Perceptions of esports and esports athleticism among gamers

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Abstract
Esports, both as a form of sport and a plausible, legitimate career path, face strongly polarized views, providing a unique context for investigating the sense-making and perceptions of people across a variety of cohorts in relation to this phenomenon. This study explores particularly how gamers, defined here as individuals familiar with esports but not as athletes, perceive and make sense of esports and related careers. We gathered qualitative data through an open-ended questionnaire among 156 participants (83% male), representing 33 countries. The majority of participants were primarily situated in North America and Europe. Thematic analysis revealed four major themes in the perceptions of esports: Competitive Professional Gaming, Accessible and Inclusive Entertainment, Cultural Phenomenon and Lifestyle, and Economic and Industry Dynamics. For esports athletic careers, five themes emerged: Professionalism and Skill Development, Economic Viability and Livelihood, Instability and Sacrifice, Public Perception and Legitimacy, and Diversity of Roles. Our findings, by offering insights from the amateur perspective, extend existing research on esports and esports athletic careers. We highlight that esports is not only seen as a competitive domain and a form of entertainment with great cultural impact but also as an inclusive space and an industry with considerable economic potential. This study also contributes to the understanding of esports as a legitimate and viable career choice and delineates perceptions surrounding esports athletic careers. Finally, this study emphasizes the need for further research to explore more diverse perspectives on esports, aiming to delineate more clearly the distinction between professional and amateur esports athletes.

1. Introduction

Electronic sports, also known as esports, have been defined by the Olympic Council of Asia [1] as "a competitive sport where gamers use their physical and mental abilities to compete in certain genres of video games in a virtual, electronic environment." At the 39th OCA General Assembly [2], esports was confirmed as a medal sport at the 19th Asian Games in Hangzhou, where from September 24th to October 2nd, 2023, 488 esports athletes from 31 participating countries competed for gold medals of 7 esports titles (e.g., League of Legends and DOTA 2). Tracing its roots back to the 1970s when the first amateur tournament occurred (e.g., [3, 4]) esports have come a long way. One of the earliest official esports events was the

Nintendo World Championship in 1990 in the United States [5]. Since then, esports has grown into a 1394-million-USD industry [6] encompassing electronic games, technology, culture, sports, business, and media [7, 8]. This growth is highlighted by global recognition from institutions such as the United Nations and the European Union, both of which indicate that it can play an important role in sustainable world development [9, 10]. The International Olympic Committee's recognition of esports, evident in the organization of an Olympic Esports Week in June 2023 in Singapore [11], further strengthens esports' status as a sport.

Given such widespread recognition, scientific interest in this field should not come as a surprise. In fact, esports has been drawing researchers' attention since the early 2000s, with the first attempt to define esports tracking back to Wagner's definition (2006) claiming that "Esports is an area of sport activities in

which people develop and train mental or physical abilities in the use of information and communication technologies" [12]. In a recent study, Formosa et al., [13] analyzed 461 peer-reviewed papers with definitions of esports. The most-cited definition was proposed from the perspective of human-computer interaction, where esports was described as "a new form of sport where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams as well as the output of the eSports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces" [14]. From their thematic analysis, Formosa et al. [13] identified nine major dimensions of current esports definitions: 1) competitive gaming, 2) leisure activity, 3) organized activity, 4) professionalism, 5) spectators and fans, 6) skills and training, 7) esports as an extension of gaming, 8) esports as a sport item, 9) gambling. Among those, competitive gaming, organized activity, professionalism, and esports as a sport were the most mentioned ones.

This brings us to an important point. Often these ways of characterizing esports arise from theoretical deliberations or the perceptions of scientists, not from the members of the community or the professionals themselves. Of course some exceptions to this do exist, such as the work of Freeman and Wohn [15], which explores the perspectives of both professional and amateur players, or the study conducted by Chang [16] on consumer perceptions of esports. In Chang's study [16], participants predominantly described esports in terms of entertainment, its proximity to traditional sports in terms of effort, and as a competitive activity with both learning opportunities and potential health risks. One participant in the study asserted that esports should be considered a separate category within the sports domain, due to the lack of physical activity.

From a different perspective, Örsoğlu et al. [17] presented the viewpoints of young esports players on community and parent perceptions of esports. The authors revealed that esports are often perceived as something unfamiliar and potentially hazardous. Parents, as reported by the players, frequently dismissed their esports pursuits and failed to offer support, especially when compared to parents of traditional sport athletes. Players themselves perceived esports as a legitimate sport, with the potential even to surpass traditional sports.

Another study exploring community perspectives is the one conducted by Vilasís-Pamos & Pires [18] who examined teens' perception of what a video gamer is. Among the created categories, the authors distinguished five types of gamers, two of which can be related to esports: Celebrity-Platform-Gamer and Professional-Gamer. These types of gamers were both described as people playing for money, who showcased their talents and gained fame. Professional gamers, in particular, were seen as people who compete in tournaments and spend a lot of time practicing. In this study, esports itself was seen as a professional opportunity.

Adding to this, it is likely that the perceptions of esports and esports athletes can be affected by the stereotypical views of gamers that leaked onto them. For example, some researchers suggest that such perceptions of gamers as being unsuccessful, socially inept, childish, unattractive or simply couch potatoes [7, 19, 20], can also apply to esports athletes. Furthermore, stereotypes related to gender, race or ethnicity can also influence the perception of esports and esports athletes. These, for instance, might include the notion that women are underskilled and less capable in esports (e.g. [21 - 23]) or in a broader perspective, less effective in stereotypically masculine tasks. Even more, in some cultures, gaming can be perceived as a harmful, addictive and dangerous activity, as seen in the societal Chinese views [24, 25]. All in all, despite this extensive knowledge, current research seems to lack empirical explorations showing how all this is reflected in the societal perceptions of esports. Although some studies on this topic have recently emerged [16 - 18], particularly those delving into the professional perspective, a substantial research gap persists.

This issue also happens in another under-studied area in esports – the esports athletic careers. Starting from the mid-2010s, playing esports as a professional has become a career option favored by the young generation [26 - 28]. This career path offers an opportunity to earn social status [12, 29, 30] and make a living from it via various types of revenue including players' contracts, prize money or sponsorship deals [19, 31, 32]. However, many questions about this career path remain unanswered. For instance, what is the journey from a casual gamer to a professional, what are the skills and efforts required in esports, what are the risks and obstacles awaiting future esports players, and where to draw the line between amateurs and professional esports athletes, are all research questions open for exploration.

In a recent study [33], researchers conducted interviews with 25 Hong Kong teenagers and young adults, predominantly students around the age of 20, to investigate their perceptions of esports participation. Several challenges identified in the study resonated with those outlined in Salo's esports career model [34], including the need to maintain a balance between academic commitments and esports involvement, societal negativity towards esports, age limitations for practicing esports, the brief career span of esports athletes, and the perceived lack of transferable skills upon discontinuation. However, some unique insights from amateur perspectives were also revealed, though specific to the Hong Kong region. Some interviewees noted a lack of parental support for their esports pursuits, while receiving encouragement from teachers and peers. Additionally, concerns were raised about the high cost of professional esports equipment, posing a barrier for aspiring esports enthusiasts in initiating their careers. These insights align to a considerable extent with the findings described by Örsoğlu et al. [17].

Nevertheless, to date, only a few researchers have studied esports athletic careers and related topics. For example, scholars have modeled the transition from a casual gamer to a professional esports player [30, 34, 35]. and investigated gaming motivations of professional esports players [8, 29, 36, 37]. Smithies et al. [38], for instance, explored the skills and experiences of esports players. Among the few studies on esports athletic careers, only a few studies [8, 33], involved casual gamers while the rest were either

theoretical deliberations or were focused on professional esports players.

As the esports industry develops globally, there remains a limited understanding of how society and the gaming community perceive the career of an esports athlete. Such an understanding is crucial from an industry perspective as it reveals what future esports talents expect from the industry. From an academic perspective, this offers valuable feedback from often-overlooked members of the esports community, serving as missing pieces to enhance future esports studies.

Considering this, we note that although esports are well and often defined in the literature [13], research lacks studies that report how the gaming community perceives esports. Moreover, in the current literature there are only few studies showing how grassroots-level participants perceive esports athletic careers. These research gaps are substantial, as the present studies fail to fully capture the diverse experiences and perspectives within the esports community, particularly those at the amateur level who may possess unique insights into the field. As suggested in the Esports Research Agenda [39], esports communities exhibit fragmentation across different layers, emphasizing the need for future studies not only at the industry level but also at the participant level. In an effort to address these research gaps and advance the understanding of non-professional perceptions of esports and esports careers, we conducted a qualitative exploratory study. A thematic analysis was conducted to provide insights into the complex nature of esports as both a competitive field and an emerging career path, and to deepen the understanding of esports athletic careers.

2. Methods

We conducted an online questionnaire featuring eight open-ended questions to explore the esports-related perceptions of individuals either non-engaged with esports or engaged at an amateur level. The questionnaire was distributed via social media from December 2022 to February 2023, namely Reddit and Facebook groups. Our selection of these platforms was based on their widespread use and availability for gaming- and esports-related discussions. For example, as of March 3, 2024, the subreddit 'Gaming' boasted 39 million members, the subreddit 'League of Legends' had 6.9 million members, the subreddit 'Counter-Strike: Global Offensive' had 2.2 million members, and the subreddit 'esports' had 159 thousand members [40], making these platforms rich sources of potential participants.

After starting the study, the participants were prompted to describe how they perceive esports and esports athletic careers, along with their perceptions of success and failure, both performance- and career-wise in esports (the current paper analyzes only the former). Subsequently, participants were asked to provide information on their socio-demographic characteristics and gaming habits. Only participants who were of legal age, not professional esports athletes, and lacked prior professional experience in the realm of esports were considered for inclusion in the study. No additional filtering criteria were employed.

Based on the methodology of thematic analysis as suggested by Nowell et al. [41] and Tong et al. [42], we explored this data for emerging themes regarding how esports and esports athletic careers are defined. Two independent coders created categories without any pre-established framework, allowing for an inductive approach to the data. Upon completion of the initial coding phase, the categories were standardized for consistency, adopting identical wording across the dataset. A number of responses received multiple codes. Inter-rater reliability was calculated to ensure the robustness of the coding process, yielding satisfactory results with intraclass correlation coefficient ICC = .83 and 90% compliance rate for the perceptions of esports, and with ICC = .70 and 85% compliance rate for the perceptions of esports careers. As per Koo and Li [43], values between .50 and .75 indicate a moderate reliability and values between .75 and .90 indicate a good reliability (calculated in IBM SPSS 29). Thus, current coefficients suggest a moderate-good reliability. The discrepancies that arose between the raters were resolved by the principal author.

A total of 156 individuals participated in the study. However, six responses were excluded due to non-serious or joke content, such as insulting remarks directed at specific individuals, and four were excluded for being responses from professional esports athletes. This resulted in a final sample of 146 participants for the thematic analysis. The current dataset comprises 292 answers giving a total of 3978 words with an average length of 13.62 words per response. Of the participants, 16 were women and 122 were men (8 people did not provide answers or were of different gender), with an average age of 25.88 years old (SD = 6.47, Mdn = 24). Gaming habits varied, with participants playing video games on average for 17.73 hours/week (SD = 15.13, Mdn = 14). On average participants were engage in esports for 8.74 years (SD = 6.28, Mdn = 8), while playing esports titles for 9.29 hours/week (SD = 13.42, Mdn = 5) and spectating esports for 2.42 hours/week (SD = 5.07, Mdn = 1). The participants in our study originated from 33 countries, with a predominant representation from North America and Europe. Specific socio-demographic and gaming habits-related information of the final 146 participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Participants' characteristics

	N	%
Gender		
Man	122	83.56
Woman	16	10.96
Other/Refusal/	8	5.48
Missing		
Age		
< 20	15	10.27
20-29	97	66.44
30-39	27	18.49
40-49	5	3.42
50-59	1	0.68
Missing	1	0.68
Country		

United States	36	24.66
Poland	22	15.07
United Kingdom	20	13.70
Canada	10	6.85
France	8	5.48
Germany	7	4.79
Spain	5	3.42
Denmark	4	2.74
Australia	3	2.05
Czech Republic	3	2.05
Others*	27	17.49
Missing	1	0.68
Esports experience/years		
None	14	9.58
1-9	73	50.00
10-19	48	32.88
20+	10	6.85
Missing	1	0.68
Gaming hours/week		
None	2	1.36
1-19	88	60.27
20-39	38	26.03
40+	17	11.64
Missing	1	0.68
Esport hours/week		
None	31	21.23
1-19	94	64.38
20-39	14	9.59
40+	3	2.05
Missing	1	0.68
Esports spectating/hours		
None	60	41.09
1-19	81	55.48
20-39	1	0.68
40+	1	0.68
Missing	1	0.68
Esport engagement		
Amateur	107	73.29
None	38	26.71
Tournament participation		
Yes	61	41.78
No	85	58.22

Note. *Others include 2 participants from: Brazil, Greece, Italy, Netherlands, Singapore, and Sweden; 1 participant from: Albania, Argentina, Austria, Croatia, Cyprus, India, Ireland, Japan, Norway, Russia, Slovakia, Switzerland, Taiwan, Thailand, and Ukraine.

The disparity observed between the percentage of individuals with esports experience and those actively engaged in esports, either through playing or spectating, can likely be attributed to the framing of the survey questions. Specifically, participants were queried about their experience in terms of cumulative years, while their engagement was assessed in the current period. Thus, even though some participants had extensive experience over the years, their current engagement might be negligible. In fact, some participants noted that they either only play esports games and do not spectate them, while others asserted that their esports viewership is limited to major tournaments, occurring only once a year, indicating minimal current engagement.

3. Results

The initial codes were categorized into groups describing similar ideas, which allowed us to distinguish two sets of emergent themes, one for perceptions of esports and one for perceptions of esports athletic careers. For brevity, in case of contradictory themes (e.g., perceiving esports as a "real" career path vs. a time-wasting activity) we combined and juxtaposed them within a single major theme. Additionally, we conducted a correlation analysis using Jamovi 2.3.28 [44] to examine the potential relationships between the emergent themes and various facets of esports engagement and experience, as well as the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants.

3.1. Esports

Answering the question of how they perceive esports, the participants, in most cases, indicated its competitive and professional nature, with some considering it a pseudo-sport. Besides such perceptions, the participants described it as an entertainment that is both a part of their daily lives as well as something that almost everyone can partake in, regardless of their physical and mental predispositions. Unsurprisingly, esports were also described as an industry or a business. Based on the aforementioned, we have distinguished four themes: 1) Competitive professional gaming, 2) Accessible and Inclusive Entertainment, 3) Cultural Phenomenon and Lifestyle, and 4) Economic and Industry Dynamics. Each theme is further described.

3.1.1. Competitive professional gaming

This theme considers esports a structured form of competitive gaming at a professional level, regardless of the game played. Participants indicated that esports is no different than traditional sports, with organized tournaments, professional teams, and individual players competing for prestige, prizes, and sponsorship and business opportunities. Similarly to traditional sports, esports is seen as requiring a high skill level, tactical and strategic abilities, rigorous training, many cognitive abilities and great dedication. Esports is often associated with competing for prizes of the professional athletic path.

> (...) it's a high quality competition in video games. Whether that be speedrunning, a solo game like GTA Vice City, 1v1 games like SC BW, or team games like LoL. It's a direct competition between two or more people to see who is the better. (Participant 60)

> A professional environment for gamers to test and prove their skills to the world. This more often than not is in a Player vs Player format but does not have to be. (Participant 7)

Playing video games at a very high competitive level, and competing for prizes at that level. (Participant 82)

However, it was also not uncommon that esports was considered a pseudo-sport or a joke in a number of the responses. The participants often claimed that esports unsuccessfully aspires to be a "real" sport or that the infusion of sports elements into games deviates from their original purpose, which is to be enjoyable. Furthermore, in comparison to the above-mentioned game versatility of esports, some participants believe that only specific games are eligible to be called as such.

A parody of a sports discipline that, however, requires a lot of skill and training. (Participant 134)

(...) Destroying a fun activity by tryharding. (Participant 20)

To me, esports is competing in competitively viable video games. The definition of that will change from person to person. But I wouldn't consider a Mario Kart tournament to be esports but rather a community event. Where even a small Street Fighter tournament I'd consider esports. (Participant 98)

3.1.2. Accessible and inclusive entertainment

Besides being seen as a professional area, esports are also perceived as an entertainment that is both accessible and inclusive. This category captures the sentiment that esports provides a level playing field for individuals regardless of their physical abilities, cultural background, or geographical location, differentiating it from traditional sports. There is a prevailing belief that esports, compared to traditional sports, is more likely to be accessible to individuals with various disabilities and those who may be otherwise marginalized or excluded from sport participation.

Esports is true equality in sports. A physically-disabled person who could not participate in 'regular' sports can participate in Esports. In real sports, you have to have genetic advantages. Some people are taller (NBA) some people are faster or stronger. If a regular person trains as hard as these gifted people, they will not achieve the same level of greatness. In ESports, the main factor in skills is hours spent. A physically-disabled person who could not participate in 'regular' sports can participate in Esports, and there are many examples of physically disabled Esports players. (...) What I'm trying to say is that everyone should be able to chase 'greatness' through some kind of 'sport' and ESports allows hundreds of millions (if not billions) of other otherwise-ineligible people to become 'great'. (Participant 8)

Almost all of the participants have noted that esports are facilitated by technology, with most of

them indicating the use of video games played on computers or gaming consoles usually via the Internet. As such, while esports aspires to be an inclusive and accessible domain, the necessity for Internet access and gaming equipment may pose barriers to participation for individuals who are less affluent or reside in economically disadvantaged regions.

Sport, but with a computer (...) (Participant 146)

A sport played using computers and computer games. (Participant 128)

3.1.3. Cultural phenomenon and lifestyle

The participants also defined esports as a cultural phenomenon that extends beyond its competitive aspects. Esports, in this case, can be seen as a reflection of the growing digitization of society, influencing social behaviors and entertainment consumption. Participants identified esports as an entertainment that includes playing esports games and spectating in order to relax and escape the everyday. The prevailing perceptions suggest that esports has seamlessly integrated into the fabric of modern life, exerting a significant influence over consumption preferences and even social behaviors. Participants draw parallels between the spectatorship of esports and that of traditional sports, underscoring the cultural significance esports has assumed in contemporary society.

(...) entertainment to watch with a beer and chips. (Participant 115)

Something fun to do, a time well-spent. (Participant 142)

Esports is a beautiful variation of the sports we watch every day such as speedway or athletics (Participants 47)

What regular tv shows are for older people (Participant 72)

3.1.4. Economic and industry dynamics

The last theme identifies esports as a growing industry with its own ecosystem of sponsors, advertisers, and a global market. Participants note different career possibilities in this industry, including financial and economic aspects. Esports is seen as an evolving sector experiencing significant investments and offering professional opportunities that align with broader trends in the entertainment and gaming industries. This includes the widespread monetization of various facets, such as in-game possibilities or the competitions themselves.

Monetised and advertised competitive gaming, and everything that supports it, and everything that is produced by it. (...) (Participant 65)

(...). Young sports industry that requires skill and sacrifice just like any sport. (Participant 13)

However, participants also highlight numerous challenges within the industry, citing predatory practices and mismanagement in various domains. These issues are often attributed to an excessive focus on monetization or profit. Participants express concern that such practices are particularly harmful to the young members of the esports community – both professional and casual players. Some participants note that originally esports were more focused on pure competition rather than profit, which has changed with increased resources being injected into the industry.

> A stumbling industry horribly mismanaged, for the most part (...) (Participant 100)

> Once it was a way for extremely competitive players to compete at the highest level. Now it is mostly a shady way for teams and companies to make money. (Participant 49)

> As most high-level sports, mostly an industry with shitty sponsors (crypto, gambling, etc...). In case of e-sports, especially preying on the young (Participant 21)

3.2. Esports athletic careers

When the participants were asked to describe how they perceive esports athletic careers, they most often described it as a "real" professional career akin to that of a sportsperson or as a job. This is similar to their perceptions of esports itself, however with a stronger emphasis on skills, achievements or fame. Despite such a view, participants were not as consistent when describing its economic viability, as this career was in a considerable number of cases seen as very precarious, unstable, and requiring great engagement at the cost of other areas of the athletes' lives. What is more, the participants at times perceived these careers as requiring the athletes to undertake numerous professional roles at once to achieve sustainability. Based on this, we have distinguished five major themes: 1) Professionalism and Skill Development, 2) Economic Viability and Livelihood, 3) Instability and Sacrifice, 4) Public Perception and Legitimacy, and. 5) Diversity of Roles; as described below.

3.2.1. Professionalism and skill development

The participants put a particular emphasis on how in esports careers, just like in traditional sports careers, the keys are skill development and professionalism. They acknowledge the necessity for regular training, strategic thinking, and continuous improvement. This theme highlights an esports athletic career as one that is highly competitive, and demands not only innate talent but also a disciplined approach to refining gaming skills. Some participants indicate that like in traditional sports, career advancement in this case is marked by achievements, such as advancing in rankings, winning tournaments, and gaining recognition within the gaming community.

> The same as a sports career. I believe that one can speak of an 'esports career' from the moment one starts playing in a professional team/on professional tournaments and it begins to yield profits. (Participant 30)

> Getting good enough at an e-sports game that you perform well in smaller tournaments, then join an established team or organization to train and go (semi-) professional. (Participant 12)

> Regularly training in a given game to improve one's performance in competitions (Participant 38)

3.2.2. Economic viability and livelihood

This theme indicates that esports athletic careers are seen as a viable career path or a job allowing to earn money and even to self-sustain. The ability to secure a stable income through various revenue streams such as sponsorships, prize money, and contracts with professional teams is central to this theme. Some participants highlight that esports athletic careers are seldom viewed as the sole source of income, with many professionals often combining it with other income-generating activities, frequently embedded within the industry. The ability to self-sustain through esports is often described as contingent on the athlete's capacity to build their personal brand.

> (...) If a player signs contracts with teams, has agreements with sponsors, and participates in competitions for which they are compensated, then in this case the similarity to classic, physical sports is significant. (Participant 126)

> Building your brand as a player in a particular game by achieving smaller or larger successes in tournaments, which translates into popularity and attracts sponsors and advertisers eager to sign contracts. (Participant 58)

However, this viability is juxtaposed with precariousness, as only a selected few can reach a level of having a sustainable source of income as an esports athlete. The participants acknowledge that in most cases such a career can be treated only as a distant dream.

> Being exploited by a team or organization to work ridiculous hours for very little compensation. For a tiny tiny tiny percentage of people they can make okay money, but will likely have few ways of making it last. (Participant 49)

3.2.3. Instability and sacrifice

In this theme, the participants describe the career of an esports athlete as unstable which requires personal sacrifice in many aspects. This includes abandoning other pursuits, education and self-development in different areas. The participants also highlighted the challenges of maintaining a long-term career, indicating potential burnout, age restrictions, short career longevity, and the saturation of the

market. Additionally, participants note the potential health consequences for players, stemming from stress due to career uncertainty and the constant demand to perform at a high level.

> Unreliable. Very difficult to have, since games will tend to lose popularity over time and very few people will be able to play professionally. A lot of games only stay popular for a few years. Some games that will be able to keep their fans are the ones that keep getting new versions like Tekken and Super Smash Brothers. (Participant 77)

> Difficult to achieve, often short-lived and has a long line of failed people behind each success. (Participants 87)

> Joining a team, dedicating over 8 hours to continuous playing with the team and practicing. Lots of stress and an uncertain career. Burnout of pleasure from the game. (Participants 86)

3.2.4. Public perception and legitimacy

This theme encompasses societal perceptions of esports, mostly as a legitimate career that can be equated to that of a traditional sportsperson. Some participants, however, consider it a frivolous activity that wastes time and should not be treated as a real job, or should even be restricted. This dichotomy reflects broader societal attitudes towards gaming and the evolving nature of what constitutes a 'real' career.

> (...) to be honest? Losing in life. (Participant 20)

> A bunch of fat guys playing video games and pretending to be actual athletes instead of getting a job. (Participant 11)

> (...). It is exactly the same as the career of a sportsman. (Participant 9)

A considerable number of participants have also noted that esports athletic careers are often perceived as an aim or a dream for many young people, who see professional esportsmanship as something worth pursuing. Furthermore, esports athletes are viewed as celebrities or stars within their communities, serving as role models for those who aspire to follow in their footsteps.

> Opportunity for young players who want to fulfill their dream of gaming. (Participant 47)

> (...) A hidden dream. (Participant 113)

> (...) and being a celebrity in this community's hierarchy. (Participant 36)

3.2.5. Diversity of roles

Finally, esports athletic careers as perceived as encompassing many different roles and paths at the same time. On one hand, people interested in these careers should be, of course, athletes, but on the other, they are required to be an entertainer or an artist. However, some participants emphasize the need to distinguish between multiple paths within esports careers, advocating for separate recognition of athletes and streamers or content creators, despite evident overlaps. Consequently, being an esports athlete is viewed as just one of the potential trajectories within the industry. In addition, participants indicate that esports athletes should develop a multitude of different career skills, to be able to transfer to other professions after retirement from professional playing.

> (...) Only a select few will make money through tournaments. The only others I see being able to have esports as a career are streamers. If they have a large following, they will be able to retain some followers if they switch games. (Participant 77)

> Getting paid to compete in esports. Streaming is not an esports career, that is something separate. (Participant 60)

> Like other industries, there are many possible careers within esports. The most visible being of course, the professional player. Many people work behind the scenes to produce broadcasts. Some jobs require more dedication to the individual game being covered, while others are more general. The popularity of the game among non-professional players, is an important part of the viability of an esports scene (from a business point of view, there are exceptions) (Participant 32)

3.3. Correlation analysis

Having different experiences with esports or gaming might be one of the factors determining how it is perceived. Consequently, we conducted a correlation analysis (Spearman's rho) between participants' characteristics and emergent themes. Each theme was coded as a binary variable indicating its presence or absence in a given response, resulting in nine variables for each response - four related to the perception of esports and five to esports athletic careers. This analysis is presented in Table 2.

As Table 2 presents, a few significant correlations are present. The variable that seems to have the strongest association with the emergent themes is the esports spectatorship: (1) a positive correlation with "Accessible and Inclusive Entertainment" theme; (2) a positive correlation with "Cultural Phenomenon and Lifestyle" theme; (3) a positive correlation with "Professionalism and Skill Development"; and a (4) negative correlation "Economic Viability and Livelihood" theme. This suggests that greater spectatorship and engagement with esports are more likely to result in its perception as an entertainment and cultural phenomenon, as well as a professional domain. Interestingly, individuals who engaged more in esports spectatorship were less likely to perceive esports careers as economically viable. Additionally, some near-significant correlations were observed, with one noteworthy finding being that older participants were less likely to perceive esports as entertainment and the career as a professional area.

Table 2
Correlation analysis

	E1	E2	E3	E4	EC1	EC2	EC3	EC4	EC5
Gender	-0.015	-0.064	0.018	0.052	-0.048	0.071	-0.052	0.060	0.117
Age	0.046	-0.157†	0.030	-0.062	-0.149†	0.077	0.023	0.058	0.003
Esports experience	0.048	0.058	0.048	-0.086	0.137	-0.040	0.116	-0.038	0.056
Gaming hours	0.015	-0.064	-0.029	0.162†	-0.002	0.074	-0.019	0.056	0.095
Esport hours	-0.027	0.055	0.074	0.027	0.096	-0.077	-0.065	-0.126	0.031
Esports spectating	-0.160†	0.169*	0.172*	0.018	0.237**	-0.168*	-0.100	-0.080	0.080
Esport engagement	-0.042	0.107	0.203*	-0.056	0.198*	-0.061	0.026	-0.135	0.041
Tournament participation	0.017	0.100	0.088	0.062	0.137	-0.078	0.014	-0.039	0.045

Note. E = Esport; EC - Esport career;
†$p = 0.075 -- 0.05$, *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$

4. Discussion

This study presents an exploration of societal perceptions of esports and esports athletic careers using a qualitative approach. With thematic analysis, our findings reveal a complex perspective on both of those areas, based on the perceptions of the members of the gaming community. Current findings extend the existing research by providing insight into a previously under-explored perspective.

Regarding perceptions of esports, four themes have emerged: 1) Competitive Professional Gaming, emphasizing esports as a high-skill, strategic, and competitive field akin to traditional sports; 2) Accessible and Inclusive Entertainment, highlighting how esports transcends physical, cultural, and geographical barriers; 3) Cultural Phenomenon and Lifestyle, indicating how esports influenced contemporary cultural landscape, as well as entertainment and social behaviors; 4) Economic and Industry Dynamics, recognizing esports as unique economic ecosystem.

To a considerable extent, these dimensions align with those identified by Formosa et al., [13] in their systematic review as well as with prior studies like that of Chang [16] or Örsoğlu et al. [17]. However, one dimension we have not identified as a significant aspect of esports is gambling. This is surprising, considering that the esports betting market reached USD 9,749 million in 2021 [45] and, as reported by the UK's Gambling Commission [46] reported, 8.5% of adults have ever bet on esports. On the one hand, our method may not have prompted participants to provide gambling-related answers, or they might have not perceived gambling as a key part of esports. On the other hand, participants might have chosen to hide their gambling activities, as it is a stigmatized activity where maintaining secrecy can be an effective method of stigma reduction (e.g.,[47, 48]).

Furthermore, in comparison to Chang's study [16], we did not identify a perception of esports as carrying significant consequences for physical health but only for mental health (i.e., stress and burnout). This finding is somewhat surprising, considering that numerous studies related to esports participation suggest potential consequences such as sleep pattern distortions [49], obesity [50], or various physical injuries [51]. This might potentially indicate a lower social consciousness regarding the existence of such physical health problems in the context of esports.

We have, however, identified an additional dimension related to how esports are perceived, which was not described by Formosa et al. [13] namely, inclusivity and equality. Many participants in the current study noted the inclusive nature of esports, a discipline that, at least in principle, should equalize chances for all who wish to participate. Of course, this is not always the case, as even if skill acquisition is less dependent on physical attributes than in traditional sports, members of many groups still experience exclusion from competition. Researchers often indicate that one of such groups is women [20 – 22, 52] or people lacking resources to purchase gaming equipment. While the first issue is a deeper sociological problem [53], the second one is slowly being addressed, as in many regions, facilities and educational programs allowing for esports participation are being created (e.g., [54 – 57]). Additionally, if we consider people with different disabilities, the way esports games are designed nowadays is gradually becoming more accommodating towards them (e.g., [58, 59]). As such, despite some difficulties, esports seems to be heading towards the ideal noted by the participants of this study.

As identified in this thematic analysis, esports are also perceived as a venue for professional and economically viable development with many possible career paths. However, some participants have noted that despite such possibilities, the industry is not exactly sustainable at the moment. As emphasized by Cranmer et al. [39], the esports industry exhibits fragmentation in various aspects, and there is a need for the development of sustainable business models to establish esports as a more stable, profitable, and well-respected career choice. Further, entering the industry might be difficult, regardless of the desired position, as reflected in the work of Ward & Harmon [60], who clearly show that esports is a "Superstar market",

where only a few may achieve true success. This is especially important considering that many young people aim to work in esports, viewing being an esports athlete as an occupation of dreams, as some participants claimed.

While exploring the perceptions on such careers, five major themes emerged: 1) Professionalism and Skill Development, showing how esports are parallel to traditional sports in its emphasis on skill, training, and devotion of the athletes; 2) Economic Viability and Livelihood, indicating to the potential for a sustainable income but also noting how precarious this careers is; 3) Instability and Sacrifice, highlighting the personal and professional sacrifices that esports athletes often have to make; 4) Public Perception and Legitimacy, showing that the societal perception towards esports careers remains ambivalent, sometimes still denying it the status of a legitimate career path; 5) Diversity of Roles, highlighting the many roles that esports athletes need to undertake.

What, in the eye of the beholder, are esports athletic careers then? They are careers, just like traditional sports careers, that require plenty of devotion and sacrifice, a source of income that is economically viable only for some. The difference lies in the ambivalent social perception of its status and the necessity for esports athletes to undertake many roles and many industry positions at the same time in order to sustain themselves. Of course, this perception is based on the views of the amateurs, thus we cannot claim that it will remain true if professional esports athletes are asked the same set of questions. Nevertheless, this is an important contribution, as it shows the wider and less explored perspective of people who perceive the industry from the outside.

One of the results, unlikely to appear to the same extent if researched among professionals, is the stereotypical views on esports athletes and their careers. Even though both video games and esports are pastimes popular among a considerable number of people (e.g., in Poland, almost 67% of the adult population play video games, while 25% of them are interested in esports [61]), negative perceptions of esports as a profession exist, even among people who participate in esports themselves. As our thematic analysis has shown, esports athletes are still sometimes perceived through the lens of the stereotypical gamer – a couch potato [62]. The occupation itself, in turn, is sometimes seen as a waste of time, a pseudo-sport, or pseudo-work. However, this view was not a very strong sentiment in the current analysis, thus it is likely that in the wider society, it might not be very prevailing.

What is necessary to note, is that perceptions of esports and esports athletic careers vary among the members of the esports community, contingent on their traits and experiences in esports and gaming. Our data highlights that as individuals gain experience and consume more esports content, particularly through spectatorship, they are more inclined to perceive esports careers as realms of professional development requiring dedication and skill. Simultaneously, they tend to view esports as not only entertainment but also as a significant cultural phenomenon. It should not surprise that people who watch esports tend to indicate that it is something fun to do, however with spectatorship comes also a greater appreciation for the craftsmanship involved in esports. Interestingly, those deeply engaged in spectatorship were less likely to believe that esports careers are economically viable. This may be attributed to insights gained during spectating, where individuals become acquainted with commentaries from athletes themselves, providing a more realistic portrayal of the challenges within this career. The generalizability of these findings to a broader societal context remains unexplored due to the limitations of the current dataset.

Furthermore, a noteworthy, albeit non-significant correlation has surfaced – older individuals were less likely to perceive esports careers as areas of professional development. Additionally, they were less likely to indicate that esports serves as a form of accessible and inclusive entertainment. Possibly, for older people, having a career in esports might not align with their preconceived notions of professional development associated with their upbrining and overall familiarity with the esports professional landscape. Those speculations, however, should be confirmed on a larger and more age-diverse sample.

In our understanding of esports, we need to draw a line between professional and amateur participation. Many of the participants of this study conflated amateurs and professionals, for instance indicating that a career as an esports athlete may be understood as simply playing video games. This, however, should not surprise, as even in the scientific literature, there is little showing at what point we can claim that a person becomes a professional esports athlete. If we look at the current data, we could claim that this happens at the moment when someone either starts earning money or starts developing their skills with the aim of engaging at the highest level of competition. However, a question remains as to how much money one should earn, or how to measure the seriousness of engagement in athletic pursuits. Finding answers to these questions should prove beneficial not only for the industry but also for the athletes.

In the extant literature, esports professionals or esports athletic careers are not usually explicitly defined, the exception being a short definition provided by Freeman and Wohn [15] describing professional players as someone "in a professional team playing for tournaments, eSports-related business, and streaming to make income". However, previous research can be used to describe esports athletes and their careers, by exploring existing selection criteria for including participants in research that are described as professional players. For instance, Ward & Harmon [60] suggested that people who received monetary compensation for tournament participation can be considered professionals. However, they also noted that such earning by itself is not enough to claim that someone is a professional, as some people might have participated in a tournament simply for fun. Thus, earnings do not necessarily indicate whether someone is an amateur or a professional.

In a different perspective, Meng-Lewis et al. [63] stated that esports professionals are "current and retired athletes working in the esports industry". Thus again, esports professionals seem to be those who work in the industry and earn money by doing their

jobs. Esports professionals can also be described as people who have "experienced esports'' for a given time [64], who are competing or belonging to gaming leagues [30], or who have greater skills and understanding than non-professionals and who practice rigorously [65]. García-Lanzo & Chamarro [66] aimed to make a distinction between amateurs and semi-professionals, resulting in showing that semi-professionals are more likely to be people spending more time on playing video games, are less motivated by the game's story or lore, and are more likely to be motivated by the desire to increase their own mental capacities. We ourselves distinguished esports athletes and professionals by allowing the participants to describe themselves as a member of either group, virtually leaving the classification to them. Thus, these insights from the literature are consistent with the prevailing sentiment among amateurs, indicating that the distinction between professional and non-professional players is an amalgamation of self-development and economic viability. Regardless of where to draw the line between amateurs and professionals, researchers and amateurs seem to agree that being an esports athlete is a "legitimate kind of job by which one could gain fame and material wealth by winning videogame competitions or belonging to videogame league" [30].

Finally, this study is not without its limitations. First, our sample is not representative, consisting mostly of video game players, but not people who do not play at all. While in itself it is not an issue, it limits the study's generalizability. Therefore, we cannot make inferences about the wider population's opinions, but only about those of the gamer population. Future studies should consider including a more diverse sample, particularly individuals disconnected from the gaming community. However, as the percentage of people engaged in video gaming increases, finding such a sample becomes increasingly challenging. Furthermore, the gender distribution in our current sample was skewed, with a majority of participants being men. This might be attributed to the method of participant recruitment, primarily utilizing Facebook and Reddit, social media platforms known for their predominantly male user base [67, 68]. Additionally, video gaming spaces and discussion forums are often perceived as stereotypically masculine spaces [69, 70] which are unwelcoming to women, further contributing to the underrepresentation of women in our sample. In addition, this study mostly included participants from North America and Europe, thus not allowing to generalize the results to other regions.

Moreover, we relied on a method that precludes a deeper understanding of the issue. Specifically, in open-ended questionnaires, follow-up questions cannot be used to expand upon the provided content, as there is no direct interaction with the participant. Furthermore, in line with our objectives, we did not include the views of professional esports athletes and industry members in the analysis. Consequently, themes covered in previous studies based on expert insights are not as well-represented in our results. Future research should consider incorporating both expert and participant views, making comparisons between the two groups using more comprehensive data collection methods [39].

Despite these limitations, our study offers insights into the perceptions of esports and esports athletic careers, an area still understudied. From the perspective of amateur esports athletes and the video gaming community, esports are viewed as competitive, inclusive, culturally influential, and a growing industry with diverse career opportunities. However, this study also reveals that individuals outside the industry perceive esports athletic careers as precarious and unstable, characterized by professional demands, economic challenges, and mixed social perceptions. Moreover, we identified that, from the amateur perspective, the primary differences between esports professionals and amateurs lie in the effort invested in self-development in gaming and the economic opportunities associated with play. Importantly, these perceptions may vary depending on demographic characteristics and the level and type of engagement in esports.

Considering current deliberations, we believe that it is necessary to continue exploring this research area. This will help to distinguish more clearly between professional and non-professional athletes, aiding prospective esports athletes in understanding what is required to become a professional in this field. Consequently, such players could form realistic expectations and plan their careers more effectively.

Acknowledgements

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