UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES, CHALLENGES, AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES OF ESPORTS COACHES

by

Robin Y. J. Kang

Bachelor of Science in Nursing, Queen's University, 2013

A Major Research Project

Presented to Ryerson University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Digital Media

in the program of

Digital Media

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2020

Author's Declaration

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION FOR ELECTRONIC SUBMISSION OF AN MRP

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this MRP. This is a true copy of the MRP, including any required final revisions.

I authorize Ryerson University to lend this MRP to other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

I further authorize Ryerson University to reproduce this MRP by photocopying or by other means, in total or in part, at the request of other institutions or individuals for the purpose of scholarly research.

I understand that my MRP may be made electronically available to the public.

UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCES, CHALLENGES,

AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES OF ESPORTS COACHES

Master of Digital Media, 2020

Robin Y. J. Kang

Digital Media

Ryerson University

Abstract

The growth of esports has resulted in the creation of new roles and careers such as esports coaches, and with that, a need for professional support and development. However, at the moment, there is little foundational knowledge, training or resources for esports coaches who, as a result, are left to their own instincts and experiences in place of official standards and guidelines. Thus, this study seeks to address this gap in esports infrastructure, resources, and career development by examining the emerging professional identity of twenty-five esports coaches through semi-structured interviews. The results highlight a series of unique challenges and point to a unique professional identity of esports coaches that weaves together themes of *pioneers in a new industry*, *self-educators*, *hybrid coaches*, and *parental figures.*

Keywords: Esports Coaches, Professional Identity, Career Development, Esports Infrastructure

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my family for their tremendous support. Without their encouragement and understanding, it would not have been possible for me to achieve my academic goals.

It is my honour to express my sincere appreciation to my supervisor, Dr. Louis-Etienne Dubois. Without his advice, expertise, and encouragement, this research would not have been possible. I'd like to extend my sincerest gratitude to Dr. William Michael Carter and Dr. Kristopher Alexander, my mentors who have shared with me a great deal of expert knowledge, advice, and support throughout the many stages and projects of the Master of Digital Media program.

I would also like to thank the esports coach participants who volunteered their time and shared their knowledge towards this research. To my fellow MDM peers and creators of *The Armoury* project, Stefan Grambart, Emily Lê, and Matthew Zyla, I am ever so fortunate to have worked with you and to call you my friends.

Lastly, I'd like to thank my team members of the 2019-20 Ryerson Overwatch team, Antony X., Jesse S., Christopher W., Brook B., Ayaan L., Kyle C., Mark T., and Aaron C., for sharing an unforgettable collegiate esports experience.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Esports refers to professionalized, competitive computer game play (Taylor, 2012; Witkowski, 2012), encompassing a dynamic realm of traditional boundaries between sports, media and digital technologies (Xue et al., 2019; Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). In a short time, it has reshaped the way spectator sports are consumed, marketed and analyzed. Case in point, its tournaments are watched by millions of viewers through live events or tuning into online streaming services (Merwin et al. 2018; Fitch, 2020; Pizzo et al., 2018; Christophers & Scholz, 2010).

The esports ecosystem is made up of numerous, dynamic collective entities. This includes leagues, game and hardware companies, media, teams, events, merchandise, associations, and more (Finch, 2020) who, in turn, depend on several stakeholders such as game publishers, developers, league organizers, and professional teams (Scholz, 2020). New roles and careers are constantly emerging, including esports coaches, and with that, a need for dedicated resources.

However, at the moment, there is still a lack of foundational knowledge for esports coaches who are left to fare for themselves and to train on their own, or who turn to "traditional" sports to devise their practice. However, this fails to account for the distinct digital aspects of competitive gaming (Hutchins, 2008). Indeed, much of esports research to date has focused on either players themselves (e.g. Bányai et al., 2018; Zwibel et al., 2019; Rhoden et al., 2019) or on comparisons with other sports, but limited to the game itself (e.g. Jenny et al., 2016; Heere, 2018; Hallmann & Giel, 2018).

Given that a strong professional identity enables individuals to perform their role with confidence, this lack of support and recognition is also problematic for coaches (Freedman &

Holmes, 2006). Thus, this study seeks to shed light on the experiences and challenges of esports coaches by examining their emerging professional identity. Through semi-structured interviews, it shows that esports coaches' identity comprises four main associations, namely *pioneers in a new industry*, *self-educators*, *hybrid coaches*, and *parental figures*. The rest of the article is as follows: first, we review the relevant literature on esports and on professional identity. Second, we outline the methodology and present the results. We then discuss these findings in light of the literature, highlight practical and theoretical implications and suggest directions for research.

Literature Review

Professional esports overview

Esports is a fast-growing international ecosystem that has millions of fans and billions of dollars in investments (Merwin et al., 2018). It operates at the intersection of traditional sports and the digital culture, involving teams competing through online and offline tournaments (Xue et al., 2019; Taylor, 2012). While its links with the video game industry are undeniable, not all games are fit for esports as they must be played competitively, have structure with standard rules, as well as governing entities (Funk et al., 2018; PwC, 2018).

Like traditional sports, media rights and sponsorships are set to eventually become the largest sources of esports revenue (Perez, 2018; Newzoo, 2018). In fact, many traditional sport entities have been establishing their own esports teams or creating virtual game representations of their sport (Funk et al., 2018). Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, major sports organizations and broadcasters launched the biggest crossover between mainstream sports and esports to fill their suddenly empty schedules (Heaven, 2020).

For those familiar with esports (Dachman, 2020), the thought of pursuing a career, be it as a player or in a support role, is no longer that far-fetched. Professional "gamers" are drawn to esports prize pools that include up to tens of millions of dollars across games and tournaments (Richman, 2019) or becoming an online streamer (Influencer Marketing Hub, 2018).

Functionally, esports mirrors professional sports, in that at the highest level it requires intense training and focus as distinguished players and teams are competitively contesting for the top spots at their respective game (Adair, 2018; Hallmann & Giel, 2018). Like any major professional sports league, professional esports teams train six to eight hours a day, have an interdisciplinary staff of coaches, analysts, managers, trainers and sports psychologists, allocate salaries, and work with seasonal windows to sign, trade or buy out players (Merwin et al., 2018; Yamaguchi, 2018).

Despite all of this traditional structure, esports coaches have little to no professional training, often using their own instincts and experiences in place of official standards and guidelines for coaching, because they simply do not exist. While academia has only recently begun to embrace esports as an official sport (Cunningham et al., 2018), it is already regarded as a sport by various organizations such as the Olympic Council of Asia, professional sport organizations, the media, U.S. collegiate athletics departments and governments (Heere, 2018).

No matter how esports is labeled, it has made significant modern developments of the sports, video games and leisure industries both economically and technologically (Xue et al., 2019; McCutcheon et al., 2017). In the process, it has also created a whole new ecosystem of jobs and, consequently, a need for adequate coaching to help professional players improve in an increasingly competitive industry (Black, 2017).

Esports coaching

Like traditional sports, an esports coach helps players train in order to improve (British Esports Association, n.d.) and has a major impact on a team's performance (Hyun, 2018; Soebbing & Washington, 2011). The level of professional esports in terms of purpose and skills vastly differs from playing games casually or as a hobby (Carbonie et al., 2018). As such, on top of analyzing team play, communication, and strategy, esports coaches must strategically contend with digital aspects of gaming such as navigating through various digital terrains, understand game character roles and abilities, and master haptic engagement in high-performance games (Witkowski, 2012). Currently, there are no official certification programs for esports coaching (British Esports Association, n.d.). Without evidence-based training or resources, esports coaches may adopt particular methods they have experienced as players or from observing other coaches, which risks perpetuating inadequate practices or habits (Cassidy et al., 2004). To counter this and to advance occupational success and social adaptation, esports coaches can look towards contributors that strengthen professional identities (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011).

Professional identity

Identity studies in professional settings provide extensive insights into the factors that influence a collective's social context and demeanor. Identity operates at individual, organizational and group levels (Cascón-Pereira & Hallier, 2012) and is considered to be fluid rather than fixed, as one can perform identities in diverse and complex ways (Foucault, 1981), and therefore becomes relevant when attempting to understand esports roles and practices.

Professional identity describes one's self-conceptualization within their occupational context based on the shared values, beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, experience and skills (Trede et

al., 2012; Schwartz, 2011; McGowen & Hart, 1990; Adams et al., 2006). As a collective, professionals not only declare their specialty and trade, but also share ways of perceiving problems and as well as possible solutions (Hughes, 1958; Lewis & Dingwall, 1983; Evetts, 2013). Consequently, part of the attraction of identification research has been the connection between professionals' view on their values and practice to workforce problems and strengthening the industry (Trede et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2012).

In addition, professional identity is an extension of personal identity, and involves the various meanings of oneself (Gecas & Burke, 1995; Slay & Smith, 2011; Olson, 2019). For instance, such identity is constructed from aspects of one's profession or their organization (Van Mannan & Barley, 1984; Caza & Creary, 2016) but also from the reflection of others (Roberts et al., 2005). Thus, attributes such as one's membership or standing in a certain profession can influence self-conceptualization, and explains the connotation of 'what we do' to our sense of 'who we are' (Kenny et al., 2011).

Occupational groups that share the required knowledge and expertise, gain distinguished control and decisions about the conditions and content affecting their members' work (Freidson, 1973; Verhoef et al., 2006). Members of the profession with a collective sense of experiences, understanding, expertise, and ways of thinking about affairs that fall in their domain (Evetts, 2013), are associated with a shared professional identity. The adoption of this shared identity shaped and maintained by the existing professional members, is reproduced and reinforced through work socialization of the shared work cultures and values by the means of educational, training backgrounds, shared experiences, and by membership of organizations (Billett et al., 2014; Evetts, 2013).

For many, professional identity develops when individuals begin their educational training for their profession and continues to evolve entering into a professionals' work life (Trede et al., 2012; Nyström, 2009). Historically, the signs of being a professional were the qualifications for completed training, obtaining certifications, and internalization of the profession's values and culture (Wilensky, 1964; Greenwood, 1957). However, the very concept of profession remains much disputed (Sciulli, 2005; Evetts, 2013). For instance, identities happen to emerge in fields where professions do not have certifications and credentials (Armstrong & McDowell, 2018), where nascent occupations are cultivated (Atherton et al., 2017) and where hybrid professional roles across occupational boundaries develop (Colley & Guéry, 2015).

The criteria for systematizing professional occupations have recently become more flexible and now regard them as skill- or knowledge-based category of service occupations supported by education, vocational training and/or experience (Billett et al., 2014). In the esports industry, a holistic pattern was conceptualized for one's progress into a professional career in esports and the development of their identity through those stages (Seo, 2016) which, rather than a sudden acquisition of a new identity, it aligns with the progressive process of identity formation (Levine & Moreland, 1995). However, the study was limited in its social context, and recent research has sought instead to understand the role of stigma on the development of professional identity (Slay & Smith, 2011; Ibarra & Deshpande, 2007).

Professional identity of coaches

Since sports and esports have many shared attributes such as a comparable ecosystem (Jenny et al., 2018), as well as shared motor and psychological qualities (ELEAGUE, 2017),

there may be parallels of professional identities between sports coaches and esports coaches. Globally, the professional identity of sports coaches is a blended status (Hall et al., 2019). Qualities and characteristics of a great sports coach as outlined by the International Olympic Committee are "positive, enthusiastic, supportive, trusting, focused, goal-oriented, knowledgeable, observant, respectful, patient and a clear communicator" (n.d., para. 3). It also mentions the importance of understanding the sport and leading by example, having an aptitude for hard work, being a visionary, educating others, being a proactive motivator, among other things (International Olympic Committee, n.d.).

Surprisingly, research on the careers of professional coaches has been relatively sparse despite their role in athletic performance, sport organization development and success (Purdy & Potrac, 2016; Dawson & Phillips; 2013). This may explain why degree-level sports coaching programmes are in their infancy and under scrutiny (Hall et al., 2019). Francis (2012) mentions that coaches identify closely with their sport, and that their personal worth is dependent on performance of their athletes. In addition, coaches believe in their ability to influence their athletes' growth and development, or in other words, coaching efficacy (Feltz et al. 1999). The role of coaches being educators has also been explored as there have been attempts to bring educational and pedagogical theories to bear on sport coaching practice (Jones, 2006). Beyond the sports sphere, coaching is seen as a facilitative process, in which coaches are called to wear different hats depending on the context (Stein, 2009). While there has been some advancement in recognizing the social complexities of coaching (Purdy & Potrac, 2016) and identifying various approaches in a range of sports, there remains a paucity of knowledge on the professional

identity of coaches, especially for esports coaches whose emerging role and unique challenges have yet to receive any attention.

Methodology

A phenomenological approach underpins this study as phenomenology is uniquely positioned to help others understand an individual or group of individuals' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Leavy, 2015). A total of 25 participants who self-identified as esports coaches, with this being a primary source of income and/or a professional occupation, were recruited via purposive sampling (Gratton & Jones, 2010). Inclusion criteria required that they be 18 years and above and had professional experience as an esports coach. All semi-structured interviews took place online via Zoom, were audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to elicit an understanding of the participants' subjective perceptions of the esports coaching experience, roles and responsibilities (Bryman & Bell, 2019). Lines of questioning included but were not limited to: the participant's journey in becoming an esports coach; their team's structure; primary responsibilities outlined in their job description; other responsibilities that emerged; essential qualifications; and tools and resources used to help with their coaching. Subsequent thematic analysis followed the process of data familiarization, generation of initial codes and categories, identification of broader themes, themes review, themes definition, and reporting as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The participants (N=25) were aged between 20 to 33 years (M=25.8 years, SD=2.68). Young males have been reported to dominate within the esports field (Taylor, 2012) thus, 23 (92%) of our participants identified as male while 2 (8%) identified as female. All of them had experience in coaching an esports team physically based in North America. Based on the

coaches' workplace, coaches were categorized in either professional (12, 48%), collegiate (10, 40%), amateur (2, 8%), or freelance (1, 4%) coaching categories. For this study, the "collegiate" category is a paid esports coaching position by an academic institution. The average number of years participants worked in the esports industry is 3.13 years. The average working hours of a full-time coaching position has been 63.5 hours per week for professional coaches and 62.5 hours per week for collegiate coaches. See Table 1 for additional details.

Table 1. Participants demographics (N=25).

Gender	Female: 2 (8%) Male: 23 (92%)
Age	Average: 25.8 years old Youngest: 20 years old Oldest: 33 years old
Location	USA: 18 (72%) Canada: 3 (12%) France: 1 (4%) Germany: 1 (4%) Sweden: 1 (4%) South Korea: 1 (4%)
Professional Category	Professional: 12 (48%) Collegiate: 10 (40%) Amateur: 2 (8%) Freelance: 1 (4%)
Highest Education Level Completed	High School: 11 (44%) Bachelor: 11 (44%) Master: 3 (12%)
Professional Esports Experience	Average: 3.13 years The least: 1 year The most: 8 years
Average Working Hours	Professional: 63.5 hours per week Collegiate: Average 62.5 hours per week

Results

Findings suggest four central themes of the esports coaches' shared professional identity: 1) Pioneers in a new industry; 2) Self-educators; 3) Hybrid coaches; and 4) Parental figures.

The *pioneers in a new industry* identity

Esports coaches see themselves as pioneers in this new industry as they navigate in establishing career pathways, standardize job responsibilities and skill sets, and educate the general public of this new profession. As there is no education or career pathway to become an esports coach, almost all participants, regardless of the game and their current workplace or sector (e.g. amateur, collegiate, and professional), began by volunteering as a coach or as a team member (e.g. player, manager, or analyst) on an amateur team to develop their skill sets:

> I had to make my own rubric, as opposed to like when you're at school, you learn from your teachers [...] so you know the do's and don'ts of how to teach, or how to look at it and go about doing something, whether it's regular sports or music, it was like, 'oh, that makes sense' and I process that, I use that as a training tool, but you never see that with [esports], we don't have that yet. (C3)

Through this first-hand experience, coaches gained knowledge in areas such as competitive gaming, tournament formats, team structures, and coaching philosophies and skills. Networking at this stage, both online and offline, was also seen as a prominent factor to most esports coaches' career trajectory as it led them to interviews and tryout opportunities for paid coaching positions. Most paid esports coaching positions at the professional level were not advertised and coaches were invited to interviews through word of mouth within their networks.

Once coaches entered a paid position, most struggled to find precise roles and responsibilities, but rather were presented with an overall expectation to "lead the team". This included, but was not limited to, creating strategic and tactical approaches, leading practice and preparation for competition, managing staff and players, and helping to shape the direction of the team. Collegiate esports coaches, on the other hand, had additional expectations such as recruitment of students, launching and running the school's program and pursuing sponsorships. In addition, being a professional, paid worker in a nascent industry, many of the respondents said that they became educators and advocates to the general public of their profession and esports:

> There's still definitely a social stigma, of not knowing what esports is as a whole, and when I first started I was like 'yeah I coach in esports' they're like, 'how do you even coach that, coaching the gamers who eat Doritos and chug Mountain Dew in their parents basement?' Oh god. Here we go. But, yeah, it's definitely gotten better. (C4)

To some respondents, this type of bias came from non-gamers and/or older demographics opposed to the idea of playing video games for a living. However, they also found that people's hostility turned into curiosity after being educated on the professionalism and rigor of esports:

> Esports is still one of those things it's quite difficult to talk about with a lot of people in public because they don't actually fully understand what it is, but once you get into a conversation with someone about like 'hey this is what an esports coach is and this is what I do,' the conversations can last hours because people are so intrigued about what you do. And after a while, people start to see it as the same thing as being a coach or manager of a professional sports team. (P3)

In addition, almost all respondents used traditional sports analogies to help elucidate esports and coaching, drawing parallels of team play, strategy, communication, and competition:

> In America it's extremely awkward sometimes to talk about what you're doing, but it's easy enough to explain. You could basically just tell them 'yeah it's like traditional sports except it's on a video game. I do everything you see that a coach or player does in traditional sports, and it's what you would see from an esports player and coaches as well'. (P11)

Likewise, collegiate esports coaches found that their colleagues and sport coaches in the athletic departments had near zero understanding, and yet a negative image of esports and that they had to frequently educate the broader academic staff on esports about the digital media aspects associated with it, such as broadcasting, shoutcasting, subscription, and social media. The student population is supportive of esports and even more so from high school students as collegiate esports coaches received frequent requests from surrounding high schools for educational visits. They also expressed the surprising amount of public speaking they had to conduct with either media or in faculty meetings. That said, respondents found that people's sentiment became either neutral or positive once explained what esports was and credit esports becoming more mainstream (i.e. viewership, industry growth, and recognition in media) as helping gradually move its past negative video gaming image or as a "wannabe" sport.

The *self-educators* identity

As esports coaching does not have official accreditation programs or dedicated training programs, our respondents indicated that they must self-educate despite having very limited resources in building a foundation of coaching knowledge and in accessing best practices:

> I'm basically doing everything I can to develop my craft, I'm constantly trying to get more information. I look at what other teams and other games are doing. Just constantly stay on top [...] I always just try to stay in a learning mode, learning from myself, learning from experience, learning from my players, from other coaches, both in esports and traditional sports. (P1)

Some respondents looked positively upon using traditional sport coaching materials and resources to help build their own coaching philosophies and skill sets however, very few had actually obtained formal certificates or experience in that area before entering the esports scene. That said, when it comes to game-specific elements such as building strategies, most relied on social media and video sharing platforms to analyze prior matches and gameplays, especially from more mature international Asian teams, to draw inspiration or to better understand new compositions. Combined with the fact that esports is intrinsically tied to communication technologies, this explains why respondents spoke of the importance of being active on digital media to stay up-to-date on the latest developments and in touch with fans:

> I wasn't much of a social media person, but I recognized that the world of esports revolves around social media, so I really went full force into Twitter, which is where I get a lot of messages from players or teams. (F1)

Twitter, Discord, YouTube and Twitch are the main platforms that North American esports coaches and teams refer to and in addition, depending on the game, respondents may also rely on third party statistical platforms to gather in-depth analytics of their players or game.

The *hybrid coaches* identity

Esports coaches' role can be considered as hybrid, a blend between sports coaching with unique digital media related attributes and culture. The majority of respondents perceived little difference between esports and traditional sport coaching in terms of the fundamentals of coaching, being seen as a teacher, mentor, guide and role model. They believed that their primary role was also to provide leadership and structure so that players and teams could improve:

> The most general definition [for coaches] [...] it's someone whose job it is to mold players into a person who can understand the fundamentals of teamwork and a competitive environment while also trying to unlock their full potential as an individual. The only real big difference between esports coaches and normal coaches is that one's online and uses games, and the other is physical and is a traditional sport. (P11)

However, with esports operating under a combined logistics of sports coupled with digital media and culture, respondents spoke of a number of new challenges and skill sets that most traditional coaches would not need to encounter. For instance, collegiate esports coaches needed to be knowledgeable of various digital media skills including how to set up streaming, broadcasting, social media and understanding streaming platforms and subscriptions. They also were responsible for setting up and upkeeping the school's esports arena that stationed multiple properly equipped computers (e.g. games, computer updates, equipment, etc.). Furthermore, collegiate esports coaches are responsible for three to five teams that each played one specific game, and each team consisted of various players and student staff members. All in all, this means that they had to manage 20-30 players and be knowledgeable about each game and

tournament. These coaches believed that they have more administrative tasks as they had to create and manage their esports program under the school's athletic or recreational departments:

> Collegiate esports coaches, you have a number of responsibilities, and it's like running a little athletic department when you're running an esports organization. I'm involved with scheduling for the five different teams we have, I recruit for all of them, I manage all of them, I'm involved in our social media; it's like it's a little athletic department. (C6)

The ambiguous boundaries for esports coaches in general have given them autonomy. However, requires them to take on multiple roles:

> In traditional sports, you'll have scouts and you'll have specific people throwing together these massive data sheets and doing offseason work [...] whereas in esports, since the infrastructure isn't completely there, the coaches actually have to do multiple roles… And so, when a lot of people think about esports coaches, they don't really think about that aspect since the infrastructure isn't there, like we're really doing a ton, a ton of people's jobs throughout the entire year. (P10)

Esports coaches agreed that traditional sports and esports share many similar attributes such as competitiveness, teamwork and team success, top level players and athletes, practice, and parallel systems (e.g. franchise, fanbase, viewership, sponsorship). However, they also recognized that the physicality and mentality was the biggest difference between the two and that esports was more a cognitive game with coordination of fine motor skills:

> Traditional sports is a physical game, esports is a cognitive game in looking at the amount of information and the speed at which you have to process information, and also putting an output, it's so much faster than traditional sports. (F1)

In addition, unlike traditional sports, participants expressed how esports hardly allows teams to practice effective "drills" because the "set up" in the game is never quite the same as there are an infinite combination of maps, character selection and their abilities, and positioning. They also differ due to their ever-changing nature (i.e. add-ons, patches and refinements) whereas sports remain mostly static. For instance, participants brought up the 2012's implementation of three-point field goals in basketball to show how infrequent changes are in traditional sports, whereas esports change every other month:

> One big difference between traditional sports and esports is that esports changes with buffs, nerfs and patches all the time but in traditional sports nothing changes. ...basketball used to not have a three-point line and then they added that in, and it changed how the game is played, and that rarely happens [in sports]. (P11)

Thus, esports coaches must be able to adapt and come up with strategies much more frequently based on the uncontrollable factors commonly updated by the game developers.

The *parental figures* identity

A majority of respondents found one surprising responsibility attached to their role as an esports coach: becoming a parental figure to the esports players. Coaches noted that because esports players are very young, as young as 15-16 years old, they had yet to develop basic "life skills" and found their role was to guide these players on how to work and live in a professional setting. For esports teams living together in team houses, coaches had to teach players how to do laundry, cook for themselves and set sleep schedules. Other skills that are lacking include time management, how to effectively communicate with others, conflict resolution, how to build rapport, and how to deal with stress and negative mentality. Collegiate esports coaches also have

the additional responsibility of guiding players with academic standings. Thus, part of their role is to be the "adult" in the room that can provide guidance. Although the players' age and inexperience were the main factors for coaches to become a parental figure within an esports team, coaches also referred to the lack of a "growth system" within the nascent industry:

> If you think about their path growing up to become an esports professional, they probably were not on traditional sports, so they never had that talk with their coaches growing up when they're like 10 or 12 [years old] playing with a team where you have to respect your teammates, you have to listen to what they're saying, you have to be carry yourself in a certain way on and off the field. So, when they do end up becoming an esports professional, sometimes it's one of the first scenes they've ever played in their lives so they don't know how to conduct themselves as teammates. There's just so much that needs to happen to take a new player and mold them to actually be able to be on a team. (P10)

Last, respondents perceived that professional athletes gained experience and professionalism by going through stages of sports throughout their lives (e.g. little league, high school, varsity) before entering the professional level whereas professional esports players are sometimes placed straight from the serious leisure scene.

Discussion

Studying the shared professional identity of esports coaches sheds light on their emerging role, as well as the barriers and challenges they face. This study shows that although coaching itself is not a new occupation, the unique medium, conditions, and structure of esports differentiates itself from traditional sports, generating its own attributes and skill sets in esports

coaching. Although the classification of esports as a sport remains unclear (Hallmann & Giel, 2018), this study suggests traditional sports and esports coaching should be seen as a Venn diagram with both shared logics and unique attributes. Case in point, our results show that esports coaches identify themselves as *pioneers in a new industry* as well as *hybrid coaches.*

One of the key differentiators that esports coaches must be more adroit in is understanding the particular landscape of digital media and culture that constitutes the esports industry. While the sports sector and its operators are also active on digital media, the case of the COVID-19 pandemic pausing both sectors' league activities resulted contrasting differences between the two industries which revealed the esports' digital culture to be one that is unique and originative (Socialbakers, 2020). The digital media economy and its actors constitute different practices, values, and influences than from traditional media (Nouri, 2018), and for esports coaches their skill sets and knowledge go beyond proficiency with game mechanics and coaching, but also include expertise on the economics of digital entertainment. As exemplified by collegiate coaches, they must quickly learn to operate streaming platforms, broadcasting systems, subscription services, and setting up standards of practice for game commentary, social media, and video production. Furthermore, the frequent changes introduced by developers create a unique challenge as they render strategies obsolete. That said, respondents appear to be gravitating around a loose set of values which, from a collective identity standpoint, suggest that do not yet amount to a coherent "occupational community" (e.g. Van Maanen & Barley, 1984)

Parallels of professional identity between traditional sports and esports coaches can be inferred from this study. For instance, sport coaches are said to possess an *athletic identity* in which their sport defines who they are and whose personal worth is dependent on how their

athletes perform (Francis, 2012). Respondents also shared that during their time in the amateur scene, their team's win records in competitions and tournaments was the major determinant of their worth and directly acted as a catalyst to enter the professional scene. In addition, esports coaches did not perceive a difference with their traditional counterparts in terms of being a teacher, mentor, and role model. Specifically, the *coaching efficacy* identity, that is the extent to which traditional coaches believe they have the capacity to affect the learning and performance of their athletes (Feltz et al., 1999), parallels our findings under *parental figures* as esports coaches also influence their players' attitude, motivation, and character building. Last, the identity of coaches as educators (Jones, 2006) takes another dimension, as *pioneers* esports coaches find themselves having to undo a stigma and to justify the industry's legitimacy. In this instance, educating extends to the general public, not just players. This is also true for the *hybrid coaches* identity, which goes much further than the *conversational identity* of traditional coaches (Stein, 2009). Namely, esports coaches do not simply adjust their approach based on the conversation and the context, but are expected to wear multiple hats - social media / community manager, budgeting and planning, scouting and recruiting, etc. - that would typically be assigned to other personnel in any collegiate or professional traditional sports setting.

The discourses of esports infrastructure that participants faced have influenced esports coaches' professional identities. Firstly, under *pioneers*, the lack of career pathways, vague job descriptions and responsibilities, and social stigma were contributing factors for this particular professional identity formation. Secondly, the lack of official accreditation programs, educational systems, esports coaching resources and also the reliance of social media and video sharing platforms for the sole purpose of gaining coaching knowledge, have created the identity

of *self-educators*. Thirdly, the *hybrid coaches* identity emerged as esports coaches took on multiple roles, wearing different hats as there was a lack of support system. Finally, with professional players being of young age combined with the lack of growth system, esports coaches are identified as *parental figures* who help guide their players on issues outside of the work domain.

Implications and Conclusion

While esports continues to transform itself from a niche community to a global professional industry (Reyes, 2019), efforts to improve and standardize esports professions have yet to be undertaken other than in South Korea and China (Jin, 2010; Tone, 2019). Professionalizing esports coaching will help further establish expectations of negotiation, professional status and privileges in the hopes of increasing jurisdictional control and related job security properties such as income and social esteem (Adams, 2007). Our findings highlight gaps and call for support to grow and legitimize the profession. This research revealed four shared professional identities among esports coaches, as well as challenges that can hinder the profession's success. The lack of infrastructure within the industry is the common denominator to all four main themes.

As such, this study's findings call for further investigation of esports infrastructure and related career development, accreditation programs, policy frameworks, as well as for coaching resources developed with inputs from psychology and sport management. Future studies may also seek to examine how social standards perpetuate stigma and ways its impacts on organizational systems and career success, or turn to non-sport professions, such as teachers

whose role is to educate and to look after equally young pupils, for insights into the interplay between esports coaches' different identities.

References

Adair, C. (2018, August 22). Game Quitters. *What Is ESports? History, Top Teams, Revenues and Risks*. https://gamequitters.com/what-is-esports/

Adams, K., Hean, S., Sturgis, P., & Clark, J. M. (2006). Investigating the factors influencing professional identity of first‐year health and social care students. *Learning in Health and Social Care*, *5*(2), 55–68. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1473-6861.2006.00119.x

Adams, T. L. (2007). Interprofessional Relations and The Emergence of A New Profession: Software Engineering in the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada. *The Sociological Quarterly*, *48*(3), 507–532.

Armstrong, L., & McDowell, F. (2018). *Fashioning professionals: Identity and representation at work in the creative industries*. Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

Atherton, M., Davidson, B., & McAllister, L. (2017). Exploring the emerging profession of speech-language pathology in Vietnam through pioneering eyes. *International Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, *19*(2), 109–120. https://doi.org/10.3109/17549507.2016.1159335

Bányai, F., Griffiths, M. D., Király, O., & Demetrovics, Z. (2018). The Psychology of Esports: A Systematic Literature Review. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, *35*(2), 351–365. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10899-018-9763-1

Billett, S., Harteis, C., & Gruber, H. (2014). *International handbook of research in professional and practice-based learning*. Springer.

Black, M. (2017, September 3). Once a novelty, coaching a growing necessity in competitive eSports. *CBC*. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/coaching-competitive-esports-1.4269619

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Bryman, A., & Bell, E. (2019). *Social research methods*. Oxford University Press.

Carbonie, A., Guo, Z., & Cahalane, M. (2018, June). *Positive Personal Development through eSports.* Paper presented at the Pacific Asia Conference on Information Systems (PACIS), Kanagawa, Japan. Retrieved from https://aisel.aisnet.org/pacis2018/125.

Cascón‐Pereira, R., & Hallier, J. (2012). Getting that Certain Feeling: The Role of Emotions in the Meaning, Construction and Enactment of Doctor Managers' Identities. *British Journal of Management*, *23*(1), 130–144. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8551.2011.00748.x

Cassidy, T., Jones, R. L., & Potrac, P. (2004). *Understanding Sports Coaching: The Social, Cultural and Pedagogical Foundations of Coaching Practice*. Routledge.

Caza, B. B., & Creary, S. (2016). The construction of professional identity. In *Perspectives on contemporary professional work*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Christophers, J., & Scholz, T. (2010). *ESports Yearbook 2009*. BoD – Books on Demand.

Colley, H., & Guéry, F. (2015). Understanding new hybrid professions: Bourdieu, illusio and the case of public service interpreters. *Cambridge Journal of Education: Evoking and Provoking Bourdieu in Educational Research*, *45*(1), 113–131. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2014.991277

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (Fourth edition). SAGE.

Cunningham, G. B., Fairley, S., Ferkins, L., Kerwin, S., Lock, D., Shaw, S., & Wicker, P. (2018). eSport: Construct specifications and implications for sport management. *Sport Management Review*, *21*(1), 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2017.11.002

Dachman, J. (2020, February 28). *Report: Global Esports Revenues To Pass $1B in 2020, Viewership To Hit 495M*. Sports Video Group. https://www.sportsvideo.org/2020/02/28/report-global-esports-revenues-to-pass-1b-in-2020-audience-grows-to-nearly-500m/

Dawson, A., & Phillips, P. (2013). Coach career development: Who is responsible? *Sport Management Review*, *16*(4), 477–487. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2013.03.003

ELEAGUE. (2017, June 17). *Breakdown: Sports vs Esports* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://youtu.be/mSSzYmal9mo

Esports job spotlight: Coach / Analyst. (n.d.). British Esports Association. Retrieved February 1, 2020, from https://britishesports.org/careers/coach-analyst/

Esports: The New Playbook in Sports Marketing. (2020). Socialbakers. https://www.socialbakers.com/website/storage/2020/07/Socialbakers_Sports_vs_Esports_Covid_Report_2020.pdf

Evetts, J. (2013). Professionalism: Value and ideology. *Current Sociology, 61*(5–6), 778–796. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392113479316

Feltz, D. L., Chase, M. A., Moritz, S. E., & Sullivan, P. J. (1999). A Conceptual Model of Coaching Efficacy: Preliminary Investigation and Instrument Development. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *91*(4), 765–776. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.91.4.765

Finch, D. J. (2020). *Implications and impacts of eSports on business and society: Emerging research and opportunities*. Business Science Reference, IGI Global.

Fitch, A. (2020, January 13). The most watched esports events of 2019. *Esports Insider*. https://esportsinsider.com/2020/01/esports-viewership-2019/

Foucault, M. (1981). The order of discourse. Inaugural lecture at the College de France, given 2 December 1970. *Untying the Text: A Poststructuralist Reader. Boston, London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul*, 48–78.

Francis, J. (2012). *You Are What You Do: An Investigative Look at Coach Identity*. Florida State University.

Free 2018 Global Esports Market Report. (2018). Newzoo. https://newzoo.com/insights/trend-reports/global-esports-market-report-2018-light/

Freedman, D. P., & Holmes, M. S. (Eds.). (2006). The Teacher's Body: Embodiment, Authority, and Identity in the Academy. *Teaching Theology & Religion*, *9*(1), 60–61. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9647.2006.00261_8.x

Freidson, E. (1983). The theory of professions: State of the art. In R. Dingwall & P. S. C. Lewis, *The sociology of the professions: Lawyers, doctors and others*. Macmillan; St Martin's Press.

Funk, D. C., Pizzo, A. D., & Baker, B. J. (2018). eSport management: Embracing eSport education and research opportunities. *Sport Management Review*, *21*(1), 7–13. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2017.07.008

Gecas, V., & Burke, P. J. (1995). Self and Identity. In K. S. Cook, G. A. Fine, & J. S. House (Eds.), *Sociological perspectives on social psychology*. Allyn and Bacon Boston.

Gratton, C., & Jones, I. (2010). *Research methods for sports studies* (2nd ed). Routledge.

Greenwood, E. (1957). Attributes of a profession. *Social Work*, 45–55.

Hall, E. T., Cowan, D. T., & Vickery, W. (2019). "You don't need a degree to get a coaching job": Investigating the employability of sports coaching degree students. *Sport, Education and Society*, *24*(8), 883–903. https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2018.1482265

Hallmann, K., & Giel, T. (2018). ESports – Competitive sports or recreational activity? *Sport Management Review*, *21*(1), 14–20. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2017.07.011

Heaven, W. D. (2020, June 22). *The pandemic will change how we watch sports*. MIT Technology Review. https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/06/22/1004194/lockdown-pandemic-sports-esports-virtual-fans-watch-video-games/

Heere, B. (2018). Embracing the sportification of society: Defining e-sports through a polymorphic view on sport. *Sport Management Review*, *21*(1), 21–24. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2017.07.002

How Much do Twitch Streamers Make? (2018, November 17). Retrieved June 23, 2020, from Influencer Marketing Hub website: https://influencermarketinghub.com/how-much-do-twitch-streamers-make/

Hughes, E. C. (1958). *Men and their work*. Glencoe: Free Press.

Hutchins, B. (2008). Signs of meta-change in second modernity: The growth of e-sport and the World Cyber Games. *New Media & Society*, *10*(6), 851–869. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444808096248

Hutchins, B., & Rowe, D. (2012). *Sport beyond television: The internet, digital media and the rise of networked media sport: Vol. 40.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203120415

Hyun, W. (2018, December 13). The Importance of Esports Coaches in League of Legends: Their Role within a Team. *Inven Global*. https://www.invenglobal.com/articles/7010

Ibarra, H, & Deshmande, P. (2007). Networks and identities: Reciprocal influences on career processes and outcomes. In H. Gunz & M. Peiperl, *Handbook of identity theory and research* (pp. 268–282). Sage Publications.

Jenny, S. E., Keiper, M. C., Taylor, B. J., Williams, D. P., Gawrysiak, J., Manning, R. D., & Tutka, P. M. (2018). eSports Venues: A New Sport Business Opportunity. *Journal of Applied Sport Management*, *10*(1), 34–49. https://doi.org/10.18666/JASM-2018-V10-I1-8469

Jenny, S. E., Manning, R. D., Keiper, M. C., & Olrich, T. W. (2016). Virtual(ly) Athletes: Where eSports Fit Within the Definition of "Sport." *Quest (National Association for Kinesiology in Higher Education)*, *69*(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2016.1144517

Jin, D. Y. (2010). *Korea's online gaming empire*. MIT Press.

Jones, R. L. (2006). *The sports coach as educator: Re-conceptualising sports coaching*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203020074

Kenny, K., Whittle, A., & Willmott, H. (2011). *Understanding identity & organizations*. Sage.

Kim, J., Hatcher, C., & Newton, C. (2012). *Professional identity of management accountants: Leadership in changing environments* (Research Executive Summary) [Book/Report (Commissioned Report)]. Chartered Institute of Management Accountants.

Leavy, P. (Ed.). (2015). *The Oxford handbook of qualitative research* (First issued an an Oxford University Press paperback). Oxford University Press.

Levine, J. M., & Moreland, R. L. (1995). *Group processes*. McGraw Hill New York, NY.

Lewis, P. S. C., & Dingwall, R. (1983). *The Sociology of the professions: Lawyers, doctors, and others*.

McCutcheon, C., Hitchens, M., & Drachen, A. (2017). *ESport vs irlSport*. 531–542.

McGowen, K. R., & Hart, L. E. (1990). Still Different After All These Years: Gender Differences in Professional Identity Formation. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *21*(2), 118–123. https://doi.org/10.1037/0735-7028.21.2.118

Merwin, C. D., Masaru Sugiyama, Piyush Mubayi, Toshiya Hari, Heath P. Terry, & Alexander Duval. (2018). *The World of Games Esports From Wild West to Mainstream. Equity Research*. Goldman Sachs.

Nouri, M. (2018). The Power of Influence: Traditional Celebrity vs Social Media Influencer. *Pop Culture Intersections*. https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/engl_176/32

Nyström, S. (2009). The Dynamics of Professional Identity Formation: Graduates' Transitions from Higher Education to Working Life. *Vocations and Learning*, *2*(1), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12186-008-9014-1

Olson, E. (2019). Personal Identity. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/identity-personal/

Olympic Coach—Tips on Finding The Right One. (n.d.). International Olympic Committee. Retrieved June 23, 2020, from https://www.olympic.org/athletes-entourage-coaches

Perez, M. (2018, February 21). Report: Esports To Grow Substantially And Near Billion-Dollar Revenues In 2018. *Forbes*. https://www.forbes.com/sites/mattperez/2018/02/21/report-esports-to-grow-substantially-and-near-a-billion-dollar-revenues-in-2018/#1845c5e42b01

Pizzo, A. D., Baker, B. J., Na, S., Lee, M. A., Kim, D., & Funk, D. C. (2018). ESport vs. Sport: A Comparison of Spectator Motives. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, *27*(2), 108–123.

Purdy, L. G., & Potrac, P. (2016). Am I just not good enough? The creation, development and questioning of a high performance coaching identity. *Sport, Education and Society*, *21*(5), 778–795. https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2014.941795

Reyes, M. S. (2019). *The Esports Ecosystem*. Business Insider Intelligence. https://store.businessinsider.com/products/the-esports-ecosystem-1

Rhoden, G. B., Valladao, S. P., Andre, T., & Cox, D. (2019). Observation Of Heart Rate Variability Response To Collegiate Esports Tournament. *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise*, *51*(6 Suppl), 31–31. https://doi.org/10.1249/01.mss.0000560583.40014.ee

Richman, O. (2019, December 30). *These are all of the biggest esports prize pools from 2019*. WIN.gg. https://win.gg/news/3387/these-are-all-of-the-biggest-esports-prize-pools-from-2019

Roberts, L. M., Dutton, J. E., Spreitzer, G. M., Heaphy, E. D., & Quinn, R. E. (2005). Composing the Reflected Best-Self Portrait: Building Pathways for Becoming Extraordinary in Work Organizations. *The Academy of Management Review*, *30*(4), 712–736. https://doi.org/10.5465/AMR.2005.18378874

Scholz, T. M. (2020). Deciphering the World of eSports. *International Journal on Media Management: E-Sports in Media Management*, *22*(1), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1080/14241277.2020.1757808

Schwartz, S. J. (Ed.). (2011). *Handbook of identity theory and research*. Springer.

Sciulli, D. (2005). Continental Sociology of Professions Today: Conceptual Contributions. *Current Sociology*, *53*(6), 915–942. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392105057155

Seo, Y. (2016). Professionalized consumption and identity transformations in the field of eSports. *Journal of Business Research*, *69*(1), 264–272. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2015.07.039

Skorikov, V. B., & Vondracek, F. W. (2011). Occupational identity. In *Handbook of identity theory and research* (pp. 693–714). Springer.

Soebbing, B. P., & Washington, M. (2011). Leadership succession and organizational performance: Football coaches and organizational issues. *Journal of Sport Management*, *25*(6), 550–561. https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.25.6.550

Stein, I. F. (2009). Which hat am I wearing now?: An evidence-based tool for coaching self-reflection. *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research and Practice*, *2*(2), 163–175. https://doi.org/10.1080/17521880903102233

Taylor, T. L. (2012). *Raising the Stakes: E-Sports and the Professionalization of Computer Gaming*. MIT Press.

Tone, S. (2020, January 19). *China To Set Occupational Standards for Esports Athletes*. Sixth Tone. https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1005096/china-to-set-occupational-standards-for-esports-athletes

Trede, F., Macklin, R., & Bridges, D. (2012). Professional identity development: A review of the higher education literature. *Studies in Higher Education*, *37*(3), 365–384. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2010.521237

Van Maanen, J., & Barley, S. R. (1984). Occupational communities: Culture and control in organizations. *Research in Organizational Behavior*.

Verhoef, M. J., Boon, H. S., & Mutasingwa, D. R. (2006). The scope of naturopathic medicine in Canada: An emerging profession. *Social Science & Medicine, 63*(2), 409–417. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2006.01.008

Wilensky, H. L. (1964). The Professionalization of Everyone? *American Journal of Sociology*, *70*(2), 137–158. https://doi.org/10.1086/223790

Witkowski, E. (2012). On the Digital Playing Field: How We "Do Sport" With Networked Computer Games. *Games and Culture*, *7*(5), 349–374. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412012454222

Xue, H., Newman, J. I., & Du, J. (2019). Narratives, identity and community in esports. *Leisure Studies*, *38*(6), 845–861. https://doi.org/10.1080/02614367.2019.1640778

Yamaguchi, A. (2018, December 23). Esports: Inside the relentless training of professional gaming stars (No. 12). In *CBSN Originals*. CBS News. https://youtu.be/box4SFtGvA0

Zwibel, H., DiFrancisco-Donoghue, J., DeFeo, A., & Yao, S. (2019). An Osteopathic Physician's Approach to the Esports Athlete. *The Journal of the American Osteopathic Association*, *119*(11), 756. https://doi.org/10.7556/jaoa.2019.125