

Academic Lit Review-

The State of the Esports Industry from the Perspective of the Players:

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Introduction:

Esports (electronic sports) has had a large influence on gaming culture and has benefitted the economic growth of the gaming industry. Statistics show that in 2019, esports had reached an audience of over 400 million (Thakur et al., 2022), and the Covid-19 pandemic had further popularised esports and gaming and had pushed the sports industry to converge with the gaming medium. (Pu et al., 2021) In spite of these successes, there is still a continuing debate as to whether or not esports should be classified as a sport. This classification is critical to the industry because – sports institutions receive financial benefits such as tax relief from government support. Many who argue against esports, such as a study by Tom Brock (2017) bring up issues regarding the effects it has on players. Most of this research has been focused on amateur players, who are likely to receive little to no support from most institutions, government or otherwise. (Brock, 2017) This has proven to have negative effects on the mental and physical well-being on these players, who would benefit the most from financial aid. (Ramella-Zampa et al., 2022) Hence, this academic literature review aims to discuss current research into the topics of the definitions of esports, its effects on players, and what further research should be taken to inform players on healthy gaming attitudes.

Esports- Sport or Game?

The lack of physical exercise:

The primary factor in the debate between esports as a game or as a sport is that it lacks direct physicality. Zimmer et al. (2022) argues that the act of competitive gaming is predominantly sedentary. Players must sit in front of a computer for long hours in front of a screen, not using any of the larger muscle groups. Research from Zimmer et al. (2022) suggests that this may lead to an increased risk factor for chronic diseases such as diabetes type 2. There is, however, a notable lack of evidence in these articles of other physical factors that may be a result of competitive gaming, for example carpal tunnel syndrome and musculoskeletal problems. (Thakur et al., 2022)

Other articles argue that competitive gaming does incorporate elements of physicality, particularly for experienced professionals. Competitive gaming involves fine motor skills, hand-eye co-ordination and long periods of consistent mental focus. (Thakur et al., 2022) Cerqueira et al. (2020) found that in another study, a high percentage of pro players associated with the International Esports Federation are involved with physical exercise that either meets or in some cases exceeds the WHO recommended guidelines.

The formation of formal leagues and federations:

There has also been scrutiny from those against esports as a sport is because game publishers maintain control of the game's rules and regulations. (Thakur et al., 2022) There is also an extrinsic benefit for the game publishers to earn sales off of esports events, which goes against commonly held values in the sports industry. (Thakur et al., 2022)

Some articles counter this argument by citing that the industry has formed organised leagues and federations, much like those in the sports industry. The International Esports Federation oversees that tournaments uphold a set standard of competitive integrity. According to Pu et al. (2021), there has been a notable media convergence between sports and digital gaming since the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, according to these aforementioned articles, esports can be classified as sport.

Other arguments:

Another argument made against the classification of esports as a sport is the violent content being displayed in-game. The Olympic committee refused esports from being added to the roster of sports at the 2024 Olympics due to in-game violence. (Thakur et al., 2022)

Nonetheless, the Olympic committee still plans to add esports to the Olympic games. (Tjønndal, 2020) Some articles argue that the competitive nature of esports is a key reason for its inclusion as a sport.

Primary Health Concerns:

Misguided concerns:

One of the major concerns with the classification and encouragement of esports as a sport is the numerous mental and physical problems that the majority of players face. Many of the available articles, however, fail to mention that the overwhelming majority of esports players competing are amateurs. (Jin, 2010) This is especially common in Korea, where players often are paid below the national average salary and work 14-16 hours a day. (Jin, 2010) These amateurs receive little to no funding or support from others, hence the conditions. (Jin, 2010) With this context in mind, here are the following common health issues:

Addiction

Many of the articles discuss the recent emergence of health organisations such as WHO and the APA (American Psychiatric Association) classifying excessive gaming as IGD/GD (Internet Gaming Disorder) and list it as a behavioural addiction. (Ramella-Zampa et al., 2022) The most commonly discussed symptoms are: Loss of interest in previous hobbies, a negatively impacted social/work life, excessive use, use of the game as a means of escapism and lack of self-control. (Thakur et al., 2022)

The primary argument used to defend the perception of gaming as an addiction is the unhealthy working conditions that South Korean pro players are subjected to. Tom Brock (2017) mentions the case of the retired Korean pro player Cheon Min-Ki.

He came from a poor socio-economic background, and said on an interview with *VICE* that his diet consisted of “a pot noodle and two cans of coffee per day.” Tom Brock (2017) notes that the sacrifice of other aspects of life in favour of the extrinsic rewards from playing esports is one of the consequences of mixing work life and play.

This first-hand account matches with the analysis made by Dal Yong Jin, author of *Korea's Online Gaming Empire*. (2010) In chapter 5, he gives statistics for the average Korean pro player – 14 to 16 hours every day, with a pay below the average national salary. A study performed by Zimmer et al, 2022 states that amateur esports is almost entirely a sedentary activity, and that these effects can be harmful and expose players to a high-risk factor of chronic disease if players are online for more than several hours daily.

Nielson & Karhulahti (2017) criticise the association of esports with Internet Gaming Addiction on several points. They believe that dedication is being misrepresented as addiction. Choosing to dedicate time honing one's skill in esports over socialising or a different career path is “not problematic” because pursuing an esports career is as much of a risk as being a writer, artist or sports athlete. They also argue that escapism is a normal coping mechanism for negative moods and isn't any worse than other activities such as sports. Ramella-Zampa et al (2022) also agree that gaming can be a legitimate means of coping with “mood disorders and stress”.

Unhealthy lifestyle:

The aforementioned chronic diseases mentioned in Zimmer et al. (2022)'s study includes type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular related diseases. Thakur et al. (2022) lists behavioural problems such as aggression, emotional stress, insomnia and depression as common psychological issues.

Dal Yong Jin (2010), however, mentions that for some few high performing professionals, conditions are the on the contrary. In chapter 5 he discusses the early conditions of professional Korean leagues, which were comparable to Korean Olympic sports teams. Smoking and drinking were prohibited, players would wake up at a set schedule to exercise at gym for an hour, after which they would study games and do finger agility exercises. Unfortunately this lifestyle is only maintained by a select few due to corporations that sponsor teams being more concerned with having a few “popular figures” that can uplift their public relations.

Conclusion:

The debate between whether or not esports should be considered a sport can be summarised into the following main arguments: Whilst esports does contain some fine motor skills, it does not include any form of gross motor movements, and may promote sedentary behaviour. (Zimmer et al., 2022) In the argument for organisation and ruling bodies, tournaments are controlled by games publishers that are often motivated by profits. (Thakur et al., 2022) This is against the motivations of most traditional sports. There are, however, formal leagues and an international esports federation, which seek to uphold competitive integrity in these games. (Thakur et al., 2022) Since the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been increasing media convergence between sports and video games, indicating similarities. (Pu et al., 2021) The Olympic committee would like to include esports as a sporting event at the Olympics (Tjønndal, 2020), but violent content present in some esports titles is acting as a barrier to entry. (Thakur et al., 2022)

Amateur esports players are at a significant risk to precarious working environments and negative mental and physical conditions due to a lack of support from most government and private institutions. (Brock, 2017) Esports players can be associated as gaming addicts by new classifications set by global health organisations. (Ramella-Zampa et al., 2022) Gaming addiction is usually defined by excessive hours spent gaming, loss of interest in other activities and using it as a means of escapism. (Thakur et al., 2022) Amateur esports players are susceptible to being classified as addicts due to unrealistically long working hours, and a generally unhealthy lifestyle. (Jin, 2010)

Due to long working hours sitting in front of a computer, with minimal physical activity, sedentary behaviour may develop. (Zimmer et al., 2022) This is dangerous because players risk chronic conditions such as Type 2 Diabetes and cardiovascular related diseases. (Zimmer et al., 2022) Common behavioural problems that esports players have been associated with includes aggression, sleep deprivation, emotional stress and depression. (Thakur et al., 2022) There has been criticism in regard to the association of esports with addictive behaviour. Some believe that dedication is being misrepresented as addiction and prioritising the practice of esports over other career choices or one's social life is simply an act of dedicated behaviour. (Nielsen & Karhulahti, 2017) Furthermore, escapism can be considered to be a healthy method of coping with negative moods, no worse than sports could be a coping mechanism. (Nielsen & Karhulahti, 2017)

For the few esports players that make it to the higher ends of their respective career fields, the quality of their lifestyle increases dramatically. (Jin, 2010) Players have a set training regimen, which includes exercise which in some cases may exceed the standards set by WHO and the APA. They do exercises for their fingers to improve agility, will review and study games and may be prohibited from intoxicants that can negatively affect the body, such as smoking and drinking. (Jin, 2010)

Therefore, amateur esports players would stand to benefit the most from classifying esports as a sport. Through better support from the government and esports organisations, these players will feel better inclined to lead more balanced lifestyles beyond the computer through the 2 key factors: The sedentary lifestyle associated with esports players can be combated with daily exercise regimens as recommended by health organisations such as WHO or the APA (Zimmer et al., 2022) and excessive playing can be minimised through financial support so that players do not feel obligated to precariously sacrifice other aspects of their life in the pursuit of extrinsic rewards. (Brock, 2017)

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