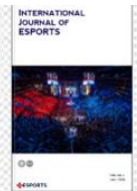


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The Psychological Impacts of eSports Gaming: A Detriment or a Lifeline in Disguise?

Introduction

Electronic sports, otherwise known as eSports, describes the realm of competitive and organized video gaming – where professional players from different leagues and teams would battle for the championship title along with a handsome prize pool (Palanichamy et al., 2020) for games such as Defense of the Ancients 2 (DOTA 2), League of Legends (LoL), Counter Strike: Global Offensive (CS: GO), and Overwatch (OW), to name a few (Poulus et al., 2020). The origin of eSports dates to 1972 at Stanford University where the first video game competition took place for Spacewar! (Palanichamy et al., 2020). Within the next two decades, the eSports industry witnessed tremendous growth due to the launch of the World Wide Web in 1989 and new technologies in the early 1990s (Palanichamy et al., 2020). The four main gameplay genres associated with eSports are Player vs. Player (PvP), First Person Shooter (FPS), Real-Time Strategy (RTS), and Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) (Bellah, 2021). Most gamers competing in eSports tournaments are from Asia, Europe, and the Americas; and are watched and supported by millions of fans worldwide through live events and online streaming media platforms such as Twitch and YouTube, (Popper, 2013) which drew an extraordinary audience of 453 million in 2019 (Palanichamy et al., 2020). While the COVID-19 pandemic took a toll on traditional sports, eSports competitors benefited from online tournaments, and an increase in revenue generation and viewership (Women in eSports are Driving Big Gains in Viewership, 2021). As the industry continues to thrive, this entices more casual gamers to take the opportunity to venture out to competitive gaming (Thielmeyer, 2019). Whether players participate in tournaments or join leagues, both casual and professional gamers would experience being part of an inclusive community, such as connecting with other

players and having the chance to improve on their gaming skills and coordination (Thielmeyer, 2019). While there are various positive aspects of this competitive sport, there is also the pressing issue of the mental demands of this industry – which leads us to the question: What are the psychological impacts of eSports gaming?

The Unspoken Impacts of eSports

While eSports has taken the world by storm and has evolved into a multibillion-dollar business, various psychological problems faced by gamers have the potential to go unnoticed (Smith et al., 2019). Contrary to popular belief, the mental demands of gamers competing in eSports are not that different from the pressures experienced by traditional sport athletes, (Birch & Chekera, 2020) such as professional basketball and football players (Smith et al., 2019). In an elite and highly competitive environment, eSports athletes are prone to face issues such as burnout, depression, anxiety, addiction, and aggression due to various stressors such as the pressure to possess outstanding mental and performance skills, and excessive gaming (Palanichamy et al., 2020). Based on a study conducted by the University of Chichester, eSports athletes experience 51 various stress factors when competing in major competitions (Smith et al., 2019). For instance, high stress levels surface when eSports athletes experience the pressures of striving for optimal performance in front of large crowds and communication issues with teammates (Palanichamy et al., 2020). These professional players are expected to think on their feet, and yet be able to cope with negative reactions and harassment while maintaining a positive attitude throughout the tournament (Palanichamy et al., 2020). Additionally, the lack of effective communication was identified as the main stress factor among players when situated in tough circumstances (Smith et al., 2019). In such a competitive field, demoralisation, and difficulty in keeping gaming and life separate can lead to excessive gaming (Palanichamy et al., 2020). Some may proclaim that eSports athletes are instilled with discipline and responsibility, which makes them less likely to suffer from the complications of excessive gaming (Chung et al., 2019). However, there is a possibility that these players can be affected by this issue due to stress (Chung et al., 2019). During intense matches, mistakes are bound to happen – one move can determine the outcome of the game, which may take a toll on the players. Athletes may be overwhelmed by their emotions – close games may leave them feeling agitated with an overpowering thought of not being good enough (Birch & Chekera, 2020). Additionally, with a successful career as a professional gamer, the line between gaming and personal life may start to blur. Studies show that excessive gaming is associated with social life distress and disturbances in daily activities (Palanichamy et al., 2020). To become a professional player in the eSports industry, interested individuals around the ages of 15 to 17 years old train to be exceptional gamers (Chung et al., 2019). There have been a handful of teenagers who have

chosen to leave school to pursue gaming as a career full-time (Chung et al., 2019). Fighting for a place in a highly competitive industry is tough – with only a couple thousand gamers attaining the professional competitive status; out of about 1.5 billion players (Chung et al., 2019). Uncertainty in career paths and confidence issues may rise – and this mentality can have adverse effects on players’ psychological state (Chung et al., 2019). Without proper coping strategies, the build-up of negative emotions and thoughts can lead to excessive gaming.

eSports – A Lifeline in Disguise?

In contrast, studies also show that gaming can enhance players’ memory, information processing, concentration skills, and problem-solving abilities (Nelson, 2021). For instance, gamers would have to memorise and understand the skills of various characters, the strategies of the enemies in-game, and different maps (Nelson, 2021). Gaming can also shape the information processing and concentration skills of players – honing adaptability, flexibility, and attentiveness (Nelson, 2021). During intense gameplays, athletes may be faced with tough game-changing situations – enabling them to stimulate problem solving skills (Nelson, 2021) in the prefrontal cortex of the brain (Mushiaké et al., 2009). Additionally, eSports gaming has been reported to alleviate many gamers’ social isolation issues (Schornack, 2020) and provide a welcoming and friendly environment to foster meaningful relationships with other players (Thielmeyer, 2019) – this can benefit their mental health and possibly instill a positive mindset.

Driving the eSports Industry to Greater Heights

In *The Invisible Game: Mindset of a Winning Team*, Zoltán Andrejkovics claimed that about 50 per cent of performance breakthroughs and development is associated with the players’ mental state (Smith et al., 2019). Little research has been done to identify specific stressors that eSports athletes face and strategies to overcome stress (Smith et al., 2019) – thus, this demonstrates the need to inculcate psychological training initiatives to safeguard the athletes’ mental health (Poulus et al., 2020). For instance, Dr Carolyn Rubenstein, a licenced psychologist has been guiding the Misfits Gaming Group (MGG) – and has established coping measures and personalised strategies for each player, to ensure an optimal state of mind (Stubbs, 2021). Additionally, coaches and administrators should be able to identify any onsets of mental distress in players and aid them in their journey to achieve optimal performance (Schornack, 2020).

Conclusion

While gaming is not necessarily the source of psychological issues, it is important to be aware of the possible negative consequences it may present. Players should acknowledge any struggles they face; and with proper guidance from wellness advisers and coaches, eSports can offer many mental benefits. Further studies should focus on the various mental stressors that players face, and various coping techniques should be adopted to help them prepare for the pressures of competing at elite levels and the demands of the industry.

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