

Abstract

This study explored the experiences of retired esports players, focusing particularly on their transition out of esports. Utilizing a qualitative approach, interviews were conducted with four retired professional esports players in South Korea. A thematic analysis revealed four recurring themes: Career Pressure and Uncertainty; Lack of Pre-Retirement Planning; Demand for Mentorship Support; and Necessity for a Realistic Perspective on Talent. The findings indicated that significant pressure and financial insecurity during their careers often catalyzed the players' decisions to retire. Players were unprepared for post-esports life due to inadequate pre-retirement planning. This study highlights the crucial roles of mentorship and realistic talent assessments in facilitating smoother career transitions. The main contribution of this research lies in its empirical evidence, which stresses the need for structured support systems for esports players transitioning out of professional gaming. Stakeholders within the esports industry can utilize these findings to formulate policies and programs aimed at providing financial assistance, career planning, mentorship, and guidance to players during their careers and upon retirement. The outcomes of this study can serve as a foundation for future research by clarifying the necessity for broader investigations into the experiences of esports players and the development of practical strategies to mitigate their transition challenges.

Keywords: career transitions in esports; career planning and development; esports players; life after esports; support systems.

Introduction

The popularity and growth of esports and its industry have been widely observed and documented (Himmelstein et al., 2017; Smithies et al., 2020). The increasing popularity of esports has led to a significant increase in the number of professional teams, which has attracted many young people who aspire to become professional esports players (Smith et al., 2019). Scholars from various disciplines have also shown a keen interest in esports, with an extensive literature review of esports research conducted by Reitman et al. (2020). Their review identified 150 publications from 2002 to 2018 across various disciplines, including media studies, informatics, business, sports science, sociology, law, and cognitive science. Several social science studies have compared esports to traditional sports, such as sport management and sport psychology (Cunningham et al., 2018; Hallmann & Giel, 2018; Heere, 2018). These studies examine various aspects of esports, such as the nature of competition, the organizational structure of the industry, and the roles of stakeholders within the esports ecosystem. Despite this wealth of knowledge, gaps remain, particularly regarding the short career spans of esports players. Such brief careers can lead to post-career challenges and difficulties, posing potential threats to their overall health and well-being (Smithies et al., 2020). Studies have investigated various topics related to esports, such as the influence of esports on football brands (Bertschy et al., 2020), esports online spectatorship (Qian et al., 2020), stressors and coping strategies of professional esports players (Smith et al., 2019), and the roles and responsibilities of esports stakeholders in ensuring players' health and wellbeing (Hong, 2022). A gap in the literature is the relative lack of research focusing on the unique experiences of esports players, the challenges they encounter during and after their esports careers, and the impact of short career spans on their well-being. This research gap highlights the importance of understanding the experiences of esports players and developing strategies to address their challenges during and after their careers. The findings of such research could provide a foundation for the

49 development of practical and effective policies and programs aimed at supporting esports
50 players and ensuring their well-being both during and after their esports careers.

51 This study aims to investigate the challenges, difficulties, and perceived needs
52 experienced by retired professional esports players in Korea during their transition out of
53 esports. The insights gleaned from this research offer valuable guidance for current or aspiring
54 professional players, better equipping them to navigate life after their esports careers. To
55 achieve the aim, the research questions are as follows: (a) What challenges and difficulties did
56 retired professional esports players in Korea face during their transition out of esports?; (b)
57 What are the perceived needs of retired professional esports players in Korea during their career
58 transition?; (c) How do the experiences of retired professional esports players in Korea inform
59 the preparation needed for current or aspiring players regarding life after their esports careers?;
60 and (d) How do the transitional experiences of retired professional esports players in Korea
61 contribute to our understanding of career transitions in esports on a broader scale?

62 In the following sections, we will review relevant literature, particularly focusing on
63 esports in the Korean context, and identify gaps in existing research. In the Methods section,
64 we describe our methodological approach to data collection and analysis. Subsequently, in the
65 Results section, we present our findings, which form the basis for the Discussion and
66 Conclusion sections. In these sections, we discuss key findings and provide their implications,
67 highlighting the contributions of our study to both theory and practice. To the best of the
68 authors' knowledge, this is the first qualitative study in the English language literature to offer
69 comprehensive insights into the career transitions of South Korean esports players. In this
70 respect, this study serves as an introductory investigation. It could provide a research design
71 for larger-scale studies and lay the foundation for future research into the experiences of retired
72 esports players worldwide. The findings significantly enrich both academic discourse and
73 practical applications, presenting empirical evidence on player transitions. This information

can inform the development of tailored support for the target population in practice. The study also presents the challenges, stressors, and uncertainties that professional players confront in their careers and sheds light on the factors that influence their decisions to retire, thereby making a valuable contribution to the literature.

Literature Review

Esports in the Korean Context

It should be emphasized that South Korea (hereafter referred to as Korea) played a pivotal role in the early growth and development of esports both on a national and international scale. Internet cafés, colloquially known as PC bangs in Korea, created an environment conducive to competition and spectatorship as early as 1998 (Jin, 2020). Another significant milestone in Korean esports was the establishment of the 21st Century Pro-Game Association in 2000, later renamed the Korea e-Sports Association (KeSPA) in October 2003 (Korea e-Sports Association, 2019). Notably, this was the world's first association for esports at the national level. KeSPA implemented essential regulations and principles, and organized esports leagues, substantially contributing to Korea's influence on the global esports industry (Jin, 2020). Korean esports' influence has extended beyond popular culture, shaping the industry's development worldwide (Rea, 2016). Given this context, it is highly valuable to investigate the experiences of retired Korean esports professionals, especially those who launched their careers during the initial surge and prosperity of esports culture in the 2000s, to garner their insights into the transition out of esports.

Whilst other countries such as the U.S. used the term of “electronic sports” in the 1990s, Koreans used different terms including cyber athletics, digital athletics, or pro-gaming to describe what is now globally known as esports (Jin, 2020). Since its introduction by Ji-Won Park, Minister of the Department of Culture and Tourism in 2000 at the inaugural meeting of

the KeSPA, the term “esports” has gained official recognition. (Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, 2008; Samsung Economic Research Institute, 2005). The active acceptance of the Internet and the significant growth of esports in Korea can be attributed to different factors including the determined mindset of the Korean people, their awareness of the potential challenges caused by globalization, as well as political and historical contexts that shape the Korea of today (Jin, 2010). Jin (2020) identified three significant milestones in the growth of esports in Korea including “the introduction of PC communications like Hitel until 1998, the introduction of StarCraft and PC bang, and the emergence of esports broadcasting and the institutionalization of spectatorship in the Korean context until 2002” (p.3727). These key periods indeed led to the prosperity of esports in Korea and particularly the introduction of StarCraft booted the esports phenomenon. Rea (2019) described such phenomenon as “a boon for Korean digital gaming culture, arriving as it did at the height of PC bang expansion. StarCraft became a pop culture sensation in Korean seemingly overnight” (p. 120).

Reflecting this phenomenon, the Korean Air Force extended its involvement in esports by sponsoring Air Force Challenges e-Sports (ACE), a professional esports team affiliated with the military branch (Taylor, 2012). Korea still maintains a mandatory military service system for men, requiring them to spend at least 18 months in military service, usually in their early twenties (Kim et al., 2016). This results in an educational or career break during this period. Given this societal context, ACE could serve as a great opportunity for the professional players to further develop their career profiles while fulfilling their military services. As Cho (2008) notes, “The Ace has been the only place where young professional gamers can continue their career while completing the mandatory military service — an inevitable choice for most players because their peak time as a gamer overlaps their military conscription age” (para. 7). Since its establishment in 2006, talented StarCraft players including “Lim Yo-Hwan” have served their military service obligations while continuing to compete until the ACE team was disbanded in

2012 (Oh, 2020). While this demonstrates the influence and power of esports culture on Korean society, the disbandment of the professional team may have had a significant impact on some individuals. The glory of StarCraft came to an end as major esports match-fixing scandals occurred. In October 2015, several professional StarCraft 2 players in Korea have been arrested on accusations of engaging in match-fixing and participating in illegal betting activities; two of them have been even banned for life (Yin-Poole, 2015). In April 2016, BBC (2016) also reported that two professional Starcraft 2 players have been charged with match fixing, which negatively impacted the reputation of the game.

It is also important to consider the influence and association of the Korean culture with the esports culture, in particular educational culture, and system. The outcomes of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), a renowned global assessment initiative, revealed that Korea demonstrated remarkable performance in the mathematics, reading, and science. In this respect, the Korean education system is widely recognized for its strong emphasis on student assessment, particularly through regular examinations. This emphasis, though, has engendered dissatisfaction, stress, and a host of challenges among students, such as intense competition and financial burden. The role of educational achievement in national development is undeniable, yet the adverse effects of an excessive focus on exams have become increasingly apparent. These negative impacts manifest in student unhappiness and a disconnect between workforce requirements and the expectations of companies (Heo et al., 2018). Korea is a society that values competitiveness and places a strong emphasis on academic performance and achievement. Such emphasis arises from the belief that achieving high academic success leads to a successful life, including entering top-tier universities, securing desirable employment, and building stronger social networks (Lee, 2013). While such competitiveness and drive for high performance have positively influence the growth and prosperity of esports culture in Korea (Jin, 2020), the social pressure placed on academic achievement may leave

esports players vulnerable. Many Koreans still prioritize studying over playing games and may perceive gaming with disdain. Thus, young people who pursue their esports careers can face challenges in balancing their commitment to both studying gaming as they endeavor to meet social expectations.

Career Transitions in Esports

Esports players tend to have a short career span, with one in five professional esports players competing for only about two years (Ward & Harmon, 2019). This is due to the fact that esports players rely heavily on their ability to respond quickly and accurately to complex visual stimuli, which may begin to decline after the age of 24 (Thompson et al., 2014). As a result, players may find it challenging to remain at the top of their game as they age (Smithies et al., 2020). Many individuals begin playing esports at a young age, and some even leave school prematurely to pursue careers as professional esports players (Hattenstone, 2017; Martin, 2019), limiting their opportunities to explore other career options after retiring from esports (Smithies et al., 2020). Similarly, in traditional sports, adolescent high-performance athletes often prioritize their sport over education, resulting in a lack of pre-retirement planning and career qualifications, and difficulties transitioning out of sport (Park et al., 2013). Dual careers have been proposed as a solution to this issue, with high-performance athletes maintaining careers in both sport and other areas, such as education or work (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014). Likewise, Johnson and Woodcock (2021) have highlighted the precariousness of being a professional esports player, as players may need to sacrifice other aspects of their lives to commit to training and competitions. As reported by Hattenstone (2017), many esports players begin their professional careers at a young age, typically between 16 and 20 years old, as there are no age restrictions to play professionally. An early onset of a professional esports career may consequently lead some players to relinquish their education to chase their esports aspirations. This phenomenon is not unique to esports, as it has also been reported among

adolescent athletes with dual careers in traditional sports who prioritize sport over education (Cosh & Tully, 2014). Given that many esports players are of an age where they are attending secondary schools or universities, there is a need for guidelines on the dual careers of esports players. Such guidelines would raise awareness of the challenges faced by players and the need for support from stakeholders, including teams, federations, sponsors, educational institutions, and parents, to enhance their well-being during and after their esports careers. Managing dual careers and developing the necessary skills to balance various obligations is critical for overall health and well-being (Hong & Connelly, 2022). This makes it crucial for esports players to synchronize their professional obligations with education, providing thorough readiness for life post-retirement (Hong, 2022). Researchers have investigated diverse aspects of esports, such as the stressors professional esports players face, coping strategies they employ, and the role of stakeholders in securing player health and well-being. Even so, there remains a dearth of studies focusing on the unique experiences of esports players during their careers and in their retirement (Smithies et al., 2020).

Esports players' short career spans may be due to a lack of financial and job security. McCutcheon and Hitchens (2020) define esports professionals as individuals who primarily earn their income through the provision of esports services, including professional players, coaches, and team managers. Every esports player in all levels in the world may be economically exploited by game publishers/developers as they heavily consume esports games and must commit to training and competitions to reach higher levels and become professional players who generate significant income through their esports career (Witkowski & Manning, 2019). This financial insecurity is particularly evident in lower level esports players who do not enjoy stable incomes or sponsorship. Esports players may be at significant risk of experiencing both financial and career insecurity (Witkowski & Manning, 2019). While some top-level professional players may generate considerable income and enjoy financial security

during their careers (Todorov, 2022), most players at lower levels do not. Tournament income, serving as a major financial source for professional players, amplifies career pressure and the motivation to perform. Yet, the achievement of financial security remains a difficult endeavor for many, with only a handful of top players maintaining the necessary high-level performance amid the intensely competitive setting of esports (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021). The prevailing notion that players are highly replaceable further compounds this precarious situation. Even those with successful track records may find themselves deselected from their professional teams (Van Allen, 2018). This insecurity can lead to a lack of pre-retirement planning, which may cause players to struggle during and after their esports careers (Smithies et al., 2020). Esports players' financial and career insecurity may be addressed through pre-retirement planning, as it is critical for both high-performance athletes and professional esports players to mitigate financial and transitional issues and ensure healthy and smooth transitions (Hong, 2022; Park et al., 2013; Smithies et al., 2020). Some high-performance athletes, like some esports players, enjoy early financial success but may struggle with financial issues in post-athletic life due to a lack of financial literacy and self-management skills (Hong & Fraser, 2021). Esports players' limited opportunities for career development due to their financially punitive contracts violate their rights and cause struggles (Witkowski & Manning, 2019). In this respect, the esports industry should establish structured systems to support esports players' transitions out of esports, including career planning assistance, mentoring, and guidance during their careers and post-retirement, to address the financial and career insecurity of esports players (Smithies et al., 2020).

Existing research on the transitions of esports players, albeit sparse, stresses the importance of this topic. It highlights the unique skill sets these players possess, which could be transferred to other domains, and the absence of structured support systems within the esports industry (Smithies et al., 2020; Hong, 2022). In contrast, the transition of high-

performance athletes out of traditional sports has received considerable attention, giving rise to supportive measures like career assistance programs (Hong & Coffee, 2018; Torregrossa et al., 2020). With these considerations in mind, the focus of this study is to explore the experiences of esports players who have retired or are about to retire. This is to provide insights that could prepare younger players for their own transitions. This study, by exploring both the challenges and opportunities faced by retired esports players, seeks to establish the basis for the creation of structured support systems that can assist esports players during and after their careers.

Theoretical Framework

The process of athletes' transitions has been studied by sport psychology researchers using theoretical models such as the Athletic Career Termination Model (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994), the Analytical Career Model (Stambulova, 1994), and the Holistic Athletic Career Model (Wylleman, 2019; for additional frameworks, see Stambulova et al., 2021). Among those well-established theoretical framework examining career transitions in sport, the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavalley et al., 2014) was chosen as the theoretical framework for this study, as shown in Figure 1. This is because the framework provides a comprehensive overview of the process of transition out of sport including causes of career termination, factors influencing athletes' adaptation to career transition, the resources available for coping with transitions, the potential challenges associated with career transitions, and intervention that can support athletes during such period. Whilst there have not been any established frameworks particularly focused on transition out of esports, adopting such well-established framework from the similar context can help provide valuable insights into the esports context and potentially contribute to the development of a theoretical framework specific to esports.

[Figure 1 near here]

The Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014) was initially developed based on research on athletes' transitions in traditional sports but can also be applied to professional esports players due to the unique characteristics of esports, such as high-performance in competitive settings and short career spans (Hong, 2018; Smithies et al., 2020; Taylor, 2012). According to the model, there are four reasons for career termination: age, deselection, injury, and free choice. While the reasons for esports players' career termination may vary, there is limited empirical evidence available. The model identifies five key factors that may impact athletes' adaptation to career transition. Research has shown that high-performance athletes may experience identity issues during their transition due to limited opportunities to develop well-rounded identities during their athletic careers (Lally, 2007; Park et al., 2013). It is important for athletes to identify available resources, such as coping strategies, social support, and pre-retirement planning, to handle the demands of career transition. When the demands of transition outweigh the available resources, athletes may experience various difficulties, such as occupational or financial problems, family or social problems, and psychopathology. In such cases, athletes may require cognitive, emotional, behavioral, social, and organizational interventions. Research has highlighted the role of sports governing bodies and organizations in providing organizational interventions (Hong & Coffee, 2018; Surujlal, 2016). There have been some studies that have found the existence of career assistance programs for athletes, as shown by Hong and Coffee (2018) and Torregrosa et al. (2020). Hong and Coffee (2018) identified such programs in 19 different countries, indicating that sport governing bodies and organizations are making efforts to establish support systems for athletes during their transitions. While these steps are promising, the research exploring athletes' interactions with organizational interventions during their transition remains scarce. They also claimed that the effectiveness of such programs has not been examined, and more research is

needed to assess their efficacy. Although there is currently no research on career assistance programs specifically for esports players, Hong (2022) emphasizes the importance of structured support systems for their career development, transitions, and overall health and wellbeing. To develop such support systems, it is critical to understand esports players' unique career path across different stages of their esports careers. This requires further investigation to establish a solid framework that conceptualizes these stages and considers the associated demands, challenges, and available resources (Salo, 2017). In this regard, it is also crucial to gather more empirical evidence on professional esports players' transitions to inform the industry and key stakeholders in establishing appropriate career development and transition support services/programs.

Methods

The present study is an exploratory study, which can contribute to theory-building within the subject area (Mollick, 2014). By applying a qualitative approach, we sought to provide in-depth narrative of Korean retired professional esports players' experiences of transitioning out of esports. As we adopted a relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology, we recognize that individuals construct their own perceptions of the social world based upon their "subjectivities, interests, emotions, and values" (Sparkes, 1992, p. 5). To achieve a more comprehensive understanding of participants' subjective experiences, we employed semi-structured interviews as a meaning-oriented methodology (McArdle et al., 2012). By utilizing this approach, we were able to explore participants' perspectives and gain valuable insights into how they interpreted and made sense of their experiences.

Participants

To select participants for this study, the researchers interviewed four retired South Korean professional esports players who met the following criteria: 1) were over the age of 18;

2) had a professional esports career of three years or more; and 3) were retired or retiring from esports. The researchers utilized purposive sampling to recruit participants, as this method allows for the selection of individuals who can provide information based on their lived experiences (Bernard, 2002). The researchers faced challenges in recruitment due to the limited number of potential participants but overcame this by utilizing their network that had been developed during previous esports research, which includes the national esports association and professional teams in South Korea.

All participants were male, between 26 and 31 years old ($M = 28.25$, $SD = 1.79$), had esports careers of 3 to 8 years ($M = 5.75$, $SD = 1.92$), and had retired between 0 and 9 years prior to data collection ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 3.27$). One participant was retiring at the time of data collection. Participants 1, 2, and 3 played StarCraft I and II, while Participant 4 played League of Legends. They were all high-profile retired athletes who were part of the top-tier professional teams in their respective game. At the time of data collection, the participants held various professional positions, including government officer (Participant 1), employee of games publisher (Participant 2), commentator (Participant 3), and undergoing military services (Participant 4).

The decision to include a small sample size of four high-profile participants in this study was based on several factors. While the authors initially aimed to recruit between six and eight high-profile participants considering the potential challenges related to accessing such specific population, they could not reach the targeted number. A small sample size was regarded as appropriate for the study since the authors and officers from the national esports association and professional teams made every possible effort to maximize the sample size within the given timeframe. Given resource limitations including restricted contact points, transcription costs, and researcher time constraints (Lakens, 2022), the decision to include these four participants was shaped. Despite these restrictions, the national esports association and professional teams

specifically recommended these individuals owing to their unparalleled and expert perspectives on the experiences of esports players. The insights and perspectives provided by these participants were deemed of high value in the context of the study's objective, offering empirical evidence on the subject matter. As such, the researchers decided to maximize the data's worth by centering their attention on a compact yet expert group of participants. The study's findings should be interpreted not as universally applicable, but as a significant input to the literature documenting the experiences of esports players. Despite this, it is critical to emphasize that the present study stands as a pioneering examination, setting the groundwork for forthcoming research by outlining initial findings.

Procedure

To gain insight into the experiences of retired or retiring esports players, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with four South Korean professional esports players who met the selection criteria (Pezalla et al., 2012). The interviews were conducted between November and December 2019, either via phone calls or face-to-face meetings, based on participants' preferences. Three interviews were conducted by the lead author and the remaining one interview was conducted by both authors, who are Korean. Prior to the interview, participants received an information sheet and were asked to sign a consent form in compliance with ethical procedures. All participants provided their consent before the commencement of their interviews. The interviews lasted between 36 and 82 minutes ($M = 55.76$, $SD = 17.64$). The interview guide was developed through a literature review and discussions between the authors, drawing on works such as Lavallee et al. (2014), Park et al. (2013), and Stambulova et al. (2009).

The interview guide was developed to explore participants' experiences with esports career transitions. The guide included four main sections. Section A focused on the background

of participants' esports careers, including the game(s) they played, the length of their professional career, and their motivation to become a professional player. Sample questions for this section include: What game(s) did you play professionally? How long was your professional esports career? What motivated you to become a professional esports player? Section B aimed to understand participants' experiences as professional players, including their training and competition routines and any challenges or stressors they encountered. Sample questions for this section include: What was your training regimen like as a professional player? How did you manage the stress of competition? What were some of the biggest challenges you faced as a professional player? Section C focused on participants' career transitions out of esports, including their reasons for retirement, how they prepared for retirement, and any issues or difficulties they faced during the transition. Sample questions for this section include: What led to your decision to retire from esports? How did you prepare for retirement? What were some of the biggest issues or difficulties you faced during your transition out of esports? Lastly, Section D aimed to understand participants' perceptions of the need for better transitions in esports, including any support they felt they needed and any recommendations they had for improving the transition process. Sample questions for this section include: What type of support did you receive during your transition out of esports? What type of support did you feel you needed but did not receive? What recommendations do you have for improving the transition process for esports players? By exploring these four areas, the interview guide aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and needs of retired or retiring esports players during the transition process.

The authors of this study possess a wealth of relevant experience in esports and sport coaching. The lead author has conducted interviews with players and stakeholders across all levels of the esports industry, as well as with active and retired athletes, on the topics of career transitions and mental health and wellbeing. Meanwhile, the co-author is a former elite athlete

and sport coaching expert who has also played StarCraft I as an amateur and followed professional players as a fan. This collective experience and interest in the topic have helped to establish a rapport with the participants and enriched the study's insights.

Data analysis and rigor

The authors employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis to detect significant patterns in the data set. This method was utilized to conduct a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the data, in accordance with Braun et al.'s (2016) recommendations. The data was transcribed verbatim to ensure a thorough understanding of the data. Since all interviews were conducted in Korean, the lead author translated the quotes used in this paper while developing the Results section. To preserve confidentiality, each participant was assigned a code name (e.g., Player 1, 2, 3, and 4). During the coding process, the authors took initial notes on the participants' experiences of transitioning out of esports while reading and re-reading each manuscript. Based on the initial notes from both authors, the notes were thoroughly reviewed and refined by the lead author resulting in 90 codes identified. These codes were then used for the next step to identify themes. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the authors had three different meetings to discuss the initial codes and common themes identified from the data, with discussions held via video or phone call. These meetings were used to finalize the themes and achieve consensus on the identified themes. Out of 90 codes, 18 potential themes were identified, and they were eventually categorized into four themes as final themes. To guarantee the accuracy and transparency of the findings, each theme was explicitly named and defined. The authors also reviewed Braun and Clarke's (2006) 15-point checklist for a good thematic analysis to ensure the quality of the analytic process throughout the six steps. By following this rigorous approach to data analysis, the authors aimed to ensure the credibility and reliability of their findings, and to provide a trustworthy and dependable account of the participants' experiences.

To ensure the validity and reliability of our qualitative study, we employed several measures. Firstly, we conducted a thorough review of the data analysis process and findings for each theme through a series of meetings. Secondly, we maintained an “audit trail” of our analytical procedures, which ensured transparency and coherence of the process and described the methods we applied and the decisions we made. Thirdly, to ensure credibility and dependability, each author conducted the primary analysis individually, and we acted as critical friends for each other by sharing and reviewing our work. ‘Critical friends’ is one of the ways to achieve rigor and quality of qualitative studies and it helps researchers enhance the rigor of their studies (Smith & McGannon, 2018). It is “to encourage reflexivity by challenging each other’s construction of knowledge” (Cowan & Taylor, 2016, p. 508). In this respect, both authors critically reviewed each other’s analysis and reflected the process of the data analysis process. These measures align with the standards for ensuring rigor and trustworthiness in qualitative research and establish the credibility and validity of our findings (Brown et al., 2018; Finfgeld-Connett, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Results

The present study identified four prominent themes from the data: (a) Career Pressure and Uncertainty, (b) Lack of Pre-Retirement Planning, (c) Demand for Mentorship Support, and (d) Necessity for a Realistic Perspective on Talent. The initial theme addresses the experiences of professional esports players prior to retirement, which constitutes a crucial aspect of their careers, encompassing the ‘Causes of Career Termination’. The subsequent theme pertains to players’ experiences upon retirement or upon deciding to retire from esports. This theme correlates with ‘Factors Related to Adaptation to Career Transition’ and ‘Available Resources for Adaptation to Career Transition’. Lastly, the third and fourth themes underscore the perceived necessity for improved preparation within the profession. These themes are linked to ‘Available Resources for Adaptation to Career Transition’, ‘Quality of Transition’,

and ‘Quality of Transition’ within the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014). The comprehensive thematic map illustrating the experiences of professional esports players in South Korea can be found in Figure 2.

[Figure 2 near here]

Career Pressure and Uncertainty

All participants in this study began their professional esports careers either during secondary school or upon graduation, as their talents were recognized by fellow professional players, teams, and coaches. Participants reported being aware of their exceptional performance even before joining professional teams, as their official rankings were verifiable. Beginning their engagement in esports with games like StarCraft or League of Legends, these players were initially drawn to the field for pure enjoyment. As recognition from other players and fans started to grow, so did their passion, leading them to see a career opportunity in something they genuinely enjoyed. That being said, the professional esports environment presented its own challenges, with significant performance pressure and a demand for consistent victories, leading to an environment filled with stress. This stress stemmed from the critical evaluation of their performance by teams, peer players, and fans, as well as the obligation to excel since they received compensation for their participation:

I did not receive a salary at the beginning of my career as a trainee, but I greatly enjoyed the experience, as the team provided me with accommodations, gaming facilities, and equipment in a gaming house. But, once I started earning a salary, I felt immense pressure to maintain high performance levels at all times. The pressure during competitions was especially overwhelming (Player 3).

Player 4 expressed an ability to cope with competitive pressure, as the drive to win often superseded any concurrent stress. Yet, like the other players, he found the professional

environment particularly taxing in the face of losses. Reflecting on this, Player 4 remarked, “Competing brought me joy. The sense of accomplishment when I won was extraordinary. Dealing with a loss, on the other hand, was a true test [...]. Coping with fan criticism can also be quite distressing.” He drew attention to criticism from fans on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. His career spanned a period of significant growth in social networking sites, and he was involved in the most popular game, League of Legends.

As players aged, they felt the pressure of competing with emerging younger talents. Player 1 noted, “We often remark, ‘It’s difficult to compete with teenagers.’” He observed a decline in his physical ability to respond swiftly and accurately with age. This decline was also attributed to excessive training while remaining physically inactive for extended periods. The other three players shared similar experiences, although all participants made an effort to exercise during their careers. Player 2 commented, “I made an effort to allocate time for exercise amidst my training and competition schedules. While the team offered fitness club memberships, the level of interest among players varied. But I was quite engaged in it.” All participants highlighted the significance of regular exercise and physical activity in optimizing performance. Player 4 stated, “Some players participate in exercise and physical activities, but many, due to their youth, don’t recognize the importance and don’t see it as a necessity.”

Participants in the study also grappled with uncertainty throughout their careers. When performing well and winning competitions, they tended to focus on their present success rather than considering their future prospects. Conversely, when experiencing losses, they became acutely aware of the myriad young, talented players who could potentially replace them. This lack of job security induced feelings of anxiety and concern about their long-term prospects in the industry. Player 1 explained, “The absence of job security caused me immense anxiety.” This sentiment highlights the precarious nature of esports careers, where a player’s success is often judged on a game-by-game basis. The constant influx of emerging talent adds to the

uncertainty, as players must constantly strive to maintain their competitive edge or risk being replaced.

For all participants in this study, the mandatory military service for South Korean men, typically occurring in their early 20s, generated uncertainty. They were unsure whether this obligation would interfere with their esports careers. A special military service arrangement for esports players, called ‘Air Force Challenges e-Sports (ACE),’ was available for a limited period. Certain professional players, particularly those engaging in StarCraft during that period, managed to balance esports involvement alongside their military service. Player 3 exemplifies such a case. Unluckily, his service arrangement was abruptly discontinued due to a scandal involving match-fixing and a decline in the game’s popularity, largely tied to the transition from StarCraft I to StarCraft II. This change sparked significant uncertainty for three players (Players 1, 2, and 3). The exceptional popularity of StarCraft I in Korea and its instrumental role in nurturing the esports culture is noteworthy. The game publisher’s introduction of StarCraft II, however, caused a domino effect that led to many professional teams’ disbandment and numerous players’ retirement, as they were encouraged or in some cases forced to transition from StarCraft I to II. The three players’ enthusiasm and passion for StarCraft II could not match that for StarCraft I. They also noticed that StarCraft II could not reach the popularity heights of its predecessor, leading to a decrease in opportunities for career progression.

In summary, the reasons for players’ retirement decisions encompass job insecurity due to factors such as short contracts, a decline in competitive advantage as they age, significant changes in the games played, and the obligation to fulfill military service.

Lack of Pre-Retirement Planning

The responses from all participants concerning the initial stage of their post-retirement careers revealed a common theme: they lacked clear ideas about their next steps due to insufficient pre-retirement planning. Player 1 admitted, “To be honest, I was at a loss. I had no experience beyond the realm of gaming.” Similarly, Player 2 mentioned, “After retirement, I took on a few part-time jobs because I was uncertain about my next career move. But I first had to complete my mandatory military service.” Player 3 initially believed he could return to his team upon completing his military service, but that option was not available. He recounted, “Following my military service, I was at a loss regarding my next steps. That period was likely the most difficult for me, as I navigated various career options outside of being a professional player.” Player 1 devoted considerable effort to networking, which eventually led him to a new career as an esports commentator. Yet, achieving stability took time due to the unpredictability of his initial freelance income. In contrast, Player 2 found a seamless transition in his career when a game publisher offered him a job, enabling him to stay within the esports industry that was already familiar to him. Despite this, he experienced a “very hard time” dealing with identity loss (e.g., “I am not a professional player anymore”) and regret (e.g., “Why didn’t I prepare anything for the future?”)—feelings shared by other players. He expressed greater satisfaction with his current profession than with being a professional player, considering improved job security.

Player 1 expressed a desire to enter a profession unrelated to esports, despite feeling unprepared for any particular career path. He had read a news article about a retired professional esports player who had successfully transitioned from esports to a government officer role, a position renowned for its job security in Korea. This player’s story served as both inspiration and motivation for him. At the time of data collection, Player 1 had recently secured a government officer post and was highly satisfied with the job security it provided. As Player 4 decided to retire, he was presented with an opportunity to become a professional

team coach following his military service. This offer was a direct result of his reputation as one of Korea's leading players. Despite this, he found himself wavering between accepting the coaching role and investigating alternative career options. As he navigated through these considerations, the immediate necessity to complete his military service became his primary focus.

Demand for Mentorship Support

A lack of pre-retirement planning was identified as a significant issue for players when they decided to retire and explore alternative career options. They also recognized a limitation in mentorship for preparing for life after esports. Due to the absence of widely known successful transitions, players felt as though they had to start 'from scratch.' While they acknowledged that many retired players shifted to occupations such as running streaming services and YouTube channels, they perceived these options as limiting. Player 3 commented, "No one seems to be remembered post-retirement. While some manage to sustain themselves via YouTube, Afreeca TV, and other platforms, a truly bright future for esports players has yet to emerge. It's a disheartening reality." This sentiment was echoed by other players. Player 3 also acknowledged several retired esports players who smoothly transitioned into poker playing careers. Despite this, he voiced an inclination towards a career path that offered more safety and security.

As mentioned earlier, Player 1 was inspired by a retired esports player to become a government officer. He emphasized the importance of mentorship in facilitating the exploration of career options, as there was limited information available on the paths taken by other retired players. Player 1 stated, "We require diverse success stories from retired senior players who have discovered new career paths, in order to inspire younger players. We can gain valuable insights from their first-hand experiences." This viewpoint was shared by the other three

participants as well. The players stressed that mentorship should be provided by professional teams, national associations, or other relevant authorities, rather than solely relying on individual efforts. Young players may not recognize the significance of pre-retirement planning while actively competing. Player 4 noted, “Players may not heed advice during their active careers; so, it is vital for teams, coaches, KeSPA [national esports association in South Korea], and other governing bodies to offer educational and mentorship support.”

Necessity for a Realistic Perspective on Talent

Drawing from their experiences as professional players and transitioning out of esports, all participants emphasized the apparent difference between playing esports for fun and playing professionally. The latter demands extensive commitment, continuous coping with pressure and stressors, and maintaining a competitive edge over other players. The participants expressed concern about young people aspiring to become professional players without understanding the commitments and responsibilities involved. They also highlighted the need for young people to critically assess and be realistic about their talent as players. Since most esports games offer rankings, individuals can easily determine their potential to become professional players: “If you lack sufficient talent, refrain from pursuing it. [...] Avoid overestimating your abilities and remain grounded in reality.” (Player 4); “You must engage in thorough self-assessment. Determine if you genuinely possess the required talent and if you are prepared to fully dedicate yourself to training and competition. Clarity is essential.” (Player 1).

Although all participants started their professional careers based on their recognized talent at a young age, sustaining a successful career proved challenging due to extreme competition. Participants suggested that young people should be more aware of alternative career paths within the esports industry if they possess a strong passion for esports but may not

succeed as professional players. This awareness can enable aspiring players to make informed decisions and pursue viable career options within the esports ecosystem.

Discussion

This study investigates the experiences of retired or retiring esports players as they transition out of their professional careers. The findings demonstrate that they have experienced significant career pressure and coped with uncertainty related to their future career path. Since they exclusively committed to training and competition from an early age, they had limited opportunity and time to establish pre-retirement plans, which resulted in challenges during the transition period. It should be noted that they also lacked sufficient guidance, highlighting their need for external resources such as social and organizational support. In this respect, the findings highlight the significance of external support from key stakeholders, such as professional teams, national associations, and other relevant authorities. This support aligns with the Organizational Intervention for Career Transition aspect of the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014), which is critical for facilitating high-quality and healthy career transitions for players. Hong and Coffee (2018) also argue in traditional sport context that organizational support from sports governing bodies and organizations, as well as practitioners, plays a critical role in the successful transition of high-performance athletes out of their sports careers.

While the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014) proposes four distinct causes of career termination (age, deselection, injury, and free choice), this study reveals a variety of reasons for transitioning out of esports, including job insecurity arising from short contracts, diminishing competitive advantage as players age, significant changes in games played, and the obligation to fulfill military service, which is an unique reason in the Korean context (Kim et al., 2016). Job insecurity due to short contracts or non-

renewal of contracts may resemble deselection, and a decline in players' competitive advantage with age aligns with the age factor in the framework. Significant changes in the games played represent a unique factor in esports, setting it apart from traditional sports. Another specific issue, mandatory military service, is pertinent only to players in countries with such requisites, like South Korea. Even so, as professional players now increasingly have opportunities to join international teams, these factors become critical not only for Korean players but also for international professional teams seeking to recruit them. Whilst the release of StarCraft I played a critical role in the growth of esports culture in Korea (Jin, 2020), the transition from StarCraft I to StarCraft II can be seen as unique challenges and difficulties for Korean professional players who participated in these games. It is likely that players will continue to face retirement as games evolve or become outdated. This issue warrants attention from industry stakeholders, particularly those responsible for player welfare. While this study's findings on the causes of transition contribute to the literature, additional research should be conducted to identify other significant causes to help reduce the prevalence of premature retirement.

It is important to highlight that Player 3 discussed the impact of a 'match-fixing scandal,' which led to the termination of a unique military service arrangement for esports players known as 'Air Force Challenges e-Sports (ACE).' This development had long-term consequences on his career. As mentioned earlier, while such special military service arrangement for talented esports players was considered a great opportunity (Cho, 2008), it should be noted that the short duration of the arrangement could negatively affected someone's career path. This aspect should be taken into consideration when establishing any future initiatives.

Match-fixing was also discussed as one of the factors influencing their career decisions. Two significant match-fixing scandals in relation to StarCarft in 2015 and 2016 (BBC, 2016; Yin-Poole, 2015) even resulted in a negative impact on those players who were not involved in match-fixing cases as one of the participants demonstrated. This was due to the diminished

614 reputation of the game, which led to a loss of popularity. Abarbanel and Johnson (2019) explore
615 esports consumers' awareness and attitudes towards gambling-related match-fixing. They find
616 that viewers are not highly concerned about match-fixing, often perceiving gambling as a
617 corruption source among competitors but also accepting some aspects. Spectators typically
618 judge wrongdoing based on rules rather than ethics and frequently excuse infractions. Schöber
619 and Stadtmann (2022) examined prohibited behaviours within esports teams, including
620 cheating, doping, and match fixing. They claimed that certain players and teams might
621 participate in self-betting, manipulating match results, in order to secure higher profits
622 compared to what they could gain from prize money. This claim can be supported by the
623 significant difference in the volume of esports, which approximately 107 times higher than the
624 volume of prize money in 2020 (Schöber & Stadtmann, 2022). Holden et al. (2017) also pointed
625 out that esports has faced issues related to sexism, banned competitors, doping, and prize pool
626 splitting scandals besides match fixing controversies. Such findings from such previous studies
627 (Abarbanel & Johnson, 2019; Holden et al., 2017) and highlight the need for increased
628 awareness and vigilance against match-fixing and other issues. To foster a culture of integrity
629 and fair play, it is crucial to strengthen ethics education among esports players and expand
630 existing anti-cheating programs to cover the wider esports community. Collaboration among
631 various esports stakeholders, including players, teams, tournament organizers, and regulatory
632 bodies, is key (Hong, 2022) to creating a more transparent and ethical competitive environment.
633 More importantly, the aforementioned factors, such as match-fixing, sexism, doping, and prize
634 pool splitting scandals, can have serious implications for professional esports players' careers.
635 Engaging in these unethical activities can damage a player's reputation, leading to
636 disqualification from competitions, loss of sponsorships, and even a potential ban from the
637 industry. The prevalence of such issues can also create an unstable and untrustworthy
638 environment, making it difficult for players to build a sustainable and successful career. By

critically examining these factors and their impact on players' careers, stakeholders can develop more effective strategies to combat these issues and create a healthier and more supportive ecosystem for professional esports players.

It is important to acknowledge that job insecurity was the one of the factors contributing to career pressure and uncertainty regarding their future career path. Professional players, who typically begin playing esports "for fun," face pressure due to the intensely competitive professional environment, leading to financial and job insecurity. Despite having contracts with renowned and well-established professional teams and receiving high salaries during their careers, financial and job insecurity were frequently cited by participants. As esports careers can be short, akin to elite sports, such pressures and concerns are inevitable for both esports professionals and high-performance athletes in traditional sports (Hong, 2022; Park et al., 2013). While a select few players enjoy financial security from annual contracts (Todorov, 2022; Smithies et al., 2020), many, if not most, professional players grapple with insecurity. For top-level professionals with annual contracts, the pressure to improve performance may actually intensify in order to remain competitive against younger, talented players who could replace them. It is also worth noting that professional players might have limited opportunities for career advancement due to harsh contractual demands, potentially resulting in players' rights violations (Witkowski & Manning, 2019). The issues of financial and job insecurity, along with the pressure to stay competitive to address these concerns, are linked to the brief careers of professional players. This is reflected in participants' advice for young players to be realistic about their talent, given the need to manage the pressure of maintaining high performance and a competitive edge, as well as devoting themselves to training. Players also need to cope with the uncertainty of relatively short professional careers, which could be effectively ended by the emergence of younger, talented players. In addressing uncertainty, it is critical for players to establish strategies to cope with these unpredictable elements, such as

broadening their skill sets, pursuing mentorship, and concentrating on long-term career planning. In doing so, esports players might enhance their readiness and resilience to navigate through changes in the esports environment, which in turn could help to mitigate the psychological burden associated with uncertainty. Despite this, it remains crucial to acknowledge that esports players, in order to cultivate additional skill sets, secure mentors and initiate career planning, necessitate social and organisational backing (Hong, 2022). They could confront hurdles in allocating time for such activities and might lack guidance in kickstarting those endeavors.

Professional players' careers are inherently short, as high performance relies on the ability to rapidly and accurately respond to complex visual stimuli; such skills are likely to decline after the age of 24 (Thompson et al., 2014). Participants emphasized their engagement in regular exercise and physical activity to maintain fitness for competition and daily intensive training. This factor may contribute to their longer-than-average careers (approximately 2 years; Ward & Harmon, 2019) and warrants consideration by active professionals, young aspiring players, and key industry stakeholders. Researchers have raised concerns about excessive sedentary behavior among esports players (Tremblay et al., 2017), as they typically spend around 15 hours per day training. This behavior can be linked to poor physical, psychological, and cognitive health outcomes (de Rezende et al., 2014). As a result, some professional players might need to terminate their careers prematurely or take unplanned breaks due to injuries, such as carpal tunnel syndrome, tennis elbow, and back pain (Jolly, 2019). The demands of training and competition can lead to stress, mental illness, and poor decision-making (Wattanapisit et al., 2020). Thus, players and key stakeholders should place greater emphasis on players' engagement in exercise and physical activity, not only to support their careers but also to promote overall health and well-being.

Professional players in this study faced difficulties exploring other career options upon retirement due to a lack of pre-retirement planning while coping with identity loss and seeking job security, aspects reflected in the framework (e.g., self-identity, perceptions of control, and social identity). This finding aligns with Johnson and Woodcock's (2021) observation that professional players often sacrifice other life domains, limiting their opportunities to engage in activities that develop broader interests and skills (Hong, 2022). In this respect, the study highlights the need for players to better prepare for life after esports (i.e., emphasizing pre-retirement planning and mentorship) and provides guidance for young, aspiring players (i.e., maintaining a realistic perspective on their talent). As proposed in the framework, players can benefit from developing coping skills to manage the pressures and uncertainties associated with a professional esports career, securing social support from mentors and other key stakeholders, and establishing pre-retirement plans. These findings provide significant practical implications for the industry and its key stakeholders, who may take these factors into account when designing career support systems tailored to esports players. In traditional sports contexts, researchers have emphasized the importance of pre-retirement planning for smooth and successful transitions (Park et al., 2013). As highlighted in the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavalley et al., 2014), pre-retirement planning is crucial for coping with the demands of transition. The absence of such planning led the professional players in this study to experience career transition distress, particularly in terms of occupational and financial challenges, as indicated in the model. This evidence should be taken into account when establishing support systems for transitioning professional esports players. Expanding on these findings, it is evident that there is a need for better pre-retirement planning and support for esports professionals. This may involve providing career guidance, networking opportunities, and access to resources that help players explore alternative career paths.

Pursuing dual careers, particularly by combining sports and higher education, has been recommended to better prepare for life after sports (Ryan, 2015). Since all participants started their professional careers while in secondary school or shortly thereafter, feelings of “being lost” might be intensified due to being “institutionalized” by esports and having developed strong identities as professional players from a young age. In the esports context, balancing esports commitments with education has been deemed critical for preparing for post-retirement life (Hong, 2022). As a result, professional teams, national/international associations, and other relevant authorities may need to consider fostering an environment that encourages young players to pursue dual careers. Participants also experienced identity loss upon retirement, stemming from their status as well-known players and their heavy commitment to esports. This issue is similarly significant in the traditional sports context (Lally, 2007). Addressing psychological challenges related to retirement, such as identity loss and regret, is critical for helping players manage the transition more effectively and attain long-term satisfaction in their post-retirement pursuits. Thus, fostering a healthy culture that encourages young players to develop well-rounded identities while competing is crucial. This can be achieved by promoting dual careers and engaging in comprehensive pre-retirement planning.

Mentorship emerged as a critical factor in managing post-retirement transitions, as evidenced by the participants’ experiences. Player 1, influenced by an article about a former player transitioning into a government officer role, chose the same trajectory. This decision turned out to be beneficial, yet it arose by chance. In response to this reality, participants advocated for the implementation of mentorship initiatives led by professional teams, national associations, or other relevant authorities. The aim would be to provide players with an understanding of life beyond esports and guide them in effective preparation strategies. The emphasis on job security for post-retirement careers is not surprising, considering the participants’ experiences with job insecurity during their esports careers—a challenge that

many other players likely face (Smithies et al., 2020). Addressing this issue requires collective efforts from all stakeholders to promote both players' overall well-being and the sustainability of the esports industry (Hong, 2022). Potential solutions may encompass mentorship programs, career planning initiatives, and extensive industry-wide efforts focused on promoting stability and generating long-term prospects for professional players. Additionally, offering access to successful role models, mentors, and tailored resources and training programs could facilitate smoother transitions into post-retirement careers and enhance overall satisfaction and stability for former professional players.

Limitation and Future Study

The present findings aim to raise awareness among young players about transitioning out of esports and encourage key stakeholders to establish career support systems for players. The Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014) serves as a valuable theoretical framework for understanding professional players' transitions out of esports. Future researchers could benefit from building on this work by developing a customized theoretical model specifically for esports players, grounded in empirical and theoretical evidence. For instance, the findings of the present study can contribute to the further development of Salo's (2017) proposed theoretical framework. While Lavallee et al.'s (2014) was considered as suitable for the present study, it may not fully capture the unique context of esports since it was developed based on studies of high-performance athletes in traditional sports. In this respect, future study can examine esports players' transitions employing different theories and theoretical framework so that it can eventually contribute to the establishment of a tailored theoretical framework specific to esports context. Focusing on the in-depth experiences of four Korean professional players, the findings' applicability to other populations may be limited. Future research should explore professional players from different countries to draw more generalizable conclusions.

While some researchers argue that there are no general rules for sample size in qualitative research (Patton, 1990), the researchers should aim to meet theoretical saturation, meaning that they continue data collection until no new themes or insights were emerging from the data (van Rijnsoever, 2017). Although the small sample size was previously justified due to the unique population characteristics and resource constraints, future studies should aim for larger sample sizes to achieve theoretical saturation. Future research could expand upon this study by examining the transitional experiences of a larger, more diverse sample of Korean professional esports players. For instance, it could include the experiences of retired players from less mainstream esports genres (e.g., fighting games) or underrepresented groups in esports, such as female players. In addition, future studies can adopt this study design to investigate the experiences of retired esports players worldwide, thus providing broader perspectives on transitioning out of esports. Future research could also focus on exploring the post-esports lives of retired players. Such studies would provide empirical evidence on life after esports, offering valuable insights to young and aspiring players on how to prepare for their post-esports life. This will allow researchers to examine the changes in the esports industry including different factors such as contract conditions, support from professional teams, and the increasing number and scale of competitions and tournaments. This would also help researchers provide broader insights into the topic, given the fact that Korea has a relatively longer history of esports culture and is still one of the leading countries with regard to esports culture and industry. All participants in this study are male; however, with the increasing number of female players in recent times, future research should also investigate female players' experiences transitioning out of esports. The present study employed a cross-sectional design, conducting only one interview per participant. While this approach provides valuable insights, future researchers might consider implementing longitudinal studies to examine professional players' adaptation to retirement over time. While qualitative studies

provide valuable insights into topic by presenting participants' narratives and researchers' interpretations of their transitional experiences, future research can complement the findings from quantitative studies by developing a scale to examine esports players' overall wellbeing during and after their esports career. Through such quantitative approach, future studies can identify common challenges and barriers, copings skills and strategies, and esports athletes' unique needs for esports players in transitions. Such quantitative perspective can provide a broader understanding of the topic, conveying a more comprehensive perspective of esports players' experiences and requirements. Lastly, as highlighted in the present study, the future study can examine esports players' experiences of pursuing dual careers to identify the specific challenges and barriers and support needs when they manage two different commitments. Such findings can enable the esports industry and key stakeholders to establish a supportive environment for young players pursuing dual careers.

Conclusion

This study offers empirical evidence regarding professional esports players' transitions out of their careers, presenting valuable lessons and implications for both theory and practice. In summary, this qualitative study offers a comprehensive understanding of esports players' career transitions, particularly identifying their unique challenges and reasons for retirement in comparison to elite athletes from traditional sports. This may inspire esports researchers to develop a theoretical framework tailored to professional esports players' retirement experiences and characteristics. Identity loss emerged as a significant challenge, much like in traditional sports. This critical experience warrants further investigation to better understand its impact on retiring players. Financial and job insecurity should also be explored more thoroughly, as it is not directly linked to pre-retirement planning, such as pursuing dual careers. Nevertheless, the study's findings emphasize the need for key stakeholders to establish effective approaches that encourage young individuals to develop life and transferable skills

applicable beyond their esports careers. This can address concerns related to the unavoidably short career span in esports. In this study, we also highlighted concerns regarding scandals, such as match-fixing, which can significantly impact professional esports players' careers. Further research on negative factors, including match-fixing, sexism, doping, and prize pool splitting, is essential to increase awareness among esports players and fans regarding ethical behaviors. This heightened awareness will contribute to the sustainable growth and development of the esports industry. The exclusive reason for retirement in the Korean context, military service, suggests that professional players from other cultures may have their own unique reasons for retirement and barriers preventing them from continuing their esports careers. These factors should be further investigated. Lastly, the importance of mentorship and adopting a realistic perspective on one's talent offers valuable insights and implications for how professional players can begin and thrive in their esports careers. This needs to be addressed by the entire industry and key stakeholders through structured support services and systems.

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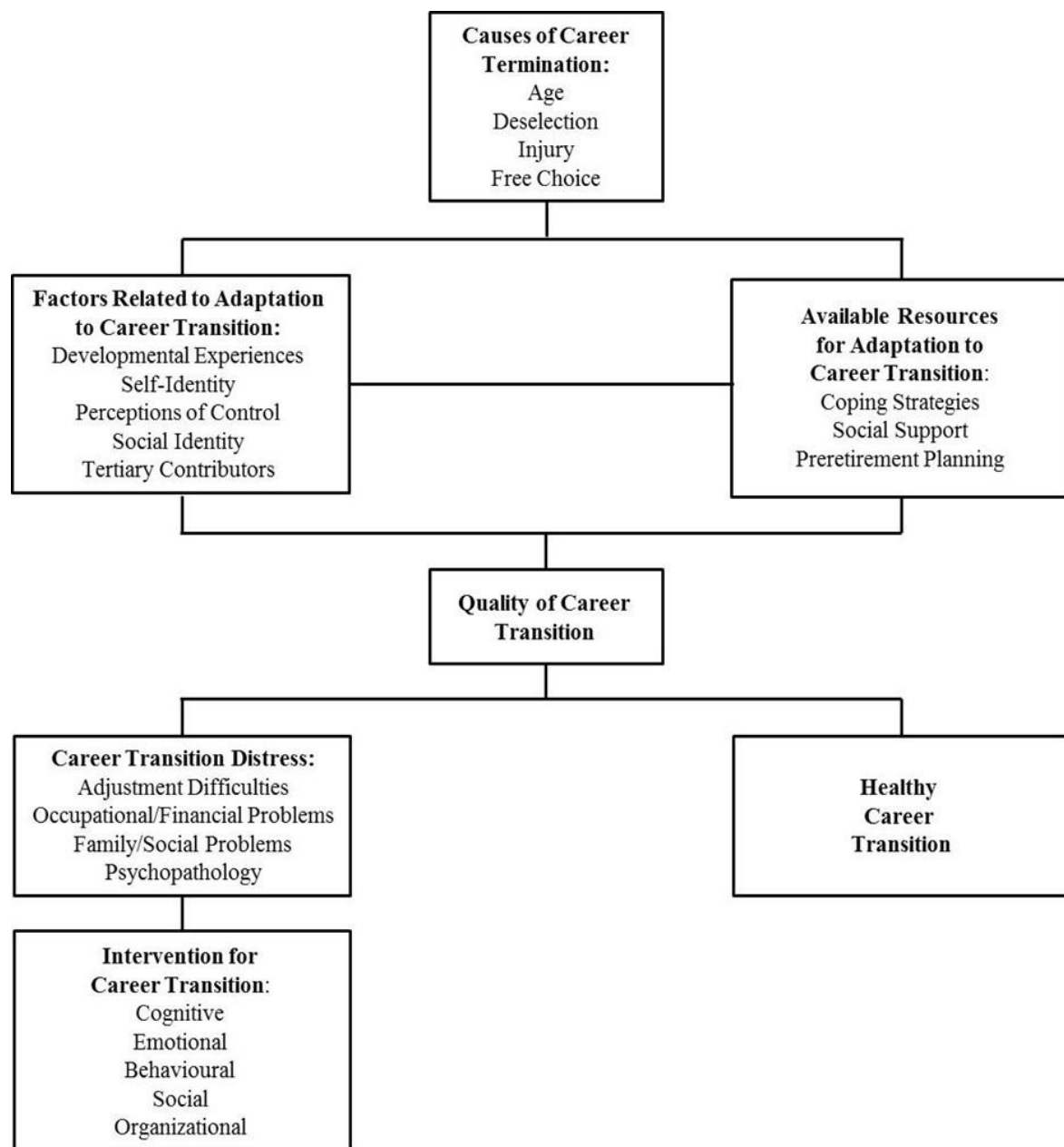
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Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014)



1020 Figure 2. Final thematic map of the Experiences of Professional Esports Players in South Korea

