ESPORTS ATHLETES ARE EMPLOYEES TOO

Organizational Responsibilities for Providing Mental Health Support Structures

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ABSTRACT

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Mental health issues can be brought on by a variety of life stressors, including job demands which are a common threat to an employee's working life. Organizations' human resources departments have a number of different responsibilities, and responsible human resource management (HRM) practices should improve motivation and productivity for both the employee and organization.

Esports is a young and developing industry that may require help from more established sports and business industries in order to develop a sustainable business model. The mental health of esports athletes is a hot topic within the industry and risks to mental health are seen as a threat to players' careers. This thesis will examine the current state of organizational mental health support structures in the esports industry and what they might be able to learn from traditional sports and human resource management research. Seven esports professionals were interviewed in order to gain an understanding of the perceived current state of mental health support in esports.

While some organizations have taken a direct example from traditional sports and hired sports psychologists to provide mental support for players, others rely on informal social support. Unique stressors to esports competition were also found that may require a more tailored approach by organizations when providing support to their athletes and employees. These unique stressors, as well as the online environment in which esports exists present a number of further opportunities for esports organizations and other industry stakeholders to create support systems to better help esports athletes have full and meaningful careers.

Key words: esports, human resource management, mental health

ABBREVIATIONS

CS:GO   Counter Strike: Global Offensive (game)

DOTA2   Defense of the Ancients 2 (game)

FPS   First Person Shooter (game genre)

HRM   Human Resource Management

LoL   League of Legends (game)

MOBA   Multi-player Online Battle Arena (game genre)

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ABSTRACT

1   INTRODUCTION

Issues related to employee mental health are a popular topic as poor mental health is known to have adverse effects on individual and organizational performance and productivity (Kowalski & Loretto, 2017). The World Health Organization (WHO) states that mental health is likely to have a 'substantial effect' on all areas of life, including work performance. Globally, it is believed that around 12 billion working days are lost every year to symptoms of depression and anxiety, and this results in an estimated cost of $1 trillion per year loss in productivity (World Health Organization: WHO, 2019). The Job Demands-resources (JD-R) model suggests that increased job resources dedicated to employee well-being could mitigate the strain of employee's job demands and increase motivation for positive organizational outcomes (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). This theory, as well as a wider understanding of human resources research, could provide much needed guidance for growing industries and organizations on how to develop useful and meaningful human resource management (HRM) practices early on in order to create more sustainable and resilient jobs (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2017).

Esports is an industry that is experiencing a burst of recent growth (Newzoo, 2022). It is currently being referred to as the 'wild west' by researchers, in relation to growth potential combined with a lack of clear governance, immature business logic, and ethically questionable power differentials (Chee & Karhulahti, 2020; Nyström et al., 2022; Scholz, 2019).

Without a well-established tradition when it comes to managing employees' well-being, esports might benefit from learning from traditional sports when it comes to handling mental health issues. There may also be factors unique to esports that can play a role in affecting esports athletes' mental health, however the research is still young and contains many gaps in addressing these specific issues. Therefore, this thesis will explore how traditional sport approaches mental health issues, the stressors that can have an effect on competitive athletes, and what is known about HRM practices that can help reduce stressors and the likelihood of players experiencing career threatening mental health issues. This will be done through a review of previous the literature on handling mental health issues in traditional sports, issues related to mental health in esports, as well as looking to the more well-established world of business research and how mental health issues are addressed with HRM practices. Following the review of literature, qualitative data will be collected through a number of interviews with current esports professionals (athletes, coaches, and mangers) in order to identify both the similarities and differences esports mental health issues might have when being compared to traditional sports. The comparison of previous literature to the data collected may yield a more

tailored approach to helping esports athletes by drawing on the knowledge of traditional sport and HRM but adapting it to this novel industry with its own unique sets of challenges and needs. However, further research into the specific needs of esports athletes is needed, in particular when it comes to applied mental health interventions that may support athlete mental health and well-being.

Chapter 2 introduces esports and the concepts of human resource management (HRM) that will be relevant to this thesis. It first gives a brief history of esports, followed by the current issues and challenges facing the industry. The next section then briefly defines HRM, and its functions related to workplace well-being. After this context is laid out, the research questions of this thesis will be presented.

Chapter 3 presents a review of the literature currently available on mental health within traditional sports, followed by the previous research on HRM and workplace well-being with a focus on mental health issues, and finally a review of what is already known about mental health and psychological well-being in esports. From these three sections, the most relevant concepts will be used to create a framework and models for the research conducted in this thesis.

Chapter 4 explains the methodology process of research for this thesis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted online to speak with a number of professional esports players, coaches, and a manager. As well as a detailed description of the data collection and analysis process, ethical considerations for this work will also be given.

Chapter 5 introduces the results of research data and its analysis. Using content analysis, the participants' responses were coded as themes, concepts, and specific instance relating to the research objectives. Three figures were created to present the findings. The figures relate to the research questions and show the classification of themes related to current threats to mental health in esports, organizational support in esports, and the participants' wishes for future support of mental health within the industry.

Chapter 6 gives a thorough discussion of the results and relates them to the literature review to answer the research questions. The findings of each research question are discussed with how they relate to the theory. From this, some limitations of the current research are also determined and presented, as well as future considerations for research in the area of HRM of esports.

Chapter 7 summarizes the findings of this thesis. It suggests that a lot can be learned from HRM and traditional sports literature on mitigating threats to the mental health of esports athletes. Practical information for the development of HRM in esports organizations is presented as well as an argument for its importance in developing responsible practices.

2   BACKGROUND

This chapter will introduce esports and HRM. First, a brief history of esports will be presented in order to establish some context for the current issues and challenges. Following that, a short description of the development and general functions of human resources in organizations will be given, as well as functions of HRM that might be unique to sport organizations because of the possible relevant crossovers between traditional sport and esports.

2.1   History of Esports

Although esports has only recently become a part of the mainstream, Scholz (2019) argues that competitive gaming has been around since *Nim*, a game where two players competed against each other using a Nimatron machine, debuted at the New York World's Fair in 1940. In this thesis, the term 'esport' will be used to describe any computer mediated game that involves a level of competition between two or more players. One of the next two person games that caught the public's attention was *Tennis for Two* created by William Higginbotham in 1958. However, at this time computers were expensive and uncommon and so developing a video game market was not viable from a business perspective (Scholz, 2019). This would change as computers, game consoles, and arcade games became more affordable. By the 1970s, videogames were accessible to the public in a number of different forms. Some consider the first esports tournament to have taken place in 1972 at Stanford University where the winner of the *Intergalactic Spacewar Olympics*, would receive a prize of a year's subscription to Rolling Stone magazine (Scholz, 2019).

Over the next few decades video games grew in popularity and both small- and large-scale competitions around the world began offering increasing amounts of prize money. Many of these events were trial and error by the gaming console makers such as Atari and Nintendo. By 1997, Scholz (2019) considers esports to have entered its next phase of development. At this time, personal computers had become affordable and not uncommon to find in people's homes. The internet also made multiplayer video games possible as well as competition between players on separate computers. It was also around this time that leagues began to form such as the Deutsche Clanliga (DeCL) in 1997, which went on to become the Electronic Sports League (ESL) in 2000 and is one of the only early leagues that still operates as a major esports league today. It was also around the turn of the century that PC gaming took off in Asia, especially in South Korea, through its initiative to modernize. PC bangs (Korean internet cafes) became

popular places for customers to rent PCs and play games. This led to the creation of the first national esports association, the Korean e-Sports Association (KeSPA), which would become a part of the Korean Ministry of Culture, Sport, and Tourism. KeSPA would broadcast tournaments, develop regular league schedules, and create an environment to support the teams and growing fan base (Scholz, 2019).

According to Scholz's (2019) history of esports, by 2005 esports had achieved a phase of relative stability. Tournaments were happening across the world for a number of different games, and esports was entering the mainstream with matches broadcasted on major cable TV channels such as MTV in the United States. MTV not only broadcasted major matches but also aired a reality show that followed a female *Counter-Strike* team. Over the next few years, mostly due to external investments, demand for esports and content related to it really began to gather momentum. The shift from hobby to business began to happen, and a focus on making a profit became essential for various stakeholder survival (Scholz, 2019).

The financial crisis of 2008 had a significant impact on the industry, and Scholz (2019) marks this as the start of the next stage for the industry. In an environment that was mainly sponsor-driven, all industries were becoming more prudent with their spending. For major esports tournaments, this meant that the prize money tournaments were able to offer might be half of what it was in previous years. While a number of esports related businesses disappeared during this time, opportunities for new games and ways to consume gaming content developed. *League of Legends (LoL)* was released in 2009, and *StarCraft II* in 2010, followed by the online streaming site Twitch in 2011. It was during this time that certain games started setting themselves apart from the others and the game developers started to take control by creating their own leagues. Riot games, the developer of LOL, emphasized creating a more spectator friendly environment and organized the first LOL World Championship in 2011 and then its own league, the LoL Championship Series (LCS) in 2013 (theScore, 2017, as cited in Scholz, 2019). Leagues for esports games bring stability such as fixed salaries for players and added structure to the business models.

Scholz (2019) proposes that in 2014 the industry entered its most recent phase. Since 2014 esports has begun to experience exponential growth led by companies from outside the esports ecosystems becoming more interested in esports, such as Amazon buying Twitch. During this current era of esports, it is not uncommon for major tournament prize pools to exceed $1 million, and, although it is not the norm, can reach up to $40 million.

Scholz's (2019) account of the history of esports highlights the ups and downs that the industry regularly encounters. The only constant from 1940 to today is that the players are central to

growth. In order for an esports competition to be successful, gamers are needed to play the game, compete, and then become esports athletes that play to a level that entertains the fans and creates demand for the growth of the industry.

2.2 Current Issues in Esports

The esports industry faces a number of challenges due to its unique structure. Recently, Nyström et al. (2022) conducted two workshops of industry professionals and academics in order to determine the main threats to sustainability of the esports industry. They discovered that their 64 participants identified three main categories which smaller themes fit into. What emerged was that the categories of 1) Health and Inclusiveness, 2) Incomplete Industry Structure, and 3) Immature Business Logic covered all of the many smaller threats and themes that appeared during their workshops. Interestingly, when it came to the concerns of stakeholders' vs practitioners' and research, the stakeholders' main concerns were those of economic sustainability, while the practitioners and researchers were more concerned about social sustainability issues (Nyström et al., 2022).

One of the largest issues faced by the esports industry is the lack of clear governance models. At the moment, much of the control over the games that are played as esports lies with the developers and publisher (Scholz, 2019). Chee & Karhulahti (2020) conducted a piece of research where they examined five cases and their rulings involving Riot Games, the publishers of esports titles LoL and Valorant. Riot Games is an example of a publisher that takes control of all parts of their game from tournament organization to in-game sales, while, for example, Valve, publishers of the similar rival games DOTA2 and CS:GO, take a much more relaxed approach to the regulation of their games allowing for external tournament organizers and secondary market sales for in-game items. Ultimately, both publishers have complete control of the games they produce and could theoretically decide to make their games unavailable, and all competition and casual play would cease to exist. This is something that could not happen in traditional sport because no one organization could make popular traditional sports such as football or basketball disappear. Chee & Karhulahti (2020) found that the control that publishers have over these games as esport could be considered 'ethically questionable', and that further research could bring opportunities for industry improvement such as a better understanding of consent, power differentials, as well as the roles and behaviors expected by players and teams in competition (Chee & Karhulahti, 2020).

Scholz (2019) uses terms like 'gold rush' and 'wild west' extensively in his book on esports management. They are used in relation to the lack of clear governance that esports faces, but he argues this is not always a negative. The lack of regulation presents opportunities for some stakeholders to thrive because they could have access to opportunities that wouldn't exist with strict regulation. Scholz (2019) suggests that a greater risk to esports is potential 'overheating' where the industry grows too quickly; external investors may pump money into esports because of a fear of missing out, but that this can destabilize a somewhat stable economic environment (Lewis, 2018 as cited in Scholz, 2019). This sudden flood of cash can create a bubble as it is unlikely to be a steady and sustainable flow over a long period of time (Scholz, 2020). Scholtz (2019) suggests that stakeholders should aim to create an environment where they can learn from previous mistakes of their own industry, and the mistakes of sport, media, and entertainment businesses, in order to create more well-organized procedures for turning new ideas into a profitable business model.

It can be difficult to consider the social sustainability needs of an organization that has not figured out its own economic sustainability. It is not uncommon for esports teams to disappear just as quickly as they appear. Sponsorships are the main funding sources for organizations competing in esports (Newzoo, 2022). Taylor (2015) notes that for many sponsors, esports can still be seen as a marketing experiment, and this leaves the current funding model in an unstable position. Jang et al. (2021) present that it is especially difficult to monetize esports because the games and streaming platforms operate using the 'freemium' model where the content is free to play, watch, and consume. Taylor (2015) uses the comparison of traditional sports and how they spent decades harnessing the duality of paid on-site spectatorship eventually feeding into paid television and some free digital production, but esports has the opposite issue where it began free and digital and was later sportified into offline events.

These sustainability issues are also important because they are in-line with the UN sustainable development goal number eight of decent work and economic growth (United Nations, 2015). Organizations being able to survive more than a couple of years will provide jobs, not only for esports athletes but also across the company in various managerial and administrative functions. This thesis will also focus on goal number three of good health and well-being, in particular how well-being can be supported and sustained by employers. A literature review conducted by Chams & García-Blandón (2019) found that some studies claim that sustainable HRM (SHRM), which are HRM practices that place heavy emphasis on highlighting the UN's SDGs, can have positive outcomes on employee well-being. However, it was also noted that there is still a lack of HR policies that back up the SDGs (Chams & García-Bladón, 2019).

2.3 Human Resources Management

Taylor et al. (2008) describes HRM as a broad definition of the "*policies, practices, procedures, and systems that influence the behavior, attitudes, values, and performance of people who work for the organization*" (p.7). Therefore, it is not a branch of an organization that performs a single function, but HRM can actually cover numerous and varied tasks. Arthur (2015) notes that when companies start out, they rarely have an HR manager. Early in a company's life, these duties are normally managed by staff from other departments. During this time, there is unlikely to be any uniformity or consistency between the different units of the company. As the organization grows, managers may have more tasks than they can comfortably handle. This is usually when an HR department is developed to help across a variety of tasks. It also helps create uniformity cross-departmentally in tasks such as hiring, compensation, as well as several others. Arthur (2015) proposes that successful HR practitioners have a good working knowledge of various business matters, such as how to influence revenue growth and productivity, and are focused on developing organizational capabilities. This is often accomplished through collaboration with the organization's financial experts in order to reduce the friction between the idea of money vs people so as to achieve organizational success. For example, HR may wish to increase spending to improve staffing so they must collaborate with finance for cost options. They need to create a joint plan that aims to create a more productive workforce in order to generate increased profits, and a win-win for HR, finance, and the organization (Arthur, 2015).

Another role of HR can be addressing and anticipating employee-related workplace challenges. These challenges might include creating a culture that attracts talent, rewarding and retaining their current talent, and developing leaders to develop talent. However, Arthur (2015) notes that in a 2013 survey of finance and HR senior executives, one of the forecasted critical issues for HR practitioners is the increasing cost of employee health care coverage. It would therefore be in the organization's interest to help maintain employee health and well-being in order to keep preventable health care costs low.

Sports organizations have some unique HR matters that might differ from those of traditional businesses. Taylor et al. (2008) names a few of these complex matters, such as player trades and acquisitions, salary caps, and team contract negotiations. Similar to traditional businesses, sports organizations are always looking to attract, develop, and retain talented people in order to gain a competitive advantage. Weerakoon (2016) suggests that HR practices from business do not easily transfer to sport as they require their own unique development of formal HR

planning that considers the significant differences between running a business organization and a sports organization. Successful sports organizations require an approach to managing people, both on and off the field, built around getting the most out of their employees as well as building and developing teams that are able to perform at their greatest potential (Taylor et al., 2008; Weerakoon, 2016).

It has already been established that HRM can include a variety of functions for an organization, related to its employees. This thesis will focus on the HRM practices that support employee health, safety, and wellness within esports organizations. Taylor et al. (2008) states, quite bluntly, that "*Every sport organization has a moral and legal obligation to provide a safe and healthy working environment*" (p. 201). They also acknowledge that not all hazards can be eliminated, especially in sports, but that the probability of harm or adverse effect can be mitigated. It is the responsibility of the organization to ensure that their employees are aware of the hazards of their job, and the procedures that the organization has in place to minimize the potentially harmful effects of these hazards. It is common for organizations to have forms of risk assessments or job hazard analyses in place in order to prepare for any potential adversities to their employees' health, safety, and wellness. One of the leading workplace hazards that an organization must look to reduce the effects of is stress (Booth et al., 2004 as cited in Taylor et al, 2008). Stress can have physical, psychological, and behavioral consequences that range from headaches, to anxiety, reduced performance, and eventually burnout and/or turnover (Robbins & Langdon, 2003 as cited in Taylor et al., 2008). In order to mitigate stress in the workplace, organizations should understand what might contribute to the stress of their employees so that they can help to lessen or avoid it. Taylor et al. (2008) makes clear that there are work-related factors that can lead to stress, such as lack of resources or increased workload, but it can also be caused by personal or non-work stress. While the stressors may not be related to work, they still may impact the employee's performance at work and so the responsible organization should still look to help manage the situation. This can be done in a number of ways, from simply reducing workplace stressors to providing employee assistance programs (EAPs). EAPs are work-sponsored services that can support but are not limited to mental health, substance abuse, marital problems, parenting issues, and financial management. This can either be provided in-house, although this is usually only found in larger organizations, or by helping the employees identify, and booking them in to see, the appropriate external professional.

A more proactive approach to maintaining a healthy workforce is the idea of employee wellness programs. These programs are designed with the intention of impacting the overall physical,

mental, and emotional health which could affect performance and retention. The idea is that they "*engage in a range of behaviors and activities associated with better health*" (Covell et al., 2003: 334, as cited in Taylor et al., 2008: 204). This could include regular exercise, nutritional advice, regular medical examinations, and assistance with financial planning. They could also include outsourced educational seminars on a number of different topics related to different aspects of a healthy lifestyle. While EAPs and employee wellness programs might come at a cost to the organization, Taylor et al. (2008) suggest that the social and economic productivity gains of a healthy workforce can outweigh the financial expenses.

Arthur's (2015) book on HRM focuses on corporate organizations, while Taylor et al. (2008) are able to provide a HRM perspective specifically related to sports. As of right now, there are no books about HRM in esports. Selecting sections from these books that are universally relevant to many fields is currently the only way to inform best practices in HRM for emerging industries such as esports.

2.4   Research Questions and Objectives

This thesis will address an issue that falls under the Nyström et al.'s (2022) threat to the esports industry category of Health and Inclusiveness. However, it will also argue that the category of Immature Business Logic plays a role as an immature business may not be reasonably equipped to support health issues. Mental health issues are a popular topic, not only in esports but also for the general public. It currently receives regular coverage in the esport and traditional sport media. Because esports is relatively new and still working towards building its industry structures, this piece of research will look to more established fields such as traditional sport and HRM of corporate business for tips on how and why it is important to protect esports employees', namely players', mental health and well-being.

This thesis attempts to answer the questions:

1) What are the issues that esports athletes face in regard to their mental health and how they perceive organizational support?

2) What knowledge from traditional sports and business HRM can be applied to esports when it comes to supporting employees' mental health?

According to the WHO, it is the responsibility of employers and organizations that represent workers to help prevent work-related mental health conditions by preventing the risks to mental

health at work (World Health Organization: WHO, 2022). Therefore, this study explores the current state of mental health support within the esports industry by asking stakeholders about the known threats to mental health at their workplace, how they perceive the supported provided by their employers, and if they feel that more resources are needed to help protect esports athletes at work, as well as drawing on research on mental health in traditional sports and well-established business HRM theories and research.

3   REVIEW OF LITERATURE

When looking to develop strategies to support esports athletes, it has been suggested that esports would benefit from what is already known about traditional sports psychology (Emara et al., 2020; Poulus et al., 2022). Therefore, esports researchers should begin by looking at the extensive amounts of literature available on sports psychology and mental health issues in traditional sport. This section will examine the best practices identified, as well as the challenges faced, in sport research regarding mental health and well-being for traditional athletes. Following that, the next section will address the research into HRM literature in relation to mental health. The final section of this chapter will explore the small amount of research that has already gone into esports and the associated mental health issues.

3.1   Mental Health Issues in the Sports Industry

Mental health in sport can be seen as a necessary basis for efficient practice and competition within the psychology of performance (Schinke et al., 2018). However, even though sport models may have a number of different support practitioners who cover a multitude of different performance related areas, mental health is often still an unmet area of concern for athletes (Van Singerland et al., 2019). When it comes to mental health in sports, it is widely agreed in the literature that the perceived stigma surrounding mental health is a leading barrier to athletes seeking support (Bauman, 2016; Bisset et al., 2020; Cassilo, 2022; Breslin et al., 2017; Jewett et al., 2019; Liddle et al., 2017; Poucher et al., 2021; Schinke et al., 2018; Sebbens et al., 2016; Souter et al., 2018; Van Singerland et al., 2019; Woods et al., 2022). Bauman (2016) suggests that the stigma associated with mental health in athletes is in contradiction to the idea of high-performance athletes needing to be 'mentally tough' to succeed. He goes on to list several factors that may cause stress to an athlete such as an organization being motivated by profit, athletes' expectation to succeed, financial gain or loss, and the glorification of success and the criticism of failure by the media. It is then said that the mental health issues that may result from these stressors are often ignored, hidden, or discarded and that a new culture is needed for the well-being of the athletes (Bauman, 2016).

According to Cassilo, (2022), the stigma associated with admitting that an athlete would require support with their mental health might be viewed in direct contradiction to a commonly held belief in sport around an athlete's 'mental toughness'. Cassilo (2022) suggests the media plays a large role in reinforcing the stigmas associated with mental health as athletes can be seen to

play the role of celebrities that endorse health messages because the media is the most common source of public knowledge about mental health. Cassillo's (2022) study was conducted on the media representation of two NBA players who admitted seeking mental health support. It was found that the context and the celebrity status of the athlete played a significant role in how their seeking mental health support was presented by the media. It should also be noted that this study mentions that mental health issues are perceived differently, in America, by black and white communities and that the individuals in the cases were both black (Cassillo, 2022). Because of the globalization of sport, this could suggest that the importance of mental health support for athletes may differ across the world and that further mental health in sport research should always consider the cultural contexts.

Mental health issues may not have anything to do with an athlete's sporting performance but may instead arise from other major negative life events (Souter et al., 2018). Poucher et al. (2021) noted that around 20 percent of the general population, at any one time, meet the diagnostic criteria for a mental disorder, most commonly a mood or anxiety disorder such as Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) & Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD). The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that between 25-50 percent of the global population are likely to experience debilitating mental health issues in their lifetime (Cavanaugh et al., 2022). Therefore, it would be logical to expect that a similar proportion, one in five, elite athletes are likely to experience mental health disorders (Poucher et al., 2021; Sebbens et al., 2016; Woods et al., 2022). However, athletes may experience additional risks to the general population because of their career demanding a high training load as well as the nature of their role to constantly be in competition with others (Schinke et al., 2018). These stressors, as well as additional ones such as the pressure to perform, coach-athlete or athlete-athlete relationships, injury, and transition to retirement, are likely to increase the risk of experiencing a mental disorder for athletes specifically (Jewett et al., 2019; Poucher et al., 2021; Souter et al., 2018; Woods et al., 2022). In addition to these factors, a recent study found that new stressors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, could arise at any time and cause uncertainty about work that may require additional mental health management for athletes, as well as the general population for those whose careers are less adaptable (Hong & Allen, 2022).

The stressors most commonly addressed in the traditional sports mental health literature are those related to injury and retirement (Hong & Fraser, 2021; Jewett et al., 2019; Poucher et al., 2021; Schinke et al., 2018; Souter et al., 2018; Woods et al., 2022). These types of life transitions, in general, are considered as stressors that would require adaptation, but especially when retirement requires a transition out of sport (Hong & Fraser, 2021; Schinke et al., 2018).

Hong & Fraser (2021) note that they have observed a significant amount of attention being paid to issues dealing with mental health in sport. However, they suggest that some resources could be committed to educating athletes about financial literacy and pre-retirement planning, in order to better cope with mental health issues that might arise from retirement. Sport is unique when referring to the term 'retirement'. Retirement from competitive sport is not limited by age and could just as easily refer to an 18-year-old or 38-year-old athlete. Jewett et al. (2019) conducted a piece of research that specifically focused on university student athletes and their experiences of mental health issues when retiring from sport in their late teens and early 20s. In their study, the universities had provided many different types of support and special access to services for the student-athletes. However, when students lost their athletic status, they also lost their access to support services which lead to increased feelings of vulnerability (Jewett et al., 2019).

For those athletes who are able to overcome the stigma and admit that they need help, the next obstacle for seeking support is a lack of knowledge about who to turn to first. Or maybe the athlete doesn't even notice that they need help, so who around them would be able to identify that they might need support? Not all teams have the resources to appoint dedicated medical professionals who could provide this help, but all teams do have a coach who should have a decent overview of their players. It has been noted that coaches play an important role in supporting mental health, but that they may be unsure of what to do and may unintentionally engage in behaviors that could negatively impact their athletes (Bisset et al., 2020). It was also found that coaches fear negatively impacting their players by saying or doing the 'wrong thing' (Mazzer & Rickwood, 2015). Several pieces of academic literature suggest that coaches, and other stakeholders close to the athletes (parents, teammates, etc.) would benefit from any form of training to recognize warning signs and how to connect players to professional help (Bisset et al., 2020; Breslin et al., 2017; Liddle et al., 2017; Mazzer & Rickwood, 2015; McHenry et al., 2021; Souter et al., 2018; Schinke et al., 2018; Sebbens et al., 2016). In a workshop with 166 coaches, Sebbens et al. (2016) found that even brief interventions can be effective in improving mental health literacy, and that these coaches were better able to recognize signs and symptoms which made them more confident in being able to support their players. This finding was later supported by Schinke et al., (2018) who also suggested mental health literacy training programs should be delivered to senior and junior players, as well as parents and coaches in order to increase overall confidence in how to deal with this delicate issue from a variety of different stakeholders. Breslin et al. (2017) also suggested the use of mental health awareness programs for coaches based on the Theory of Planned Behavior. The Theory of

Planned Behavior attempts to explain the links between attitude, norms, and perceived behavioral controls. They also found that short mental health awareness programs increased the knowledge and intention to offer support because the Theory of Planned Behavior bridges the gap between how stigma influences intentions to seek help and how a person can make the transition from the intention to seek help to actually seeking help (Breslin et al., 2017).

While it would be beneficial for coaches to play a role in supporting players' mental health by identifying concerns and facilitating help-seeking behaviors, the certified medical performance consultants would be the one most qualified to address athletes' mental performance needs (Mazzer & Rickwood, 2015; McHenry et al., 2021). The coach's role in this holistic athlete care would be to work together with the medical professionals to be the ones responsible for fostering a team culture that supports athlete mental health, helps identify and connect at-risk athletes to appropriate resources, and provides ongoing support to athletes seeking mental healthcare (Bisset et al., 2020; McHenry et al., 2021). Two tools used by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) that differentiate the roles of mental health professionals and coaches, or other persons close to the athlete, are the Sport Mental Health Assessment tool (SMHAT-1) and Sport Mental Health Recognition Tool (SMHRT-1). The difference being that the SMHAT is used only by licensed mental health professionals and the SMHRT is developed for athletes and their entourage (Gouttebarge et al., 2020). Gouttebarge et al. (2020) claim that the SMHAT & SMHRT enable mental health symptoms and disorders in elite athletes to be recognized earlier than they otherwise would, and this would facilitate a timelier referral of the athlete in need for support and treatment.

3.2 Human Resource Management and the Jobs Demands-Resources Model

When discussing the performance implications mental health can have on top level athletes, it might be useful to compare the literature described above to HRM literature. These top-level athletes are employees of their organizations, as well as being some of the organization's most valuable resources. Poor well-being at work can have adverse effects on performance and overall productivity (Kowalski & Loretto, 2017). While in most businesses the performance of an employee is not streamed on the internet or broadcast on TV, the sporting world is made up of businesses that have added complexities. Therefore, their well-being should fall under the remit of an HR department that is aware of the intricacies of this unique business environment. While not all HRM practices may be applicable to sports organizations, there is existing

scientific literature on mental health and workplace well-being that may be relevant across industries and that sports/esports organizations may be able to learn from when designing their own HRM policies.

Job stress is not limited to sport, or esport. All jobs are likely to include stressors in some form. Some suggest that adopting a more holistic approach to HRM may lead to a better understanding of how HR practice can be designed to enhance employee well-being and foster sustainability of the workforce (Kowalski & Loretto, 2017). It was found by Kang & Kang (2016) that when an employee recognizes an organization's high-commitment HRM, it reduces the amount of stress experienced. High-Commitment HRM is a holistic approach to HRM that includes job security, empowerment, appropriate compensation, and information sharing. This study was conducted on more than 2000 participants in South Korea, and it found that one of the most significant factors in reducing job stress was the perceived amount of supervisor support, which can reinforce the effects of high-commitment HRM in lessening overall job stress (Kang & Kang, 2016). Perceptions of supporting HR practices contribute to perceived organizational support, and these perceptions of supportive HR have been found to be negatively related to turnover. However, because of the number of factors at play, it is unlikely that it is entirely related to only HR practices (Allen et al., 2003).

One model that may fit with the idea of high-commitment HRM is the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model. This model is presented in Figure 1. This model supports the idea that employee health and well-being are the results of a balance between workload and resource availability (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker et al., 2014; Pagán-Castano et al., 2020). This model suggests that high-commitment HRM would result in a greater number of resources being available, or perceived to be available, to employees, which could then help support them as the demand for their performance increases (Bakker et al, 2014). When focused specifically on employee health and well-being, it was found by Pagán-Castano et al. (2020) that there was a positive effect of some HR practices on employee health and performance at work, but that this was likely due to having employee-focused HRM practices, which had a much more positive impact than those practices that focused on the organization. Figure 2 shows the predictions of Bakker & Demerouti (2007) on the interaction effects of high vs low commitment to resources and how it may affect employee motivation.

The Job Demands-Resources Model

Mental

Emotional

Physical

Etc.

Job Demands

Support

Autonomy

Feedback

Etc.

Job Resources

+

-

-

+

Strain

Motivation

Organizational Outcomes

-

+
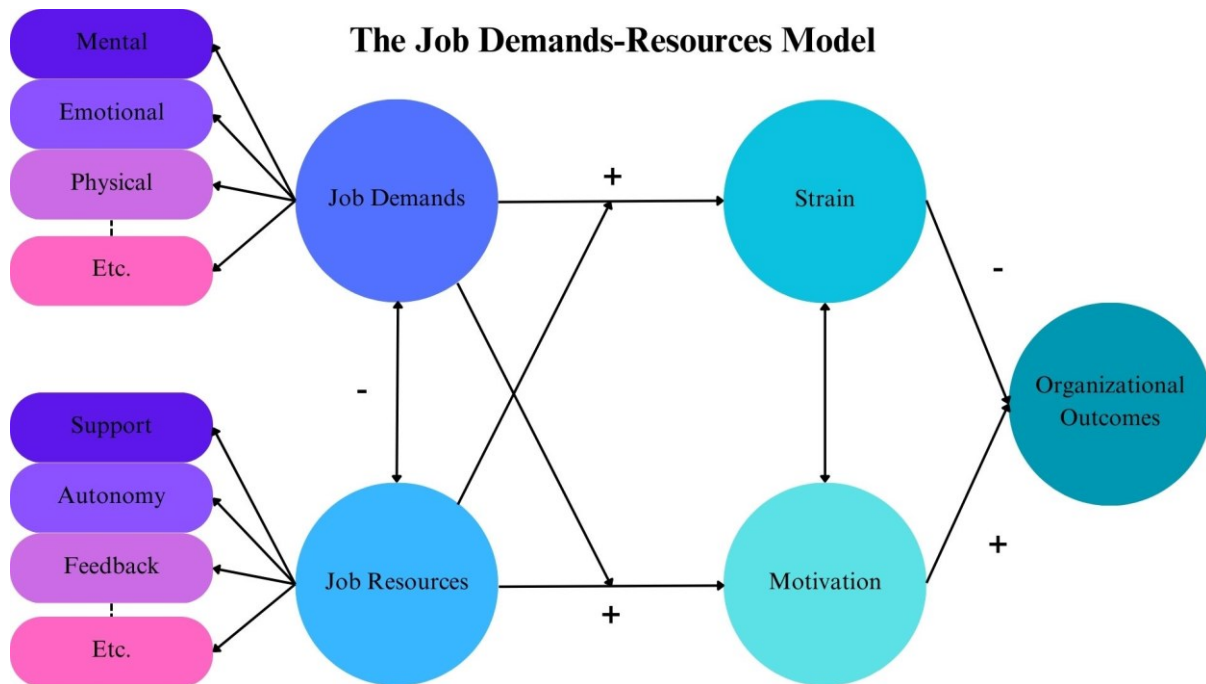
FIGURE 1. The Job Demands- Resources Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Predictions of the Job Demands-Resources model based on Interaction Effects

Resources

High

Low

Low Strain
High Motivation

Average Strain
High Motivation

Low strain
Average Motivation

High Strain
Low Motivation

Low

High

Demands

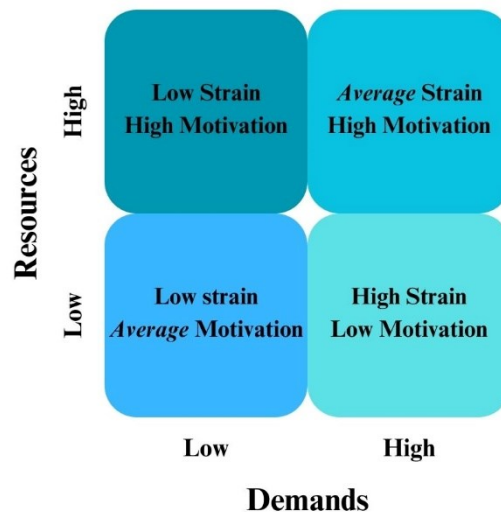FIGURE 2. Predictions of the Job Demands-Resources model based on Interaction Effects (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

It has been seen that individuals with mental health conditions are on the rise, but that HRM practices specific to mental health issues are scarce (Richard et al., 2021). Richard et al. (2021) also suggest that equity is difficult to maintain for teams that include employees with mental

health conditions because the practices that are in place may be standardized, but not appropriate for each case. This is thought to be because of a lack of resources that may make team leaders feel insufficiently equipped to motivate individuals with mental health conditions (Richard et al., 2021). Similarly, the suggestions in the sports literature by Sebbens et al. (2016), training provided to managers is suggested by Richard et al. (2021) to create a better 'climate of understanding' within an organization and give the leaders greater confidence in supporting those that require additional mental health support. It is thought that the Human Resources Health Action Framework may provide a helpful approach to addressing shortages in HR for mental health (Kakuma et al., 2011). As a part of the framework, Kakuma et al. (2011) also suggest that education through the form of brief training for non-specialist health professionals, lay workers, affected individuals, and caregivers could assist mental health specialists in the detection, diagnosis, and treatment of individuals with mental health conditions. They propose that this would reduce the burden on individual caregivers through greater awareness for others on the specific needs of people struggling with mental health conditions (Kakuma et al., 2011). Awareness and knowledge of the mental health care process are often noted in the literature as a potential step forward in helping those with mental health care needs. Research conducted by Cavanaugh et al. (2022) and Wang et al. (2022) suggest that there is a group who know the process better than most and might actually be the best people to help support those in need. They are the ones with Lived Experiences (LE), having gone through the process already themselves. Cavanaugh et al. (2022) highlight LE employees as important because they may have increased empathy and a genuine understanding of how people access services. Wang et al. (2022) agree and suggest that employing people with LE are better able to help those currently in need how to access getting a diagnosis, use services, and understand periods of healing. Their study included 327 participants, 116 in LE roles and 211 in traditional roles. It was found that the LE roles helped achieve better performance, diversity, and inclusion outcomes, especially for those with mental health challenges (Wang et al., 2022). Both Cavanaugh et al. (2022) and Wang et al. (2022) agree that it is a cultural shift in how mental health is perceived in the workplace that is needed in order to see progress and create safer, happier, and more productive workplaces.

Similar to the literature on mental health well-being in sport, it has been noted in traditional workplace literature that systematic stigmatizing attitudes towards individuals with mental health issues are common and cause challenges within the workplace that can prevent those who need it from actively seeking help (Cavanaugh et al., 2022). A number of suggestions have been presented on how to proceed from creating special roles for individuals with previous

experiences with mental health issues (Cavanaugh et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022), to providing education to everyone in an organization on how to support colleagues who may be struggling with their mental health well-being (Kakuma et al., 2011; Richard et al., 2021). These are ways of providing employees with the resources they might need, and showing high-commitment to HRM, which should help employees better able to handle increasing demands placed on them and increase their perceptions of being supported (Allen et al., 2003; Kang & Kang, 2016; Pagán-Castano et al., 2020). In summary, the ways of showing high-commitment HRM practices that may enhance employee resilience are things such as developing social supports at work, ensuring work-life balance practice, creating assistance and development programs, providing flexible work arrangements, ensuring occupational health and safety guidelines are in place, risk and crisis management systems are well thought out, and placing importance on diversity and inclusion (Bardoel et al., 2014).

3.3   Mental Health in Esports

While the concept of competitive gaming can be traced back several decades, literature on competitive gaming, or esports, as a professional career has become more relevant recently as the industry has grown to where it is now. Much of the esports literature references the similarities to traditional sports psychology, however there is a gap when it comes to esports organizations as a workplace. The previous two sections have shown that there are a number of relevant similarities to mental health in both sport and the workplace. The following paragraphs will give examples that show the similarities, and differences, the esports industry has to traditional sport and workplaces, in regard to mental health and well-being.

It is believed that 90 percent of American children play video games recreationally (Emara et al., 2020). A very small portion of them will become professionals, but those that do may spend 5.5-10 hours a day gaming, which some view as a similar commitment young traditional sport athletes make to their game (Emara et al., 2020). As a sport, esports is not as physical in nature as traditional sports, but is much more reliant on the mental aspect, even though precise micro-movements and accuracy are important. It is even suggested that there is increasing empirical evidence of a relationship between playing esports and improved cognitive performance (Pedraza-Ramirez et al, 2020). However, a number of limitations were noted in Pedraza-Ramirez et al. 's (2020) literature review and highlighted the importance of gaming being structured and the use of coaches to help the players develop their skills. One of the big issues

with this is that esports coaching is still in its infancy and often lacks standards (Sabtan et al., 2022).

While Pedraza-Ramirez et al. (2020) suggest the possible cognitive benefits of esports, more literature presents possible detrimental effects, although these could be considered risks for traditional sports or other jobs that require high levels of focus and concentration. Sabatan et al. (2022) note that the coaches they spoke to are concerned about the long practice hours, player attitudes, mental stress, and back & wrist injuries. Specific to players and competition, factors that have been noted include but are not limited to, communication issues, criticism from the in-game leader or other teammates, outcomes of losing, lack of shared team goals, life balance, social media, event audience, media interviews, and logistics (Smith et al., 2019). Further researchers have presented deeper risks as results of such stressors, such as depression, anxiety, tension, burnout, addictive behavior, social anxiety, and sleep disturbances, and emotional exhaustion (Hong et al., 2022; Martin-Niedecken & Schättin, 2020; Palanichamy et al., 2020).

If esports coaching is considered an issue because of its age, esports organizations may not be any more mature (Sabtan et al., 2022). This thesis hopes to explore this theme partially of whether organizations' priorities are player/employee focused or more organizationally focused and how this affects their HRM strategies, if any exist. According to Hong & Wilkinson's (2020) study on how esports athletes perceive the availability of the organizational support that focuses on their mental and physical health, most players are left to self-manage their own mental health. More experienced players were found to have adopted their own strategies with differing degrees of success, however they also noted that a mental coach or sports psychologist would be appreciated, especially for the younger and early career players, for managing not only individual mental well-being support needs, but also team dynamics (Hong & Wilkinson, 2020).

Team dynamics are important in esport, just as they are in traditional sport. While internal stressors produced the largest number of themes, team issues were found to be the most common stressor in competitive esports (Smith et al., 2019). In a study conducted by Poulus et al. (2022) teammate stressors and stressors related to performance were reported by 79 percent of esports athletes. The stressors related to performance were seen as a challenge to these athletes, and the teammate stressors were viewed as a threat (Poulus et al., 2022). For the top 1% of these athletes, more stressors were related to performance than teammates. However, the esports athletes taking part in the study who were considered in the top 60th-99th percentile reported more teammate-related stressors than performance (Poulus et al., 2022). Several

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studies have examined the differences between players at different levels in order to better understand what can affect top end players vs casual gamers, of which there is a significantly higher number of. The largest piece of research on this compared 4284 recreational gamers and esports athletes on variables such as gametime, motivations, and severity of gaming disorder and psychiatric symptoms (Banyai et al., 2019). Banyai et al. (2019) found that esports athletes spent significantly more time playing on all days, and that they also had higher scores on social, competition and skill development motivations. It was also found that there was not a significant difference between recreational gamers and esports athletes when it came to experiencing psychiatric distress or showing signs of internet gaming disorder.[1] The motivation found to be the most common predictor of problematic gaming among both groups were those that fell into the escapism model (Banyai et al., 2019). Kocadağ (2019 & 2020) conducted two smaller scale pieces of research where they compared professional esports athletes and casual gamers but focused on the amount of time spent playing. In the first study, they surveyed 320 players aged 15-27 in Turkey and found that playing video games daily affected self-reported psychological well-being levels, and that the desire to have a career in esports was a further significant predictor of low psychological well-being levels (Kocadağ, 2019). In the follow up study, the 368 teenage participants were divided into 3 groups based on their level and the amount of time they spent playing their chosen game. It was again found that the professional esports athletes had lower psychological well-being levels than the other two groups, amateur players playing more or less than 6 hours per day. Those that played more than 6 hours daily were also found to report lower levels of psychological well-being than those who played less than 6 hours per day on average (Kocadağ, 2020). This supports the finding of a relatively early, for gaming, piece of research conducted in Norway which found that video gamers obtained lower scores on self-reported health questionnaires than those who did not play video games (Mentzoni et al., 2011). Mentozoni (2011) also noticed that those considered problem gamers, playing several hours daily, had elevated scores on measures of anxiety and depression with lower scores on satisfaction with life. These studies are concerning for those that have made a career out of training and competing in video games. Cottrell et al. (2019) notes just a few of the demands placed on competitive esports athletes such as concentration, communication, motivation, and emotional regulation for up to several hours in competitions

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[1] Internet gaming disorder is included in Section III of the DSM-5-TR as a condition that requires additional research, along with caffeine use disorder and other conditions. It is the first, and only, psychiatrically diagnosable mental health disorder related to video games. Its classification is similar to that of substance-related addictive disorders (e.g., alcohol, tobacco, stimulants, etc.), but is most closely related to gambling disorder as a behavioral addiction instead of a chemical addiction (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

that can be as many as five consecutive matches that might each last over an hour each. Research on other high-stress and high-concentration jobs, namely air traffic control, has also shown significant job effects and increased anxiety and depression (Arghami et al., 2005).

The term 'burnout' is commonly used in literature relating to esports or gaming and mental health (Hong & Wilkinson, 2021; Hong et al., 2022; Martin-Niedecken & Schättin, 2020; Smith et al., 2022). Hong et al. (2022) suggested that athlete burnout can lead to further mental health issues such as depression. They reason this by highlighting the psychologically demanding nature of esports combined with the potentially excessive hours spent gaming that when combined can lead to burnout, especially in young players (Hong et al., 2022). Smith et al. (2022) conducted a survey of 313 competitive student esport athletes in the UK in order to investigate stressors and how they might predict poor sleep patterns, feelings of burnout, social phobia anxiety, and mental ill health in esports. All stressors were found to be significantly positive predictors of mental ill health. They further suggested that these should be the areas that future interventions should focus on in regard to improving the mental health of those who compete in esports (Smith et al., 2022). Based on interviews conducted with top players, there are signs that mental health is being taken seriously in the industry by some. The interviews found that current interventions focus on time/sleep management, life balance, and social support (Hong & Connelly, 2022). Interestingly, social support was highlighted to be not only important for athletes during their careers, but also a way to cope with mental health after their retirement from esports (Hong & Connelly, 2022). Post career mental health has been mentioned extensively in the section about traditional sport and mental health, but perhaps because of the relatively young age of the esports industry it has not received as much attention in the esports literature.

Social support can be viewed as a real challenge for esports athletes. In traditional sports, teammates must always be in the same physical space in order to train and compete. Because of the digital nature of esports, players can communicate, train, and even compete from their homes. While larger organizations may have the resources to regularly bring players from around the world to a physical location, the majority of casual players regularly play with strangers (Freeman & Wohn, 2017). In an early esports study, Trepte et al. (2012) found that physical proximity to teammates positively influenced bonding and created social capital, and this led to greater bridging and bonding later online. This social capital was found to be positively related to fostering offline social support between players. In support of this idea, Freeman & Wohn (2017) found that the context facilitated situations of helping through both tangible and intangible means within a game between strangers. They suggest that as these

strangers play together more often, they can develop emotional and esteem support skills which function not only in game but might also transfer over into in-person interactions and relationships (Freeman & Wohn, 2017).

Terms such as strong mindset or mental toughness are commonly referred to and believed to be important to players' mental health (Hong & Wilkinson, 2021; Leis et al., 2021; Poulus, 2020). Poulus (2020) asserts that mental toughness is associated with mitigating problems and emotion focused stressors. Leis et al. (2021) go on to expand on Polus' idea to suggest that players should systematically learn how to recognize and regulate specific stress responses in order to develop their own mental toughness. Poulus et al. (2022a) turned this into a study focused on stress appraisal and coping effectiveness. They had a team of six LoL players keep a diary over a competitive season (87 days in 2020). Unsurprisingly, they found that more stressors were reported in the competition diaries than the training diaries, and that the competition stressors were rated as being 'more intense'. In order to handle these stressors, they found that players more frequently employed problem-focused, followed by emotion-focused, coping strategies (Poulus et al., 2022b). Problem-focused strategies are those such as positive self-talk and supportive teamwork, while emotion-focused strategies refer to focusing on objectives and blocking out irrelevant information (Smith et al., 2019). When Poulus et al. (2022a) used these strategies, they were perceived as more effective than avoidance coping, suggesting that these players had developed these coping skills which resulted in them being more mentally tough (Poulus et al., 2022a). Avoidance coping is still common, but it is seen as a short-term solution that would not be useful in the long term, especially when it comes to team communication (Smith et al., 2019). It is interesting to observe that while the traditional sports literature appears to be trending away from the use terms related to 'mental toughness', it is still considered positive and necessary in the esports literature.

Traditional sport and HRM literature both mention a holistic approach, and this topic shows up again in the esports research. It is suggested that to develop these positive skills and limit the stressors that might predict poor mental health, a holistic approach is needed because of the many different areas where stressors could arise (Emara et al., 2020; Hong & Wilkinson, 2021; Hong, 2022). Hong & Wilkinson (2021) attempted to identify esports athletes' needs at all levels for a holistic well-being view both during and after an esports career. They concluded that these athletes need to be prepared to have a 'strong mindset' and a variety of mental/psychological skills to overcome psychological distress and mental health issues such as burnout, anxiety, and depression (Hong & Wilkinson, 2021). Hong & Wilkinson (2021) also bring up the fact that, at the moment, esports careers are relatively short and that there can be

a great amount of uncertainty over future careers, which has been identified as a significant stressor for players, as was receiving criticism via social media. These are factors that are not unique to esports but were also seen in the review of traditional sports literature. Emara et al. (2020) note that they have observed a greater emphasis placed on identification, management, and prevention of common health hazards in sport and esport, and both could be supported by similar sports psychology interventions. In a further connection between sport and esport, in a study funded by the IOC Advanced Olympic Research Grant Programme, Hong (2022), based on her earlier work with Wilkinson (2021) set out to explore the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders in helping ensure the mental and physical health of esports athletes. Through 51 interviews of players at all levels, coaches, game publishers, national associations, sponsors, and tournament organizers, she asked these stakeholders their perspectives on criticisms which may affect players' health and wellbeing as well as the quality of their careers. Her research found a few interesting points. Firstly, the responsibility for these players' health and well-being should be shared by all. Next, there was a need for young players to balance training and commitment to esports with broader educational requirements. Lastly, a holistic view from all stakeholders' perspectives should be considered to better understand the career and developmental needs of players (Hong, 2022).

This thesis will strongly draw on the previous research by Hong & Wilkinson (2021) and Hong (2022) by also exploring the perceived needs of esports athletes when dealing with stressors known to cause mental health issues such as burnout, anxiety, and depression. It will place heavy importance on the experiences of players and coaches in how seriously they perceive mental health issues to be considered by different stakeholders in the esports industry. More specifically, it will attempt to answer the question of whether players and coaches currently feel that they are provided with adequate organizational support to perform their roles under increasingly demanding circumstances, which is based on the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

4   METHODOLOGY

This chapter introduces the methodology and will justify the choices made through the planning process, as well as how the research was conducted. Firstly, the research design will be discussed. This will include the strategy and framework for creating this research project, followed by a description of those taking part in the research. Then, a reasonable justification for the data collection process will be detailed. This will include descriptions of how participants were sampled as well as an explanation of how the interviews were conducted. Finally, the approach used for data analysis will be clarified and the credibility and validity of the research approach will be reviewed.

4.1   Research Methodology

A qualitative approach was chosen in order to explore the experiences and beliefs of a variety of stakeholders within professional esports organizations and how they perceive mental health support from their own organization, and from the esports industry as a whole. Interviews were used as the participants' perspectives were thought to be the most meaningful, knowledgeable, and able to be made explicit, according to the qualitative research method's guidelines of Skinner et al. (2015). The interviews were semi-structured and involved a series of open-ended questions based on the research topic (Skinner et al., 2015). The open-ended nature of the questions allowed opportunities for both the interviewer and interviewees to discuss some topics in more detail. The interviewer also had more freedom to probe the interviewees if he felt that they might have more than a simple answer to the question. However, according to Skinner et al. (2015), this can also be viewed as one of the disadvantages of semi-structured interviews as it may not generate comparable data if not all interviewees are asked the same questions, and the interviewer becomes vulnerable to the subjective insights of the interviewee. Overall, a semi-structured interview provided more perceived benefits to the research questions than potential short-comings and it was used to the researcher's best abilities.

An interview script comprised of 15 questions was developed and used by the interviewer. However, the semi-structured nature allowed the interviewer to use their discretion to ask further questions within a question, or skip questions on the script, if they felt it to be necessary. The script was divided into three sections. In order to gain a better understanding of the context of the response, the first section included questions about the background of the interviewee and the organization that they represent. These questions were designed to have little to do with

the research questions, but instead to start the interview with some 'easy' questions to get the interviewees comfortable with speaking about themselves and their teams. The second section of questions in the interview script were based on the objectives of research question one and how the interviewees perceive mental health in esports from their own perspective and how mental health issues are dealt with within their organizations. The third section contained questions about the interviewees' futures and what kinds of goals they wish to accomplish in their esports careers. This last section of questions, while not directly related to the research questions, allowed some processing time for the interviewees to answer some less difficult questions. This third section also gave an opportunity to come back to anything they might have forgotten to mention in the section two questions related to mental health. The full script can be found in Appendix 1.

4.2 Research Participants

The study included seven participants who were recruited through subjective sampling. It was necessary for all participants to be a part of a professional FPS esports team. This means that they all receive money for competing in esports and view it as their job. This is important because the aims of the study focus on mental health in the workplace, where casual or enthusiastic amateur players may not experience the same pressures that those that stand to gain financially do. The participants included three Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO) players, two CS:GO team coaches, one coach of other first-person shooter (FPS) esports from an educational institution, and one CS:GO Team Manager/Team Operations Manager for their organization. The seven participants represented four different teams/organizations. All organizations were European or European/Asian based.

Two participants identified as female and five as male. The players' ages ranged from 18-22 years-old, while coaches and managers' ages ranged from 21-33 years-old. All players, coaches, and managers had experience playing CS:GO at various levels. The players interviewed had between 7-9 years of playing experience, but only 1-3 years of experience playing at professional level. Coaches and managers had 1-6 years of experience in coaching or management roles.

Participants were assured that all personal information would be kept private, and their names, as well as the names of their organizations, would be left out of the final report. Therefore,

players are referred to as P1, P2, and P3, while coaches are referred to as C1, C2, and C3, and the sole manager as M1.

4.3   Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via Google Meets. Being able to conduct interviews online was important for interviewees' convenience. They would also be able to participate in a comfortable and familiar environment at their homes or workplaces across Europe. Interviews were conducted from December 2022 to March 2023. Interviews lasted from 20 minutes up to an hour, depending on how much the participant had to say about the topic. Participants with more experience or stronger opinions on the topic typically gave longer and more detailed answers to the questions. All interviews were conducted in English. Although only one participant was a native English speaker, all other participants use English regularly in their work.

The interviews were video recorded with the participants' consent. These recordings were later transcribed using the AI video editing software Descript, but also listened to and checked again by the researcher in order to correct any computer transcription errors. A total of 83 pages of transcripts were collected. The interviews were conducted by a researcher who has experience in esports and FPS gaming. Even so, the interviewer asked the interviewees to define certain abbreviations or gaming lingo for the sake of the transcript. The interviews were designed to explore the participants' perceptions and experiences regarding the importance of organizational mental health support in esports, particularly in professional level CS:GO and other FPS titles.

4.4   Data Analysis

Data were analyzed in April 2023. Content analysis was used to analyze the data obtained from the interviews in order to make replicable and valid references from the data to the contexts (Skinner et al., 2015). The transcripts were read multiple times to identify key themes and patterns related to the research questions. An inductive approach to identify emergent themes from the data was used. The themes were then organized into categories appropriate to the research questions, and the findings were presented in the Results section of the thesis. Both

themes and direct quotes are presented in the Results chapter in order for the quotes to provide context for the theme.

The researcher used a table to collect and view main themes, sub themes, and relevant responses under each. A second table was also created to collect the direct quotations from the interviews that corresponded to the themes, sub-themes, and relevant responses collected in the first table.

4.5   Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted with the acknowledgement that mental health can be a sensitive subject for some people. Before the interviews, all interviewees received a research notification and privacy notice stating the intention of the research project, how their data is collected and stored, as well as their rights as participants.

The intention of the researcher was to help participants feel as comfortable as possible by interviewing participants in their own homes or places of work. Participants were informed about the purpose and nature of the study, and their consent was obtained before the interviews were conducted. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study, and the participants were assured that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. No participants withdrew from the study after the interviews were conducted.

Some participants used the names or gamer tags of other people when describing specific examples in their responses, but these names and gamer tags have also been omitted from the final report of this research, as identifying individuals is not relevant to the research project.

5   RESULTS

In this chapter, the qualitative results are reviewed in order to identify the topics and themes that emerged from the interviews. These topics and themes have been categorized and laid out based on their relevance to the research questions. The first section will look at the perceived threats to esports athletes' mental health and well-being, as well as where and how the threats may come about. The next section will present the types of support that are currently offered to esports athletes from their organizations. The final section will show the wishes and ideas of the participants of what more they believe could be done within the industry to protect the mental health and well-being of esports athletes.

5.1   Perceived Threats to Esport Athletes' Mental Health and Well-being

Anxiety, depression, and burnout were the mental health outcomes that were brought up by the interviewees. While interviewees mentioned different types of stressors leading to these outcomes, all stressors fell under the categories of *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* in reference to how or why the stressors might be experienced. *Extrinsic stressors* brought up in the interviews were primarily related to the organization, or other work-related stressors coming from outside the organization, while the *intrinsic stressors* were related to esports athletes' inner motivations and competitiveness as well as their own reasons for spending time in their game and away from the 'real world'. It was suggested by Coach 1 (C1) that players might 'grind', and spend time playing, for up to 11 hours a day. C1 also gave an example of how the demanding schedule of esports athletes can play a role in their poor mental health.

> *"I've heard stories before where, you know there'll be a team that gets so close to winning a game in, in a certain tournament, they fall at the last hurdle and lose to the other team. And a person is so emotionally struck by that loss. They can't get over it for weeks and they're, you know, in their room, they're really upset about it. They've cried to family members, and you know, it's hard for them because they need to get back on their toes and be mentally strong because they've got another tournament next week because their schedules are jam packed. Have they really overcome the loss? No, probably not, but they're now playing another tournament and then they're constantly stressing themselves" (C1).*

C3 also mentions workplace specific stressors related to career instability for players as a source of stress.

> *"You are not normally at more than one year at same team because you will change the team or they will throw out, throw you out from the team because there's so much change because people are like, they're like burning people out" (C3).*

Player 2 (P2), who has themself taken breaks from competing due to not feeling mentally well-enough, points out how it's not just workplace related factors, but how other people (fans, opponents, etc.) can place stress on players.

> *"People are not really kind or neutral to each other. Uh, it also can affect, if you hear a lot of, you know, bad things for a long time, of course, you know, you can mute people, but at some point, it does get, uh, you know, kind of too much" (P2).*

Other stressors that received mentions were those created between teammates, regular international travel, and general loneliness, as summed up by P2:

> *"I think I've seen a lot of people who are like depressed, um, or have anxiety or just, uh like afraid to go out in the public or like be around a lot of people, but that could be for a lot of games maybe" (P2).*

These issues may not, on their own, cause well-being issues for players, but the variety of stressors coming from many different areas of their life might make esports athletes particularly vulnerable to the mental health outcomes of depression, anxiety, and/or burnout.

Figure 3 compiled response themes and topics from the interviewed participants and was designed to determine the similarities and differences faced by esports athletes vs traditional sports athletes. Differences are most often seen under the *Intrinsic Stressors.* Competition related stressors appear similar for both types of athletes, but the uniquely digital and online nature of esports may lead to increased feelings of isolation and loneliness.

FIGURE 3. Threats to Mental Health and Well-being Currently Faced by Esports Athletes

5.2 Organizational Support Currently Offered to Esports Athletes

Of the four organizations interviewed, two employed a specialist sports psychologist. It should also be noted that the two teams that employ sports psychologists are two of the higher ranked teams in the CS:GO scene and had more resources than the other two organizations that were interviewed. For both teams that employed a sports psychologist, the role was new in the organization and the person had only been with the teams for a few months. Even so, the interviewees had only positive things to say about having a new sports psychologist. C1, who mentioned having their own previous experience with anxiety issues, said this about their new sports psychologist:

> *"She's not actually your therapist, but in a way she acts like that… You can go there and vent so much about what the problems are and she'll give you ideas and ways to work on yourself" (C1).*

P1, who was from the same organization as C1, mentioned that they didn't know about any of the processes for dealing with mental health issues. They said that their coach knew more, and they were aware of the new sports psychologist, but had not yet had an experience with her. This example may show that players are not aware of the processes of how to receive mental health support, even when there are structures and plans in place for them.

The other organization that employed a sports psychologist was that of Manager 1 (M1). M1 mentioned that they had hired a sports psychologist from a major European football club, and in regard to the players' awareness and access to him said that:

> *"So, the players they can text him on WhatsApp or call him whenever they want. And they're scheduling group sessions together as well as a team to discuss both in-game and outside game problems. So they have access to a sports psychologist at all times" (M1).*

M1 also clarified that their players' experiences with sports psychologists had not always been positive. They told a story about the team's captain who had a negative experience with a sports psychologist in the past. The captain believed that their current sports psychologist was especially good and would encourage the other players to use his services for any and all related issues.

P2, P3, C2, and C3 did not have access to a sports psychologist provided by their organization. However, they did mention other support systems that they believed had positive effects on their mental health.

P2 and P3 both talked about how they felt a strong sense of social support from their teammates and the management. C2 conceded that they would not know who to contact if there were a serious concern for a player's mental well-being, but that they try to regularly schedule 1-on-1 sessions to talk about issues that the players might be having. This, along with trying to foster a sense of honesty and comfort in the team, is a tactic they use in their own attempt to reduce stress for their players.

C3 discussed how they have seen how some organizations take mental health more seriously than others, but they believe that it may only be a relevant point at the international level as there is likely no money for mental health professionals at the national level. This was supported by M1 who believed that only teams competing to realistically win championships should employ sports psychologists. These two participants may be suggesting that these players at higher levels have a greater demand placed on them and require greater resources, as suggested by the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). It should also be mentioned that of the four organizations from which the participants came from, the two that employed dedicated sports psychologist have achieved the greatest amount of success in terms of results and prize winnings of the organizations taking part.

"We have to also keep that line when it's, uh, mental health about, about, about esports and when it's mental health, about, uh, like mental health that needs a professional and we need to guide them to the right place because there's also people would not need mental help that we give because we are not, uh, medical people" (C3).

While not a 'medical person', C3, the oldest and most experienced coach of those interviewed, provides advice, learned coping skills for stress, and 1-on-1 talks with their players, and was the only participant that felt confident that they knew a therapist whom they could refer players to if they should need it, but that it was not a service provided by the organization. These could be considered learned experience skills that they are then able to pass along to younger players. C3 was also the most confident in knowing who to refer players to in a situation that might require a mental health professional.

Figure 4 compiled responses from interviewed participants that are related to how they currently receive organizational support from their employers.
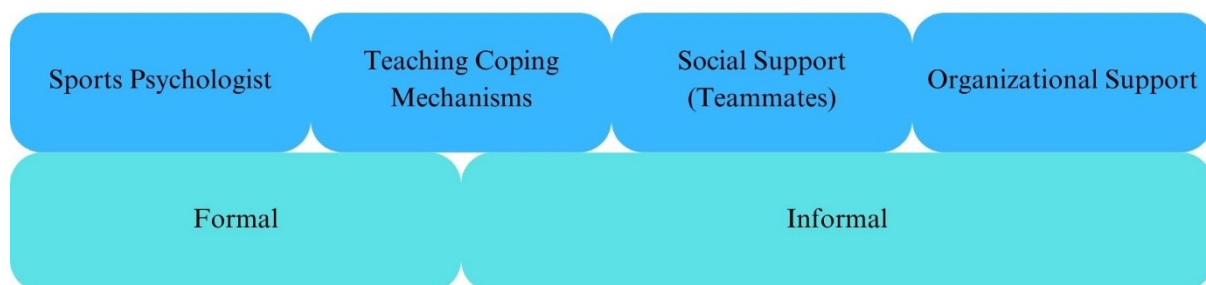

FIGURE 4. Organizational Support Currently Offered to Esports Athletes

5.3 Suggestions for the Industry to Consider

When asked about what more could be done for esports athletes, in regard to mental health, all 3 players mentioned that it is an important issue that people know about, but it is not talked about much.

"It should definitely be talked more and like somehow, you know, get people to listen about this stuff because a lot of bad things, I would say, have been happening" (P2).

"Telling them who they can contact, talk to, you know, stuff like that. Just overall telling them about this mental health thing, like what to do and, yeah" (P3).

C1 and C3 consider mental health an issue that is not highly enough prioritized by organizations and other stakeholders in the esports industry.

"It needs to be more public. It needs to be open, right?... If I can't remember any specific moment in esports where I've seen a mental health advert or a way to get help in esports, then that's bad right?" (C1).

C1 went on to talk about how they have seen advertisements on TV for mental health charities and thought it would be useful in esports as well. They suggested that major tournaments and streaming platforms give at least a little advertising space to causes that help players rather than *"the new Intel processor even though it pays the bills"* (C1). C3 believes that issues related to players' well-being come from an abundance of talent and how attractive becoming a professional esports athlete is to young people.

"Because now it's like, 'okay, we [an organization] use in two years' and then they are like, 'We get the new ones'. There's so many new players coming up, so you don't have to actually think about mental. For players, you can just take the next on the line" (C3).

Other suggestions that arose were those of more physical proximity to people. P3 & C2 called for more LAN tournaments where players come together and play in one location, rather than playing from their own homes. P3 had never met their teammates in person and has only ever spoken with them through a computer. P2 said that players are often *"terminally online",* and also called for spending more time with *"real people"* to take their minds off gaming and the

scene around it. P2 said that getting a part-time job helped to create balance and helped *"get back on my feet"* after a break from professional competition.

A theme that appeared in nearly all interviews was that of social media. M1 suggested that in order to reduce the stresses placed on players by social media, they would benefit from media training. They believed that learning how to speak to different types of media, developing a persona, and receiving tips for how to manage their social media would be a step towards better online well-being.

Figure 5 compiled response themes and topics from the interviewed participants and was compiled to show what more could be done within the esports industry in order to help athletes. Figure 5 shows four general areas, in the top row, and then more specific suggestions or wishes were able to be categorized under these four topics.

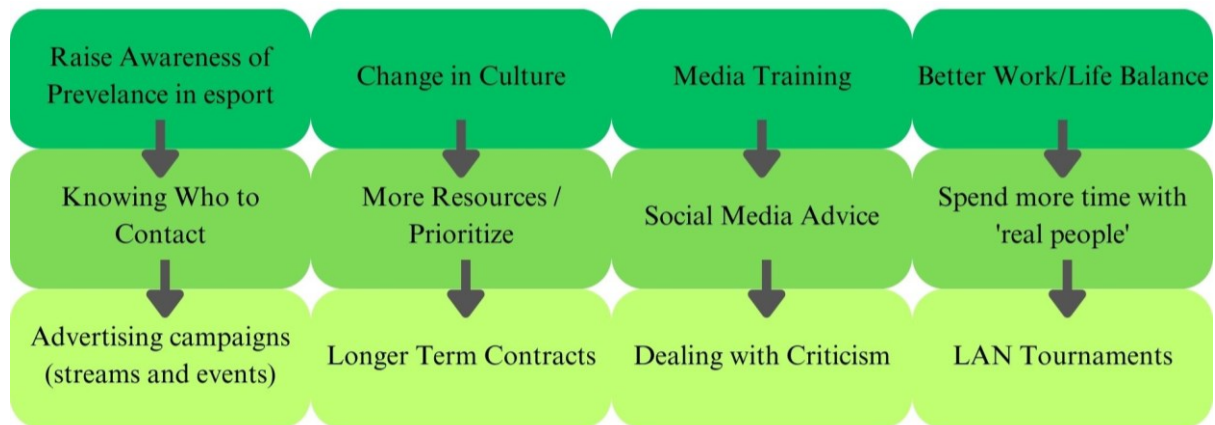| Raise Awareness of Prevalence in esport	Change in Culture	Media Training	Better Work/Life Balance
Knowing Who to Contact	More Resources / Prioritize	Social Media Advice	Spend more time with 'real people'
Advertising campaigns (streams and events)	Longer Term Contracts	Dealing with Criticism	LAN Tournaments

FIGURE 5. Issues to be addressed that may Support Esports Athlete's Future Mental Health and Well-being

6   DISCUSSION

This thesis was designed to explore the issues that esports athletes face in regard to their mental health and how they perceive organizational support, as well as what knowledge from traditional sports and business HRM can be applied to esports when it comes to supporting employees' mental health. In order to do this, the threats esports athletes face that may affect their mental health and well-being were examined through a literature review. Next, current organizational support practices for mental health and well-being were identified using interviews. Finally, the players, coaches, and manager presented ideas about what more they wish would be done in regard to supporting players' mental health and well-being. In this chapter, these results will be discussed in relation to the findings of previous literature.

6.1   Research Question 1 – What are the issues that esports athletes face in regard to their mental health and how they perceive organizational support?

A number of issues related to esports athletes' mental health have been identified by both the previous research and the responses found by the interviewees in this thesis. This section will examine and discuss the support and threats, as well as how they are perceived, by the interviewees.

6.1.1   Threats to esport athletes' mental health

In order to answer the first research question, this thesis needed to determine the relevant mental health related threats esports athletes face in their work life and how they perceived organizational support. The interviews provided a number of known stressors, or threats, that had the potential to impact the mental health and well-being of esports athletes. Several of these stressors were also noted in the previous literature as being challenges to traditional athletes' mental health. Issues related to external pressure to win, career stability, schedule, as well as stressors that include opponents and fans are all relevant to both esports and traditional sports athletes. All of the extrinsic stressors in esports presented in the interviews can also be considered stressors in traditional sport. It was the extrinsic stressors that made up the majority of perceived threats to mental health and well-being in the interviews. However, this research

cannot definitively state whether or not extrinsic stressors cause more stress than intrinsic stressors as this thesis was not designed to examine the severity of stressors.

While intrinsic stressors, such as competitiveness, may be present in both types of athletes, one stressor that could be considered unique to esports athletes is their online vs offline lives. Esports athletes are required to sit at a computer for long periods of time, sometimes in a room with their teammates, but more often alone in their homes. The results of the interviews found that at least one of the esports athletes, P3, had never met their teammates or coach in-person. It is perhaps this area where esports organizations might differ from other sports organizations. While many principles of sports psychology might also apply to esports, there will be differences that organizations must consider when developing strategies to preserve the health and performance of their athletes. Perhaps as an alternative to hiring a sports psychologist, especially when the resources are not available for that, these organizations might look to the employee wellness programs suggested by Taylor et al. (2008) in order to provide specific activities that encourage off-line behaviors of esports athletes.

The sports literature found that stressors related to injury and retirement were most common (Hong & Fraser, 2021; Jewett et al., 2019; Poucher et al., 2021; Schinke et al., 2018; Souter et al., 2018; Woods et al., 2022). Physical injuries were not mentioned in the interviews, but P2 and a teammate of P3 had taken time away from esports due to stress and anxiety related to competition. If not diagnosed, these mental health related issues that result in breaks from competition may not classify as medical injuries, but they often have similar results to an athlete's career. When asked about their futures in esports, all participants, except P2, said that they wished to still be involved in some way in esports in five years' time. P2 had talked about their part-time job and how it had helped them overcome some of the issues they had with esports, and while they were enjoying playing again now, they would probably like to be doing something different in five years. P2's planning for a career shift several years down the line could be considered as a positive mitigating factor to stresses that accompany retirement from sport and career change as it takes away some of the uncertainty of life after professional esports.

In the literature review, Poucher et al. (2021) and Cavanaugh et al. (2022) note that issues related to mental health affect a large portion of the general population. While this research did not examine the likelihood of mental health issues arising in the esports industry, these findings should be expected to apply to esports athletes. It may therefore still be wise for organizations to develop plans on how to help employees get support for their mental health, as a player's development of mental health needs could be unrelated to the stressors placed on them by

playing esports. The need for organizational plans to support players' mental health was mentioned by C3, whose organization did not provide professional mental health support directly, but they were confident that they knew where to direct the players who need professional, medical support.

6.1.2 Perceived organizational support in esports

As was already stated in the literature review, job stress is not limited to sport or esport. The JD-R model suggests that negative organizational outcomes will only arise if the demands of the job are greater than the resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Pagán-Castano et al. (2020) found there to be a positive effect of HR interventions on employee health. This can be supported by the results of this thesis. The organizations, that employed professionals dedicated specifically to helping the athletes with mental performance and well-being issues, were viewed extremely positively by players, coaches, and managers. It was also these interviewees that were the most certain on the first steps for seeking help if any issues were to arise. According to the JD-R model, this could be because these employees view their organization as providing an appropriate amount of support to meet the demands of their job, which could result in them achieving optimal performance for the organization.

While the teams that did not employ sports psychologists were mostly satisfied with social support from teammates and 1-on-1 sessions with coaches, according to Bisset et al. (2020), there is a risk of these teammates or coaches unintentionally providing advice that may be detrimental to the situation. None of the players interviewed felt confident in recognizing or approaching a teammate that may be struggling with a mental health issue. They all indicated that they would bring it up with the coach or team leader. This could be in-line with the findings of Mazzer & Rickewood (2015) who found that there might be fear of doing the 'wrong thing' for the athlete in need. This is also an opportunity for organizations who may not have the resources to provide dedicated, mental health professionals, instead to look into occasional mental health, or other types of health related, trainings, and interventions. According to Sebbens, et al. (2016) even brief interventions would prove useful. This may also increase the perception of commitment by the organization to player well-being and the holistic approach of high-commitment HRM suggested by Kang & Kang (2016).

C1 and P2 admitted to having had struggles with their own mental health at points, and this may be a reason that they had so much to say about its importance in esports and opinions on

what more could be done. These were the longest interviews in this project. C1 and P2 would be considered employees with Lived Experiences (LE), which the literature suggests is a positive for their organizations (Cavanaugh et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022). These LE employees may have more empathy towards the struggles of others, be able to recognize symptoms, and act sooner.

It should be noted that even though this thesis takes a HRM centered perspective on the issue at hand, none of the participants mentioned a HR department in their organization. As mentioned in Arthur (2015), organizations that are relatively new do not have dedicated HR professionals as the tasks can be managed by other departments. This might be the case for these esports organizations. This thesis, as well as any future research on HR in esports, could become very beneficial if these organizations grow large enough to require the development of a dedicated HR department. For now, it could be beneficial for coaches and team managers to gain a basic understanding of what the stressors are that face their players and the role they can play in supporting their players, and the organization's valuable assets.

6.2 Research Question 2 – What knowledge from traditional sports and business HRM can be applied to esports when it comes to supporting employees' mental health?

Chapter 3 and the review of literature helps us to better understand the issues regarding employees' mental health in traditional sport and HRM literature. This section will draw similarities and discuss how the responses of this study relate to literature review, and Bakker & Demerouti's (2007) Jobs Demands-Resources model in particular.

6.2.1 Interviewees' ideas on improving mental health support structures

All participants recognized the importance of mental health and the need for support in their industry. When asked about the changes they wished to see, all participants suggested mainly industry level changes rather than organizational level changes. Participants who had more experience within the industry had more to say on this topic than those who had been at the top level for less than a year. The most common suggestions were that there needed to be increased

awareness of mental health issues, change the culture to prioritize resources for mental health, training on how to engage with media & social media, and create a better work/life balance.

Raising awareness, especially in the cases of teams that do not have the resources to provide professional mental health or performance support, the players, coaches, and manager might benefit from even short trainings on mental skills and where/how to seek professional help, which is supported by both the sport and HRM literature (Bisset et al., 2020; Breslin et al., 2017; Kakuma et al., 2022; Liddle et al., 2017; Mazzer & Rickwood, 2015; McHenry et al., 2021; Souter et al., 2018; Schinke et al., 2018; Sebbens et al., 2016). This is one suggestion that could be implemented at the organizational level and also result in an increased perception of organizational resources, in-line with the JD-R model.

Although the word 'stigma' was not used in the interviews, like it was so often in the literature, the theme of 'cultural change' regarding how mental health is perceived was present. C1 suggested that, at the moment, profits are considered a higher priority than mental health, even though it is a widely acknowledged issue within the industry. C1 discussed how in their home country mental health advertisements are regularly shown on TV and these give advice on how to seek help. C1 wished to see that on esports tournament streams as well. They could recall seeing an advertisement for the latest computer hardware, but never anything about mental health. C3 further supported this idea that the culture in esports does not prioritize mental health highly enough when they described how players can play for a year or less, and then suddenly be dropped from the team in favor of a new and cheaper player.

Issues related to interaction in-person vs. online were especially important to the players interviewed. They quite often mentioned how social media was not a positive place for esports athletes, but that it was often necessary. All players interviewed mentioned how they rarely, if at all, meet with their teams for in-person LAN tournaments that are held in one location vs. being held on-line. This issue is especially relevant, not only in esports, but also because of the effects of COVID-19 on working life. Hong & Allen (2022) also used the pandemic as an example when suggesting that athletes and the general population may require additional mental health care management because of the stressors resulting from COVID-19.

6.2.2 Job Demands-Resources Model and how it might relate to interviewees' responses

The Job Demands-Resources Model suggests that the greater the demand a job places on an employee, the greater the resources will be needed to mediate the amount of strain the employee will feel and increase their motivation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). All participants noted the demands placed on esports athletes by their work and how potential threats can affect motivation and performance. M1 comments that only the teams competing to win championships should invest in significant mental health resources, which is supported by the J-DR model. However, the model suggests that all teams that face increased demands on results by their organization, sponsors, and/or fans may also require greater resources in order to moderate the strain and maintain adequate levels of motivation.

The JD-R model, while developed for HRM purposes, seems appropriate and applicable to the esports industry, but also the traditional sports industry as the threats to mental health are the majority external factors that both sets of athletes may face. Resources that may benefit esports athletes specifically might actually be experts in fields other than psychology. The esport specific threats that were identified in the data were those related to loneliness and isolation and living in their own 'on-line world'. Lifestyle coaching, or training that addresses fitness, nutrition, sleep, etc., might be resources valuable to organizations looking to create better balance in players' lives. These are aspects that are common and widely known to benefit traditional sports athletes' performances but may be viewed by some esports athletes and less vital since direct connections to something like physical fitness and esports performance may not be as obvious. The traditional sport literature suggests that those organizations that might not be able to provide dedicated sports psychologists or lifestyle coaches, could instead use learning and development sessions for all staff (Bisset et al., 2020; Breslin et al., 2017; Liddle et al., 2017; Mazzer & Rickwood, 2015; McHenry et al., 2021; Souter et al., 2018; Schinke et al., 2018; Sebbens et al., 2016). While this research focused on the literature related to education session about mental health specifically, for esports athletes it could be important to also include educational session about how to create better work-life balance and activities that get them into the 'real world'. Providing courses in this way could show high commitment to HRM by the organization towards their employees and create an increase in the perception of resources that may increase the motivation of the employees, according to the JD-R model.

6.3   Limitations

While the number of participants for this study was adequate, the sample size was still relatively small. Only four teams were represented, however, it was useful to have several viewpoints from the same organization. Probably the largest limiting factor in recruiting more participants was the busy schedules of the teams, especially those at the highest levels and part of the larger organizations. When reaching out to organizations several responded that they wished to be able to help, and that they believed it to be an important topic in the industry, but that their schedules did not allow it as the teams were often competing in multiple matches per day, sometimes in different competitions, or traveling to and from tournaments around the world. This could further support the findings that the schedules of esports athletes may be a source of stress as it is incredibly demanding. Another factor that led to receiving fewer participants than expected was that while in the process of scheduling interviews for this research, one organization declared bankruptcy and dissolved before they were able to participate. This too is normal for esports organizations. In esports, teams can disappear just as quickly as they appear. For example, one team that did participate in this research qualified for the highest-level competition late in the data collection process, and this also qualified them to be suitable participants for this study.

Another limitation that could be considered is that while this research could include teams and organizations for many of the FPS esports, seven of the eight participants came from CS:GO and only one coach of Valorant and Overwatch. The games are similar in genre, but different games are more popular in different parts of the world. In Europe, especially in the Nordics, CS:GO is more popular, but often professional players of Valorant and Overwatch have moved over to these games from CS:GO because it is older and was the most popular FPS esport during many of these athletes' formative years.

6.4   Considerations for Future Research

This study's first research objective was to identify stressors that may affect esports athletes' mental health. However, this study was not designed to measure the severity of stressors or determine which are most likely to predict mental health and well-being issues. This could be an area for further study. By using the stressors indicated in this thesis, if a scale of severity

could be developed then this would provide useful information on specific areas in which mental health support could be focused in order to reduce stress for esports athletes.

It might also be interesting to consider the cultural contexts of the finding of this research. Could it be the case that different geographic areas consider mental health more important than others and might prioritize it when building an esports organization? As mentioned in the previous section, CS:GO is the most popular FPS game in Europe, but further research could be conducted in North America where Valorant has overtaken CS:GO in popularity. In the literature review, Casillo (2022) discusses how mental health issues are perceived differently, in America, by black and white communities. Esports is a global phenomenon and understanding these cultural contexts for mental health may also be important. Asia is one of the most active regions when it comes to esports. Fewer Asian teams compete in professional level FPS games, however, the Asian market is dominated by MOBAs, like LoL and Mobile Legends: Bang Bang. It would be interesting to explore if there might be different types of stressors in these different game genres.

Another interesting topic to explore may be how sports psychology and esports psychology differ. It was found in this research that sports psychologists are currently used in esports organizations, but research that looks at the factors that are unique to esports could help develop the role of esports psychologists and differentiate them from traditional sports psychologists. The whole esports industry has been 'sportified', but there are many ways that it is its own distinct industry and requires its own approaches to issues, such as player health, and the challenges that face the sustainability of the industry. A further study might instead look at the life-balance problem, or issues of being chronically online, that esports face which might not necessarily be addressed by a psychologist, but instead by other types of professionals that deal with health-related issues such as fitness, nutrition, or sleep.

The literature review also noted the use of tools for assessing mental health by professionals (SMHAT-1) or by athletes and their entourage (SMHRT). They are designed for traditional sports athletes and used by the IOC, but further research could examine whether or not they might be suitable for esports athletes as well, especially since esports is recognized by the IOC who will host their own esports series beginning in summer 2023.

7   CONCLUSIONS

Poor mental health and well-being of esports athletes is considered a serious issue by many in the industry as it has direct implications towards their competitive performance, and if untreated can end careers, or worse. This thesis sets out to explore how organizational practices from traditional sport and business can be applied to the organizational structures managing esports athletes' mental health and well-being. The esports players, coaches, and manager that participated in this study acknowledged a number of internal and external stressors, some unique to esports athletes and some that could apply to traditional sports athletes or others in highly competitive work environments. They also identified different types of support that are provided by their organizations, as well as expressing wishes for mental health and well-being supports that they hoped to see in the future. Their results were compared with the literature on sports psychology and HRM for mental health and well-being issues. Several themes from the participants were consistent with the theories of sports psychology and HRM which shows that these are relevant areas to draw information from when designing HRM structures within esports organizations.

Esports organizations have a responsibility to their athletes, as employees of the company, to create decent working conditions by minimizing stressors and providing the necessary mental health and well-being structures to support them. It is in the organization's best interests to create a good and sustainable working environment for their athletes in order to get the best possible performance out of these valuable assets. By demonstrating a high commitment to HRM, organizations can give the athletes a greater perception of organizational support which will moderate their perceived strain and the demands on them that are already high due to the nature of their competitive work.

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APPENDIX 1. Interview Script

Age began playing esports:

Years playing esports:

Year playing/coaching/managing esports professionally :

1) How did you come to (Team Name) and how long have you been with them? How would you describe your time with (Team Name)?
2) Can you describe your role in the team? What roles do the other team members have? Who is leading the team? What kind of leader are they?
3) What is working well in your team at the moment? and what could be improved?
4) What kind of conflicts might occur in your team? How are the conflicts solved? Can you give any practical examples. (player-player, coach-player, organization-team, etc.)
5) Could you please tell me more about how (Team Name) is organized?
6) Can you describe shortly your career in esports?
7) What was the motivation for this type of career?
8) Why did you choose this career? did you have any other considerations?
   Can you describe the positives of this type of career?
   Can you describe what negatives (if any) are a part of this type of career?

9) What do you know about mental health and wellbeing in esports in general?
10) What factors do you know of that can affect esports players' mental wellbeing? Please can you describe them in detail, and can you give practical examples?
11) How does your organization support mental health and well-being?
12) Do you have any ideas about what more could be done to support professional esports players'/coaches' mental wellbeing?

    We are turning to the end of the interview:
13) Can you describe what you want to achieve in your career? What motivates you currently and what are things you still want to develop? and why?
14) Where do you see yourself in 5 years? Do you see a career after esports? What kind of plans do you have for the future?
15) Is there anything you want to add (an issue, or a theme) that we did not discuss related to the topic?

Thank you for this interview!