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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Institutionalising esports: professional players and national representation at the 2022 Asian Games

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study aims to explore the unique experiences of esports players who participated and competed at the 2022 Asian Games in Hangzhou, China, which represented a historical milestone by officially including esports in a medal event. This significant step reflects the increased recognition of esports as a legitimate and influential part of international sport culture. A qualitative approach was applied to gain in-depth insights into esports players' lived experiences of competing at the 2022 Asian Games. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 esports players who represented South Korea as part of the national squad and reflexive thematic analysis was employed to analyse the qualitative data. Following the analytical process, there were six themes were identified: (a) pathways to professional esports careers, (b) honourable opportunities with high demands and challenges, (c) another level of psychological pressure at the Asian Games, (d) available support for the psychological battle, (e) pride and regret as sources of motivation and (f) post-Asian Games trauma. Applying the framework of institutional work, the findings show how the inclusion of the esports in the Asian Games reflects intertwined processes of institutional creation, maintenance and institutional change, which offers insights into how merging professions gain legitimacy and organisational form. The findings highlight how national representation reshapes professional identity, intensifies performance pressures and centres the institutionalisation of psychological and physical health support. Importantly, they emphasise the need for sustained support structures beyond event-based participation, with implications for the professionalisation and governance of new professional fields.

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Introduction

At the 2022 Asian Games in Hangzhou, esports was officially included as a medal event (Shankar 2023), which served as a successful demonstration of its integration into a multi-sport competition. Esports was introduced as a pilot event at the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games and was regarded as a successful initiative (Tidy 2022). The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has increasingly engaged with esports as

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a means of attracting younger audiences (Abanazir 2022). In line with this broader institutional recognition, the announcement of the Olympic Esports Games during the 412nd IOC Session held in July 2024 (International Olympic Committee 2024) further strengthened esports' presence within the global sports industry. Having first appeared as a demonstration event at the 2018 Asian Games in Palembang (BBC News 2018), esports' recognition as a medal event in 2022 represented a key turning point, with the potential to influence the inclusion of esports in other major multi-sport events. The Olympic Council of Asia positions the Asian Games as the most significant multi-sport event after the Olympics, often reflecting its structure and sporting disciplines. The inclusion of esports in this context was not incidental but rather a direct response to its rapid growth and strong appeal among younger generations. As such, this inclusion represents a critical development in efforts to establish esports as a formally acknowledged sporting category within the broader domain of international sport (Olympic Council of Asia 2017).

However, despite such growing recognition, researchers have continued to highlight the fragmented and evolving nature of esports governance, which remains closely connected to ongoing discussions surrounding the institutionalisation and legitimacy of esports. Abanazir (2019) discussed institutionalisation in esports through comparisons with traditional sport, highlighting various scholarly perspectives on the concept. For instance, institutionalisation in esports has been associated with the increasing formalisation of competitive structures, including the establishment of governing systems, standardised practices, specific roles and organised competition environments (Funk *et al.* 2018, Jenny *et al.* 2017). Furthermore, through a critical analysis of institutionalisation in esports, Abanazir (2019) argued that it may be problematic to evaluate esports, a relatively recent phenomenon that emerged in the late twentieth century, using criteria originally developed to define traditional sport in the nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, considering the broader discussions presented by Abanazir (2019) and other scholars, the inclusion of esports as an official medal event at the Asian Games may still be regarded as a significant outcome reflecting the growing institutionalisation and legitimacy of esports. In particular, incorporation into a formally governed sport mega-event contributes to the further development and standardisation of competitive structures, organised competition environments, specialised roles and institutional practices associated with esports (Funk *et al.* 2018, Jenny *et al.* 2017) as noted earlier. At the same time, however, it remains important to recognise that esports governance continues to differ from traditional sport due to the influential role of game developers and publishers who retain ownership and control over individual esports titles. As such, while centralised esports governing bodies could further institutionalise esports through more consistent regulation (Abanazir 2019, 2022), governance issues including fragmented regulatory structures should continue to be considered as important aspects of ongoing institutionalisation processes within the esports ecosystem (Peng *et al.* 2020, Hutchinson *et al.* 2025).

In current period of significant changes in international sport, it is timely and necessary to investigate the experiences and perspectives of athletes who play a central role in competitions, including the Asian Games. In this context, the participation of professional esports players in the 2022 Asian Games can be regarded as uniquely significant. Drawing on this distinct experience, their insights will be crucial in shaping critical reflection on the integration of esports into the sporting domain

within future mega-events. As core agents in the esports ecosystem, professional players play a critical role in sustaining industry development by mobilising audiences and influencing the evolution of game platforms, league-based competitions and international events (Scholz 2020). Their central position in the esports industry places professional players at the intersection of organisational, regulatory and cultural forces. When entering a governed mega-event context such as the Asian Games, they engage directly with the institutionalisation of esports as sport, including the construction of professional identity and legitimacy. Competing within a multi-sport governance environment offers insights that differ significantly from publisher-led leagues yet remain under-examined.

Accordingly, this exploratory study examines the unique experiences of South Korean professional esports players who competed at the 2022 Asian Games in Hangzhou, informing how emerging professional fields are shaped through institutional work in nationally governed contexts.

Literature review

Development of esports scholarship

Esports has increasingly drawn scholarly attention, which prompts critical reflection across disciplines on how it should be defined and approached as an area of academic inquiry (Cunningham *et al.* 2018). While debates surrounding whether esports qualifies as sport have not entirely disappeared, academic discourse has largely moved beyond this foundational question. As a result, a growing body of research has established throughout a range of scholarly disciplines, which explores the phenomenon of esports. For instance, an increasing number of studies have focused on investigating players' physical and mental wellbeing (Hong 2023, 2025, Leis *et al.* 2024, Monteiro Pereira *et al.* 2023), sport brands and spectatorship (Bertschy *et al.* 2020, Qian *et al.* 2020), and esports players' career development and transitions (Hong 2023, Hong and Hong 2023, Meng-Lewis *et al.* 2022). Moreover, in their esports scholarship review, Pizzo *et al.* (2022) identified three recurring core themes: (a) sensemaking of esports: sport parallels, (b) development of the esports industry: growth challenges and (c) consumer behaviour and culture focus.

As such, a wide range of research agendas has been pursued across various disciplines, which demonstrates significant progress. However, in the light of the recent inclusion of esports in a sport mega-event, there remains a scarcity of research examining professional esports players' experiences as national representatives, particularly as it extends their careers beyond esports- tournaments.

Professional esports players and their career pathways

The significance of investigating professional players' experiences can also be attributed to their critical roles within the esports ecosystem. In Scholz's (2020) categorisation of the esports ecosystem, particular emphasis is placed on the central role of players, especially professional players, as primary stakeholders within the esports industry. Given the focus of the present study on professional players, it is important to examine how their careers progress over time and what pursuing a professional career in this context entails. This, in

turn, can lead to better understanding of their experiences of competing at the highest level, which may involve challenges similar to those faced by high-performance athletes in traditional sport.

The professionalisation of video gaming has transformed competitive play into a recognised career option for a limited number of players (Griffiths 2017). This shift has given rise to the field of esports, which has become an increasingly prominent domain within gaming culture, particularly among adolescents and young adults (Bányai *et al.* 2019). Based on field work at international esports tournaments and in-depth interviews with 10 professional players, Seo's (2016) study highlights significance of how individuals transition from casual gamers to professional esports players. Their study explored what motivates players to pursue esports as a profession and how their identities evolve throughout this process. Their findings show that players are initially motivated to pursue a professional career by the desire to master skills, improve themselves and engage in a competitive environment that emphasises fairness and mutual respect. Importantly, alongside the demands of esports, players highlighted enjoyment and intrinsic motivation as sustaining their engagement (Seo 2016). Despite the significance of enjoyment and intrinsic motivation, professional players must also manage demanding training and competition environments.

Demands and challenges in professional esports

The intense and sustained demands of practice in esports, which is characterised by long hours of training, high-performance expectations and continuous pressure to outperform, have been consistently associated with increased psychological distress. This includes excessive stress levels, symptoms of anxiety and depression, and diminished decision-making capabilities (DiFrancisco-Donoghue *et al.* 2019). Furthermore, players can experience sleep and mood disruptions, which may hinder performance and increase the risk of mental health issues (Smith *et al.* 2022). These adverse outcomes highlight the critical need for professional players to be equipped with psychological resilience (Hong 2025), as well as for holistic psychosocial support that proactively addresses esports players' mental health and emotional wellbeing (Hong 2023).

In the aspect of physical health, Monteiro Pereira *et al.* (2023) highlighted that poor ergonomic conditions and long hours of sitting contribute to health concerns among esports players, which leads to suggestions for improved equipment and workspaces. Extended periods of sedentary training and limited engagement in physical activity have been closely associated physical health problems, in particular injuries, among esports players. These factors contribute to broader concerns regarding their overall physical wellbeing. Injuries in esports are generally linked to repetitive stress rather than immediate physical trauma (DiFrancisco-Donoghue *et al.* 2019). Responding to these risks requires to ergonomics, posture, structured training schedules and regular rest (McGee *et al.* 2024). Psychological pressure is an important contributing factor to both performance and wellbeing.

Psychological pressure describes situations in which one or more factors increase the perceived significance of performing well at a given moment (Baumeister 1984), which plays a critical role in determining performance outcomes. It can also lead to choking and deteriorating performance under pressure (Hill *et al.* 2009), or to enhanced performance

in high-pressure situation (Otten 2009, Swann *et al.* 2019). In this context, sport has long been recognised that athletes may benefit from exposure to stressors such as psychological pressure (Collins and MacNamara 2012). To enhance adaptive responses to such stressor exposure in high-performance athletes (Fletcher and Arnold 2021), pressure training has been introduced in high-performance sport as an intervention (Kegelaers and Oudejans 2024).

Pressure training purposefully heightens practice pressure to bring about a stress response (Low *et al.* 2021) and works only when athletes perform the task under pressure (Oudejans and Pijpers 2009), with the aim of improving coping and decision-making during performance (Low *et al.* 2021). While such interventions to help professional esports players cope with competitive pressure and performance-related stressors have remained limited, adapting established approaches from traditional sport may be appropriate as these players also encounter comparable competitive and performance-related pressures in training and competition (Naidenova *et al.* 2024). These pressures may be intensified when professional players represent their nation within a multi-sport mega-event.

Beyond the physical and psychological demands and challenges that players experience in relation to training and competition, there are also additional demands associated with the institutionalisation of esports within the context of a sport mega-event, namely the Asian Games, which forms the context of the present study. From this perspective, discussions surrounding esports governance become unavoidable. Scholars have continued to highlight the fragmented nature of esports governance and have raised concerns regarding related issues, particularly doping, gambling and player wellbeing (Peng *et al.* 2020, Kelly *et al.* 2022, Hutchinson *et al.* 2025). In response, esports organisations have made efforts to establish formalised integrity and anti-doping structures as part of broader attempts to achieve institutionalisation and legitimacy. For instance, the International Esports Federation (IESF) is a signatory to the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) Code, meaning that member organisations and players are required to adhere to WADA guidelines and regulations (Abanazir 2019). Accordingly, under the anti-doping programme implemented for the 2022 Asian Games, esports players competing in officially recognised medal events were required to undergo anti-doping testing in the same manner as athletes from traditional sports (World Anti-Doping Agency 2024). This may therefore represent an important milestone in the ongoing institutionalisation and growing legitimacy of esports, while simultaneously introducing another layer of regulatory and performance-related demands for esports players.

Theoretical background

To better understand the integration of esports into the Asian Games, as an international multi-sport mega-event, and the experiences of professional esports players, this study is informed by the concept of institutional work. Institutional work is grounded in institutional theory, which has been one of the key theoretical frameworks within sport research (Washington and Patterson 2011). Washington and Patterson (2011) claimed that research had applied only a limited set of concepts from institutional theory and called for scholars to examine how institutions in sport are created, maintained and disrupted as well as to engage more fully with the micro- and macro-level dynamics of institutional change. In

this respect, they also encouraged sport researchers to examine the broader sport ecosystem, where new sports are continually emerging and some traditional sports decline or shift into marginal position. This perspective is particularly relevant given the evolving governance structures, legitimacy debates and institutional tensions surrounding esports (Abanazir 2019, 2022, Peng *et al.* 2020, Hutchinson *et al.* 2025) as it becomes incorporated into formally governed sport environments, especially in light of its inclusion in the Asian Games.

Institutional work, informed by embedded agency, was initially conceptualised as 'the broad category of purposive action aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions' (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006, p. 216). It is evident that institutional work has proved useful for analysing how sport institutions are created, sustained and transformed (Nite and Edwards 2021). Institutional work has advanced institutional theory by integrating neo-institutional concerns with structure and earlier emphases on agency and action (Lawrence *et al.* 2011). At its core is embedded agency, where structures constrain behaviour yet are continually reshaped by actors achieving their interests (Hampel *et al.* 2017). This is particularly relevant within esports, where professional players operate within rapidly evolving institutional environments (Scholz 2020) by publishers, governing organisation, mega-events and broader legitimacy processes (Abanazir 2019, 2022).

Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) identified three main forms of institutional work: creation, maintenance and disruption. Institutional creation involves developing and enacting new practices (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006, Dover and Lawrence 2010). Esports' inclusion in the Asian Games reflects processes of institutional creation, as new practices related to governance, accreditation, competitions formats and inter-organisational coordination, including the development of integrity systems, regulatory structures and legitimacy practices associated with traditional sport governance (Abanazir 2019, Funk *et al.* 2019, Jenny *et al.* 2016), had to be developed, learned and enacted collectively by a range of actors. Institutional maintenance concerns reinforcing and sustaining established norms (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006). Following its inclusion, sustaining esports within the Asian Games depended on institutional maintenance, which involves efforts to uphold established regulations and standards, monitor and enforce compliance, and repair structural misalignment (Scott 2008, Zilber 2009). However, within esports, such maintenance processes remain continually negotiated due to the fragmented and evolving nature of esports governance structures (Peng *et al.* 2020, Hutchinson *et al.* 2025).

Lastly, institutional disruption refers to undermining or challenging existing arrangements (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006). Esports' inclusion in the Asian Games reflects elements of such disruption by challenging traditional assumptions surrounding sport governance, legitimacy and institutional boundaries through introduction of publishers as influential actors and digitally native competitive structures (Abanazir 2019, Peng *et al.* 2020, Hutchinson *et al.* 2025). However, within the context of the present study, these developments may be more appropriately understood as reflecting broader processes of institutional change and institutional negotiation rather than direct disruption alone. These developments are nevertheless consistent with conceptualised forms of disruption, including challenging entrenched assumptions and reshaping established institutional expectations, and indicate that esports may continue to influence institutional boundaries in future multi-sport events. Overall, esports' inclusion in the Asian Games provides a context in which these processes intersect, as governance structures, accreditation

systems and expectations associated with traditional sport interact with digitally native competitive practices. Professional players' experiences thus offer important insight into how institutionalisation, governance structures, legitimacy expectations and regulatory demands are experienced and negotiated in practice within emerging esports environments.

South Korean contexts

Given that this study explores the experiences of esports players who represented South Korea (hereafter Korea) at the Asian Games in Hangzhou, an understanding of the Korean context of esports is critical. Several factors have contributed to Korea's rapid esports growth and early internet adoption including a strong collective mindset, sensitivity to globalisation's potential risks, and the country's political and historical context (Jin 2010). For instance, the rapid development of PC gaming in Korea has been closely linked to the growth of esports. This development was influenced by the economic crisis that affected Korea in the late 1990s, during which many individuals working in the IT sector lost their jobs and subsequently established PC bangs (i.e. internet cafés), contributing to their rapid popularity. These spaces enabled large numbers of people to access high-speed internet and engage in PC gaming within socially accessible environments (Jin and Besombes 2024). This contrasts with Japan's stronger console gaming culture, which dominated the Asian gaming market in the past, while Korea developed a particularly strong PC gaming ecosystem that significantly contributed to the growth of esports (Li 2017). Moreover, in Korea, competitiveness is a deeply embedded social value, especially in education. Academic success is widely regarded as central for life success, including admission to prestigious universities, access to job opportunities and social connections (Lee 2013).

The competitive mindset in Korea (Jin 2020) also contributes to intense academic pressure, which may place esports players in a socially precarious position if their pursuits are seen as conflicting with educational expectations. Such cultural and societal conditions also contribute significantly to psychological pressure since esports players like other adolescents and young adults in Korea are expected to meet social expectation of excelling in both competition and academics simultaneously. Given the ongoing societal preference for academic success and the stigma still attached to gaming in Korea, young individuals pursuing esports careers often face difficulties managing both educational commitments and training demands while striving to satisfy traditional social expectations (Hong and Hong 2023). Korea also places great national significance on sport mega-events and invests substantial financial human resources to ensure strong participation and success (Choi *et al.* 2015). Accordingly, national representatives possess a strong competitive mindset aimed at achieving success and brining pride to the nation. Government initiatives, including the *Act on Promotion of E-sports*, and military service exemptions for gold medallists at the Asia Games, demonstrate formal recognition of esports as a nationally significant field (Lam and Kuen Wong 2024).

Despite growing research on wellbeing and professionalisation, limited attention has been given to how professional players experience and manage institutionalised, multi-sport governance contexts. This study thus examines how Korean professional esports players who represented the national team at the 2022 Asian Games experienced career

pathways, selection processes, performance pressures and support structures. Accordingly, the research questions are as follows: (1) how do professional esports players navigate pathways into professional careers?, (2) how are players selected for national representation, and how do they experience preparation within a multi-sport governance context?, (3) what institutional, organisational and personal challenges do players encounter before, during and after the Asian Games?, (4) How do players manage these challenges, and what forms of formal and informal support do they engage with? and (5) which support structures are perceived as most significant for sustaining professional esports careers?

Methods

This study adopted a qualitative approach to examine how professional esports players developed their careers, were selected for the Asian Games, prepared for the event, competed and reflected on their experiences. The research was grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, adopting a relativist ontology and constructivist epistemology (Fossey *et al.* 2002, Guba and Lincoln 2005). The philosophical approach was well suited to exploring how players made sense of competing as national representatives in a unique mega-event context. Accordingly, semi-structured interviews were employed to explore their lived experiences in depth.

Participants

Using purposive sampling (Etikan *et al.* 2016), 10 professional esports players were recruited. Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1. Ages were presented in categorical ranges ($M = 26.20$, $SD = 7.87$), and game titles were described broadly as either *Individual Competitive Game* or *Team-based Strategy Game* to project confidentiality given participants' high-profile status.

Procedure

Following institutional ethical approval, interviews were conducted by the lead author via video or telephone calls due to geographical constraints as the lead author was based in the UK while participants were located in Korea. Only one interview was conducted by a research assistant due to scheduling limitations.

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

Code Name	Gender	Age	Esports
Pro 1	Male	21–24 years old	Individual Competitive Game
Pro 2	Male	30+ Years old	Individual Competitive Game
Pro 3	Male	21–24 years old	Team-based Strategy Game
Pro 4	Male	21–24 years old	Team-based Strategy Game
Pro 5	Male	19–20 years old	Individual Competitive Game
Pro 6	Male	25–29 years old	Team-based Strategy Game
Pro 7	Male	21–24 years old	Team-based Strategy Game
Pro 8	Male	30+ Years old	Individual Competitive Game
Pro 9	Male	21–24 years old	Team-based Strategy Game
Pro 10	Male	19–20 years old	Team-based Strategy Game

The interview guide was developed through a review of key literature and was informed by institutional work to address the research questions (Roberts 2020). The following outlines the interview guide: (a) their motivation to engage with esports and their drive to pursue a professional career in esports (e.g. what initially attracted you to the esports game(s) that you compete in?; can you discuss the factors that drive you to compete at a high level in esports?); (b) journey to qualify for the Asian Games (institutional creation; e.g. what was your journey like being selected as a national team member, and how did you find the experience?); (c) preparation leading up to the Asian Games (institutional maintenance and institutional change; e.g. How did you prepare for these events? Did you have any specific strategies or training routines?); (d) insights into their experiences throughout the Asian Games (institutional maintenance and institutional change; e.g. can you describe your experiences during the competitions and any other activities you participated in at the event?); and (e) post-Asian Games reflections (institutional maintenance and institutional change; e.g. how did the experience of competing at the Asian Games affect your career or personal life?). In total, the interview lasted 569 minutes ($M = 56.90$, $SD = 22.42$) and the recorded data were transcribed for analysis.

Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019) was employed to analyse the data collected. Reflexive thematic analysis is grounded in an interpretivist approach by highlighting the active role of the researcher, which values subjective interpretation and embraces a flexible, iterative approach to coding. It also prioritises thoughtful engagement with the data and encourages ongoing critical reflection throughout the analytical process (Braun and Clarke 2019). Given the study's interpretivist and relativist stance, reflective thematic analysis was used to explore how esports players made sense of their experiences. Using an inductive approach, the lead author read all transcripts multiple times, revisited the recordings, generated initial codes, and iteratively developed and refined themes. In this context, institutional work provided an analytical lens for interpreting how players' narratives reflected the institutional dynamics surrounding esports' integration into the Asian Games. The framework guided the analysis by highlighting instances in which players' experiences reflected processes of institutional creation, maintenance and institutional change across the period before, during and after the event.

Since reflexivity plays a central role in ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative study (Dodgson 2019), researchers are encouraged to critically reflect on and disclose their own social positions in relation to participants, acknowledging how these may influence the research process and shape the interpretation of findings (Adler 2022). Keeping a research journal does not automatically ensure reflexive practice. However, it can serve as a beneficial tool to support and strengthen the researcher's critical reflection throughout the process (Meyer and Willis 2019). To further strengthen the reflexive process, the co-author served as a critical friend who can thoughtfully question the work in a way that enhances interpretative depth and rigour while remaining supportive and respectful of the lead author's perspective (Costa and Kallick 1993). This involved iterative discussions between both authors to refine themes through shared interpretation and reflection.

Results

Six themes were identified, which fully address the research questions: (a) pathways to professional esports careers (Q1), (b) honourable opportunities with high demands and challenges (Q2, Q3), (c) another level of psychological pressure at the Asian Games (Q3, Q4), (d) available support for the psychological battle (Q4, Q5), (e) pride and regret as sources of motivation (Q3, Q4) and (f) post-Asian Games trauma (Q3).

Pathways to professional esports careers

Despite differences in age (between 19 and 30+ years old), all players reported initial uncertainty about pursuing professional gaming as a legitimate and financially sustainable career. Concerns centred on social perceptions and long-term stability. Nevertheless, recognition of their superior skill and competitiveness led many to commit decisively to professional gaming. Once they had made the decision to pursue a career as a professional gamer and successfully joined a professional team, their approach to gaming shifted from playing for fun to training within increasingly structured and professionalised systems. Many Korean professional teams adopt communal living models similar to traditional sport, which posed adjustment challenges for younger players. Over time, pride in team affiliation and performance improvements helped them adapt and reshaped parental perceptions. Initial parental resistance often shifted as players achieved competitive success and national selection. Pro 10 noted, 'At the time of being selected, I remember feeling extremely excited together with my parents. They repeatedly expressed how proud they were of me'. Pro 5 also reflected, 'They already felt proud that I was representing the country, but winning a gold medal seemed to mean even more to them'.

However, professional affiliation also intensified expectations and training demands:

When I had just joined the professional team, I definitely trained a lot more compared to now. It felt like I was really pushing myself to the limit. It was quite tough at the time, but looking back, I think it helped me a lot. (Pro 6)

While some players experienced overseas recruitment and adaptation challenges, professional life was consistently described as intense and cyclical. Despite the demanding nature of this environment, players exhibited a strong competitive drive and appeared to be highly motivated to become the best in their field. Once again, their efforts were rewarded when they were selected to represent their country as members of the national team for the Asian Games. However, concerns about the long-term sustainability persisted, particularly among players in less commercially stable titles such as some of the fighting games. Participants highlighted the dependence of career stability on game popularity, publisher-led ecosystems and broader industry structures, emphasising the need for more sustainable professional frameworks.

Honourable opportunities with high demands and challenges

The inclusion of esports in the Asian Games generated strong motivation to secure national selection. However, the COVID-19 postponement introduced uncertainty, with

some qualification processes repeated, increasing pressure. As Pro 2 explained, 'With the delay, there could be other players performing better by the time the Games actually take place'. Following the final selection, intensive residential training started. As esports-specific facilities were required, the Korea Esports Association (KeSPA) provided dedicated accommodation and training spaces. While some players adapted quickly to communal living, others initially struggled. Nevertheless, most described performance improvements and strong team cohesion: 'When skilled players come together, working as a team isn't particularly difficult, so I think we were able to adjust quite quickly' (Pro 9).

Training intensity increased further due to schedule adjustments and regulatory demands associated with participation in a formally governed multi-sport event. Pro 7 described the difficulty of shifting routines: 'I had to wake up at around 7 or 8 in the morning and still train until the early hours of the next morning. I think everyone found it quite hard to adjust'. In addition, certain dietary restrictions linked to anti-doping regulations were occasionally inconvenient but generally accepted. Despite these demands, players consistently framed participation as an immense honour that strengthened commitment. The sense of pride and responsibility also helped them stay focused and committed throughout their preparations.

Another level of psychological pressure at the Asian Games

Although accustomed to international tournaments, players described the Asian Games as a distinctly different experience. Staying in the athletes' village and representing the nation within a formally governed multi-sport environment intensified psychological pressure. Pro 1 reflected, 'Even while I was trying to enjoy the experience, part of me kept thinking that I needed to perform well'. Pro 9 also noted, 'Representing the country as a national athlete naturally comes with a different level of responsibility'. Likewise, all players reported experiencing significant psychological pressure during their time at the Asian Games. Some relied on previously learned techniques or tournament experience; others struggled to cope fully. As Pro 8 stated, 'Representing the country and wearing the national flag felt heavier than I ever imagined'.

Participants also reflected on operational challenges. Some reported inconsistencies in match procedures and limited familiarity with esports-specific rules among officials, occasionally leading to complaints and confusion: 'There were cases where the event organisers didn't fully understand the rules, which led to players filing complaints and even having to replay matches' (Pro 5). Others experienced no major issues, suggesting variation across titles. In one title, late modifications to competition format required rapid adaptation. Many felt that the late notice surrounding the new format limited their ability to adapt effectively and left them with lingering regret, despite their successful performance: 'We were told that the rules would change, but we weren't informed exactly what those rules would be. We only found out during training, which made things difficult' (Pro 3). Although players adapted professionally, delayed communication generated frustration and additional pressure.

Available support for the psychological battle

Many players emphasised that esports is fundamentally a psychological battle and that mental preparation and emotional stability were crucial. They expressed

appreciation for the psychological and physical support provided by KeSPA during the residential training camp. Even players affiliated with top-tier professional teams noted that such structured services were not usually available within their teams. Receiving comparable support reinforced feelings of legitimacy as national representatives:

Since it's a game where psychological battles play a significant role, I felt it was important to be in the right mental state to perform well. [. . .] Experiencing all of that made it really feel like I had become a national team athlete. (Pro 1)

Tailored psychological and physical support was made available from the beginning of the team's residential training camp and delivered on-site by qualified professionals. While engagement varied, most players used these services. Some focused more on psychological services, others focused on physiotherapy, with many benefiting from both. Pro 2 reflected, 'I believe that the psychological counselling helped me perform more consistently, even though it was a new environment and such a major event'. Pro 4 similarly noted, 'The physiotherapists played a really important role. Their support helped us play for longer periods and stay focused'.

Nonetheless, the pressure of competing in esports as an official discipline for the first time at the Asian Games intensified over time. This psychological burden appeared to have been managed through counselling and psychological skill development, which was repeatedly raised across participants. That said, a small number of players acknowledged that while they were aware of the available support services, they chose not to use them. Some stated that they were capable of self-regulating their mental state and that such support did not align well with their existing routines.

Performance analysis services were also made available to each national esports team: 'They analysed our gameplay as well as that of players from other countries, which allowed us to focus entirely on training without distraction. [. . .] It was incredibly helpful and made a real difference' (Pro 4). Overall, the comprehensive support provided by the national esports association appeared to play a crucial role in the players' preparation for the Asian Games.

Pride and regret as sources of motivation

Most participants achieved remarkable success, with the majority winning medals at the Asian Games. However, several expressed disappointments at not securing a gold medal, highlighting that it had been their ultimate goal: 'To be honest, my goal was to win the gold medal. I hadn't even considered the possibility of getting bronze' (Pro 1). This sense of regret was not only related to performance but also to the wider implications of medal attainment in the Korean context. Under current regulations, only gold medallists at the Asian Games, or any medallist at the Olympic Games, are eligible for exemption from mandatory military service. For players in the peak of their careers, the prospect of conscription remains a major concern, as it may significantly disrupt or limit their professional trajectory. Some players reflected on missed opportunities to demonstrate their full potential, expressing that they wished they had prepared more thoroughly or performed better in key moments. For some, the Asian Games represented a rare and possibly once-in-a-lifetime opportunity: 'Looking back now, I still feel that it was the kind of experience

I may never have again in my lifetime. It really felt like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity' (Pro 1).

Returning to Korea was described as emotional, with strong public recognition and encouragement from family and supporters: 'The response from people around me after winning the gold medal was very positive. I felt that, through the Asian Games, more people came to know who I was' (Pro 7). Many players expressed a renewed determination to once again represent their country at a future multi-sport event, should the opportunity arise. Following the Asian Games, players' paths diverged as they worked to progress their careers, though some reported post-event trauma related to their performance. This will be explored in more detail in the following section.

Post-Asian Games trauma

Some players described experiencing lasting psychological distress and trauma responses following the Asian Games. Although varying in age, game title and career stage, they described intense regret and emotional distress linked to performances they felt did not reflect their full potential. Reflecting on moments during the Asian Games when they felt they were mentally falling apart, the players described their experiences as follows: 'At that point, while I was playing, I was already mentally checked out. My mind just wasn't there anymore. [...] I honestly don't remember anything from that moment' (Pro A)¹; 'I was extremely mentally unsettled. Yes, I lost my composure completely' (Pro B).²

Despite utilising psychological support both during the residential training camp and throughout the Asian Games, regret and sense of failure they carried home from the competition later manifested as trauma. One player described attempting to fulfil their responsibilities as a professional athlete but ultimately being unable to deliver the expected performance:

Since then, I haven't really competed much. [...] The experience left a bit of a trauma, so I initially intended to take a break. But my team insisted I compete because I was considered one of the stronger players, so I did end up participating. At home, my family encouraged me to take it slow and approach the matches with a calm mindset, so I gave it another try. But in the end, things only got worse for me [...] Even if I perform well in practice, it's just not the same on stage. (Pro A)

Another participant, who had not been affiliated with a professional team at the time of the Games, reported a more acute experience of post-event trauma:

I think I developed a bit of PTSD afterwards. I wasn't able to sleep at night [...] the recovery process felt slow. It took me more than six months to really feel like I was starting to get better. It still comes to mind from time to time. At the time, I didn't realise it was claustrophobia, but later I found out that's what it was. (Pro B)

While short-term support was available after the Games, players felt that long-term coping largely depended on themselves.

Similar to the Pro A and Pro B, Pro C,³ who competed in the 2018 Asian Games when esports was featured as a demonstration event, also reported experiencing trauma. This player described the devastating loss at the 2018 Games as a turning point that had a lasting negative impact on their career and mental wellbeing: 'It was trauma. Quite severe, actually. I'm not exactly sure how to explain it, but it stayed with me, deeply

embedded within me. That loss at the Asian Games left a lasting impact'. However, they went on to compete again in the 2022 Asian Games and, by winning a gold medal, expressed a sense of redemption and relief.

Despite the 5 years that had passed, they stated that the psychological impact associated with the Asian Games remained with them and that the pressure they felt during the event was greater than at any other international competition: 'Even though a lot of time has passed, I mentioned that the previous Asian Games had left me traumatised. [...] I cried a lot after being defeated 5 years ago. Those memories kept coming back, and it really affected me' (Pro C). Interestingly, Pro C did not feel that psychological support was necessary, either in the past or the present. They explained that, following the 2018 demonstration event, they had never imagined an opportunity to redeem that experience would come again, and felt a deep sense of pleasure and closure in overcoming it through their recent gold-medal performance: 'What meant the most was the relief and joy of finally letting go of the pain I had carried for the past five years'.

Discussion

Based on an in-depth analysis of the experiences of esports players who represented Korea at the Asian Games, this study makes a significant contribution to both academic literature and professional practice. First, the findings advance understanding of how players' first-hand accounts reflect broader institutional process related to the integration of esports into a multi-sport environment. Interpreting the findings through an institutional work lens provides a structured way to better understand how esports is simultaneously being created, maintained and disrupted (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006) as it becomes embedded within transitional sport systems. In doing so, the study extends institutional work scholarship within esports by demonstrating how institutionalisation is experienced not only organisational and governance structures (e.g. residential training systems, anti-doping regulations and national-team procedures), but also through the psychological pressures (e.g. intensified responsibility and performance burden), identity negotiations (e.g. transitions from professional gamer to national representative) and legitimacy expectations (e.g. recognition as official athletes within a multi-sport environment) experienced by professional players within evolving broader sport environments. Korean professional esports players' career pathways into professional gaming, their selection to the national team through the national Olympic Committee and the associated shifts in public and familial perceptions highlight processes of institutional creation (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006, Dover and Lawrence 2010). These developments demonstrate how new career structures, professional identities and narratives framing esports as a credible profession alongside traditional high-performance athletes are constructed through inclusion in Asian Games. Organisational practices such as residential training, psychological and physical support, and performance analysis further reflect the formation of institutional arrangements that reinforce recognition of esports within the sporting domain.

Meanwhile, rigorous training procedures, anti-doping compliance, national-team norms reflect institutional maintenance (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006, Scott 2008, Trank and Washington 2009, Edwards and Washington 2015). These practices embed sport-specific standards and reproduce expectations around discipline and professionalism.

However, operational inconsistencies, late game-format changes and unfamiliarity with esports logic also exposed institutional tension between established sports practices and the emerging institutional demands of digital competitions (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006). Specifically, the psychological strain experienced before, during and after the event, including instances of post-Games trauma, illustrates how emerging institutional expectations around esports representation can place burdens on athletes that extend beyond what existing support mechanisms can fully mitigate. In addition, professional esports players' reflections on governance, preparation and organisational competence emphasise efforts to question and challenge existing assumptions, which indicates that esports continues to push against the boundaries of traditional sport institutions.

Overall, the findings highlight that esports' entry into the Asian Games is evidenced by overlapping forms of institutional creation, maintenance and institutional change. The Korean professional esports players, as embedded agents, experienced these institutional processes directly and actively contribute to shaping how esports is organised, governed and understood. At the same time, while previous studies have highlighted esports governance as fragmented and continually evolving (Abanazir 2019, Peng *et al.* 2020, Hutchinson *et al.* 2025), the findings suggest that the inclusion of esports within the Asian Games nevertheless represents an important step towards the further institutionalisation and legitimisation of esports through the formalisation of governance structures, regulatory practices and professional standards within a sport mega-event context. In this respect, the continued inclusion of esports in the upcoming Aichi-Nagoya 2026 Asian Games (Nalwala 2025) may further reinforce these institutionalisation developments and contribute to the ongoing stabilisation and recognition of esports within international sport systems. Even so, recent developments in relation to the Olympic Esports Games (International Olympic Committee 2024), including the cancellation of the proposed partnership with Saudi Arabia (Rogers 2025), further demonstrate that the institutionalisation of esports remains ongoing and continually evolving. While increasing integration into traditional sport systems may strengthen legitimacy and professional recognition, continuing governance fragmentation and evolving organisational arrangements suggest that esports institutionalisation is unlikely to follow the same trajectory as traditional sport (Abanazir 2019, 2022). The findings of the present study support this perspective, as players simultaneously experienced greater formalisation and legitimacy alongside operational inconsistencies, evolving regulations and tensions between esports-specific and traditional sport systems.

Beyond the institutional work perspective, several key findings invite further discussion. Players consistently highlighted the value of physical and psychological support services provided by their national esports association throughout both the preparation and competition periods, resources traditionally offered to athletes in traditional sport (Hong and Minikin 2023). These findings highlight the significance of addressing esports players' wellbeing with comparable rigour to traditional sport. Players also expressed gratitude for performance analysis support, which suggests that the formal integration of systematic performance and tactical analysis can further enhance gameplay and competitive outcomes. These findings are particularly significant as they draw attention to the continued limitations of financial and psychosocial support structures within esports.

Several participants raised concerns about aspects of the event's operational management, which highlights organisational constraints throughout the competition. While it is

acknowledged that administrative challenges may have arisen due to the complexity of incorporating multiple game titles under the newly formalised esports category, it remains critical that future events draw on these lessons to ensure more consistent and well-coordinated tournament delivery, particularly in recognition of the extensive sacrifices made by the players in their preparation for such a prestigious stage. Moreover, a primary source of psychological pressure was the profound sense of responsibility associated with representing one's country on an international platform, which placed a heavy mental burden on many. It appears that expectation from both themselves and the public became difficult to manage (Hanton *et al.* 2005). Psychological pressure, as a key determinant of performance outcomes (Baumeister 1984), can result in both enhanced and diminished performance (Hill *et al.* 2009, Otten 2009, Swann *et al.* 2019). As the findings highlight, professional esports players experience considerable psychological pressure, particularly when representing their countries at sport mega-events. Tailored interventions, such as pressure training drawn from high-performance sport (Low *et al.* 2021, Kegelaers and Oudejans 2024), could therefore be considered as part of broader support structures for these players.

Indeed, psychological support before and during the Games was helpful, but players emphasised that their own accumulated experience and coping strategies were also crucial in managing pressure. Even so, not all players were able to fully demonstrate their abilities. As highlighted in the findings, some participants reported experiencing trauma following the event, which emphasises the need for ongoing research and targeted practical interventions in this area. These findings suggest that beyond the moments of success and national pride, there are less visible emotional costs that some players continue to carry. Collectively, this highlights the urgent need for sustained psychological support beyond competition to support broader player wellbeing, in line with the claims made in the previous study (Hong 2023).

The findings also highlight another critical issue that requires further consideration. For players not affiliated with professional teams, the post-Games period proved especially difficult, as they struggled to sustain their careers and explored various alternatives to remain active in the scene. On the other hand, players who competed in more commercially popular game titles were generally able to reintegrate into their teams and continue their careers with greater stability. This disparity, attributed to differences in popularity and institutional support surrounding specific game titles, is not unique to esports. Similar patterns have long been observed in traditional sport, where factors such as a sport's marketability, the existence and viability of professional leagues, and institutional support significantly influence players' salaries, public profiles and the longevity of their careers (Rosen and Sanderson 2001, Hindman and Paulsen 2024). Given these parallels and the apparent imbalance between the popularity of disciplines and underlying industry structures, the findings suggest the need to diversify revenue streams, strengthen institutional support mechanisms and implement coordinated policy-level interventions to sustain long-term industry development.

Implications

This study offers several significant implications for theory, practice and policy development. First, the findings make an important theoretical contribution by advancing

institutional work as a lens for understanding the professionalisation and governance of emerging fields. By exploring the first-hand experiences of Korean professional esports players, the study offers empirical insights into how institutional creation, maintenance and institutional change occur simultaneously as esports becomes integrated into established organisational and regulatory sport structures. The professional players' narratives, identity work and interactions with sport-governance structures demonstrate that they act as embedded agents who actively negotiate legitimacy and professional status, which contributes to the ongoing institutional progression of esports. This highlights the value of institutional work for understanding how new professions are organised, legitimised and sustained through overlapping processes of creation, maintenance and evolving institutional change, as observed in the Asian Games context. In this respect, the findings further suggest that processes of institutional work within esports are closely connected to broader governance and policy developments required to support the continued institutionalisation and legitimacy of esports within international sport systems.

Second, the present study provides significant implications for stakeholders involved in the governance and management of esports. The findings highlight the importance of sustained psychological, physical and performance analysis support as part of the professional infrastructure for esports players, both in preparation for and during major multi-sport events. While the Korean professional esports players benefited significantly from support provided by KeSPA, cases of post-event trauma demonstrate that such support needs to extend beyond event-based participation and into long-term career care. Operational inconsistencies at the Asian Games further highlight the need for organisers to integrate esports-specific organisational expertise into competition operations, scheduling and rule management. In addition, transparent communication of game-format changes and consistent regulatory practices are key for reducing psychological distress, supporting performance stability, and maintaining the legitimacy and credibility of emerging professional competitions. Accordingly, there is the need for policymakers, governing bodies and esports organisation to develop more coordinated governance practices, clearer regulatory standards and sustainable long-term player support structures as esports becomes further institutionalised within international sport systems.

Finally, the findings present several policy-level implications related to career sustainability and the professionalisation of emerging fields, particularly inequalities across game titles. As discussed earlier, players affiliated with less commercially prominent games experienced higher post-Games career instability, which reflects structural disparities comparable to those observed in traditional sport. This highlights the need for policy initiatives that strengthen institutional support mechanisms for esports players across different titles, including the development of diversified revenue streams, long-term career support systems and safeguards for career continuity. As esports continues to integrate into international sport systems, policy frameworks and governance structures will need to adapt to support more sustainable, equitable and standardised professional environments across different esports titles.

Limitations and future research direction

While this study offers meaningful findings and implications, several limitations should be acknowledged. The research focused exclusively on national representatives from Korea,

one of the leading nations in esports. Although this provided rich insights, drawing on a single national context limits the transferability of the findings to other institutional and governance settings. Future research could include players from other nations who participated in the Asian Games to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how institutionalisation and national representation pressures are experienced across different organisational and cultural contexts. Given the highly personal focus of the study, one-on-one interviews were appropriate. However, future research might employ focus groups or World Café methods to explore shared experiences and collective sense-making process. Such approaches could generate deeper insights into how professional identities and institutional meanings are co-constructed, particularly in multi-national settings.

It is also worth noting that all participants in this study were male. While male-dominated game titles remain common, the experiences and perspectives of female esports players, including those who competed at the Asian Games, may differ in important ways. As such, the absence of female participants represents a key limitation, and future research should seek to include female players' voices to develop a more inclusive understanding of professionalisation and identity formation in emerging fields. Lastly, although beyond the scope of the present study, examining athletes' longer-term experiences following major competitions such as the Asian Games could provide meaningful insights into the sustainability of emerging professional careers. This is particularly relevant given that participants' post-event reflections, which point to a strong need for longitudinal research that capture how institutional support, identity and wellbeing evolve across career transitions and beyond active competition.

Notes

1. To further ensure anonymity, the code name has been changed for this section.
2. To further ensure anonymity, the code name has been changed for this section.
3. To further ensure anonymity, the code name has been changed for this section.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT to support language-related tasks, including checking grammar, enhancing clarity and readability, translating content from Korean to English, and refining expressions and phrasing. All content generated with the assistance of this tool was reviewed and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the final manuscript and its scholarly integrity.

Data availability statement

Due to the qualitative nature of the study and the sensitivity of the data, the interview transcripts are not publicly available. The participants are high-profile, well-known professional esports players, and sharing the data could significantly increase the risk of identification and compromise participant confidentiality and anonymity. Reasonable requests for further information about the dataset may be considered by the corresponding author, subject to ethical approval and data protection requirements.

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