

Identifying Stressors and Coping Strategies of Elite Esports Competitors

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have examined some of the psychological aspects of competing at a high level in esports. The present study aims to build on this literature by examining the various stressors faced and the associated coping strategies employed by seven esports competitors. The interviews were inductively analysed, and the findings illustrated a range of internal (e.g., communication issues, lack of shared team goals) and external (e.g., event audience, media interviews) stressors that the participants faced. Following this, the coping strategies used to deal with these stressors were deductively analysed. A number of emotion- (e.g., breathing, relaxation), problem- (e.g., intra-team communication after matches), and approach- (e.g., team camps, delegating roles) coping strategies were described by participants. Avoidance coping strategies were predominantly highlighted as being used during games. Results are considered in line with how applied practitioners might support players to develop strategies to deal with stressors, which might in turn lead to performance enhancements.

KEYWORDS

Communication, Competition Environment, Coping Strategies, Counter-Strike Go, Demands, Mental Skills, Optimal Performance, Performance Psychology, Sport Psychology

INTRODUCTION

The video game industry has seen a dramatic acceleration in growth over the last 10 years (Himmelstein et al., 2017). Globally, more and more viewers are watching esports, and international businesses and organisations have invested millions of dollars into sponsoring competitions (Jenny et al., 2017). This has led to the formulation of professional teams, with some competing for seven-figure prize funds and playing contracts. Similar to traditional sports (e.g., soccer, basketball), many young video gamers are attracted to the prospect of earning millions of dollars and therefore aspire to be high-level professional gamers. The rise of professional video gaming has resulted in esports. Morris (2013) defined esports as “organized video game competitions that pit world class players against each other for cash prizes” (Gamers Are Not Only Athletes, para. 2). The games are either played remotely online with the team members in various locations, or more commonly in high level competition, the teams gather at a specific event location to compete. Such competitive gameplay

DOI: 10.4018/IJGCMS.2019040102

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has developed to include highly-paid star-players, team-owners, spectators, and increasing levels of sponsorship (Taylor, 2012). Furthermore, competing in such a high-pressured environment has led to greater interest in the mental side of esports. For example, Andrejkovics (2016) in writing about the mindset of winning players and teams in esports, suggests that up to 50 per cent of improvement in performance is linked to mental preparedness and a player's state of mind.

In line with the increase in competitive gaming, the interest into the science underpinning performance has accelerated dramatically in the last decade. However, there have been relatively few empirical studies which have explicitly examined the factors influencing esports performance when compared to studies examining traditional sports. For example, research which has examined esports performance has focused on expertise (Fanfarelli, 2018) and mental skills usage (Himmelstein et al., 2017). Very recently, key stakeholders in esports (e.g., ESL) have expressed an interest into the stressors faced by esports athletes and the strategies used to overcome stress. However, research has yet to explicitly examine stressors faced by esports athletes and the coping strategies used to overcome such stressors. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to enhance our understanding of such stressors and coping strategies in the esports environment.

The term stressor has been used to express “environmental demands encountered by individuals” (Fletcher et al., 2006). As esports athletes are competing in highly pressurized and competitive environments that are comparable to more traditional sports, it is likely that stressors exist in an esports performance environment. Research has identified that elite athletes are under intense pressure to succeed and face a wide variety of demands in performing in an elite environment (e.g., Thelwell et al., 2007; Weston et al., 2009; Arnold & Fletcher, 2012). Researchers have investigated these demands principally using qualitative methods to interview elite participants about the specific stressors they face when performing. For example, Cosh and Tully (2015) interviewed 20 Australian University athletes to understand the stressors they faced combining elite sport participation with higher education study. The findings revealed a range of stressors that included schedule clashes, financial pressure, and inflexibility of coaches. Himmelstein et al. (2017) interviewed five high-level League of Legends players about psychosocial factors in competitive esports and found that a number of obstacles prevented optimal performance. These obstacles included pressure of competing, being harassed by others, and negative communication during performance. However, no research has explicitly examined stressors that esports players face.

An ability to deal with the demands of elite performance environments has been identified as a key element needed for sporting excellence (cf. Fletcher & Arnold, 2017). In addition, if athletes are unable to cope with demands, researchers have offered evidence of negative outcomes for individuals such as burnout (Goodger et al., 2007). Consequently, researchers have also investigated how athletes cope with the demands of competing in such environments. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define coping as deliberate cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as stressful. Research attention has centred on illustrating coping strategies in different elite contexts, for example, the coping of professional cricketers (Thelwell et al., 2007), youth swimmers (Hayward et al., 2017) and elite student athletes (Cosh & Tully, 2015). Findings have illustrated a range of coping strategies, with athletes employing multiple strategies to deal with single stressors (Nicholls & Polman, 2007). This research has informed approaches that applied practitioners might use to support athletes. However, thus far, there is a dearth of research that has considered coping strategies used by esports competitors.

Research studies investigating coping have seen such coping strategies categorized into five primary dimensions. Initially, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) proposed two dimensions of coping; problem-focussed coping, which are strategies that aim to manage and/or alter the stressor at hand (e.g., attempts to manage the person/stressor transaction, goal setting, problem solving, time management, and information gathering); and emotion-focussed, referring to regulation of the emotional distress resulting from demands but do not attempt to change the actual stressor. (e.g., attempts to regulate emotional states, deep breathing, visualisation, and acceptance). Other researchers have proposed a

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