Esports Players' Transition out of Esports: Is There Life After Esports?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore retired/retiring esports players' experience of transitioning out of esports. To provide in-depth insights into esports players' transition experiences that may contribute to young players being better prepared for their own transitions, a qualitative approach was applied and four retired professional esports players in South Korea were interviewed. Thematic analysis was applied, and four themes were identified: Pressure and Uncertainty; Lack of Pre-Retirement Planning; Need for Mentorship; Need for Realism about Talent. The findings highlight that esports players experience pressure and struggle with job/finance insecurity during their careers, and that this contributes significantly to their retirement decisions. Lack of pre-retirement planning causes them to be ill-prepared for their life after esports. The study provides empirical evidence which should encourage the industry and stakeholders to establish structured systems to support esports players' transitions out of esports.

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

1. Introduction

The unprecedented growth and popularity of esports and its industry has been observed worldwide (Himmelstein et al., 2017; Smithies et al., 2020); this has contributed to a substantial increase in the number of professional teams attracting young people keen to pursue careers as professional esports players (Smith et al., 2019). Esports has also attracted academics' attention. For instance, in an extensive literature review of esports research (Reitman et al., 2020), the authors identified 150 publications between 2002 and 2018: Media studies (37), Informatics (30), Business (26), Sports science (20), Sociology (15), Law (12), and Cognitive science (10). A variety of social science studies (e.g., sport management, sport psychology;

Cunningham et al., 2018; Hallmann & Giel, 2018; Heere, 2018) have compared esports to traditional sport. In this regard, researchers have focused, for example, on 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). While esports has been examined from the different perspectives of various well-established disciplines, research is required on esports players' short career spans which may cause post-career challenges and difficulties (Smithies et al., 2020), negatively influencing their overall health and wellbeing.

Like high-performance athletes in traditional sport who usually transition out of sport by their early 30s (Hong, 2018), the career span of esports players is short; more so, even, than those of athletes; one-in-five professional esports players compete for approximately only two years (Ward & Harmon, 2019). Esports players depend on their ability to respond to complex visual stimuli in an accurate and fast manner; this ability may start decreasing after the age of 24 (Thompson et al., 2014), hence short careers are inevitable, and players may struggle to remain as top ranked players as they age (Smithies et al., 2020). Individuals generally start playing esports games at a young age and some adolescents leave school prematurely to pursue careers as professional esports players (Hattenstone, 2017; Martin, 2019). This may mean having limited opportunities to explore other career options after esports (Smithies et al., 2020). This is also not uncommon in traditional sport as adolescent high-performance athletes tend to prioritise sport over education (Cosh & Tully, 2014), thereby causing athletes to experience struggles and challenges when they transition out of sport due to a lack of pre-retirement planning and career qualifications (Park et al., 2013). In a traditional sport context, researchers (e.g., Ryan, 2015) have highlighted the importance of

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high-performance athletes maintaining 'dual' careers, "a career with major foci on (both) sport and studies or work" (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014, p.1). Johnson and Woodcock (2021) identified the precariousness of being a professional player; it was found that, in order to be successful, players may need to be prepared to sacrifice other domains of their lives, as esports players need to exclusively commit to training and competitions to be the best. In this regard, Hong (2022) interviewed a range of esports players and stakeholders and emphasised the importance of players balancing esports commitments and education and preparing comprehensively for post-retirement life.

Further, a lack of finance and job insecurity may contribute significantly to esports players' short career spans. In the context of digital labour, McCutcheon and Hitchens (2020) define esports professional players as the 'esports professional' along with other professionals, such as, coaches and team managers who generate their main income from the 'provision of esports services (p.66). They also claim that esports players, at all levels, may be engaged in the provision of free labour and economic activity to some extent. Thus, players, including professional players, may be economically exploited by game publishers/developers as players heavily consume esports games and must commit to training and competitions to a reach higher level and become professional players who generate significant income through their esports career (McCutcheon & Hitchens, 2020). While some professional players at the highest level have opportunities to generate considerable income and enjoy financial security during their careers (Todorov, 2022), this is not the case for esports players at lower levels who do not enjoy stable incomes or sponsorship. Esports players have been unable as yet to unionise. Players are highly replaceable and so may be deselected from their professional teams despite having successful track records (Van Allen, 2018). In cases, tournament income is a major financial source for professional players, which can be the primary method to ensure financial security (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021). While this can be a motivation for professional players to better perform, it also can increase career pressure. It should be noted that very few top players can maintain the high-level of performance required to achieve financial security, this is due to the highly competitive setting of esports (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021). Witkowski and Manning (2019) also raised a concern that professional players have limited opportunities for career development due to their financially punitive contracts, which cause player struggles and violates players' rights. Thus, esports players may be at significant risk of experiencing both financial and career insecurity. In a traditional sport context, some high-performance athletes, like some esports players, enjoy early financial success. However, they may struggle with financial issues in post-athletic life due to a lack of financial literacy and self-management skills (Hong & Fraser, 2021). Thus, it is critical for both high-performance athletes and professional esports players to give attention to pre-retirement planning to mitigate financial and transitional issues and to ensure healthy and smooth transitions (Hong, 2022; Park et al., 2013; Smithies et al., 2020).

There are very few studies on esports players' transitions, these have highlighted the importance of the topic by recognising players' unique skill sets, e.g., communication, teamwork and cognitive skills, which they can transfer to other domains; (Smithies et al., 2020) and considering their short-career spans and the lack of structured support systems in the esports industry (Hong, 2022). However, athletes' transitions out of sport is now a well-established research area, contributing to the development of support systems, e.g., career assistance programmes (Hong & Coffee, 2018; Torregrossa et al., 2020) for high-performance athletes. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore retired/retiring esports players' experiences of transitioning out of esports with the aim of contributing to young players being better prepared for their transitions.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

Researchers in sport psychology have proposed theoretical models such as the Athletic career termination model (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994), the Analytica career model (Stambulova, 1994), and the Holistic athletic career model (Wylleman, 2019), to conceptualise the process of athletes' transitions (for more information about other frameworks, see Stambulova et al., 2021). The Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014) served as the theoretical framework for the present study (see Figure 1).
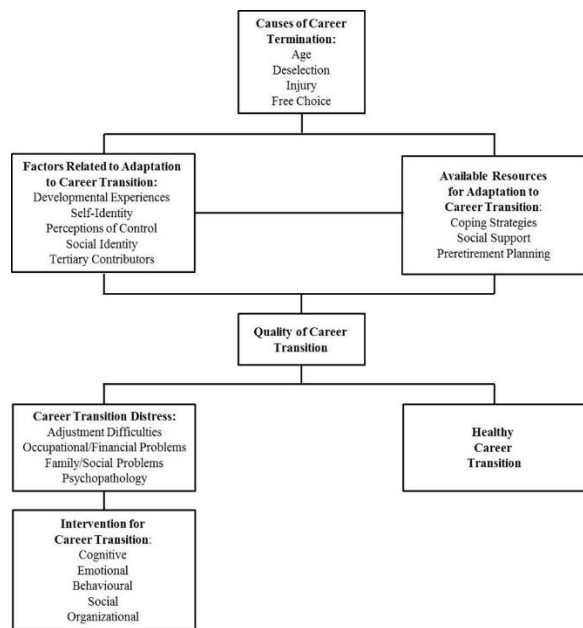
Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014)

While the model is grounded in research on athletes' career transitions in traditional sport contexts, it is useful to conceptualize professional esports players' transitions given esports characteristics such as high-performance in competitive settings and short career spans (Hong, 2018; Smithies et al., 2020; Taylor, 2012). There are four different reasons for career termination including age, deselection, injury, and free choice. The reasons for esports players' career termination may vary but there is limited empirical evidence. Five key factors may impact on athletes' adaptations to career transition as stated in the model. Among those, researchers have found that high-performance athletes suffer identity issues on transition as a result of enjoying only limited opportunities to develop well-rounded identities during their athletic careers (e.g., Lally, 2007; Park et al., 2013).

It is also important for athletes to identify available resources, including coping strategies, social support, and pre-retirement planning, to cope with the demands of transition. When these outweigh available resources, athletes may experience adjustment difficulties, occupational/financial problems, family/social problems, and psychopathology. In such cases, they may require cognitive, emotional, behavioural, social, and organisational interventions. Researchers have highlighted the roles and responsibilities of sport governing bodies/organisations in providing organisational interventions (e.g., Hong & Coffee, 2018; Surujlal, 2016). Responding to these research

findings, Hong and Coffee (2018) identify sport career transition support services/programmes within19 countries. Hong (2022) argues for structured support systems for esports players' career development and transitions and their long-term health and wellbeing. Thus, more empirical evidence on professional esports players' transitions is needed to inform the esports industry and key stakeholders with a view to establishing appropriate career development and transition support services/programmes.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Four retired South Korean professional esports players were interviewed. The criteria for selecting participants were: 1) over 18-year-old; 2) professional esports career of 3 years or more; and 3) retired or retiring from esports. Purposive sampling was applied to recruit participants; this involves researchers making decisions on what needs to be understood and known and searching for individuals able to provide such information based on their lived experiences (Bernard, 2002). The unique nature of the target population presents challenges in recruitment due to the limited number of potential participants. To overcome this, the first author utilised her network that had been developed during previous esports research, which includes the national esports association and professional teams in South Korea. In addition to those interviewed, the research team contacted three more retired professional esports players, however, interviews could not be arranged with them within the timeline of the study due to a lack of responses. While we understood that the minimum sample size should meet theoretical saturation, this can be challenging in certain contexts (van Rijnsoever, 2017). As the aim of the study is to explore the experiences of esports players to provide empirical evidence, not to generalise findings, we proceeded with four participants. This is also related to our consideration of resource constraints (e.g., limited contact points, costs for transcribing, timeline connected to the researchers' time; Lakens, 2022). Further, some researchers claim there are no general rules for sample size in qualitative research (i.e., Patton, 1990) since the judgement of the sample size tends to be implicit (van Rijnsoever, 2017). The participants were all male and between 26 and 31-years-old at the time of data collection ($M = 28.25$, $SD = 1.79$). The length of their esports careers was between 3 and 8 years ($M = 5.75$, $SD = 1.92$) and years of retirement at the time of data collection were between 0 and 9 years ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 3.27$). One participant was at the point of retirement at the time of data collection. Participants 1, 2, and 3

played StarCarft I and II and Participant 4 played League of Legends. At the time of data collection participants held various professional positions; Government officer (Participant 1), Employee of games publisher (Participant 2), Commentator (Participant 3), and Undergoing military services (Participant 4).

2.2. Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore participants' lived experiences (Pezalla et al., 2012). All interviews were conducted in November and December 2019 by the authors via either phone calls (Player 1 and 2) or face-to-face meetings (Player 3 and 4) according to participants' preferences. Once participants confirmed their participation, an information sheet was provided to them, and they were asked to sign a consent form prior to interview in compliance with ethical procedures. Interviews lasted between 36 and 82 minutes (M = 55.75, SD = 17.64). The interview guide was developed based on the literature review (e.g., Lavallee et al., 2014; Park et al., 2013; Stambulova et al., 2009) and discussions between the authors. The interview guide included: (a) background to esports career (e.g., game(s) played, length of professional career, motivation to become a professional player); (b) experiences as a professional player (e.g., training/competition, challenges/stressors); (c) career transition out of esports (e.g., reasons/preparation for retirement, issues faced, coping with the issues, current profession); (d) perceived need for better transitions (e.g., support needed, recommendations). The lead author has interviewed both a number of players (of all levels) and stakeholders in the esports industry as well as active and retired athletes on the topics of career transitions and mental health and wellbeing. The co-author is a former elite athlete who has experienced transitioning out of sport and who is an expert in sport coaching. He has played StarCraft I enthusiastically as an amateur and has followed professional players as a fan. Thus, both authors have an understanding of, and interest in, the topic; this contributed to developing a rapport with the participants.

2.3. Data Analysis

The authors applied thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with an inductive approach that enabled them to identify significant themes across the qualitative data (Braun et al., 2016). Accordingly, the six-steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed. First, all interview data were transcribed verbatim and code names (e.g., Player 1, 2, 3, and 4) were given to each participant to ensure anonymity. Both authors read

and re-read each transcript to be familiar with, and better understand, participants' accounts. Each author made notes and comments during the coding process. Subsequently, these notes and comments were used to identify themes. After cross-examination of codes and themes, the final themes were agreed both authors.

To ensure the robustness of the analysis, the authors held a series of meetings to discuss each step of the analysis process (Morris et al., 2017). The authors also ensured that the sample of participants was consistent with the research aims, conducted pilot interviews, and ensured rigor across the research design and implementation phases. The lead author developed an audit trail by documenting the analytical procedures, which enhanced transparency and coherence (Brown et al., 2018). The authors asked senior colleagues, with extensive backgrounds in qualitative research, to review the data analysis process and identify themes and provide feedback as 'critical friends' (Smith & Caddick, 2012).

3. Results

Four themes were identified from the data: 1) Career Pressure and Uncertainty; 2) Lack of Pre-Retirement Planning; 3) Need for Mentorship; and 4) Need for Realism about Talent. The first theme relates to professional esports players' experiences before retirement, which describes a key part of their professional career and includes the 'Causes of Career Termination'. The second theme concerns their experiences once players had retired from esports or had decided to do so, which is related to 'Factors Related to Adaptation to Career Transition' and 'Available Resources for Adaptation to Career Transition'. The third and fourth themes are concerned with the perceived need for better preparation for the profession, which is also associated with 'Available Resources for Adaptation to Career Transition', 'Quality of Transition', and 'Healthy Career Transition' in the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014).

3.1. Career Pressure and Uncertainty

All participants started their professional careers when at secondary school, or on graduation from it, as their talent became recognised by other professional players, teams, and coaches. However, participants stated that they were aware of their high performance before joining professional teams as their official rankings could be verified. They started playing esports (e.g., StarCraft or League of Legends) for fun but their passion for esports grew as they became recognised by

other players and fans. Players realised that they could enjoy a career they were passionate about. However, playing esports professionally was stressful due to pressure to perform and win. This is because their performance was critically judged by their teams, peer-players, and fans and they felt obligated to perform well as they were paid for playing:

> I had no salary at the beginning of my career as a trainee but enjoyed so much as I was living and training in a gaming house that the team provided, including accommodations, gaming facilities and equipment. But I started feeling a lot of pressure as I got my salary. I thought I had to be good all the time […] Too much pressure when competing (Player 3).

Player 4 did not experience significant pressure while competing as his desire to win overcame this. However, he found the professional environment to be challenging and stressful when losing; this experience was shared by the other three players: "I think I enjoyed competitions. If I won, I felt so rewarded. But it was really difficult to get over if I lost. […] Also, you need to deal with criticism from the fans, which can be very painful". Player 4 emphasised fans' criticism via social networking services (SNS); he played the most popular game (League of Legends) and his career coincided with the dramatic growth of SNS.

As players aged, they experienced pressure from having to compete with up-and-coming younger players. Player 1 remarked, "we usually say 'we can't compete with teenagers". He had observed a decrease in his physical ability to respond quickly and accurately as he aged. This was also due to too much training while being physically inactive for a long time. This experience was shared by the other three players although all participants made an effort to exercise during their careers: "I tried to make some time for exercise during my training and competition time. Although the team provided fitness club membership, it depended on each player. Not all were interested in it, but I was" (Player 2). All participants highlighted the importance of engaging in regular exercise and physical activity to optimise performance: "some are doing their exercise and physical activities, but most players are not aware of the importance of it as they are young. They do not see that it is necessary" (Player 4).

Participants also struggled with uncertainty. When they performed well and won competitions, they did not think about the future. However, they experienced anxiety when losing, with an awareness that there were many young talented players who could replace them:

"there was no job security, which made me so anxious" (Player 1).

For all participants, their obligation to undergo military service, typically in their early 20s, as South Korean men, also created uncertainty as they were unsure whether this obligation would interfere with their esports careers. There was a special military services arrangements for esports players called 'Air Force Ace' for a limited period. Some professional players who played StarCraft at the time were able to continue to play esports while doing their military service. Player 3 was one of them. However, the arrangement was terminated during his service due to a match fixing scandal, and a decrease in the popularity of the game due to the transition from StarCraft I to StarCraft II. The transition from StarCraft I to StarCraft II, created major uncertainty for three players (Players 1, 2, and 3). StarCraft I was exceptionally popular in Korea and contributed to the growth of esports culture. However, many professional teams were disbanded, and a number of players retired as the game publisher introduced StarCraft II and encouraged (or forced) players to transition from StarCraft I to II. The three players become discouraged as they were not as interested in and passionate about StarCraft II as they were about StarCraft I. They observed that StarCraft II was not as popular as StarCraft I used to be and, consequently, reduced opportunities to advance their careers.

Overall, the reasons for players' retirement decisions include job insecurity, resulting from e.g., short contracts, decrease in players' competitive advantage as they age, significant changes in games played, and the obligation to undergo military service.

3.2. Lack of Pre-Retirement Planning

The responses from all participants in relation to the initial stage of their post-retirement careers were similar. They did not have clear ideas on what to do next due to lack of pre-retirement planning: "I didn't know what to do, honestly. I didn't have any other experience but gaming" (Player 1); "I did some part time jobs after retirement as I didn't know what to do as my next job, but I had to go to military services first" (Player 2). Player 3 thought he could go back to his team once he finished his military service, but it was not possible: "after military services, I didn't know what to do. I guess it was the most difficult time for me to explore other career options without being a professional player". Thus, he expended much effort contacting people to find a secure job. Eventually, he started a new career as a commentator for esports competitions. However, it took some time for him to settle down as he

earned only on a freelance basis, which was hard to generate a secure income. Player 2 was offered a job from a game publisher, and he perceived that he was lucky to have a career in the esports industry with which he was familiar. However, he stated that he had a 'very hard time' due to identity loss (e.g., "I am not a professional player anymore") and regret (e.g., "why I did not prepare anything for future"), feelings shared with other players. He stated that he was more satisfied with his current profession than with being a professional player due to now enjoying job security.

Player 1 stated that he wanted to enter a profession unrelated to esports although he was not prepared to do anything. He had read a news article about a retired professional esports player who had successfully transitioned from being an esports player to being a government officer, well-known for its job security in Korea. The player's story inspired and motivated him. He had just obtained a government officer post at the time of data collection and was very satisfied with its job security. Player 4 had just decided to retire. Although he was offered a job as a professional team coach, after his military service, as he was one of the leading players in Korea, he was unsure whether he wanted to be a coach or something else. It was not easy for him to accept no longer being a professional player. He was in the process of exploring different career options but completing his military service might require to be a priority.

3.3. Need for Mentorship

While a lack of pre-retirement planning was identified as a major issue when players decided to retire and explore other career options, they also recognised a lack of mentorship when preparing for life after esports. Since players were unaware of any successful transitions, they had to start 'from scratch'. While players observed that many of those retired transitioned to occupations such as running streaming services and YouTube channels, they found these to be limiting options: "there is no one who is remembered after retirement. Some survived out of YouTube, Africa TV, etc. but there is no bright future for esports players yet. It is sad reality" (Player 3). This perspective was also shared by other players. Player 3 mentioned some retired esports players who transitioned to becoming poker players; some of them were very successful. However, he mentioned that he wanted something safer and more secure.

As mentioned earlier, Player 1 decided to become a government officer inspired by a retired esports player. He highlighted the need of mentorship. Due to /limited information about what paths other retired players had taken, it was hard for him to explore his career options:

"we need some different successful stories from other senior players who retired before us and found some new career pathways to inspire young players. We can learn from their first-hand experience" (Player 1). This perspective was also shared by the other three players. It was stressed that mentorship should be provided by professional teams, national associations, or other relevant authorities, not only by individuals themselves. Young players may be unaware of the importance of pre-retirement planning when actively competing: "players won't listen during their active careers, so it is important for teams, coaches, KeSpa [national esports association in South Korea], other governing bodies to provide education and mentoring support" (Player 4).

3.4. Need for Realism about Talent

Based on their experience of being professional players and transitioning out of esports, all participants highlighted that playing esports 'for fun' is completely different from playing esports professionally, the latter requires extensive commitments, coping constantly with pressure and stressors, and maintaining their competitive advantage over other professional players. They were concerned about young people keen to become professional players without being aware of the commitments and responsibility involved. More importantly, they emphasised that young people interested in becoming professional players needed to be critical and realistic about their talent as players. Since most esports games provide rankings, it is straightforward for individuals to check if they have potential to be a professional player or not: "if you are not talented enough, don't do it. […] do not overestimate yourself. Be realistic" (Player 4); "you will need to be very critical about yourself. You need to check if you are really talented or not and are ready to commit wholeheartedly to training and competition. It has to be very clear" (Player 1).

While all participants started their professional careers by their talent being recognised at a young age, maintaining a successful career was challenging given the extreme competition. Participants suggested that young people needed to be more aware of different career pathways in the esports industry if they had a strong passion for esports but were not likely to be successful professional players.

4. Discussion

The present study explores retired/retiring players' experiences of transitioning out of esports so that young players, who are currently professional players or aim to become professional players, can understand the process and have a better idea of how to prepare for life

after esports. The findings also indicate the importance of external support from key stakeholders such as professional teams, national associations, and other relevant authorities, which is closely associated with Organisational Intervention for Career Transition in the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014) for players' high quality and healthy career transitions. In this regard, Hong and Coffee (2018) claimed that such organisational support from sport governing bodies/organisations as well as practitioners play a critical role in high-performance athletes' transition out of sport.

To the authors' knowledge, this is the first qualitative study to provide in-depth insights into esports players' career transitions. Thus, the findings contribute to both literature and practice by providing empirical evidence on players' transitions. In terms of contributions to the literature, the findings provide insights into the challenges and stressors faced by professional players (career pressure and uncertainty) as well as their retirement decisions. While the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014) suggests four different causes of career termination (age, deselection, injury, free choice), the findings in this study provide a range of reasons for transition out of esports (job insecurity, resulting from short contracts, decrease in players' competitive advantage as they age, significant changes in games played, and the obligation to undergo military service). Job insecurity due to short contracts or failure to renew contracts may be similar to deselection and decrease in players' competitive advantage as they age is associated with age in the framework. However, significant changes in games played can be considered as a unique cause in esports, compared to traditional sport, and military duty may be only applied to players in a country where such military service is required, such as, South Korea.

The study also identifies players' struggles to explore other career options while experiencing identity loss and pursuing job security, which is presented in the framework (e.g., self-identity, perceptions of control, and social identity). The need for both players to better prepare for life after esports (i.e., importance of pre-retirement planning and need for mentorship) and for advice for young, aspiring players (i.e., being realistic about their talent) were also identified. As suggested in the framework, players' coping skills to manage the pressure and uncertainty of a professional esports career, social support from mentors and other key stakeholders, and developing pre-retirement planning can be beneficial. These are significant practical implications that the industry and key stakeholders may appropriately consider when developing career support systems for esports players.

Professional players, although they typically started playing esports 'for fun', experience pressure due to the competitive professional environment, which causes financial and job insecurity. Financial and job insecurity were frequently mentioned by participants although the participants had contacts with well-known and well-established professional teams and were highly paid during their careers. Since esports professional career can be short, as elite sport is, such pressure and concerns are inevitable for both esports professional players and high-performance athletes in traditional sport (Hong, 2022; Park et al., 2013). Whilst a small number of professional players enjoy financial security from yearly contracts (Todorov, 2022; Smithies et al., 2020), many or most professional players experience insecurity. While professional players at the highest level enjoy yearly contracts, this may actually increase the pressure to enhance their performance in order better to compete with younger and talented players who may replace them. It should also be noted that professional players may have restricted opportunities to further their careers due to merciless contractual demands, which may also cause players' rights violations (Witkowski & Manning, 2019). The issues of financial and job insecurity, and the pressure to stay competitive in order to deal with such issues, are also associated with the short careers of professional players. This is reflective of participants' advice to young players to be realistic about their talent given that they need to manage the pressure of maintaining high-performance and a competitive advantage as well as committing to training. Players also require coping with the uncertainty of relatively short professional careers which may be effectively terminated by younger talented players.

Professional players' careers are inevitably short since high-performance depends on the ability to respond to complex visual stimuli quickly and accurately; such ability is likely to decline after 24-years-of age (Thompson et al., 2014). However, participants emphasised they engaged in regular exercise and physical activity in order to stay fit for competition and intensive training on a daily basis. This may be a contributing factor to their longer than average careers (which are about 2 years; Ward & Harmon, 2019), and requires consideration by active professional players, young aspiring players and key industry stakeholders. Researchers have expressed concern about esports players' excessive sedentary behaviour (Tremblay et al., 2017); professional players spend approximately 15 hours per day training. Such behaviour can be related to players' poor physical, psychological, and cognitive health (de Rezende et al., 2014). In this regard, some professional players may need to terminate their career prematurely or take unplanned breaks due to injuries including carpal tunnel

syndrome, tennis elbow, and back pain (Jolly, 2019). Furthermore, the demands of training and competition may also cause stress, mental illness, and poor decision-making due to the demands of training and competition (Wattanapisit et al., 2020). Thus, players and key stakeholders should pay more attention to players' engagement in exercise and physical activity not only for the sake of their careers but also their overall health and wellbeing.

As mentioned earlier, findings identified in terms of the causes of career termination reflect all participants being South Korean. Not all factors may apply to players in other countries, in particular the duty of military service. However, since professional players now have more opportunities to join international teams, this may be a key factor for Korean players themselves and international professional teams that wish to recruit Korean players. The transition from StarCraft I to StarCraft II can be considered as a unique phenomenon and experience for the Korean professional players who played these games. However, more generally, it is likely that players that will continue to be required to retire due to games being amended or superseded. This matter might also be appropriately considered by industry stakeholders; specifically, those responsible for player welfare. Furthermore, in the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014), causes of athletes' career terminations (e.g., age, deselection, injury, free choice) are identified but empirical evidence on the causes of professional esports players' transition out of esports remains sparse. Thus, the findings on the causes of transition contribute to literature while further research should be conducted to identify other significant causes in order to reduce the incidence of premature retirement.

Professional players struggled with exploring other career options on retirement due to a lack of pre-retirement planning, this is in line with the findings of Johnson and Woodcock (2021) that professional players tend to sacrifice other domains of their lives, which limit opportunities to be engaged in other activities that help develop wider interests and skills (Hong, 2022). In the traditional sport context, researchers have highlighted the importance of pre-retirement planning for smooth and successful transitions (e.g., Park et al., 2013). As highlighted in the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014), pre-retirement planning is key to coping with the demands of transition. Its absence caused the professional players in the study to face career transition distress, in particular, occupational and financial problems as indicated in the model. This evidence should be considered when establishing support for transitioning professional esports players. Having dual careers, in particular combining sport and higher education, has been

recommended to better prepare for life after sport (e.g., Ryan, 2015). Since all participants started their professional careers when at secondary school or shortly after, feelings of 'being lost' may be intensified due to being 'institutionalised' by esports and their strong identities as professional players from a young age. In the esports context, it has been argued that it is critical to balance esports commitments and education especially when preparing for life post-retirement (Hong, 2022). Thus, professional teams, national/international associations and other relevant authorities may need to consider creating an environment to encourage young players to have dual careers. Participants also experienced identity loss upon retirement due to being well-known players and heavily committed to esports. Such identity loss is also considered as a significant issue in the traditional sport context (e.g., Lally, 2007). Thus, it is important to create a healthy culture that encourages young players to develop well-rounded identities while competing, this will be helped by having dual careers and careful pre-retirement planning.

Participants highlighted the importance of mentorship. Taking the example of Player 1, he made a decision to become a government officer after reading an article about an ex-player who followed the same path. While the result was beneficial, it was fortuitous. Thus, the participants proposed that mentorship should be provided by professional teams, national associations, or other relevant authorities, so that players are aware of what happens in life after esports and how to prepare for it. Participants emphasised the importance of job security when choosing post-retirement careers. This is unsurprising given their struggles with job insecurity during their esports careers; many other players may face the same issue (Smithies et al., 2020). All stakeholders need to make a collective effort to solve the issue in order to contribute to both players' overall wellbeing and the sustainability of the industry.

5. Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence on esports professional players' transitions out of esports, providing life lessons and implications for theory and practice. However, this study is subject to some limitations. The study focuses on the in-depth accounts of four Korean professional players; the findings may therefore be limited in terms of their applicability to other populations. Future studies should investigate professional players in other countries to provide more generalizable conclusions. While we previously justified the small sample size due to the unique population characteristics, as well as resource constraints, future studies should consider a larger

sample size to meet theoretical saturation. All participants in this study are male. Since there are more female players in recent times, compared to when the current participants competed, future studies should also investigate female players' experience of transitioning out of esports. The current study was designed as cross-sectional, with the authors conducting only one interview per participant. While still providing useful insights, future researchers might consider conducting longitudinal studies to examine professional players' adaptation to retirement.

Overall, it is hoped that the current findings will contribute to young players becoming more aware of life after esports and key stakeholders establishing career support systems for players. Furthermore, the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014) serves as a valuable theoretical framework to better understand professional players' transitions out of esports. Future researchers might usefully build on this by developing a tailored theoretical model for esports players based on empirical and theoretical evidence.

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