Guest Editorial:
Esports: A Multidisciplinary Research Perspective and Future Research Direction

Introduction

Video gaming is poised to become the dominant form of modern entertainment, with esports emerging as a central pillar of this transformation. Experts predict that esports—defined as professional, tournament-level competitive gaming (Cunningham et al., 2018)—could one day rival traditional sports such as football in terms of player participation, audience size, and revenue generation (Scholz, 2019). With rapidly expanding audiences, institutional support, and cultural relevance, esports now rivals traditional sports in economic impact and societal presence. Yet, scholarly understanding of this phenomenon remains fragmented across disciplines, lacking a unified conceptual foundation. Cranmer et al. (2021) redefined esports and proposed the "Esports Matrix", which categorises esports into four realms: traditional game experience, digitally enhanced sports, immersive reality sports, and sports digitalisation. Similarly, Jeong and Youk (2023) refined esports definitions and highlighted its shared elements with traditional sports, such as institutionalisation, industry involvement, and contingent problems. Addressing the conceptual fragmentation these studies highlight, this special issue of *Internet Research* presents multidisciplinary research on the governance, technological innovation, and consumer dynamics shaping the esports ecosystem. To integrate these diverse insights, we propose a Unified Multilayered Esports Framework (UMEF) that maps research across macro, meso, and micro levels and offers a roadmap for future inquiry.

The last decade has witnessed the explosive growth of esports in terms of viewership and revenue. The COVID-19 pandemic further accelerated this expansion, as the absence of traditional sports fuelled mainstream interest in competitive gaming (Ke and Wagner, 2022). The global esports market continues to grow rapidly, with its value rising from approximately 2.3 billion USD in 2023 to 2.8 billion USD in 2024. By 2025, the United States is projected to lead the global market with 1.3 billion USD in revenue, followed by China with 537 million USD. The 2024 *League of Legends* World Championship became the most-watched esports event to date, attracting a peak audience of 6.86 million concurrent viewers (Clement, 2025). Meanwhile, there is increasing official recognition of the significance of esports by societies, governments, international event organisers, and sports policymakers. Numerous universities now offer esports education programs at bachelor's, master's, and executive education levels. Moreover, for the first time, esports were a medal event at the 2022 Asian Games in China and the first Olympic Esports Games are scheduled to be held in 2027 in Saudi Arabia. With continuous growth, the former "niche market" of esports has transformed into a mainstream global phenomenon.

The boom of the esports industry, the interconnectedness of multiple platforms and media, and the complex relationships between different stakeholders posit various opportunities and challenges (Meng-Lewis *et al.*, 2022). Academic research on esports has expanded rapidly over the past decade, growing to a multidisciplinary academic field involving media studies, informatics, business, sports science, sociology, law, and cognitive science (Reitman *et al.*, 2020). This special issue aims at, firstly, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how esports have transformed the nature of sports from what is involved and who is involved to where and how the sports is staged,

and secondly, examining the impact of esports development from multidisciplinary perspectives.

Towards a Unified Multilayered Esports Framework (UMEF) and Special Issue Contents

Esports research, while expanding rapidly, is still marked by fragmentation across disciplines, and this results in isolated studies that are not able to capture the holistic nature of the esports ecosystem. This fragmentation limits our ability to address complex issues including, for example, governance, player health, technological and cultural impacts, and audience engagement, in a cohesive manner.

Building on the discussion in our special issue, there is a critical need to advance esports research through a multidisciplinary lens while fostering more holistic, interdisciplinary approaches. A multidisciplinary perspective brings together expertise and insights from diverse fields, including sports science, media studies, business, and others. However, future esports research should adopt an interdisciplinary approach that integrates these insights into cohesive conceptual frameworks, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the field (Pizzo et al., 2022).

This special issue received a substantial number of submissions covering a wide range of esports research topics, addressing the identified gaps from a multidisciplinary perspective. Nine full-length articles were selected with the support of our anonymous reviewers. Methodologically, diverse research methods were employed. Based on the research themes, key theories and findings of our SI articles, we propose conceptualising esports through the UMEF (Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 here]

The UMEF structures esports research across three interconnected levels—macro (governance and institutions), meso (organisational practices and technologies), and micro (individual behaviours and identities). This model provides a holistic view of the esports ecosystem, encouraging interdisciplinary connections and guiding future inquiry. It also reflects the editorial structure of this special issue, grouping selected articles by level of practice. Additionally, UMEF links these levels to three core practical domains and six emerging research themes, which we elaborate in the sections that follow.

Governance and Industry Evolution at the Macro-Level

The macro-level studies highlight how esports is increasingly embedded in public policy, national branding, and global governance debates. Together, they demonstrate the strategic importance of esports for state actors. Under this theme, research focuses on regulatory frameworks, development of the business ecosystem, corporate social responsibility, sustainability, and national branding.

Zhengyang Li, Qi Peng, and Nicolas Scelles' study explores the evolution of a government-led esports business ecosystem through a longitudinal case study of Zhongxian Esports Town in China. Drawing on Moore's (1993) four-stage business ecosystem lifecycle model, the study collected qualitative data through semi-structured interviews and analysis of secondary documents. Findings reveal that while

government policy accelerated the ecosystem's formation, overly ambitious goals and misalignment between government strategies and commercial stakeholder expectations have created tensions at early stages. These discrepancies led to a necessary shift in the town's value proposition and strategic reorientation. In addition, the authors observed that over time, previously fragmented stakeholder relationships evolved from conflict to cooperation, particularly through a renewed focus on esports education. These partnerships between educational institutions and training centres illustrate a process of value co-creation and coopetition, supporting the ecosystem's sustainability. Theoretically, this study contributes to our understanding of ecosystem co-evolution and stakeholder alignment in emerging digital clusters, particularly in non-Western contexts (Li et al., 2025).

Dimitrios Kolyperas, Christos Anagnostopoulos, Ismini Pavlopoulou, Argyro Elisavet Manoli, and Simon Chadwick's article explores the evolving nature of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and introduces corporate digital responsibility (CDR) within the esports industry. Using a qualitative multiple case study design, the authors analysed CSR and CDR activities across a wide range of esports organisations, including publishers, teams, tournament organisers, and governing bodies. Through content analysis, this study maps the multidimensional roles these actors play. The findings reveal that esports organisations, particularly game publishers, exercise humanitarian, business, and cultural influence, while CSR and CDR practices are often fluid, adapting across these domains. This study extended Carroll's CSR framework (1979) to include digital responsibility alongside business performance and modes of responsiveness dimensions, including digital issues. It highlights the increasing need to integrate CSR and CDR into the routine operations of esports, given its rising public profile and commercial relevance, and makes an original theoretical contribution by bridging CSR and CDR literatures in a digital sports context (Kolyperas et al., 2024).

The article co-authored by Yiran Su, Dongqi Wang, and Wanting Sun explores how esports athletes are transformed into national brand symbols during international multisport events such as the Asian Games. Adopting a multi-method qualitative approach, including netnographic observations, semiotic visual analysis of social media posts, and semi-structured interviews, the findings show that government policies, such as real-name regulations and national visual symbolism, play a strategic role in legitimising esports athletes as representatives of national identity. Nevertheless, these changes also create risks of diluting the subcultural authenticity of esports valued by fans. Digital platforms enable both government-led agenda-setting and fan-driven co-creation of athlete brands, revealing tensions between national visibility and individual expression. This study introduces the *Polycatalytic Athlete Brand Transformation Model*, which conceptualises how esports athletes' identities are shaped across state, media, and fan domains. This research study contributes to understanding the evolving dynamics of athlete branding in esports (Su et al., 2025).

Technological and Experiential Innovations at the Meso-Level

Research at the meso level underscores the central role of hybrid experiences, platform design, and consumer technologies in shaping how esports is produced and consumed. It reveals how innovations in interactivity and immersion are redefining value creation in the esports ecosystem. The research focus under this theme is centred on the integration of digital technologies, esports adaptation in the metaverse, and phygital event experiences (Heidemann et al., 2024).

The article co-authored by Alex Baudet and Marie-Agnès Parmentier explores the evolving concept of "phygital" experiences (or hybrid experiences) at esports tournaments. Taking a triadic lens involving producers, performers, and audiences, this study investigates how consumer experiences are shaped at the intersection of digital immersion and physical presence. Employing ethnographic and netnographic approaches and using data from multiple sources, this study reveals how tensions arise when reconciling the virtual focus of esports performers with the sensory demands of physical audiences. This study provides insights into value creation and destruction in phygital spaces and offers a novel framework for managing hybrid experiences in esports, contributing to the literature on phygital customer experience (Baudet and Parmentier, 2025).

Tom Brock and Garry Crawford's article examines the broader concept of "esports experience economy", where consumers engage in experiential consumption that expresses identity and social meaning. Based on a multiple case study of esports tournaments, gaming products, and esportswear fashion, the study identifies three experiential characteristics: immersive spectacles, self-work through product customisation in online communities, and lifestyle branding via fashion and symbolic affiliation. This study reveals how esports consumption is shaped not only by personal engagement but also by macro-level, market-driven processes. "Experiential consumption" can be understood as a meso-level concept that bridges psychological, economic, and cultural dimensions of consumer behaviour. This research study challenges the assumption that competitive play is the primary driver of esports engagement, highlighting instead the authenticity and symbolic value that shape the esports consumer experiences (Brock and Crawford, 2024).

Yongjin Hwang, Keshav Gupta, and Deokkyung Ock's article uses experiments to examine how interactive virtual shopping (IVS) affects players' game enjoyment. Drawing on cognitive appraisal theory, this study finds that IVS significantly enhances players' enjoyment of the game. Players derive emotional satisfaction not just from buying virtual items but also from their decision-making and evaluation processes involved in shopping. When players perceive the game environment and their avatars as realistic and relatable, their enjoyment increases, especially when they feel attached to their game characters. Interestingly, this attachment can form regardless of whether the character's gender is congruent with the player's own, suggesting that there is room for identity exploration and inclusivity. This research study provides new insights into how esports players experience virtual consumption and contributes to esports marketing literature by highlighting how immersive shopping experiences can offer real value for both players and brands (Hwang et al., 2025).

Ali Mahmoud's study investigates the public's beliefs about metaverse esports by analysing user-generated comments on popular YouTube videos. Using a social media data approach, this study employed machine learning techniques and Python programming to collect, clean and process over 40,000 comments. Thematic analysis identifies five key themes: immersive engagement, technical constraints, future possibilities, cost and inclusivity barriers, and health considerations. The findings reveal a mix of excitement and scepticism, highlighting public concerns around user comfort, toxicity, financial accessibility, and health risks, while also recognising the innovation potential of the metaverse. This study critiques and extends assumptions from various models, including the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989), Uses

and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1974), and Diffusion of Innovations (Rogers, 2010), by offering novel insights into user expectations and societal readiness for metaverse esports (Mahmoud, 2025).

Consumer Psychology and Branding at the Micro-Level

At the micro level, the selected papers provide deep insights into individual player motivations, branding effects, and cognitive-behavioural responses to esports experiences. Collectively, they illustrate how identity, satisfaction, and engagement are constructed at the intersection of gameplay, marketing, and psychological processes.

The article authored by Weisha Wang, Wentong Liu, Haiming Hang, and Zhifeng Chen utilise the popular *Honor of Kings* as the background to evaluate esports players' preference. Drawing upon the self-hierarchy and self-determination theories, this paper examines the motivations of players at individual, relational, and community levels. This study adopted a mixed-method approach, using semi-structured interviews to reveal self-definitional motivations at multiple levels and a large-scale survey with *Honor of Kings* players to test their effects on players' satisfaction. Findings indicate that antecedents identified at individual, relational and collective levels contribute to players' game satisfaction, with some relationships significantly moderated by game character identification. This research study takes *Honor of Kings* as an example and uncovers reasons behind game satisfaction. The findings also offer important guidelines for game designers to offer satisfactory experience to players (Wang et al., 2024).

At the micro-level of esports practice, the article by Byung-Jae Min, Daehwan Kim, and Yong Jae Ko examines the impact of in-game situations (i.e. battle vs. non-battle), advertisement animation (i.e. static vs. animated), and their interaction on chain effects of positive behavioural intentions in esports. With experimental design, participants wore eye-trackers, watched stimuli and completed the survey. The visual attention significantly shapes in-game situations, affecting both fixation duration and fixation count. Meanwhile, fixation count positively influences both explicit and implicit memories. While only implicit memory positively shapes brand attitude and players' behavioural intention. The findings carefully unpack the psychological mechanisms of the esports participants and demonstrate the psychological reactions throughout the examination. Such findings contribute important insights to esports design and players' engagement (Min et al., 2025).

Synthesis and Research Agenda

Growth in academic research pertaining to esports is itself an inevitable outcome of the rapid expansion in the number of people playing or watching esports, organisations producing hardware and software, and countries that have adopted some aspect of esports engagement as part of policy and strategy. As this special issue demonstrates, the quality of research is developing, and we therefore hope this special issue can contribute to improvements in the industry. For the purposes of assessing potential practical impact, we view esports at the macro (nations and economies), meso (organisations and communities), and micro (individuals and relationships)levels.

Works published in this special issue on corporate social responsibility and ecosystems are macro level studies, and both articles highlight two profound issues that have rapidly emerged over the last decade. At this level, the need for effective CSR approaches to esports is imperative given the environmental challenges that both the

world and esports face. With climate change and its consequences becoming increasingly acute, an inconvenient truth for the sector is that it is a significant contributor to the environmental problems we face. Kolyperas et al. (2024) provides us with some insights into the challenges esports faces, though the speed and effectiveness of mitigating actions are of paramount importance. Similarly, given the often fractious, geopolitical, and toxic nature of esports environments, addressing how to create and maintain appropriate standards of behaviour is a pressing challenge. This raises issues of how state and non-state entities address issues of intervention, regulation, and control, though such matters are intricate and sensitive. In a similar way, Li et al. (2025) on ecosystems (specifically in China) demonstrates how significant esports has become in policy and strategy terms. Countries across the world are now actively seeking to position themselves as industrial development hubs that secure global competitive advantages. There are economic dimensions to this, notably the way in which esports contributes to economic growth, employment, export revenues, and investment. Yet equally, there is a political dimension, as cities and countries deploy esports for the purposes of diplomacy and soft power projection, but also for creating dependencies and exerting power. Understanding this broader, often international and global context is essential for those who are seeking to navigate such environments, which are often complex and sensitive.

In addition, Su et al. (2025) sheds light on how esports is now deeply entangled with national identity building. Through state-backed initiatives such as real-name policies and symbolic branding during events like the Asian Games, esports athletes are being recast as national representatives. This highlights the increasing politicisation of esports visibility on global stages, whilst simultaneously exposing tensions between mainstream legitimacy and the preservation of subcultural authenticity.

At the meso level, this special issue highlights how, in broad terms, public engagement with esports is currently an issue of significant interest. Papers on beliefs (Mahmoud, 2025), experiences (Baudet and Parmentier, 2025; Brock and Crawford, 2024), and interactivity (Hwang et al., 2025) provide some salient lessons for those researching or working in the sector. Fundamentally, the debate about whether esports is a sport continues to be an important one, especially as sport governing bodies continue to grapple with the challenges of engaging, integrating, or competing with esports. Such challenges are exacerbated by the continuing fast pace of technological development, most recently (and potently) symbolised by the metaverse's emergence. This phenomenon suggests all manner of issues for managers and leaders to address, ranging from how to keep pace with change through to ensuring the mass market appeal of esports and its available products. The roles that augmented and virtual reality technologies and artificial intelligence will play in the future of esports remain to be seen, but how people respond to these technologies will dictate how esports look in, for example, 2050. The experiential elements of esports resonate with current consumer trends. Indeed, marketers no longer refer simply to the product and service dimensions of what they offer. New technologies will undoubtedly shape consumer attitudes and preferences, though as consumers go searching for new, value-adding experiences, they will induce innovation by organisations operating in the sector. Although this special issue focuses on one form of identity formation, the broader question of how communities create and sustain identity through esports presents intriguing possibilities. This process strongly aligns with experiential product elements and implies that those working in the sector need to understand the cognitive-behavioural nature of esports

engagement. The act of shopping, as illustrated in this special issue, appears to be significant in both identity formation and experiential terms. Getting to grips with what this means and what success looks like presents interesting challenges for managers and leaders.

Cognitive-behavioural dimensions are also evident and important at the micro level, which the papers Wang et al. (2024) and Min et al. (2025) serve to illustrate in this special issue. The former paper, focusing on players' need and satisfaction, introduces us to the specifically human dimension of esports, whether it is consumer- or athlete-focused. Why people play or watch is important for the likes of marketers and product development professionals, while managing the performance of athletes is an evolving field that is likely to see analytics play a more prominent role in esports (echoing the Moneyball phenomenon that has become pervasive in other sports). At the same time, however, at this micro human level addressing issues of personal well-being is crucial, especially as they pertain to mental health. The latter paper alludes to the typically immersive nature of esports, which new technologies may ultimately deepen. Once "inside" esports or one's own lived experience of it, how we think, feel, and behave raises all manner of issues. For instance, as gambling sponsorships, loot boxes, and other speculative instruments begin to embed themselves within esports, the potential for damaging addiction – economically and otherwise – is already becoming a problem. Yet micro-level esports is not just a matter of consumers and players, it is also one of individual organisations. The macro and meso levels can only thrive if they are underpinned by a healthy industrial base consisting of both early-stage and mature businesses. Although this special issue did not draw submissions from within this field, we nevertheless contend that for decision makers, leaders, and managers, how to establish and sustain firm-level developments in the esports sector is imperative for and central to the success of its long-term development. As such, we encourage other researchers to become more active in this highly important research stream.

We recognise these three layers of esports governance, technology, and consumer behaviour influence each other in complex ways. Our framework suggests that in order to address the fragmentation in esports research, we will need to take a unified holistic view instead of treating them isolated. The UMEF emphasises both structure and conceptual layering across research and practical domains and provides a clear road map for esports researchers. Deriving from an in-depth analysis of existing research gaps highlighted in our special issue, the articles' findings, and the broader interdisciplinary literature, we identify six overarching research themes that cut across the macro, meso, and micro levels of the UMEF: *Esports Governance and Political Implications*, *Economic and Geopolitical Impacts*, *Cultural and Regional Diversity and Inclusivity*, *Technological Integration and Innovation*, *Social Interaction and Identity Formation*, and *Health Impacts*. Each theme discussed below is accompanied by targeted future research directions presented as research questions (see Table 1), which reflect both conceptual and empirical priorities.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

Esports Governance and Political Implications

Esports has not yet established international governance with the power to define rules across games (Peng *et al.*, 2020). Despite growing recognition at major events including the Asian Games and discussions by organisations such as the International Olympic Committee and the Olympic Council of Asia (Murray *et al.*, 2022), it continues to lack

formal, centralised regulation and oversight. These regulatory gaps raise complex legal and structural questions that require further investigation, including how governance structures can refine policy, safeguard employment rights, address legal risks, and ensure sustainable industry growth. Hence, future research could provide a comprehensive understanding of the current governance structure of esports and explore how international coordination may benefit multiple stakeholders, from players and teams to governing bodies and sponsors. Research on esports integrity, legal frameworks, and sustainable development remains limited. Strategic studies should address regulatory challenges, intellectual property issues, governance-stakeholder coordination, and the integration of CSR and CDR into national and organisational policies (Flegr and Schmidt, 2022; Kolyperas et al., 2024).

Economic and Geopolitical Impacts

Although research has been conducted regarding esports monetisation models and sponsorship dynamics through economic frameworks (Zhu et al., 2024), there is still limited exploration of how esports can generate broader national and regional benefits beyond financial gains (Murray et al., 2022). This includes exploring how financial barriers influence accessibility, how sponsorship and investment shape brand development, and how esports is strategically used for soft power, digital diplomacy, and geopolitical positioning. There is also increasing interest in understanding the ways in which global economic systems, platform governance, and surveillance capitalism intersect with esports as a communication and economic platform (Wong and Meng-Lewis, 2023; Zuboff, 2015).

Cultural and Regional Diversity and Inclusivity

Esports as a global phenomenon has transcended cultural and regional boundaries and offers a platform for inclusivity through diverse participation. Esports can serve as a space for inclusivity that is influenced by regional dynamics and cultural implications. Comparative studies on cultural and regional variations in esports practices can provide valuable insights into global trends and localised challenges (Carrillo Vera et al., 2018). Future research could explore how esports promote cross-cultural communication, diversity and cultural syncretism, as well as how collectivist versus individualist contexts shape player identity and experiences. Understanding these dynamics can help inform policies and practices that strengthen global equity, representation, and inclusivity in competitive gaming spaces.

Technological Integration and Innovation

Emerging technologies including AI, AR, and VR present opportunities to reshape esports experiences (Schmidt, 2024). Integrating people, technology, and organisations, information system theories are crucial for examining the socio-technical dynamics of esports platforms (Ke et al., 2022). These perspectives can guide future studies on how digital ecosystems shape player and audience experiences, market dynamics, and platform innovations (Zhu et al., 2024). Similar socio-technical approaches have been applied in other domains to understand how information-rich environments influence user beliefs and long-term advocacy behaviours (Liu et al., 2024b). Research should also assess how technological advances impact esports at both the players (micro) and infrastructure (macro) levels.

Social Interaction and Identity Formation

Esports as an increasingly popular form of gaming can be regarded as a "third place" in addition to home and work, where meaningful social interaction is evident (Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006). Esports games provide an environment in which players engage in online social interactions and collaborative community-building (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017). Future research could explore how esports facilitates the development of social networks, supports identity co-creation between fans and athletes, and fosters lifestyle shifts within player and spectator communities (Carrillo Vera et al., 2018; Su et al., 2025). In particular, there is scope to examine how avatars, fan culture, and branding contribute to digital community narratives across different games, genres, and cultures.

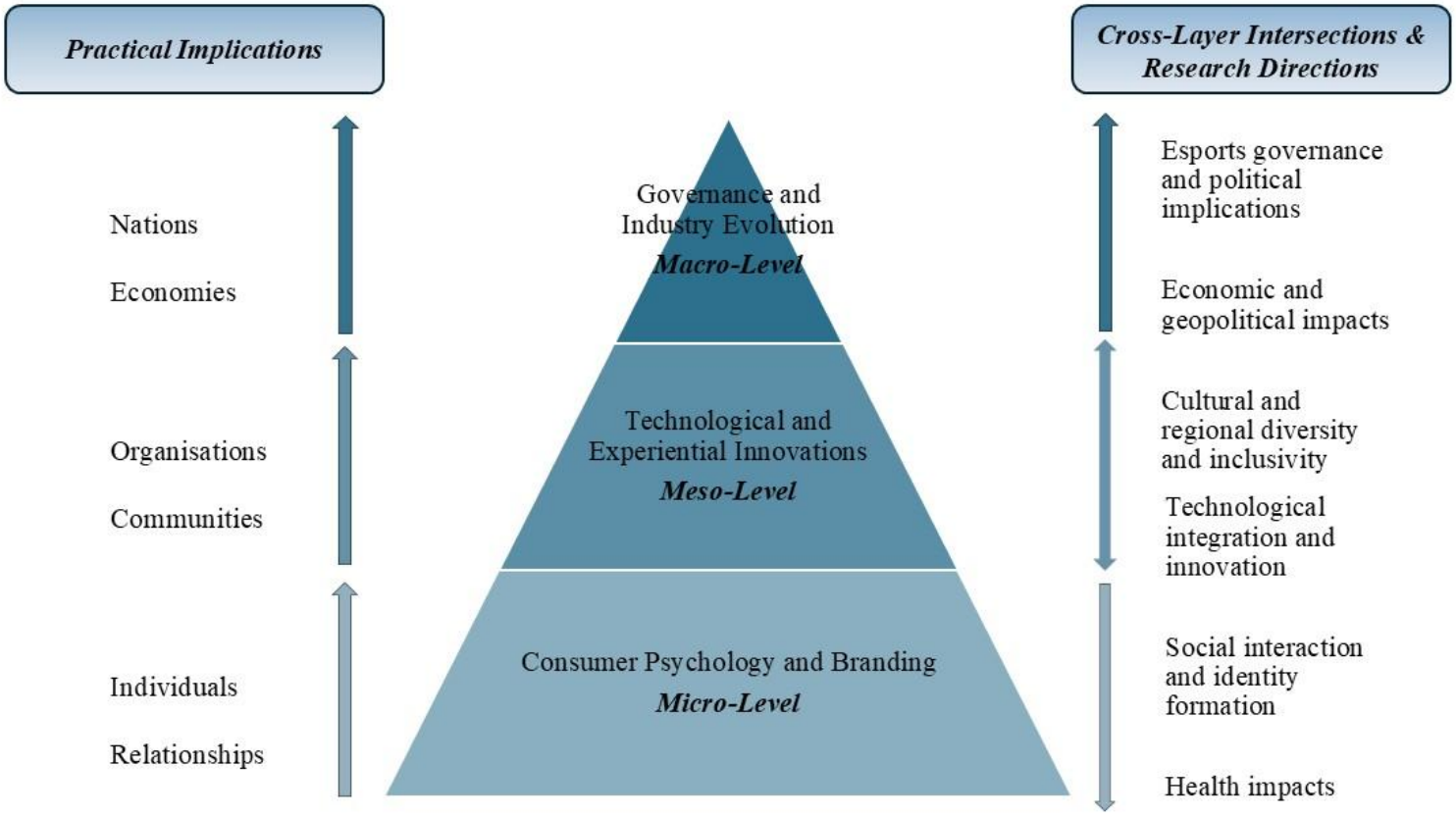
Health Impacts

Esports professionals face unique health challenges, including exhaustion driven by intense training schedules, high-performance expectations, and the volatile nature of esports careers (Liu et al., 2024a). Spectators may also face physiological and cognitive strain during prolonged or immersive viewing environments (Rodrigues et al., 2023). Psychological studies often adopt frameworks from sports psychology to explore motivation, cognitive performance, and emotional regulation in esports (Pedraza-Ramirez et al., 2020). Future studies should examine short and long-term effects of participation on mental and physical health, investigate strategies to destigmatise gameplay, and evaluate the effectiveness of adaptive interfaces and approaches for managing well-being of esports professionals and participants. Interventions to promote physical activity, mental health, and nutritional awareness within esports ecosystems could be developed and assessed (Schary et al., 2022).

Building on these diverse research pathways outlined above, it becomes clear that advancing esports research requires not only deeper specialisation within each domain but also stronger conceptual integration across macro, meso, and micro levels. Esports is not just a digital pastime; it is a dynamic, multilayered domain of cultural production, economic activity, and technological innovation. The articles in this special issue demonstrate the richness of this field and the value of interdisciplinary approaches. As esports continues to mature, this special issue offers a roadmap for future inquiries that are analytically rigorous, globally inclusive, and responsive to rapid technological and societal change.

Yue Meng-Lewis
Open University Business School, The Open University, UK
Hongfei Liu
Southampton Business School, University of Southampton, UK
Simon Chadwick
Emlyon Business School, China
Sascha L. Schmidt
WHU - Otto Beisheim School of Management, Germany

Figure 1: The Pyramid of Unified Multilayered Esports Framework (UMEF)



Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 1. Future research directions in esports from a multidisciplinary perspective

Future Research Directions	Potential Research Questions
Esports Governance and Political Implications	• How does international governance of esports contribute to policy refining in esports? • How do employment structures in esports ensure fair labour conditions and benefit all stakeholders? • What governance models best support sustainable growth of the esports industry as it gains recognition? • What are the critical legal and policy issues that need to be addressed in esports practice? • How do government-led esports towns demonstrate the impact of public policy and strategic pivots on esports ecosystem life cycle evolution? • How do comparative studies across different countries and towns enhance our understanding of governance frameworks, stakeholder coordination, and infrastructure adaptability? • How do esports regulations (e.g. real-name policy, digital moderation) impact athlete freedom and brand identity? • How are CSR and CDR models in esports embedded into broader national or organisational policies for promoting responsible management?
Economic and Geopolitical Impacts	• How do societies, nations and regions benefit from esports in addition to economic gains? • How do financial barriers (e.g. immersive hardware costs) and sponsorship structures influence accessibility and brand development in metaverse esports? • What role do national policies (e.g. esports in the Olympic Games) play in shaping legitimacy and investment? • How do global economic systems and surveillance capitalism affect esports governance and user-brand dynamics? • How does esports athlete branding evolve across commercial, national, and global frames over time? • How are monetisation models, CSR strategic relevance, and ecosystem financing evaluated and optimised for long-term sustainability? • In what ways does esports serve as a tool for public diplomacy, soft power projection, and geopolitical influence?

Future Research Directions	Potential Research Questions
Cultural and Regional Diversity and Inclusivity	• How does esports participation contribute to the development of inclusivity and diversity? • How does esports facilitate cross-cultural communication? • How do cultural values and norms shape player identity, digital behaviour, and esports participation? • How are esports practices adapted to balance Western and non-Western contexts while respecting local cultures? • How do multilingual, cross-cultural studies of metaverse esports adoption inform global inclusion strategies? • How does esports participation promote cultural syncretism and amplify underrepresented voices across regions in digital spaces?
Technological Integration and Innovation	• How do emerging technologies (e.g. AI, AR, VR) shape esports at micro and macro levels? • What are the factors that affect the socio-technical dynamics of esports platforms? • How do digital ecosystems shape player and audience experiences? • How do game genre and character design influence perceived realism and engagement? • What roles do audio-visual and haptic technologies play in consumer-performer interactions? • How does interactive esports virtual shopping (IVS) influence player enjoyment, spending behaviour, and brand attitudes over time? • How can advanced metrics (e.g. physiological monitoring) be used to measure and improve user well-being in immersive gaming?
Social Interaction and Identity Formation	• How does esports contribute the development of social networks of players? • How does esports contribute to the development of new lifestyles? • How do self-definitional motivations vary across games and cultures? • How do avatar identity and self-avatar congruity influence player attachment, enjoyment, and emotional responses? • How do fan cultures co-create athlete branding and identity narratives? • What are the factors that shape the formation of esports players' digital personas and how do they integrate into broader community relationships?

Future Research Directions	Potential Research Questions
Health Impacts	• How does esports participation affect the mental health of the players and the spectators? • What are the sustained psychological and physiological impacts of competitive esports involvement? • What strategies can reduce stigma around gaming by highlighting its positive psychological and social outcomes? • How do real-time physiological and adaptive metrics reduce health risks in esports? • How do haptic and immersive strategies influence cognitive load, stress, and well-being? • What in-game, event-based, or technological disconnection and reconnection strategies are the most effective for reducing fatigue and supporting well-being for both performers and the spectators in esports? • How can health sciences, media studies, and technology research be integrated to create safe practice guidelines for competitive VR environments?

Source(s): Authors' own work

References

Baudet, A. and Parmentier, M.-A. (2025), "Mediating social phygital experiences in the context of esports tournaments", *Internet Research*, doi: 10.1108/INTR-03-2024-0522.

Brock, T. and Crawford, G. (2024), "The esports experience economy: a multiple-case study of esports events, peripherals and fashion", *Internet Research*, doi: 10.1108/INTR-02-2024-0138.

Carrillo Vera, J.A.,, Aguado Terrón, J.M. and García, S.G. (2018), "Following the trail of eSports: the multidisciplinary boom of research on the competitive practice of video games", *International Journal of Gaming and Computer-Mediated Simulations*, Vol. 10 No. 4, pp. 42-61, doi: 10.4018/IJGCMS.2018100103.

Carroll, A.B. (1979), "A three-dimensional conceptual model of corporate performance", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 4 No. 4, pp. 497-505, doi: 10.5465/amr.1979.4498296.

Clement, J. (2025), "eSports market revenue 2025, by country", available at: https://www.statista.com/forecasts/1130696/esports-revenue-share-country (accessed 8 April 2025).

Cranmer, E.E., Han, D.D., van Gisbergen, M. and Jung, T. (2021), "Esports matrix: structuring the esports research agenda", *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 117, 106648, doi: 10.1016/j.chb.2020.106671.

Cunningham, G.B., Fairley, S., Ferkins, L., Kerwin, S., Lock, D., Shaw, S. and Wicker, P. (2018), "eSport: construct specifications and implications for sport management", *Sport Management Review*, Vol. 21 No. 1, pp. 1-6, doi: 10.1016/j.smr.2017.11.002.

Davis, F.D. (1989), "Perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, and user acceptance of information technology", *MIS Quarterly*, Vol. 13 No. 3, pp. 319-340, doi: 10.2307/249008.

Flegr, S. and Schmidt, S.L. (2022), "Strategic management in eSports - a systematic review of the literature", *Sport Management Review*, Vol. 25 No. 4, pp. 631-655, doi: 10.1080/14413523.2021.1974222.

Hamari, J. and Sjöblom, M. (2017), "What is eSports and why do people watch it?", *Internet Research*, Vol. 27 No. 2, pp. 211–232, doi: 10.1108/IntR-04-2016-0085.

Heidemann, G., Schmidt, S.L., von der Gracht, H.A. and Beiderbeck, D. (2024), "The impact of the metaverse on the future business of professional football clubs – A prospective study," *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, Vol. 208, doi: 10.1016/j.techfore.2024.123573.

Hwang, Y., Gupta, K. and Ock, D. (2025), "Gotta take my avatar shopping: impacts of interactive virtual shopping in esports", *Internet Research*, doi: 10.1108/INTR-03-2024-0346

Jeong, D. and Youk, S. (2023), "Refining esports: a quantitative cartography of esports literature", *Entertainment Computing*, Vol. 47, 100597, doi: 10.1016/j.entcom.2023.100597.

Katz, E., Blumler, J.G. and Gurevitch, M. (1974), "Utilization of mass communication by the individual", Blumler, J.G. & Katz, E. (Ed.s), *The Uses of Mass Communications: Current Perspectives on Gratifications Research*, Sage Publications, Beverly Hills, pp. 19-31.

Ke, X. and Wagner, C. (2022), "Global pandemic compels sport to move to eSports: understanding from brand extension perspective", *Managing Sport and Leisure*, Vol. 27 No. 1-2, pp. 152-157, doi: 10.1080/23750472.2020.1792801.

Ke, X., Wagner, C. and Du, J. (2022), "Calling for information systems research on esports: an overview study", *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*, Vol. 50,, doi: 10.17705/1CAIS.05010.

Kolyperas, D., Anagnostopoulos, C., Pavlopoulou, I., Manoli, A.E. and Chadwick, S. (2024), "Corporate social and digital responsibility in esports", *Internet Research*, doi: 10.1108/INTR-01-2024-0134.

Li, Z., Peng, Q. and Scelles, N. (2025), "Esports business ecosystem and its lifecycle: a case study of Zhongxian Esports Town in China", *Internet Research*, doi: 10.1108/INTR-03-2024-0497.

Liu, G., Meng-Lewis, Y., Wang, W. and Zhao, Y. (2024a), "Unveiling factors and contingencies influencing exhaustion in professional esports players: evidence from China", *Internet Research*, doi: 10.1108/INTR-09-2023-0832.

Liu, H., Meng-Lewis, Y. and Liu, W. (2024b), "Excessive information on social media and Generation Z's long-term COVID-19 vaccine advocacy: a post-pandemic perspective", *Information Technology & People*, doi: 10.1108/ITP-06-2023-0622.

Mahmoud, A.B. (2025), "Eliciting public beliefs about metaverse esports", *Internet Research*, doi: 10.1108/INTR-02-2024-0275.

Meng-Lewis, Y., Wong, D., Zhao, Y. and Lewis, G. (2022), "Understanding complexity and dynamics in the career development of eSports athletes", *Sport Management Review*, Vol. 25 No. 1, pp. 106-133, doi: 10.1016/j.smr.2020.08.003.

Min, B., Kim, D. and Ko, Y.J. (2025), "Effect of in-game situations and advertisement animation in eSports on visual attention, memory, brand attitude and behavioral intentions", *Internet Research*, doi: 10.1108/INTR-03-2024-0491.

Moore, J. (1993), "Predators and prey: a new ecology of competition", *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 71 No. 3, pp. 75–86.

Murray, S., Birt, J. and Blakemore, S. (2022), "eSports diplomacy: towards a sustainable 'gold rush'", *Sport in Society*, Vol. 25 No. 8, pp. 1419-1437, doi: 10.1080/17430437.2020.1826437.

Pedraza-Ramirez, I., Musculus, L., Raab, M. and Laborde, S. (2020), "Setting the scientific stage for esports psychology: a systematic review", *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, Vol. 13 No. 1, pp. 319-352, doi: 10.1080/1750984X.2020.1723122.

Peng, Q., Dickson, G., Scelles, N., Grix, J. and Brannagan, P.M. (2020), "Esports governance: Exploring stakeholder dynamics", *Sustainability*, Vol. 12 No. 19, 8270, doi: 10.3390/su12198270.

Pizzo, A.D., Su, Y., Scholz, T., Baker, B.J., Hamari, J. and Ndanga, L. (2022), "Esports scholarship review: synthesis, contributions, and future research", *Journal of Sport Management*, Vol. 36 No. 3, pp. 228-239, doi: 10.1123/jsm.2021-0228.

Reitman, J.G., Anderson-Coto, M.J., Wu, M., Lee, J.S. and Steinkuehler, C. (2020), "Esports research: a literature review", *Games and Culture*, Vol. 15 No. 1, pp. 32-50, doi: 10.1177/1555412019840892.

Rodrigues, E., Filgueiras, E., Valente, J. and Godinho, L. (2023), "Physiological analysis of spectator engagement in counter strike: global offensive", Marcus, A., Rosenzweig, E. & Soares, M.M. (Ed.s), *Design, User Experience, and Usability. HCII 2023. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, vol 14032*, Springer Nature Switzerland, Cham, pp. 317-332.

Rogers, E.M. (2010), *Diffusion of Innovations*, Simon and Schuster, New York.

Schary, D.P., Jenny, S.E. and Koshy, A. (2022), "Leveling up esports health: current status and call to action", *International Journal of Esports*, Vol. 1 No. 1.
Schmidt, S.L. (2024), *21st Century Sports: How Technologies Will Change Sports in the Digital Age, 2nd Edition,*, Springer, doi: 10.1007/978-3-031-38981-8.
Scholz, T.M. (2019), *eSports is Business: Management in the World of Competitive Gaming*, Springer, doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-11199-1.
Su, Y., Wang, D. and Sun, W. (2025), "Mainstreaming stardom: the intersection of national identity, digital fan Culture, and esports athlete branding", *Internet Research*, doi: 10.1108/INTR-03-2024-0516.
Steinkuehler, C.A. and Williams, D. (2006), "Where everybody knows your (screen) name: online games as 'third places'", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Vol. 11 No. 4, pp. 885–909, doi: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2006.00300.x.
Wang, W., Liu, W., Hang, H. and Chen, Z. (2024), "Understanding esports player preferences: which self-definitional needs drive their satisfaction?" *Internet Research*, doi: 10.1108/INTR-02-2024-0305.
Wong, D. and Meng-Lewis, Y. (2023), "Esports diplomacy–China's soft power building in the digital era", *Managing Sport and Leisure*, Vol. 28 No. 3, pp. 247-269, doi: 10.1080/23750472.2022.2104877.
Zhu, J., Cao, C., Liu, H., Lim, E.T.K. and Tan, C.-W. (2024), "Knowledge trajectory of esports as an emerging field of research", *Industrial Management & Data Systems*, Vol. 124 No. 4, pp. 1531–1557, doi: 10.1108/IMDS-06-2023-0423.
Zuboff, S. (2015), "Big other: surveillance capitalism and the prospects of an information civilization", *Journal of Information Technology*, Vol. 30 No. 1, pp. 75-89, doi: 10.1057/jit.2015.5.

About the authors

Dr. Yue Meng-Lewis is Associate Professor in Digital Marketing at the Open University Business School, United Kingdom. Her research focuses on esports and gaming, digital transformation in marketing, and international communication strategies. She specialises in the sustainable development of esports ecosystems, including talent and career development, player well-being, and fan experiences. Her work has been published in leading journals such as *Internet Research, Journal of Business Research*, *European Journal of Marketing*, *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, and *Information Technology & People* amongst other journals. She is a co-author of the SAGE book *Business Research Methods* and is co-editing the Routledge Book *The Geopolitical Economy of Esports* with Simon Chadwick.

Dr. Hongfei Liu is Associate Professor in Marketing at the University of Southampton. His research focuses on the impact of digitalisation, technologisation, and servitisation on individuals, businesses, and societies. Hongfei likes employing both quantitative and qualitative methods to address the marketing and social issues in the digital age. His work has been published in the highly regarded journals, including *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *European Journal of Marketing*, *Industrial Marketing Management* among others. Hongfei serves in editorial boards of international journals and chairs tracks in international conferences.

Prof. Simon Chadwick is a researcher, writer, academic, consultant, advisor, and speaker, whose work focuses on leading and managing in complex environments. His particular areas of expertise are in

policy and strategy, international and global markets, as well as business and marketing. Chadwick has three decades of experience working in the global sport, event, and cultural industries, particularly in an Afro-Eurasian setting (notably the MENA region, East and South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Europe). He currently works as a Professor of Afro-Eurasian Sport and is advising several clients from across the world of sport. He is co-editor of *The Geopolitical Economy of Esports*, which will be published in early 2026.

Prof. Sascha L. Schmidt is Professor and Director of the Center for Sports and Management at the WHU - Otto Beisheim School of Management in Düsseldorf, Germany. He is affiliated with the Laboratory for Innovation Science at Harvard (LISH) University and Senior Lecturer of the MIT Sports Entrepreneurship Bootcamp. Schmidt is a widely published author with more than one hundred and sixty articles, cases, and notes published in books and leading journals, such as the *European Sport Management Quarterly*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Sloan Management Review*, and *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*. His latest book, *21st Century Sports: How Technologies Will Change Sports in the Digital Age* (Springer International), explores innovative strategies for shaping the future of sports and esports in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.