1 **Abstract**

2 This study explored the experiences of retired esports players, focusing particularly on their

3 transition out of esports. Utilizing a qualitative approach, interviews were conducted with four

4 retired professional esports players in South Korea. A thematic analysis revealed four recurring

5 themes: Career Pressure and Uncertainty; Lack of Pre-Retirement Planning; Demand for

6 Mentorship Support; and Necessity for a Realistic Perspective on Talent. The findings

7 indicated that significant pressure and financial insecurity during their careers often catalyzed

8 the players' decisions to retire. Players were unprepared for post-esports life due to inadequate

9 pre-retirement planning. This study highlights the crucial roles of mentorship and realistic

10 talent assessments in facilitating smoother career transitions. The main contribution of this

11 research lies in its empirical evidence, which stresses the need for structured support systems

12 for esports players transitioning out of professional gaming. Stakeholders within the esports

13 industry can utilize these findings to formulate policies and programs aimed at providing

14 financial assistance, career planning, mentorship, and guidance to players during their careers

15 and upon retirement. The outcomes of this study can serve as a foundation for future research

16 by clarifying the necessity for broader investigations into the experiences of esports players

17 and the development of practical strategies to mitigate their transition challenges.

18 *Keywords*: career transitions in esports; career planning and development; esports players; life

19 after esports; support systems.

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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

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

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

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

74   can inform the development of tailored support for the target population in practice. The study

75   also presents the challenges, stressors, and uncertainties that professional players confront in

76   their careers and sheds light on the factors that influence their decisions to retire, thereby

77   making a valuable contribution to the literature.

78   **Literature Review**

79   **Esports in the Korean Context**

80   It should be emphasized that South Korea (hereafter referred to as Korea) played a

81   pivotal role in the early growth and development of esports both on a national and international

82   scale. Internet cafés, colloquially known as PC bangs in Korea, created an environment

83   conducive to competition and spectatorship as early as 1998 (Jin, 2020). Another significant

84   milestone in Korean esports was the establishment of the 21st Century Pro-Game Association

85   in 2000, later renamed the Korea e-Sports Association (KeSPA) in October 2003 (Korea e-

86   Sports Association, 2019). Notably, this was the world's first association for esports at the

87   national level. KeSPA implemented essential regulations and principles, and organized esports

88   leagues, substantially contributing to Korea's influence on the global esports industry (Jin,

89   2020). Korean esports' influence has extended beyond popular culture, shaping the industry's

90   development worldwide (Rea, 2016). Given this context, it is highly valuable to investigate the

91   experiences of retired Korean esports professionals, especially those who launched their

92   careers during the initial surge and prosperity of esports culture in the 2000s, to garner their

93   insights into the transition out of esports.

94   Whilst other countries such as the U.S. used the term of "electronic sports" in the 1990s,

95   Koreans used different terms including cyber athletics, digital athletics, or pro-gaming to

96   describe what is now globally known as esports (Jin, 2020). Since its introduction by Ji-Won

97   Park, Minister of the Department of Culture and Tourism in 2000 at the inaugural meeting of

98   the KeSPA, the term "esports" has gained official recognition. (Ministry of Culture, Sports,

99   and Tourism, 2008; Samsung Economic Research Institute, 2005). The active acceptance of

100   the Internet and the significant growth of esports in Korea can be attributed to different factors

101   including the determined mindset of the Korean people, their awareness of the potential

102   challenges caused by globalization, as well as political and historical contexts that shape the

103   Korea of today (Jin, 2010). Jin (2020) identified three significant milestones in the growth of

104   esports in Korea including "the introduction of PC communications like Hitel until 1998, the

105   introduction of StarCraft and PC bang, and the emergence of esports broadcasting and the

106   institutionalization of spectatorship in the Korean context until 2002" (p.3727). These key

107   periods indeed led to the prosperity of esports in Korea and particularly the introduction of

108   StartCraft booted the esports phenomenon. Rea (2019) described such phenomenon as "a boon

109   for Korean digital gaming culture, arriving as it did at the height of PC bang expansion.

110   StarCraft became a pop culture sensation in Korean seemingly overnight" (p. 120).

111   Reflecting this phenomenon, the Korean Air Force extended its involvement in esports

112   by sponsoring Air Force Challenges e-Sports (ACE), a professional esports team affiliated with

113   the military branch (Taylor, 2012). Korea still maintains a mandatory military service system

114   for men, requiring them to spend at least 18 months in military service, usually in their early

115   twenties (Kim et al., 2016). This results in an educational or career break during this period.

116   Given this societal context, ACE could serve as a great opportunity for the professional players

117   to further develop their career profiles while fulfilling their military services. As Cho (2008)

118   notes, "The Ace has been the only place where young professional gamers can continue their

119   career while completing the mandatory military service — an inevitable choice for most players

120   because their peak time as a gamer overlaps their military conscription age" (para. 7). Since its

121   establishment in 2006, talented StarCraft players including "Lim Yo-Hwan" have served their

122   military service obligations while continuing to compete until the ACE team was disbanded in

123   2012 (Oh, 2020).   While this demonstrates the influence and power of esports culture on

124   Korean society, the disbandment of the professional team may have had a significant impact

125   on some individuals. The glory of StarCraft came to an end as major esports match-fixing

126   scandals occurred. In October 2015, several professional StarCraft 2 players in Korea have

127   been arrested on accusations of engaging in match-fixing and participating in illegal betting

128   activities; two of them have been even banned for life (Yin-Poole, 2015). In April 2016, BBC

129   (2016) also reported that two professional Starcraft 2 players have been charged with match

130   fixing, which negatively impacted the reputation of the game.

131   It is also important to consider the influence and association of the Korean culture with

132   the esports culture, in particular educational culture, and system. The outcomes of the Program

133   for International Student Assessment (PISA), a renowned global assessment initiative, revealed

134   that Korea demonstrated remarkable performance in the mathematics, reading, and science. In

135   this respect, the Korean education system is widely recognized for its strong emphasis on

136   student assessment, particularly through regular examinations. This emphasis, though, has

137   engendered dissatisfaction, stress, and a host of challenges among students, such as intense

138   competition and financial burden. The role of educational achievement in national development

139   is undeniable, yet the adverse effects of an excessive focus on exams have become increasingly

140   apparent. These negative impacts manifest in student unhappiness and a disconnect between

141   workforce requirements and the expectations of companies (Heo et al., 2018). Korea is a

142   society that values competitiveness and places a strong emphasis on academic performance

143   and achievement. Such emphasis arises from the belief that achieving high academic success

144   leads to a successful life, including entering top-tier universities, securing desirable

145   employment, and building stronger social networks (Lee, 2013). While such competitiveness

146   and drive for high performance have positively influence the growth and prosperity of esports

147   culture in Korea (Jin, 2020), the social pressure placed on academic achievement may leave

148   esports players vulnerable. Many Koreans still prioritize studying over playing games and may

149   perceive gaming with disdain. Thus, young people who pursue their esports careers can face

150   challenges in balancing their commitment to both studying gaming as they endeavor to meet

151   social expectations.

152   **Career Transitions in Esports**

153   Esports players tend to have a short career span, with one in five professional esports

154   players competing for only about two years (Ward & Harmon, 2019). This is due to the fact

155   that esports players rely heavily on their ability to respond quickly and accurately to complex

156   visual stimuli, which may begin to decline after the age of 24 (Thompson et al., 2014). As a

157   result, players may find it challenging to remain at the top of their game as they age (Smithies

158   et al., 2020). Many individuals begin playing esports at a young age, and some even leave

159   school prematurely to pursue careers as professional esports players (Hattenstone, 2017; Martin,

160   2019), limiting their opportunities to explore other career options after retiring from esports

161   (Smithies et al., 2020). Similarly, in traditional sports, adolescent high-performance athletes

162   often prioritize their sport over education, resulting in a lack of pre-retirement planning and

163   career qualifications, and difficulties transitioning out of sport (Park et al., 2013). Dual careers

164   have been proposed as a solution to this issue, with high-performance athletes maintaining

165   careers in both sport and other areas, such as education or work (Stambulova & Wylleman,

166   2014). Likewise, Johnson and Woodcock (2021) have highlighted the precariousness of being

167   a professional esports player, as players may need to sacrifice other aspects of their lives to

168   commit to training and competitions. As reported by Hattenstone (2017), many esports players

169   begin their professional careers at a young age, typically between 16 and 20 years old, as there

170   are no age restrictions to play professionally. An early onset of a professional esports career

171   may consequently lead some players to relinquish their education to chase their esports

172   aspirations. This phenomenon is not unique to esports, as it has also been reported among

173 adolescent athletes with dual careers in traditional sports who prioritize sport over education

174 (Cosh & Tully, 2014). Given that many esports players are of an age where they are attending

175 secondary schools or universities, there is a need for guidelines on the dual careers of esports

176 players. Such guidelines would raise awareness of the challenges faced by players and the need

177 for support from stakeholders, including teams, federations, sponsors, educational institutions,

178 and parents, to enhance their well-being during and after their esports careers. Managing dual

179 careers and developing the necessary skills to balance various obligations is critical for overall

180 health and well-being (Hong & Connelly, 2022). This makes it crucial for esports players to

181 synchronize their professional obligations with education, providing thorough readiness for life

182 post-retirement (Hong, 2022). Researchers have investigated diverse aspects of esports, such

183 as the stressors professional esports players face, coping strategies they employ, and the role

184 of stakeholders in securing player health and well-being. Even so, there remains a dearth of

185 studies focusing on the unique experiences of esports players during their careers and in their

186 retirement (Smithies et al., 2020).

187   Esports players' short career spans may be due to a lack of financial and job security.

188 McCutcheon and Hitchens (2020) define esports professionals as individuals who primarily

189 earn their income through the provision of esports services, including professional players,

190 coaches, and team managers. Every esports player in all levels in the world may be

191 economically exploited by game publishers/developers as they heavily consume esports games

192 and must commit to training and competitions to reach higher levels and become professional

193 players who generate significant income through their esports career (Witkowski & Manning,

194 2019). This financial insecurity is particularly evident in lower level esports players who do

195 not enjoy stable incomes or sponsorship. Esports players may be at significant risk of

196 experiencing both financial and career insecurity (Witkowski & Manning, 2019). While some

197 top-level professional players may generate considerable income and enjoy financial security

198   during their careers (Todorov, 2022), most players at lower levels do not. Tournament income,

199   serving as a major financial source for professional players, amplifies career pressure and the

200   motivation to perform. Yet, the achievement of financial security remains a difficult endeavor

201   for many, with only a handful of top players maintaining the necessary high-level performance

202   amid the intensely competitive setting of esports (Johnson & Woodcock, 2021). The prevailing

203   notion that players are highly replaceable further compounds this precarious situation. Even

204   those with successful track records may find themselves deselected from their professional

205   teams (Van Allen, 2018). This insecurity can lead to a lack of pre-retirement planning, which

206   may cause players to struggle during and after their esports careers (Smithies et al., 2020).

207   Esports players' financial and career insecurity may be addressed through pre-retirement

208   planning, as it is critical for both high-performance athletes and professional esports players to

209   mitigate financial and transitional issues and ensure healthy and smooth transitions (Hong,

210   2022; Park et al., 2013; Smithies et al., 2020). Some high-performance athletes, like some

211   esports players, enjoy early financial success but may struggle with financial issues in post-

212   athletic life due to a lack of financial literacy and self-management skills (Hong & Fraser,

213   2021). Esports players' limited opportunities for career development due to their financially

214   punitive contracts violate their rights and cause struggles (Witkowski & Manning, 2019). In

215   this respect, the esports industry should establish structured systems to support esports players'

216   transitions out of esports, including career planning assistance, mentoring, and guidance during

217   their careers and post-retirement, to address the financial and career insecurity of esports

218   players (Smithies et al., 2020).

219   Existing research on the transitions of esports players, albeit sparse, stresses the

220   importance of this topic. It highlights the unique skill sets these players possess, which could

221   be transferred to other domains, and the absence of structured support systems within the

222   esports industry (Smithies et al., 2020; Hong, 2022). In contrast, the transition of high-

223   performance athletes out of traditional sports has received considerable attention, giving rise

224   to supportive measures like career assistance programs (Hong & Coffee, 2018; Torregrossa et

225   al., 2020). With these considerations in mind, the focus of this study is to explore the

226   experiences of esports players who have retired or are about to retire. This is to provide insights

227   that could prepare younger players for their own transitions. This study, by exploring both the

228   challenges and opportunities faced by retired esports players, seeks to establish the basis for

229   the creation of structured support systems that can assist esports players during and after their

230   careers.

231   **Theoretical Framework**

232   The process of athletes' transitions has been studied by sport psychology researchers

233   using theoretical models such as the Athletic Career Termination Model (Taylor & Ogilvie,

234   1994), the Analytical Career Model (Stambulova, 1994), and the Holistic Athletic Career

235   Model (Wylleman, 2019; for additional frameworks, see Stambulova et al., 2021). Among

236   those well-establish theoretical framework examining career transitions in sport, the

237   Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014) was chosen as the

238   theoretical framework for this study, as shown in Figure 1. This is because the framework

239   provides a comprehensive overview of the process of transition out of sport including causes

240   of career termination, factors influencing athletes' adaptation to career transition, the resources

241   available for coping with transitions, the potential challenges associated with career transitions,

242   and intervention that can support athletes during such period. Whilst there have not been any

243   established frameworks particularly focused on transition out of esports, adopting such well-

244   established framework from the similar context can help provide valuable insights into the

245   esports context and potentially contribute to the development of a theoretical framework

246   specific to esports.

247   [Figure 1 near here]

248   The Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014) was

249   initially developed based on research on athletes' transitions in traditional sports but can also

250   be applied to professional esports players due to the unique characteristics of esports, such as

251   high-performance in competitive settings and short career spans (Hong, 2018; Smithies et al.,

252   2020; Taylor, 2012). According to the model, there are four reasons for career termination: age,

253   deselection, injury, and free choice. While the reasons for esports players' career termination

254   may vary, there is limited empirical evidence available. The model identifies five key factors

255   that may impact athletes' adaptation to career transition. Research has shown that high-

256   performance athletes may experience identity issues during their transition due to limited

257   opportunities to develop well-rounded identities during their athletic careers (Lally, 2007; Park

258   et al., 2013). It is important for athletes to identify available resources, such as coping strategies,

259   social support, and pre-retirement planning, to handle the demands of career transition. When

260   the demands of transition outweigh the available resources, athletes may experience various

261   difficulties, such as occupational or financial problems, family or social problems, and

262   psychopathology. In such cases, athletes may require cognitive, emotional, behavioral, social,

263   and organizational interventions. Research has highlighted the role of sports governing bodies

264   and organizations in providing organizational interventions (Hong & Coffee, 2018; Surujlal,

265   2016). There have been some studies that have found the existence of career assistance

266   programs for athletes, as shown by Hong and Coffee (2018) and Torregrosa et al. (2020). Hong

267   and Coffee (2018) identified such programs in 19 different countries, indicating that sport

268   governing bodies and organizations are making efforts to establish support systems for athletes

269   during their transitions. While these steps are promising, the research exploring athletes'

270   interactions with organizational interventions during their transition remains scarce. They also

271   claimed that the effectiveness of such programs has not been examined, and more research is

272   needed to assess their efficacy. Although there is currently no research on career assistance

273   programs specifically for esports players, Hong (2022) emphasizes the importance of

274   structured support systems for their career development, transitions, and overall health and

275   wellbeing. To develop such support systems, it is critical to understand esports players' unique

276   career path across different stages of their esports careers. This requires further investigation

277   to establish a solid framework that conceptualizes these stages and considers the associated

278   demands, challenges, and available resources (Salo, 2017). In this regard, it is also crucial to

279   gather more empirical evidence on professional esports players' transitions to inform the

280   industry and key stakeholders in establishing appropriate career development and transition

281   support services/programs.

282   **Methods**

283   The present study is an exploratory study, which can contribute to theory-building

284   within the subject area (Mollick, 2014). By applying a qualitative approach, we sought to

285   provide in-depth narrative of Korean retired professional esports players' experiences of

286   transitioning out of esports. As we adopted a relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology,

287   we recognize that individuals construct their own perceptions of the social world based upon

288   their "subjectivities, interests, emotions, and values" (Sparkes, 1992, p. 5). To achieve a more

289   comprehensive understanding of participants' subjective experiences, we employed semi-

290   structured interviews as a meaning-oriented methodology (McArdle et al., 2012). By utilizing

291   this approach, we were able to explore participants' perspectives and gain valuable insights

292   into how they interpreted and made sense of their experiences.

293   **Participants**

294   To select participants for this study, the researchers interviewed four retired South

295   Korean professional esports players who met the following criteria: 1) were over the age of 18;

296 2) had a professional esports career of three years or more; and 3) were retired or retiring from

297 esports. The researchers utilized purposive sampling to recruit participants, as this method

298 allows for the selection of individuals who can provide information based on their lived

299 experiences (Bernard, 2002). The researchers faced challenges in recruitment due to the limited

300 number of potential participants but overcame this by utilizing their network that had been

301 developed during previous esports research, which includes the national esports association

302 and professional teams in South Korea.

303   All participants were male, between 26 and 31 years old ($M = 28.25$, $SD = 1.79$), had

304 esports careers of 3 to 8 years ($M = 5.75$, $SD = 1.92$), and had retired between 0 and 9 years

305 prior to data collection ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 3.27$). One participant was retiring at the time of data

306 collection. Participants 1, 2, and 3 played StarCarft I and II, while Participant 4 played League

307 of Legends. They were all high-profile retired athletes who were part of the top-tier

308 professional teams in their respective game. At the time of data collection, the participants held

309 various professional positions, including government officer (Participant 1), employee of

310 games publisher (Participant 2), commentator (Participant 3), and undergoing military services

311 (Participant 4).

312   The decision to include a small sample size of four high-profile participants in this study

313 was based on several factors. While the authors initially aimed to recruit between six and eight

314 high-profile participants considering the potential challenges related to accessing such specific

315 population, they could not reach the targeted number. A small sample size was regarded as

316 appropriate for the study since the authors and officers from the national esports association

317 and professional teams made every possible effort to maximize the sample size within the given

318 timeframe. Given resource limitations including restricted contact points, transcription costs,

319 and researcher time constraints (Lakens, 2022), the decision to include these four participants

320 was shaped. Despite these restrictions, the national esports association and professional teams

321   specifically recommended these individuals owing to their unparalleled and expert perspectives

322   on the experiences of esports players. The insights and perspectives provided by these

323   participants were deemed of high value in the context of the study's objective, offering

324   empirical evidence on the subject matter. As such, the researchers decided to maximize the

325   data's worth by centering their attention on a compact yet expert group of participants. The

326   study's findings should be interpreted not as universally applicable, but as a significant input

327   to the literature documenting the experiences of esports players. Despite this, it is critical to

328   emphasize that the present study stands as a pioneering examination, setting the groundwork

329   for forthcoming research by outlining initial findings.

330   **Procedure**

331   To gain insight into the experiences of retired or retiring esports players, the authors

332   conducted semi-structured interviews with four South Korean professional esports players who

333   met the selection criteria (Pezalla et al., 2012). The interviews were conducted between

334   November and December 2019, either via phone calls or face-to-face meetings, based on

335   participants' preferences. Three interviews were conducted by the lead author and the

336   remaining one interview was conducted by both authors, who are Korean. Prior to the interview,

337   participants received an information sheet and were asked to sign a consent form in compliance

338   with ethical procedures. All participants provided their consent before the commencement of

339   their interviews. The interviews lasted between 36 and 82 minutes ($M = 55.76$, $SD = 17.64$).

340   The interview guide was developed through a literature review and discussions between the

341   authors, drawing on works such as Lavallee et al. (2014), Park et al. (2013), and Stambulova

342   et al. (2009).

343   The interview guide was developed to explore participants' experiences with esports

344   career transitions. The guide included four main sections. Section A focused on the background

345   of participants' esports careers, including the game(s) they played, the length of their

346   professional career, and their motivation to become a professional player. Sample questions for

347   this section include: What game(s) did you play professionally? How long was your

348   professional esports career? What motivated you to become a professional esports player?

349   Section B aimed to understand participants' experiences as professional players, including their

350   training and competition routines and any challenges or stressors they encountered. Sample

351   questions for this section include: What was your training regimen like as a professional player?

352   How did you manage the stress of competition? What were some of the biggest challenges you

353   faced as a professional player? Section C focused on participants' career transitions out of

354   esports, including their reasons for retirement, how they prepared for retirement, and any issues

355   or difficulties they faced during the transition. Sample questions for this section include: What

356   led to your decision to retire from esports? How did you prepare for retirement? What were

357   some of the biggest issues or difficulties you faced during your transition out of esports? Lastly,

358   Section D aimed to understand participants' perceptions of the need for better transitions in

359   esports, including any support they felt they needed and any recommendations they had for

360   improving the transition process. Sample questions for this section include: What type of

361   support did you receive during your transition out of esports? What type of support did you

362   feel you needed but did not receive? What recommendations do you have for improving the

363   transition process for esports players? By exploring these four areas, the interview guide aimed

364   to provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and needs of retired or retiring

365   esports players during the transition process.

366   The authors of this study possess a wealth of relevant experience in esports and sport

367   coaching. The lead author has conducted interviews with players and stakeholders across all

368   levels of the esports industry, as well as with active and retired athletes, on the topics of career

369   transitions and mental health and wellbeing. Meanwhile, the co-author is a former elite athlete

370   and sport coaching expert who has also played StarCraft I as an amateur and followed

371   professional players as a fan. This collective experience and interest in the topic have helped

372   to establish a rapport with the participants and enriched the study's insights.

Data analysis and rigor

374   The authors employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis to detect

375   significant patterns in the data set. This method was utilized to conduct a systematic and

376   comprehensive analysis of the data, in accordance with Braun et al.'s (2016) recommendations.

377   The data was transcribed verbatim to ensure a thorough understanding of the data. Since all

378   interviews were conducted in Korean, the lead author translated the quotes used in this paper

379   while developing the Results section. To preserve confidentiality, each participant was

380   assigned a code name (e.g., Player 1, 2, 3, and 4). During the coding process, the authors took

381   initial notes on the participants' experiences of transitioning out of esports while reading and

382   re-reading each manuscript. Based on the initial notes from both authors, the notes were

383   thoroughly reviewed and refined by the lead author resulting in 90 codes identified. These

384   codes were then used for the next step to identify themes. To ensure the trustworthiness of the

385   findings, the authors had three different meetings to discuss the initial codes and common

386   themes identified from the data, with discussions held via video or phone call. These meetings

387   were used to finalize the themes and achieve consensus on the identified themes. Out of 90

388   codes, 18 potential themes were identified, and they were eventually categorized into four

389   themes as final themes. To guarantee the accuracy and transparency of the findings, each theme

390   was explicitly named and defined. The authors also reviewed Braun and Clarke's (2006) 15-

391   point checklist for a good thematic analysis to ensure the quality of the analytic process

392   throughout the six steps. By following this rigorous approach to data analysis, the authors

393   aimed to ensure the credibility and reliability of their findings, and to provide a trustworthy

394   and dependable account of the participants' experiences.

395   To ensure the validity and reliability of our qualitative study, we employed several

396   measures. Firstly, we conducted a thorough review of the data analysis process and findings

397   for each theme through a series of meetings. Secondly, we maintained an "audit trail" of our

398   analytical procedures, which ensured transparency and coherence of the process and described

399   the methods we applied and the decisions we made. Thirdly, to ensure credibility and

400   dependability, each author conducted the primary analysis individually, and we acted as critical

401   friends for each other by sharing and reviewing our work. 'Critical friends' is one of the ways

402   to achieve rigor and quality of qualitative studies and it helps researchers enhance the rigor of

403   their studies (Smith & McGannon, 2018). It is "to encourage reflexivity by challenging each

404   other's construction of knowledge" (Cowan & Taylor, 2016, p. 508). In this respect, both

405   authors critically reviewed each other's analysis and reflected the process of the data analysis

406   process. These measures align with the standards for ensuring rigor and trustworthiness in

407   qualitative research and establish the credibility and validity of our findings (Brown et al., 2018;

408   Finfgeld-Connett, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

409   **Results**

410   The present study identified four prominent themes from the data: (a) Career Pressure

411   and Uncertainty, (b) Lack of Pre-Retirement Planning, (c) Demand for Mentorship Support,

412   and (d) Necessity for a Realistic Perspective on Talent. The initial theme addresses the

413   experiences of professional esports players prior to retirement, which constitutes a crucial

414   aspect of their careers, encompassing the 'Causes of Career Termination'. The subsequent

415   theme pertains to players' experiences upon retirement or upon deciding to retire from esports.

416   This theme correlates with 'Factors Related to Adaptation to Career Transition' and 'Available

417   Resources for Adaptation to Career Transition'. Lastly, the third and fourth themes underscore

418   the perceived necessity for improved preparation within the profession. These themes are

419   linked to 'Available Resources for Adaptation to Career Transition', 'Quality of Transition',

420   and 'Quality of Transition' within the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition

421   (Lavallee et al., 2014).   The comprehensive thematic map illustrating the experiences of

422   professional esports players in South Korea can be found in Figure 2.

423   [Figure 2 near here]

Career Pressure and Uncertainty

425   All participants in this study began their professional esports careers either during

426   secondary school or upon graduation, as their talents were recognized by fellow professional

427   players, teams, and coaches. Participants reported being aware of their exceptional

428   performance even before joining professional teams, as their official rankings were verifiable.

429   Beginning their engagement in esports with games like StarCraft or League of Legends, these

430   players were initially drawn to the field for pure enjoyment. As recognition from other players

431   and fans started to grow, so did their passion, leading them to see a career opportunity in

432   something they genuinely enjoyed. That being said, the professional esports environment

433   presented its own challenges, with significant performance pressure and a demand for

434   consistent victories, leading to an environment filled with stress. This stress stemmed from the

435   critical evaluation of their performance by teams, peer players, and fans, as well as the

436   obligation to excel since they received compensation for their participation:

437   I did not receive a salary at the beginning of my career as a trainee, but I greatly enjoyed

438   the experience, as the team provided me with accommodations, gaming facilities, and

439   equipment in a gaming house. But, once I started earning a salary, I felt immense

440   pressure to maintain high performance levels at all times. The pressure during

441   competitions was especially overwhelming (Player 3).

442   Player 4 expressed an ability to cope with competitive pressure, as the drive to win

443   often superseded any concurrent stress. Yet, like the other players, he found the professional

444   environment particularly taxing in the face of losses. Reflecting on this, Player 4 remarked,

445   "Competing brought me joy. The sense of accomplishment when I won was extraordinary.

446   Dealing with a loss, on the other hand, was a true test [...]. Coping with fan criticism can also

447   be quite distressing." He drew attention to criticism from fans on social media platforms like

448   Facebook and Twitter. His career spanned a period of significant growth in social networking

449   sites, and he was involved in the most popular game, League of Legends.

450   As players aged, they felt the pressure of competing with emerging younger talents.

451   Player 1 noted, "We often remark, 'It's difficult to compete with teenagers.'" He observed a

452   decline in his physical ability to respond swiftly and accurately with age. This decline was also

453   attributed to excessive training while remaining physically inactive for extended periods. The

454   other three players shared similar experiences, although all participants made an effort to

455   exercise during their careers. Player 2 commented, "I made an effort to allocate time for

456   exercise amidst my training and competition schedules. While the team offered fitness club

457   memberships, the level of interest among players varied. But I was quite engaged in it." All

458   participants highlighted the significance of regular exercise and physical activity in optimizing

459   performance. Player 4 stated, "Some players participate in exercise and physical activities, but

460   many, due to their youth, don't recognize the importance and don't see it as a necessity."

461   Participants in the study also grappled with uncertainty throughout their careers. When

462   performing well and winning competitions, they tended to focus on their present success rather

463   than considering their future prospects. Conversely, when experiencing losses, they became

464   acutely aware of the myriad young, talented players who could potentially replace them. This

465   lack of job security induced feelings of anxiety and concern about their long-term prospects in

466   the industry. Player 1 explained, "The absence of job security caused me immense anxiety."

467   This sentiment highlights the precarious nature of esports careers, where a player's success is

468   often judged on a game-by-game basis. The constant influx of emerging talent adds to the

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

470   replaced.

471   For all participants in this study, the mandatory military service for South Korean men,

472   typically occurring in their early 20s, generated uncertainty. They were unsure whether this

473   obligation would interfere with their esports careers. A special military service arrangement

474   for esports players, called 'Air Force Challenges e-Sports (ACE),' was available for a limited

475   period. Certain professional players, particularly those engaging in StarCraft during that period,

476   managed to balance esports involvement alongside their military service. Player 3 exemplifies

477   such a case. Unluckily, his service arrangement was abruptly discontinued due to a scandal

478   involving match-fixing and a decline in the game's popularity, largely tied to the transition

479   from StarCraft I to StarCraft II. This change sparked significant uncertainty for three players

480   (Players 1, 2, and 3). The exceptional popularity of StarCraft I in Korea and its instrumental

481   role in nurturing the esports culture is noteworthy. The game publisher's introduction of

482   StarCraft II, however, caused a domino effect that led to many professional teams' disbandment

483   and numerous players' retirement, as they were encouraged or in some cases forced to

484   transition from StarCraft I to II. The three players' enthusiasm and passion for StarCraft II

485   could not match that for StarCraft I. They also noticed that StarCraft II could not reach the

486   popularity heights of its predecessor, leading to a decrease in opportunities for career

487   progression.

488   In summary, the reasons for players' retirement decisions encompass job insecurity due

489   to factors such as short contracts, a decline in competitive advantage as they age, significant

490   changes in the games played, and the obligation to fulfill military service.

491   **Lack of Pre-Retirement Planning**

492   The responses from all participants concerning the initial stage of their post-retirement

493   careers revealed a common theme: they lacked clear ideas about their next steps due to

494   insufficient pre-retirement planning. Player 1 admitted, "To be honest, I was at a loss. I had no

495   experience beyond the realm of gaming." Similarly, Player 2 mentioned, "After retirement, I

496   took on a few part-time jobs because I was uncertain about my next career move. But I first

497   had to complete my mandatory military service." Player 3 initially believed he could return to

498   his team upon completing his military service, but that option was not available. He recounted,

499   "Following my military service, I was at a loss regarding my next steps. That period was likely

500   the most difficult for me, as I navigated various career options outside of being a professional

501   player." Player 1 devoted considerable effort to networking, which eventually led him to a new

502   career as an esports commentator. Yet, achieving stability took time due to the unpredictability

503   of his initial freelance income. In contrast, Player 2 found a seamless transition in his career

504   when a game publisher offered him a job, enabling him to stay within the esports industry that

505   was already familiar to him. Despite this, he experienced a "very hard time" dealing with

506   identity loss (e.g., "I am not a professional player anymore") and regret (e.g., "Why didn't I

507   prepare anything for the future?")—feelings shared by other players. He expressed greater

508   satisfaction with his current profession than with being a professional player, considering

509   improved job security.

510   Player 1 expressed a desire to enter a profession unrelated to esports, despite feeling

511   unprepared for any particular career path. He had read a news article about a retired

512   professional esports player who had successfully transitioned from esports to a government

513   officer role, a position renowned for its job security in Korea. This player's story served as

514   both inspiration and motivation for him. At the time of data collection, Player 1 had recently

515   secured a government officer post and was highly satisfied with the job security it provided.

516   As Player 4 decided to retire, he was presented with an opportunity to become a professional

517   team coach following his military service. This offer was a direct result of his reputation as one

518   of Korea's leading players. Despite this, he found himself wavering between accepting the

519   coaching role and investigating alternative career options. As he navigated through these

520   considerations, the immediate necessity to complete his military service became his primary

521   focus.

Demand for Mentorship Support

523   A lack of pre-retirement planning was identified as a significant issue for players when

524   they decided to retire and explore alternative career options. They also recognized a limitation

525   in mentorship for preparing for life after esports. Due to the absence of widely known

526   successful transitions, players felt as though they had to start 'from scratch.' While they

527   acknowledged that many retired players shifted to occupations such as running streaming

528   services and YouTube channels, they perceived these options as limiting. Player 3 commented,

529   "No one seems to be remembered post-retirement. While some manage to sustain themselves

530   via YouTube, Afreeca TV, and other platforms, a truly bright future for esports players has yet

531   to emerge. It's a disheartening reality." This sentiment was echoed by other players. Player 3

532   also acknowledged several retired esports players who smoothly transitioned into poker

533   playing careers. Despite this, he voiced an inclination towards a career path that offered more

534   safety and security.

535   As mentioned earlier, Player 1 was inspired by a retired esports player to become a

536   government officer. He emphasized the importance of mentorship in facilitating the exploration

537   of career options, as there was limited information available on the paths taken by other retired

538   players. Player 1 stated, "We require diverse success stories from retired senior players who

539   have discovered new career paths, in order to inspire younger players. We can gain valuable

540   insights from their first-hand experiences." This viewpoint was shared by the other three

541 participants as well. The players stressed that mentorship should be provided by professional

542 teams, national associations, or other relevant authorities, rather than solely relying on

543 individual efforts. Young players may not recognize the significance of pre-retirement planning

544 while actively competing. Player 4 noted, "Players may not heed advice during their active

545 careers; so, it is vital for teams, coaches, KeSPA [national esports association in South Korea],

546 and other governing bodies to offer educational and mentorship support."

547 **Necessity for a Realistic Perspective on Talent**

548 Drawing from their experiences as professional players and transitioning out of esports,

549 all participants emphasized the apparent difference between playing esports for fun and playing

550 professionally. The latter demands extensive commitment, continuous coping with pressure

551 and stressors, and maintaining a competitive edge over other players. The participants

552 expressed concern about young people aspiring to become professional players without

553 understanding the commitments and responsibilities involved. They also highlighted the need

554 for young people to critically assess and be realistic about their talent as players. Since most

555 esports games offer rankings, individuals can easily determine their potential to become

556 professional players: "If you lack sufficient talent, refrain from pursuing it. [...] Avoid

557 overestimating your abilities and remain grounded in reality." (Player 4); "You must engage in

558 thorough self-assessment. Determine if you genuinely possess the required talent and if you

559 are prepared to fully dedicate yourself to training and competition. Clarity is essential." (Player

560 1).

561 Although all participants started their professional careers based on their recognized

562 talent at a young age, sustaining a successful career proved challenging due to extreme

563 competition. Participants suggested that young people should be more aware of alternative

564 career paths within the esports industry if they possess a strong passion for esports but may not

565   succeed as professional players. This awareness can enable aspiring players to make informed

566   decisions and pursue viable career options within the esports ecosystem.

567   **Discussion**

568   This study investigates the experiences of retired or retiring esports players as they

569   transition out of their professional careers. The findings demonstrate that they have experienced

570   significant career pressure and coped with uncertainty related to their future career path. Since

571   they exclusively committed to training and competition from an early age, they had limited

572   opportunity and time to establish pre-retirement plans, which resulted in challenges during the

573   transition period. It should be noted that they also lacked sufficient guidance, highlighting their

574   need for external resources such as social and organizational support. In this respect, the

575   findings highlight the significance of external support from key stakeholders, such as

576   professional teams, national associations, and other relevant authorities. This support aligns

577   with the Organizational Intervention for Career Transition aspect of the Conceptual Model of

578   Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014), which is critical for facilitating high-

579   quality and healthy career transitions for players. Hong and Coffee (2018) also argue in

580   traditional sport context that organizational support from sports governing bodies and

581   organizations, as well as practitioners, plays a critical role in the successful transition of high-

582   performance athletes out of their sports careers.

583   While the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014)

584   proposes four distinct causes of career termination (age, deselection, injury, and free choice),

585   this study reveals a variety of reasons for transitioning out of esports, including job insecurity

586   arising from short contracts, diminishing competitive advantage as players age, significant

587   changes in games played, and the obligation to fulfill military service, which is an unique

588   reason in the Korean context (Kim et al., 2016). Job insecurity due to short contracts or non-

589   renewal of contracts may resemble deselection, and a decline in players' competitive advantage

590   with age aligns with the age factor in the framework. Significant changes in the games played

591   represent a unique factor in esports, setting it apart from traditional sports. Another specific

592   issue, mandatory military service, is pertinent only to players in countries with such requisites,

593   like South Korea. Even so, as professional players now increasingly have opportunities to join

594   international teams, these factors become critical not only for Korean players but also for

595   international professional teams seeking to recruit them. Whilst the release of StarCraft I played

596   a critical role in the growth of esports culture in Korea (Jin, 2020), the transition from StarCraft

597   I to StarCraft II can be seen as unique challenges and difficulties for Korean professional

598   players who participated in these games. It is likely that players will continue to face retirement

599   as games evolve or become outdated. This issue warrants attention from industry stakeholders,

600   particularly those responsible for player welfare. While this study's findings on the causes of

601   transition contribute to the literature, additional research should be conducted to identify other

602   significant causes to help reduce the prevalence of premature retirement.

603   It is important to highlight that Player 3 discussed the impact of a 'match-fixing scandal,'

604   which led to the termination of a unique military service arrangement for esports players known

605   as 'Air Force Challenges e-Sports (ACE).' This development had long-term consequences on

606   his career. As mentioned earlier, while such special military service arrangement for talented

607   esports players was considered a great opportunity (Cho, 2008), it should be noted that the

608   short duration of the arrangement could negatively affected someone's career path. This aspect

609   should be taken into consideration when establishing any future initiatives.

610   Match-fixing was also discussed as one of the factors influencing their career decisions.

611   Two significant match-fixing scandals in relation to StarCarft in 2015 and 2016 (BBC, 2016;

612   Yin-Poole, 2015) even resulted in a negative impact on those players who were not involved

613   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

639   critically examining these factors and their impact on players' careers, stakeholders can

640   develop more effective strategies to combat these issues and create a healthier and more

641   supportive ecosystem for professional esports players.

642   It is important to acknowledge that job insecurity was the one of the factors contributing

643   to career pressure and uncertainty regarding their future career path. Professional players, who

644   typically begin playing esports "for fun," face pressure due to the intensely competitive

645   professional environment, leading to financial and job insecurity. Despite having contracts with

646   renowned and well-established professional teams and receiving high salaries during their

647   careers, financial and job insecurity were frequently cited by participants. As esports careers

648   can be short, akin to elite sports, such pressures and concerns are inevitable for both esports

649   professionals and high-performance athletes in traditional sports (Hong, 2022; Park et al.,

650   2013). While a select few players enjoy financial security from annual contracts (Todorov,

651   2022; Smithies et al., 2020), many, if not most, professional players grapple with insecurity.

652   For top-level professionals with annual contracts, the pressure to improve performance may

653   actually intensify in order to remain competitive against younger, talented players who could

654   replace them. It is also worth noting that professional players might have limited opportunities

655   for career advancement due to harsh contractual demands, potentially resulting in players'

656   rights violations (Witkowski & Manning, 2019). The issues of financial and job insecurity,

657   along with the pressure to stay competitive to address these concerns, are linked to the brief

658   careers of professional players. This is reflected in participants' advice for young players to be

659   realistic about their talent, given the need to manage the pressure of maintaining high

660   performance and a competitive edge, as well as devoting themselves to training. Players also

661   need to cope with the uncertainty of relatively short professional careers, which could be

662   effectively ended by the emergence of younger, talented players. In addressing uncertainty, it

663   is critical for players to establish strategies to cope with these unpredictable elements, such as

664 broadening their skill sets, pursuing mentorship, and concentrating on long-term career

665 planning. In doing so, esports players might enhance their readiness and resilience to navigate

666 through changes in the esports environment, which in turn could help to mitigate the

667 psychological burden associated with uncertainty. Despite this, it remains crucial to

668 acknowledge that esports players, in order to cultivate additional skill sets, secure mentors and

669 initiate career planning, necessitate social and organisational backing (Hong, 2022). They

670 could confront hurdles in allocating time for such activities and might lack guidance in

671 kickstarting those endeavors.

672 Professional players' careers are inherently short, as high performance relies on the

673 ability to rapidly and accurately respond to complex visual stimuli; such skills are likely to

674 decline after the age of 24 (Thompson et al., 2014). Participants emphasized their engagement

675 in regular exercise and physical activity to maintain fitness for competition and daily intensive

676 training. This factor may contribute to their longer-than-average careers (approximately 2 years;

677 Ward & Harmon, 2019) and warrants consideration by active professionals, young aspiring

678 players, and key industry stakeholders. Researchers have raised concerns about excessive

679 sedentary behavior among esports players (Tremblay et al., 2017), as they typically spend

680 around 15 hours per day training. This behavior can be linked to poor physical, psychological,

681 and cognitive health outcomes (de Rezende et al., 2014). As a result, some professional players

682 might need to terminate their careers prematurely or take unplanned breaks due to injuries,

683 such as carpal tunnel syndrome, tennis elbow, and back pain (Jolly, 2019). The demands of

684 training and competition can lead to stress, mental illness, and poor decision-making

685 (Wattanapisit et al., 2020). Thus, players and key stakeholders should place greater emphasis

686 on players' engagement in exercise and physical activity, not only to support their careers but

687 also to promote overall health and well-being.

688   Professional players in this study faced difficulties exploring other career options upon

689   retirement due to a lack of pre-retirement planning while coping with identity loss and seeking

690   job security, aspects reflected in the framework (e.g., self-identity, perceptions of control, and

691   social identity). This finding aligns with Johnson and Woodcock's (2021) observation that

692   professional players often sacrifice other life domains, limiting their opportunities to engage in

693   activities that develop broader interests and skills (Hong, 2022). In this respect, the study

694   highlights the need for players to better prepare for life after esports (i.e., emphasizing pre-

695   retirement planning and mentorship) and provides guidance for young, aspiring players (i.e.,

696   maintaining a realistic perspective on their talent). As proposed in the framework, players can

697   benefit from developing coping skills to manage the pressures and uncertainties associated with

698   a professional esports career, securing social support from mentors and other key stakeholders,

699   and establishing pre-retirement plans. These findings provide significant practical implications

700   for the industry and its key stakeholders, who may take these factors into account when

701   designing career support systems tailored to esports players. In traditional sports contexts,

702   researchers have emphasized the importance of pre-retirement planning for smooth and

703   successful transitions (Park et al., 2013). As highlighted in the Conceptual Model of Adaptation

704   to Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014), pre-retirement planning is crucial for coping with

705   the demands of transition. The absence of such planning led the professional players in this

706   study to experience career transition distress, particularly in terms of occupational and financial

707   challenges, as indicated in the model. This evidence should be taken into account when

708   establishing support systems for transitioning professional esports players. Expanding on these

709   findings, it is evident that there is a need for better pre-retirement planning and support for

710   esports professionals. This may involve providing career guidance, networking opportunities,

711   and access to resources that help players explore alternative career paths.

712   Pursuing dual careers, particularly by combining sports and higher education, has been

713   recommended to better prepare for life after sports (Ryan, 2015). Since all participants started

714   their professional careers while in secondary school or shortly thereafter, feelings of "being

715   lost" might be intensified due to being "institutionalized" by esports and having developed

716   strong identities as professional players from a young age. In the esports context, balancing

717   esports commitments with education has been deemed critical for preparing for post-retirement

718   life (Hong, 2022). As a result, professional teams, national/international associations, and other

719   relevant authorities may need to consider fostering an environment that encourages young

720   players to pursue dual careers. Participants also experienced identity loss upon retirement,

721   stemming from their status as well-known players and their heavy commitment to esports. This

722   issue is similarly significant in the traditional sports context (Lally, 2007). Addressing

723   psychological challenges related to retirement, such as identity loss and regret, is critical for

724   helping players manage the transition more effectively and attain long-term satisfaction in their

725   post-retirement pursuits. Thus, fostering a healthy culture that encourages young players to

726   develop well-rounded identities while competing is crucial. This can be achieved by promoting

727   dual careers and engaging in comprehensive pre-retirement planning.

728   Mentorship emerged as a critical factor in managing post-retirement transitions, as

729   evidenced by the participants' experiences. Player 1, influenced by an article about a former

730   player transitioning into a government officer role, chose the same trajectory. This decision

731   turned out to be beneficial, yet it arose by chance. In response to this reality, participants

732   advocated for the implementation of mentorship initiatives led by professional teams, national

733   associations, or other relevant authorities. The aim would be to provide players with an

734   understanding of life beyond esports and guide them in effective preparation strategies. The

735   emphasis on job security for post-retirement careers is not surprising, considering the

736   participants' experiences with job insecurity during their esports careers—a challenge that

737   many other players likely face (Smithies et al., 2020). Addressing this issue requires collective

738   efforts from all stakeholders to promote both players' overall well-being and the sustainability

739   of the esports industry (Hong, 2022). Potential solutions may encompass mentorship programs,

740   career planning initiatives, and extensive industry-wide efforts focused on promoting stability

741   and generating long-term prospects for professional players. Additionally, offering access to

742   successful role models, mentors, and tailored resources and training programs could facilitate

743   smoother transitions into post-retirement careers and enhance overall satisfaction and stability

744   for former professional players.

Limitation and Future Study

746   The present findings aim to raise awareness among young players about transitioning

747   out of esports and encourage key stakeholders to establish career support systems for players.

748   The Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014) serves as a

749   valuable theoretical framework for understanding professional players' transitions out of

750   esports. Future researchers could benefit from building on this work by developing a

751   customized theoretical model specifically for esports players, grounded in empirical and

752   theoretical evidence. For instance, the findings of the present study can contribute to the further

753   development of Salo's (2017) proposed theoretical framework. While Lavallee et al.'s (2014)

754   was considered as suitable for the present study, it may not fully capture the unique context of

755   esports since it was developed based on studies of high-performance athletes in traditional

756   sports. In this respect, future study can examine esports players' transitions employing different

757   theories and theoretical framework so that it can eventually contribute to the establishment of

758   a tailored theoretical framework specific to esports context. Focusing on the in-depth

759   experiences of four Korean professional players, the findings' applicability to other populations

760   may be limited. Future research should explore professional players from different countries to

761   draw more generalizable conclusions.

762   While some researchers argue that there are no general rules for sample size in

763   qualitative research (Patton, 1990), the researchers should aim to meet theoretical saturation,

764   meaning that they continue data collection until no new themes or insights were emerging from

765   the data (van Rijnsoever, 2017). Although the small sample size was previously justified due

766   to the unique population characteristics and resource constraints, future studies should aim for

767   larger sample sizes to achieve theoretical saturation. Future research could expand upon this

768   study by examining the transitional experiences of a larger, more diverse sample of Korean

769   professional esports players. For instance, it could include the experiences of retired players

770   from less mainstream esports genres (e.g., fighting games) or underrepresented groups in

771   esports, such as female players. In addition, future studies can adopt this study design to

772   investigate the experiences of retired esports players worldwide, thus providing broader

773   perspectives on transitioning out of esports. Future research could also focus on exploring the

774   post-esports lives of retired players. Such studies would provide empirical evidence on life

775   after esports, offering valuable insights to young and aspiring players on how to prepare for

776   their post-esports life. This will allow researchers to examine the changes in the esports

777   industry including different factors such as contract conditions, support from professional

778   teams, and the increasing number and scale of competitions and tournaments. This would also

779   help researchers provide broader insights into the topic, given the fact that Korea has a

780   relatively longer history of esports culture and is still one of the leading countries with regard

781   to esports culture and industry. All participants in this study are male; however, with the

782   increasing number of female players in recent times, future research should also investigate

783   female players' experiences transitioning out of esports. The present study employed a cross-

784   sectional design, conducting only one interview per participant. While this approach provides

785   valuable insights, future researchers might consider implementing longitudinal studies to

786   examine professional players' adaptation to retirement over time. While qualitative studies

787   provide valuable insights into topic by presenting participants' narratives and researchers'

788   interpretations of their transitional experiences, future research can complement the findings

789   from quantitative studies by developing a scale to examine esports players' overall wellbeing

790   during and after their esports career. Through such quantitative approach, future studies can

791   identify common challenges and barriers, copings skills and strategies, and esports athletes'

792   unique needs for esports players in transitions. Such quantitative perspective can provide a

793   broader understanding of the topic, conveying a more comprehensive perspective of esports

794   players' experiences and requirements. Lastly, as highlighted in the present study, the future

795   study can examine esports players' experiences of pursuing dual careers to identify the specific

796   challenges and barriers and support needs when they manage two different commitments. Such

797   findings can enable the esports industry and key stakeholders to establish a supportive

798   environment for young players pursuing dual careers.

Conclusion

800   This study offers empirical evidence regarding professional esports players'

801   transitions out of their careers, presenting valuable lessons and implications for both theory

802   and practice. In summary, this qualitative study offers a comprehensive understanding of

803   esports players' career transitions, particularly identifying their unique challenges and reasons

804   for retirement in comparison to elite athletes from traditional sports. This may inspire esports

805   researchers to develop a theoretical framework tailored to professional esports players'

806   retirement experiences and characteristics. Identity loss emerged as a significant challenge,

807   much like in traditional sports. This critical experience warrants further investigation to better

808   understand its impact on retiring players. Financial and job insecurity should also be explored

809   more thoroughly, as it is not directly linked to pre-retirement planning, such as pursuing dual

810   careers. Nevertheless, the study's findings emphasize the need for key stakeholders to establish

811   effective approaches that encourage young individuals to develop life and transferable skills

812   applicable beyond their esports careers. This can address concerns related to the unavoidably

813   short career span in esports. In this study, we also highlighted concerns regarding scandals,

814   such as match-fixing, which can significantly impact professional esports players' careers.

815   Further research on negative factors, including match-fixing, sexism, doping, and prize pool

816   splitting, is essential to increase awareness among esports players and fans regarding ethical

817   behaviors. This heightened awareness will contribute to the sustainable growth and

818   development of the esports industry. The exclusive reason for retirement in the Korean context,

819   military service, suggests that professional players from other cultures may have their own

820   unique reasons for retirement and barriers preventing them from continuing their esports

821   careers. These factors should be further investigated. Lastly, the importance of mentorship and

822   adopting a realistic perspective on one's talent offers valuable insights and implications for how

823   professional players can begin and thrive in their esports careers. This needs to be addressed

824   by the entire industry and key stakeholders through structured support services and systems.

825   **Acknowledgements**

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835   **References**

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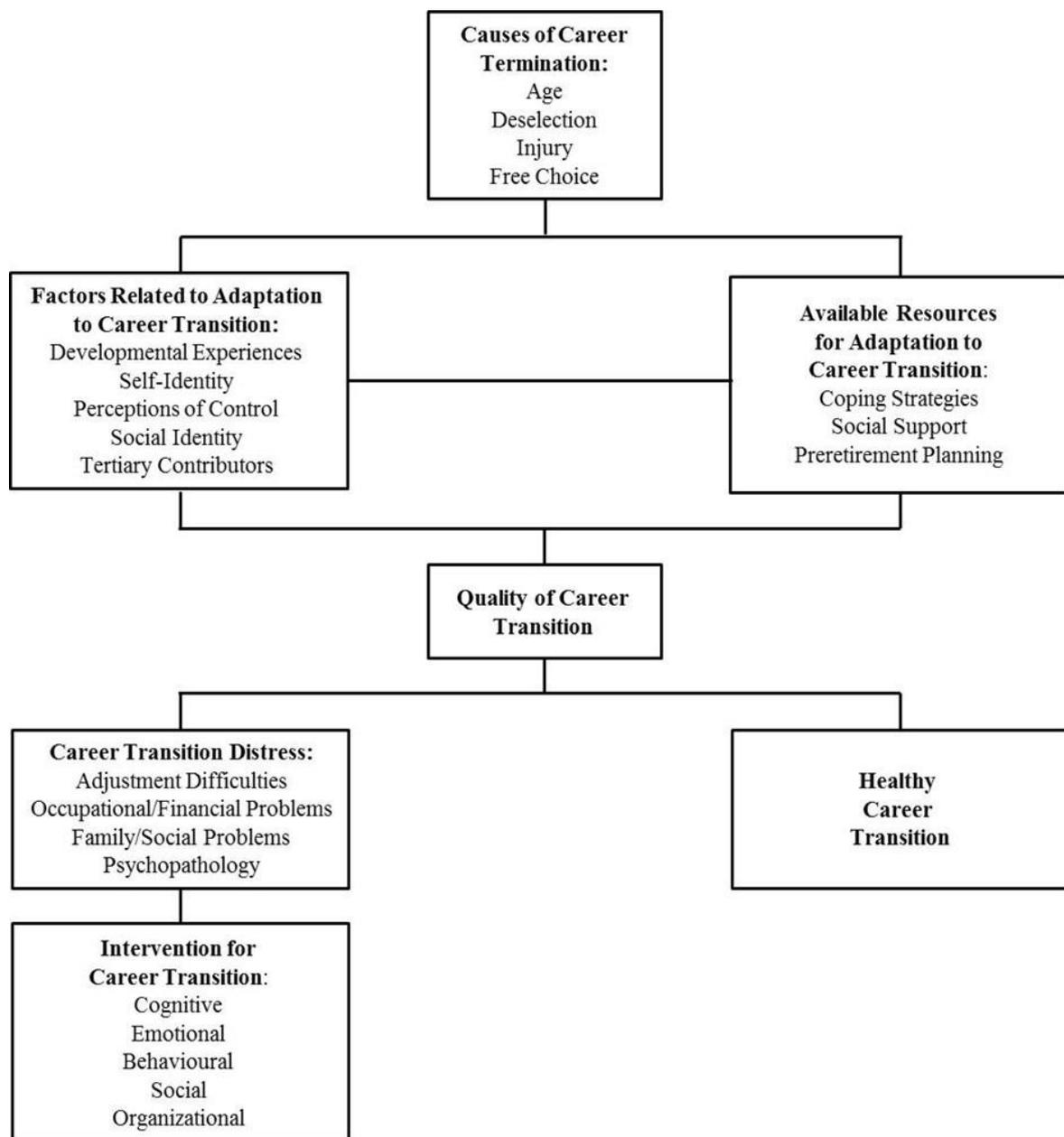968   *Psychology, 7*, 395-412. doi: 10.1080/1612197X.2009.9671916

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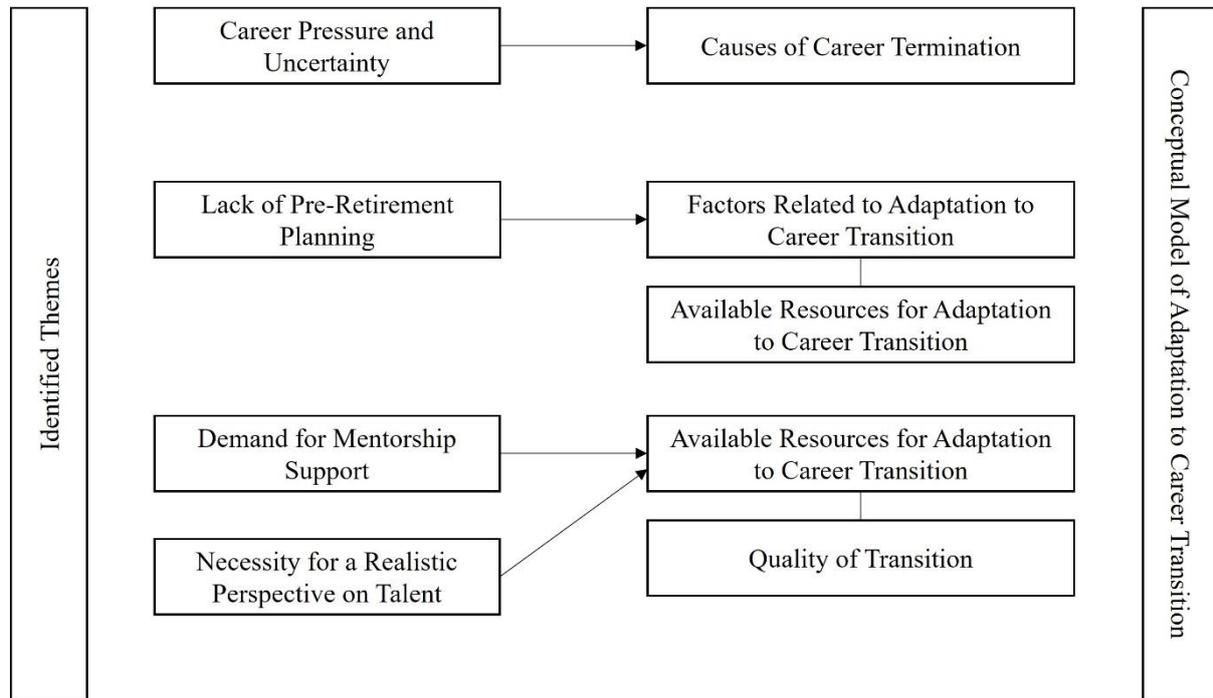1015   https://www.eurogamer.net/korean-starcraft-rocked-by-another-match-fixing-scandal

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1017   Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Career Transition (Lavallee et al., 2014)

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Causes of Career Termination:
Age
Deselection
Injury
Free Choice

Factors Related to Adaptation to Career Transition:
Developmental Experiences
Self-Identity
Perceptions of Control
Social Identity
Tertiary Contributors

Available Resources for Adaptation to Career Transition:
Coping Strategies
Social Support
Preretirement Planning

Quality of Career Transition

Career Transition Distress:
Adjustment Difficulties
Occupational/Financial Problems
Family/Social Problems
Psychopathology

Healthy Career Transition

Intervention for Career Transition:
Cognitive
Emotional
Behavioural
Social
Organizational

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

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