals, competitive levels, and community contexts.

Reported experiences were closely tied to in-game performance itself, with participants consistently describing a reciprocal relationship between mental health and performance. Reduced mental well-being was associated with reduced motivation, poor communication, and impaired decision-making: "*When I am stressed or burnt out, my performance actually drops. So, I lose motivation. Mental health actually plays a major role in my performance...*" (FIFA, Male, Age: 40). Another participant described how emotional distress disrupted cognitive functioning during play: "*If you aren't in the right state of mind, your decision-making...[is] all influenced by whatever's going on in your head*" (League of Legends, Male, Age: 18). Several participants described this relationship as cyclical, whereby poor mental health reduced performance, which then further worsened well-being. Players did not describe mental ill-health as a fixed set of symptoms. It affected, and was affected by, their ability to train, compete, and keep playing.

1.2 Toxic Environments and Harassment

Participants described toxicity as a pervasive feature of esports environments, encompassing harassment, discrimination, and pressurised environments. These experiences were reported across both in-game and organisational contexts and were perceived to intensify psychological distress. One participant highlighted the role of discrimination: *"I would add that ethnicity and gender are the major contributors to discrimination... it's been something that everyone is still trying to navigate…so I would still say that gender and ethnicity are big contributors"* (*League of Legends*, Female, Age: 23). Others described how exclusion and harassment affected belonging and well-being: "*I think women and LGBTQIA+ players have higher rates of online harassment and exclusion, which creates anxiety, stress, and a lower sense of belonging*" (*Call of Duty*, Male, Age: 31). Bullying and harassment were also described as consequences of players' difficulty managing competitive outcomes: "*Those who have difficulty coping with losses… [which] may lead to other things, such as bullying and harassment…eventually could lead to sleep disturbances"* (*League of Legends*, Male, Age: 27).

Participants linked toxicity to team dynamics, noting that conflict among teammates or coaches, and environments where mistakes were harshly scrutinised, added further strain. Toxicity, discrimination and pressurised team dynamics were described as everyday features of esports, not isolated incidents. For example: "*[Esports players] face team dynamics and conflict…conflict with teammates or coaches can lead to additional stress and impact [their] mental well-being"* (*League of Legends*, Male, Age: 28). Players' well-being was closely tied to how teammates and coaches handled their own stress.

Theme 2: Unequal and Stigmatised Access to Mental Health Support

Participants described multiple barriers and facilitators to accessing mental health support across the esports ecosystem. Two sub-themes were identified: accessibility and structural barriers, and cultural stigma around mental health.

2.1 Accessibility and Structural Barriers

Participants identified structural factors that limited access to mental health support, including geographical location, socioeconomic status, and competitive level. Access to psychologists, well-being staff, and support infrastructure was perceived to be uneven across regions, with players in Western or more developed areas reporting greater availability of services. One participant noted: "*But in some of the Western countries…you could have better access to psychologists, to wellness coaches…"* (*Street Fighter*, Male, Age: 27). Access was stratified within countries, particularly between urban and rural areas: "*Players in urban developed regions may have better access to resources than those in rural or developing areas*" (*League of Legends*, Female, Age: 29). Financial barriers further limited access, with participants describing existing digital tools as paid, limited in depth, or not suitable for their needs: "*Some of these apps…are even paid… [and] do not to provide adequate access to the resource materials…"* (*Street Fighter*, Male, Age: 27)

Participants emphasised that accessibility, rather than specialisation, was the primary concern, particularly for those outside formal organisational structures, who make up the majority of the esports population. Players described limited availability and affordability of support as more immediate barriers than whether services were tailored to esports: "*Accessibility… would be the most important factor…to get support to these players"* (*League of Legends*, Male, Age: 18).

A clear divide emerged in participants' experience levels. More experienced participants within structured organisations were reported to have access to psychologists or mental-health coaches, whereas less experienced participants relied on sparse and inconsistent online resources: *"For non-elite esports players, there is very little formal support…"* (*Call of Duty: Mobile*, Male, Age: 31). Support for less experienced participants was described as overly generalized and lacking relevance to competitive demands: "*There is next to zero things outside of…'take a break'…*" (*League of Legends*, Male, Age: 18). Access to support was uneven across geography, financial resources, and competitive status, and less experienced players outside formal systems were the most disadvantaged.

2.2 Cultural Mental Health Stigma

Stigma was a pervasive barrier across all focus groups. Participants described a dominant 'grind culture' that normalized persistence through stress and discouraged help-seeking: "*…there's a culture…that overlooks mental health…players…push through stress without rest"* (*Call of Duty: Mobile*, Male, Age: 22). This culture reinforced expectations of self-reliance and minimized mental health concerns, often reducing support to superficial advice: "*…'grind culture' is so ingrained in esports…there is no actual solution provided... just 'grind it out'…"* (*League of Legends*, Male, Age: 18). Fear of judgement, appearing weak, or losing competitive opportunities further discouraged help-seeking: "*I think that many players don't feel fully comfortable seeking help. There's often fear of being judged, seen as weak or losing opportunities. Stigma is still a barrier, especially in a competitive environment*" (*Call of Duty: Mobile*, Male, Age: 28). Participants also highlighted how broader cultural and ethnic beliefs reinforced stigma, with some communities viewing mental health as shameful or illegitimate: "*In many cultures, mental health is…linked to shame…especially for boys"* (*Team Fortress 2*, Male, Age: 30).

Stigma wasn't experienced only at the individual level; teams and communities reinforced it through shared expectations of self-reliance. Participants described environments where distress was dismissed or ignored, and poor performance was rarely interpreted through a well-being lens: "*If you play badly, you just play badly…not…is there anything affecting you that's causing you to play poorly?"* (*League of Legends*, Male, Age: 18). Cultural norms in esports discourage help-seeking and reinforced emotional suppression, especially in competitive, socially interdependent environments.

Stigma was also sustained by limited mental health literacy across the esports ecosystem, with participants describing gaps in understanding among players, coaches, and organisations: "*Not everyone is fully aware of the complexity, especially when it comes to stigma, discrimination, or long-term impacts of stress*" (FIFA, Female, Age: 26). This lack of awareness was described as a barrier to early recognition and appropriate response to distress: "*the lack of understanding, whereby players might not fully understand mental health issues or feel unsure about seeking help*" (League of Legends, Male, Age: 28). Participants suggested that improving mental health literacy across stakeholders could reduce stigma over time, rather than treating awareness and stigma as separate problems.

At a dispositional level, these accounts point to a mechanism in which mental health disclosure is interpreted as a signal of competitive incompetence rather than a legitimate health need. This interpretation appears sustained by two structural conditions evident across participants' accounts: the precarity of competitive opportunity, whereby visible distress is read as a threat to team or sponsor confidence, reflected above in players' fear of being judged or losing opportunities; and the public visibility of performance, whereby fan and community scrutiny extends judgment of disclosure beyond the immediate team environment. For example: *"...people might think asking for help means they are weak or not serious enough... others might worry how it may look on teams... and also to their fans and our sponsors*" (FIFA, Male, Age: 40). These conditions generate a structural incentive to conceal distress rather than disclose it, reproducing grind culture independently of individual players' personal beliefs

about mental health. The ‘grind culture’ also appears to compound further for players holding gender or ethnic identities within these environments, for example:

“Esports are influenced by a ‘grind harder, don’t complain’ mindset… admitting mental health struggles can be seen as a weakness. The air is especially thick in highly competitive or male-dominated teams. Another reason you don’t feel comfortable [disclosing mental ill-health] is the fear of career impact” (*Call of Duty: Mobile*, Male, Age: 31).

Theme 3: Esports Participation as a Conditional Protective Factor

In addition to challenges, participants also identified several aspects of esports that supported mental well-being through social connection, skill-building, and meaningful engagement. A commonly reported benefit was stress relief and social connectedness: *“It [esports] has positive benefits, which will lead to stress relief, relaxation, improved social connection and mood elevation…”* (*FIFA*, Male, Age: 18). Participants also highlighted the development of psychological and cognitive skills, including resilience, teamwork, problem-solving, and decision making: “*It builds self-esteem through achievement, encourages teamwork and socialisation, and improves cognitive functions like decision-making”* (*League of Legends*, Female, Age: 29). A smaller number of participants extended this account further, describing well-being as closely linked to performance itself, influencing focus, decision-making, and consistency under pressure: *"...when I'm also in good headspace, I can focus better*" (FIFA, Male, Age: 26). This relationship was described as reciprocal, whereby positive mental states enhanced performance stability, and improved performance in turn reinforced well-being and sustained motivation to engage.

However, these benefits were not experienced uniformly. Participants' accounts suggested that positive outcomes were contingent on how esports was engaged with, particularly whether participation was socially supportive and balanced, rather than highly pressurised or isolating. For example:

“[Esports] can influence [mental health] positively and negatively. The positive side is that it builds self-esteem through achievement, encourages teamwork, socialisation, and improves cognitive function. Whereas on the negative side, high-pressure performance and toxic online environments and long screen time, can lead to poor sleep and burnout, which conversely leads to anxiety and depression or stress” (*League of Legends*, Female, Age: 29).

In this way, the same environments that fostered growth could also contribute to distress when demands exceeded coping capacity or when social interactions become negative. Overall, esports were described as a context that can support psychological and social development, particularly when participation is meaningful, socially embedded, and well-regulated.

Theme 4: Shared Responsibility Across an Uncoordinated Ecosystem

Participants emphasised that responsibility for mental health in esports extends beyond individual players and is shared among multiple stakeholders across the ecosystem. Two sub-themes captured these perspectives: team and organisational support, and publisher responsibilities.

4.1 Team and Organisational Supports

Participants viewed teams and organisations as central to supporting player mental well-being by creating positive environments, structured support systems, and peer-based networks. Peer support was frequently highlighted as a practical and accessible form of support: *"…a kind of peer support group where…players can openly talk… it needs to be easy to access, private, and judgment-free, so players can actually feel safe using it"* (*FIFA*, Male, Age: 40). Participants emphasized the importance of workload management, particularly balanced scheduling to reduce pressure: *"Teams should support players…by balancing their schedules"* (*Call of Duty*, Male, Age: 20) Participants also advocated for formal mental health support delivered by trained professionals. This included mental health workshops, embedded support staff, and system-wide policies: *"Organisations… need to develop these policies that enforce mental health breaks, fair scheduling, and a safe competition environment, which can include maybe mental health workshops…"* (*Team Fortress 2*, Male, Age: 27). Teams and orgnisations were described as key intermediaries, shaping the social and structural conditions that affect player wellbeing.

4.2 Publisher Responsibilities

Publishers were perceived as having substantial influence over mental health outcomes through their control over game design, online environments, and player interactions. Participants suggested that publishers could reduce harm by improving moderation systems, embedding features, and shaping healthier digital environments: *"Build these tools into games, to help the players manage play time…or access mental health information or invest in moderation system that fights toxicity…"* (*Team Fortress*, Male, Age: 30). Participants highlighted the role of publishers in promoting mental health resources, particularly as part of routine support rather than crisis response: *"…provide access to mental health resources like therapists or performance coaches…not just when something goes wrong [crisis], but as part of the training…* (*FIFA*, Male, Age; 23). Participants saw publishers as uniquely influencing mental health outcomes through the games and platforms they design and govern.

Theme 5: The Need for Contextually Grounded Mental Health Support

Participants described several approaches to improve the relevance and effectiveness of mental health support within esports. Three sub-themes were identified: esports-specific and trusted professional support, lifestyle and balance support, and education and training.

5.1 Esports Specific and Trusted Professional Support

Participants consistently reported that existing mental health resources were overly generalized and failed to reflect the specific demands of esports, including online environments, competitive structures,

and team dynamics: “*The information and content…is not really anything different to a simple Google search...it's so barebones and basic”* (*League of Legends*, Male, Age: 18). Participants emphasized the need for frameworks and guidelines tailored to the realities of esports, including minimum standards of care and system-wide expectations for play well-being: *“…development of guidelines or frameworks, like a mental health requirement…that the players are, you know, psychologically safe”* (*League of Legends*, Female, Age: 29). Support perceived as generic or externally imposed lacked credibility, reinforcing the importance of approaches grounded in esports' cultural, competitive, and digital context.

This need for tailoring extended to the qualifications and trustworthiness of professional support itself. Participants highlighted that effective mental health care requires access to qualified clinicians who understand the specific pressures of esports: *"...access to therapists, counsellors, or mental performance coaches who understand the esports industry*" (League of Legends, Female, Age: 28). However, access alone was insufficient, trust and confidentiality were critical factors influencing engagement, particularly when support staff were embedded in teams: *"...they [players] don't trust the teams appointed psychologists...[due to] confidentiality and also all the others feel that managers prioritise performance*" (Call of Duty: Mobile, Male, Age: 31). Participants also advocated for accessible, independent support options, such as digital platforms that provide confidential and ongoing care: "*...an application where one can log in and get...professional input...to better their self-being while also gaming*" (League of Legends, Female, Age: 23). Expertise and trust were both necessary, not one or the other. Participants described generic support and team-embedded support as equally inadequate on their own, regardless of the practitioner’s qualifications.

5.2 Lifestyle and Balance Support

Participants highlighted the importance of lifestyle factors, such as sleep, nutrition, physical activity, and structured recovery, in maintaining mental health. Many described a tendency in esports to prioritise practice at the expense of broader well-being: *“…we only focus on practising. But then there are other aspects of life, like nutrition and your physical health that could have a major impact on the mental health of the players”* (*Street Fighter*, Male, Age: 27). Balanced routines, recovery periods, and the integration of physical activity were seen as key strategies to mitigate burnout and support sustained engagement in esports.

5.3 Education and Training

Participants distinguished between the provision of support and the capacity of individuals in esports to recognise and respond to mental health concerns. Education and training were considered essential for improving mental health literacy among players, coaches, managers, and moderators. Participants emphasised training key stakeholders to identify early signs of mental distress and respond appropriately:

“…more investment can be made to train coaches and moderators, not just for the in-game play or logistics, but in the spots and mental distress… it will help. I think it would help clear or prevent the early signs of

burnout, depression or abuse.” (*League of Legends*, Female, Age: 28).

They also called for structured mental health literacy programs focused on awareness, recognition, and help-seeking: *“…a mental health literacy program…for the needs of both players and coaches.”* (*League of Legends*, Male, Age: 28). Participants viewed education and training as necessary alongside professional support, not a substitute for it.

Discussion

This study explored esports players’ mental health needs, identifying five interrelated themes capturing challenges, barriers, protective factors, stakeholder responsibilities, and system-level needs. Mental health in esports emerges as a systemic issue, shaped by individual, cultural, organisational, and industry-level factors (Fig. 1). Figure 1 was developed inductively from the five themes generated through the analysis, mapping each theme onto the level of the esports ecosystem it primarily reflects, individual, relational, organisational, or industry-wide, to illustrate how these levels interact rather than operate in isolation. This interpretation aligns with emerging evidence conceptualising esports performance as an integrated, dynamic system (51). While several of these themes align with existing esports mental health literature, particularly burnout, toxicity, and stigma as recognised challenges (11,13,31), the current study extends the literature by identifying a specific mechanism underlying cultural beliefs in esports. Mental health disclosure can be interpreted as a signal of competitive incompetence rather than a legitimate health need, sustained by the precarity of competitive opportunity and the public visibility of performance, supporting findings in previous esports literature (52,53). By foregrounding player perspectives, this study shows how mental health risks are produced and maintained within competitive gaming structures and how to design mental health support (11,15).

Figure 1 **here**

Psychological challenges in competitive esports

Players described the primary psychological challenges of competitive esports as arising from cumulative performance pressure, hostile social environments, and reciprocal relationships between mental health and performance (RQ1). Participants did not describe mental ill-health as an individual vulnerability or a one-off response to competition. Instead, distress built up through sustained engagement in competitive systems that prioritise performance, volume, and visibility, while offering limited protection for recovery and well-being (3,54). These accounts align with quantitative evidence documenting elevated stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and burnout among esports competitors (12,15,55–57), and add to that literature by showing how these outcomes play out in practice.

Burnout was a central challenge, characterised by emotional exhaustion, reduced motivation, and diminished enjoyment. Participants described burnout as developing through prolonged exposure to intensive training schedules, irregular routines, and constant performance evaluation, rather than excessive play alone, consistent with previous esports research (57,58). This fits broader models of

athlete burnout, where chronic stress without adequate recovery leads to maladaptive outcomes (21). It also points to contributors more specific to esports, such as sustained cognitive load, sedentary demands, and disrupted sleep (59,60). Pressure was intensified at elite levels, but similar patterns were reported among amateurs, suggesting burnout may be a shared challenge across competitive levels, differing more in intensity and available safeguards than in underlying mechanisms (57,58,61).

Participants also described toxic environments and harassment as core psychological stressors, not incidental ones. Previous research has defined toxicity as behaviour that disrupts team dynamics and morale, where players are inclined to normalise negative behaviours and justify it as part of competitive game culture (62). Players described discrimination, abuse, and hostile communication as normalised features of competitive esports (55). These perceptions align with prior research on negative behaviours in esports (15,31), and extend it by showing that toxicity was distressing at the individual level and embedded in team and community life. Harassment targeting women and LGBTQIA+ players was described as persistent and exclusionary, reinforcing evidence that marginalised groups carry a disproportionate psychological burden in esports contexts (5,63).

These findings also invite interpretation through a masculinities lens. Hegemonic masculinity, marked by emotional stoicism, self-reliance, and invulnerability (64), helps explain the grind culture participants described, where stress is endured without rest or disclosure. Within esports specifically, elements of "geek masculinity" may intersect with traditional sport masculinities to reinforce these norms of emotional restriction and competitive dominance (65,66). Rather than explicit emotional disclosure, distress was frequently expressed through performance decline, disengagement, and withdrawal; consistent with evidence that masculine norms privilege performance-based indicators over emotional articulation (67–69). In elite traditional sport, help-seeking is commonly suppressed by norms that equate disclosure with weakness, particularly among male athletes (70). Recent findings link masculine norms directly to greater self-stigma and more negative help-seeking attitudes, where self-compassion moderated the effect (71). Addressing mental health in esports will likely require gender-sensitive approaches that account for the cultural conditions shaping how distress is recognised and responded to (69).

Players also described a two-way relationship between mental health and performance. Distress impaired focus, reaction time, decision-making, and motivation, while performance decline in turn intensified stress and emotional strain. Mirroring findings in traditional sport, where mental ill-health both shapes and is shaped by performance trajectories (22) and aligns with esports evidence linking psychological strain to impaired executive functioning under pressure (72,73). Participants did not describe this as a simple individual process. It was intensified by continuous evaluation, limited recovery, and public visibility through streaming and social media, tying mental health directly to players' capacity to perform and stay engaged over time.

Barriers to accessing mental health support in esports

Players described access to mental health support in esports as fragmented, uneven, and contingent on competitive status rather than need (RQ2). Barriers were framed as systemic, shaped by inequitable infrastructure, pervasive stigma, and low mental health literacy. Structural and accessibility barriers were identified as the most immediate constraints. Participants described a pronounced divide between elite players embedded within professional organisations, who often reported access to psychologists or mental performance staff, and the broader competitive population, which relied on inconsistent online resources or self-navigated support pathways (3). This tiered access resembles patterns in traditional sport, where services are concentrated at elite levels (22), but was perceived as more acute in esports due to fragmented governance and a lack of standardised welfare expectations, which may expose young participants to wellbeing harms (74). Geographic and financial disparities further compounded these inequities, resulting in a system where access was shaped by status, location, and resources rather than clinical need (26).

Stigma was identified as a second major barrier. Participants described a dominant ‘grind culture’ that valorised endurance, continuous practice, and emotional suppression, framing mental health difficulties as personal weakness or a lack of competitive resilience. While a similar stigma has been observed in traditional sports (22), participants suggested it is intensified in esports by constant performance evaluation and precarious career trajectories (75). Concerns that disclosure could jeopardise team selection, sponsorship, or organisational support reflected environments lacking psychological safety. In traditional sport, help-seeking is low at 22.4% with common barriers including stigma, fear of deselection, confidentiality concerns, and athlete-identity pressure (76). Cultural and ethnic norms further shaped stigma in some communities, where mental ill-health was viewed as shameful or illegitimate. Stigma in esports, then, is reproduced culturally and organisationally, not just held individually (15). More specifically, stigma in esports appears sustained less by individual misunderstanding of mental health than by a structural interpretation of disclosure itself, whereby seeking support is read as evidence of competitive incompetence rather than a legitimate health need. This interpretation appears reinforced by the precarity of competitive opportunity and the public visibility of performance, conditions that jointly incentivise concealment regardless of players' personal beliefs about mental health (35,38,48). This distinguishes esports from some traditional sport contexts, where welfare infrastructure and governing body oversight can partially offset similar cultural pressures (22).

Limited mental health literacy was identified as a foundational barrier. Participants described gaps in recognising warning signs, responding supportively, and navigating appropriate services. Although similar deficits have been documented in traditional sport (28), participants perceived these gaps as compounded in esports by stigma, toxicity, and chronic performance stress (31). Mental health literacy, on this account, is not just knowledge; it is the capacity to build psychologically safe environments where help-seeking is normalised and protected.

Protective factors and perceived benefits of esports participation

Participants described substantial psychological challenges but also identified protective factors that complicate deficit-focused narratives of esports participation. Understanding what mental health support structures currently exist and where gaps remain (RQ2) necessarily involves understanding the informal, naturally occurring sources of support that esports participation itself can provide, alongside the formal structural gaps. Consistent with recent evidence (11), well-being outcomes were shaped not only by exposure to stressors but also by the social, psychological, and developmental opportunities afforded by competitive play when appropriately structured. Social connection and belonging were identified as central protective influences, particularly for players who experienced social isolation or difficulty forming relationships offline. Esports was described as facilitating meaningful interaction, shared identity, and peer support, contributing to stress relief, mood regulation, and a sense of community. These findings align with broader literature showing that social connectedness is a key positive correlate of gaming engagement in supportive environments (11,54), where esports players generally report less social support, self-regulation, and psychological skill when compared to traditional sports athletes (77). But participants were clear that these benefits were conditional; the same environments contributed to distress when demands became excessive, or interactions turned hostile (15). Participants also described esports as building transferable psychological and interpersonal skills, including resilience, teamwork, problem-solving, emotional regulation, and cognitive flexibility, evidence that esports carries developmental potential alongside its risks. Evidence from traditional youth sport suggests such benefits emerge within structured, psychologically safe environments (30), and participants similarly viewed these outcomes as contingent on manageable demands, constructive communication, and the absence of persistent toxicity (78).

Design and delivery of mental health support in esports

Players said effective mental health support in esports must be systemic, context-specific, and shared across multiple stakeholders, rather than left to individual responsibility (RQ3). Support felt most credible when embedded in the structures, cultures, and everyday realities of competitive esports rather than delivered through generic models (17). At the organisational and team level, culture was identified as a primary determinant of mental health outcomes. Supportive communication, psychologically safe environments, and balanced scheduling were perceived as foundational to disclosure, help-seeking, and burnout prevention. Peer support mechanisms, such as structured opportunities to share experiences, were seen to normalise distress and reduce isolation, consistent with evidence from traditional sport (30). Workload and recovery practices mattered just as much, intensive training schedules and inadequate recovery were identified as key contributors to distress (21). From the player perspective, mental health support is therefore inseparable from broader organisational decisions about training volume, expectations, and rest.

Trust and confidentiality were also critical. Players hesitated to disclose difficulties to team-employed professionals because of concerns about performance surveillance, information sharing, and consequences for selection or career progression, reflected in participants' concern that team-appointed psychologists prioritise performance over confidentiality. This concern is consistent with the mechanism

identified in Theme 2, in which disclosure is read as a threat to competitive standing; team-embedded professionals are seen as an extension of that same evaluative structure, rather than as a safe space apart from it. Trust and confidentiality have similarly been identified as key barriers to help-seeking in traditional elite sport, particularly where mental health support is delivered within the same organisational structures responsible for selection and performance decisions (14,26). Independent, confidential support options, including online or app-based platforms, have been suggested as one way to address this in traditional sport settings (76), consistent with participants' own preference for accessible, self-directed digital tools in the present study. This points to a need for clear ethical frameworks, transparent reporting structures, and independent support options alongside team-based services (14,26). Organisational responsibility, on this account, means more than providing services; it means ensuring autonomy, confidentiality, and psychological safety.

Beyond organisations, participants pointed to game publishers and industry actors as influential in shaping mental health outcomes. Calls for improved moderation systems, play-time management tools, and embedded well-being features reflect a recognition that digital environments are a primary site of risk in esports, in line with public health perspectives on environmental design (15). Participants consistently rejected generic mental health resources as detached from lived experience and poorly suited to esports-specific stressors. They wanted approaches that account for online toxicity, public performance scrutiny, irregular routines, sedentary demands, and digitally mediated team dynamics (15,31), which points to co-design and context-sensitive implementation as more useful than simply transferring models from traditional sport or clinical settings (22,23).

Participants also articulated a holistic view of support, emphasising lifestyle behaviours, education, and professional care as interconnected rather than competing priorities. Sleep, nutrition, and physical activity were identified as foundational to well-being and performance (16,59,60), alongside the need for training and education across coaching, management, and moderation roles to build recognition and response capability across the ecosystem (28). Esports cultures often prioritise practice volume over recovery, signalling the need for cultural change alongside individual education (75,79–81).

These findings carry a specific implication for intervention design. If disclosure is interpreted as a competence signal rather than a health signal, increasing the availability of support services alone is unlikely to shift help-seeking behaviour while that interpretation remains intact. This is consistent with evidence from traditional elite sport, where brief educational and destigmatisation interventions have reliably improved mental health literacy and reduced self-reported stigma, without translating into a corresponding increase in actual help-seeking behaviour (82,83). Fear of disclosure may also reflect a realistic appraisal of risk rather than a misperception to be corrected through education: vignette research has found that athletes with a history of mental health difficulties may be judged less signable than their peers (76), a finding consistent with the precarity-based mechanism identified in the present study. Interventions may instead need to target the interpretation directly, for example, by structurally separating disclosure from selection and performance decisions, embedding confidential and independent reporting channels, and involving fans and community stakeholders in shifting public

narratives around disclosure, rather than treating stigma reduction solely as a matter of player or coach education (76). Coach and organisational support have been identified as key facilitators of help-seeking in traditional sport (83), and relationship-based approaches involving athletes, families, and clubs have shown early promise in normalising mental health conversations beyond individual education alone. This reframes stigma reduction in esports as an organisational and cultural design problem rather than solely an individual literacy gap.

Limitations and Future Research Recommendations

Several limitations should be considered. First, the study reflects the perspectives of esports players who were willing and able to participate in the focus group and does not aim for statistical representativeness. Although participants were recruited across multiple game titles and geographic regions, the study was not designed to compare experiences across specific games, genres, or competitive formats, and some player groups and cultural contexts may be underrepresented. Ethnicity was not collected as part of the demographic data. Given that participants raised cultural and ethnic dimensions of stigma and discrimination in their accounts (Themes 1 and 2), this limits our ability to contextualise these findings against participants' own ethnic backgrounds. The findings should be read as contextually situated and transferred to other esports settings with caution.

Second, the findings are based on self-reported accounts captured at a single point in time, which may be shaped by recall, social desirability, or retrospective interpretation. The study did not assess clinical diagnoses or symptom prevalence; it focused on how players understood and experienced mental health challenges, well-being, and support within esports. The cross-sectional design also limits insight into how mental health experiences, performance pressures, and organisational practices evolve over time (84).

Thirdly, this study adopted Keyes' (8,9) dual-continua to define mental ill-health and well-being. It is important to note that participants frequently used mental health terminology in the focus groups, along with related terms such as stress or burnout, interchangeably in their own accounts. This reflects a broader conceptual ambiguity around mental health terminology within the esports community, and future research may benefit from exploring mental health literacy among esports stakeholders.

This study intentionally foregrounded player perspectives and therefore does not capture the views of other key stakeholders, such as coaches, managers, publishers, or mental health practitioners. It also does not evaluate the effectiveness of specific interventions or support models. There would be benefits to incorporating multiple stakeholder perspectives and examining how esports-specific support systems are implemented and experienced over time. Future research should prioritise longitudinal and multi-stakeholder designs to examine how mental health experiences evolve across competitive cycles and to capture the perspectives of coaches, managers, and industry actors. The co-design and evaluation of esports-specific mental health interventions is a critical next step (17), with particular attention to gendered norms shaping help-seeking and the potential role of physical activity in supporting well-being among this population (16,69,85).

Conclusion

This study provides player-centred insight into the mental health needs of competitive esports players, and identifies a specific mechanism, the interpretation of disclosure as a signal of competitive incompetence, that helps explain why stigma persists despite growing awareness of mental health risks in esports. Psychological well-being in esports depends on individual, relational, organisational, and industry-level factors together, not any one of them alone. Esports participation offers real opportunities for social connection, skill development, and personal growth, but these benefits depend on environments that keep toxicity, stigma, and inequitable access to care in check. Coordinated, esports-specific mental health systems are needed that go beyond individual approaches to include organisational responsibility, industry accountability, and a holistic support infrastructure. By foregrounding player perspectives, this study provides an empirical foundation for developing and implementing contextually relevant mental health frameworks that support both well-being and sustainable performance in esports.

Declarations

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Conflict statement: The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate: This study was conducted in accordance with the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Bellberry Human Research Ethics Committee, under the study protocol Movember Esports Mental Health Guidelines (protocol number MOV-EMHG-1). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to participation.

Consent for Publication: Not applicable. This manuscript does not contain any individual person's data in any form, including images, videos, or identifiable case details. All quotations included are anonymised and attributed by pseudonymous descriptors only (game title, gender, age).

Availability of Data and Material: The data that support the findings of this study are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions protecting participant confidentiality. Requests to access the data may be directed to the corresponding author

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Author Contributions: MN collected the data, led data analysis, and prepared the manuscript. DP conceptualised the project, led data analysis, supervised the project, and edited the manuscript. ZS was the critical friend and edited the manuscript. BTS conceptualised the study, reviewed the findings, and edited the manuscript. NL provided access to participant recruitment and edited the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Figures

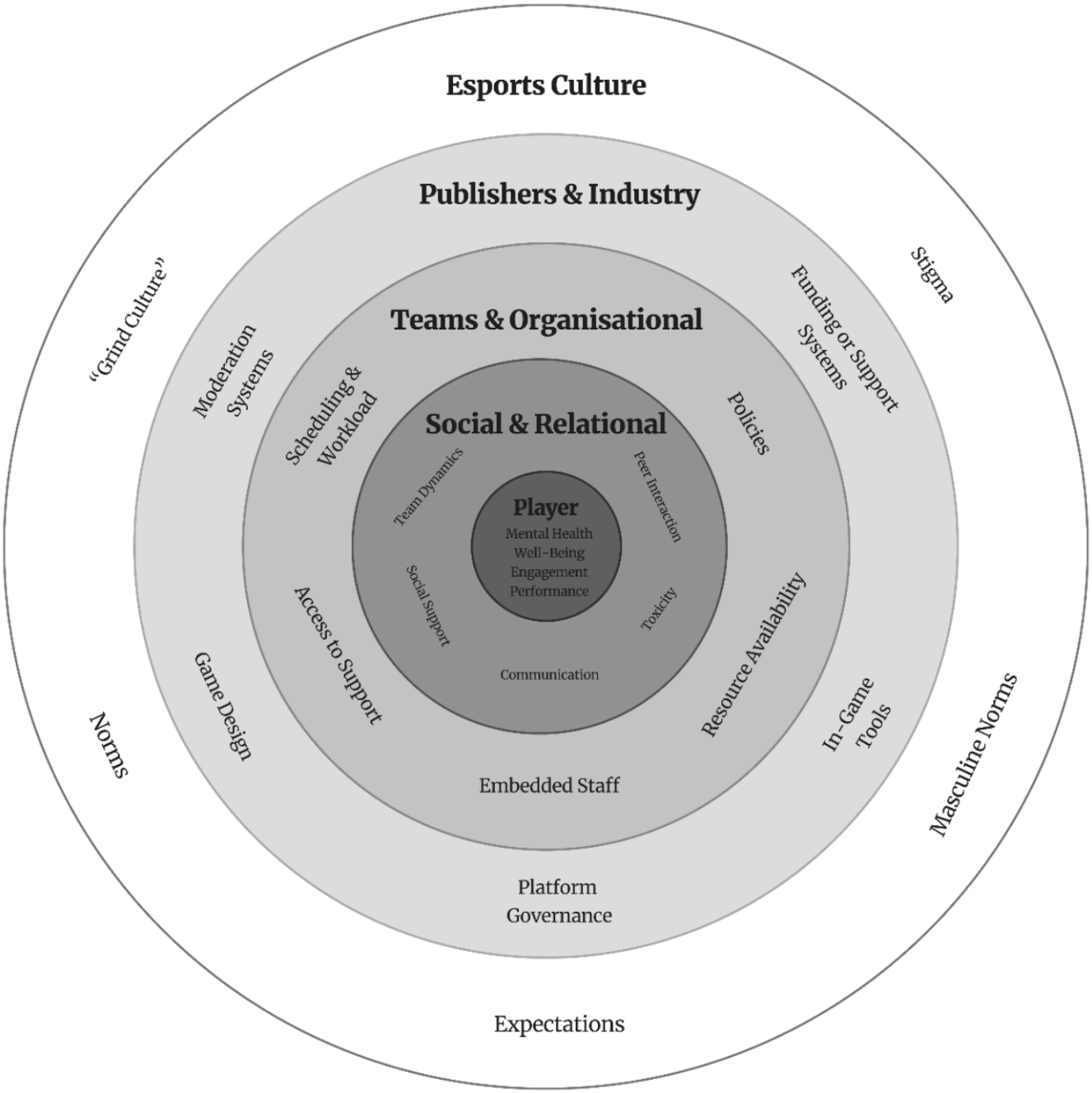


Figure 1

A multi-level representation of mental health in esports, illustrating how player's well-being is shaped by interacting with individual, relational, organisational, and industry-level factors, embedded within broader cultural norms.

Supplementary Files

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