A Protocol for International Mental Health Guidelines for Esports

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Abstract

Despite esports' rapid growth as a competitive platform, the industry lacks comprehensive mental health support systems for players, coaches, and stakeholders who face unique challenges including emotional distress, online toxicity, and inadequate support structures. This study aims to develop evidence-based international mental health guidelines for the esports ecosystem using a Community-Based Participatory Research framework. The research employs a six-phase methodology: (1) stakeholder focus groups to determine preferences for guideline content and scope, (2) an e-Delphi study with international experts to gather recommendations, (3) an Expert Guideline Development Committee meeting to draft initial guidelines, (4) follow-up focus groups to assess guideline acceptability and usability, (5) a second e-Delphi study for expert feedback on revised guidelines, and (6) implementation case studies across various esports organizations. By 2026, these guidelines aim to establish a globally applicable framework that addresses the urgent need for mental health support in esports, while ensuring practical implementation across diverse organizational contexts.

Keywords: Esports psychology; Mental health guidelines; Community-based research; Competitive gaming

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The landscape of competitive sports has evolved significantly in recent years (Baker et al., 2024), with esports emerging as a prominent domain that presents unique mental health challenges and considerations. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2022), mental health encompasses a state of well-being where individuals can realise their potential, cope with normal stressors, work productively, and contribute meaningfully to their community. This conceptualisation aligns with Keyes (2002) dual continuum model, which recognises that mental health involves both the presence or absence of disorders and the experience of subjective well-being, including life satisfaction and positive social relationships. While research has extensively documented the mental health challenges faced by traditional athletes, with over 640 identified stressors affecting elite athletes (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012), the esports domain - defined as competitive video gaming focused on professional development (Pedraza-Ramirez et al., 2020) - presents its own unique set of mental health considerations. Elite esports athletes encounter numerous stressors, including performance pressure, team dynamics, audience expectations, social media scrutiny, and challenges in maintaining work-life balance (Leis et al., 2024; Poulus & Polman, 2022; Sharpe et al., 2024).

The prevalence of mental health concerns among esports athletes is particularly alarming. Studies of electronic football players indicate that approximately 37% experience depression and anxiety symptoms, while 45% report sleep disturbances (Monteiro Pereira et al., 2022). Even more concerning, recent research examining Counter-Strike professionals revealed that 25.5% reported moderately severe to severe symptoms of depression, with an overwhelming 82.4% reporting symptoms of anxiety/depression. Furthermore, 54.9% of these professionals reported psychological distress, and 72.5% indicated low mental well-being (Birch et al., 2024). These rates parallel or exceed those observed in traditional sports, suggesting significant vulnerabilities within the competitive esports environment. However,

research in esports mental health remains nascent, with much of the existing literature focusing narrowly on gaming addiction rather than the broader spectrum of mental health challenges (Kuss & Griffiths, 2012; Schary et al., 2022). A significant gap exists in the esports ecosystem regarding comprehensive mental health support systems (Schary et al., 2022). Unlike traditional sports, which have established mental health guidelines and support frameworks, the esports community lacks evidence-based structures for protecting and promoting mental health. This absence is particularly concerning given that responsibility for e'athletes' mental health should be distributed across all stakeholders within the esports landscape, requiring a well-organised support system (Hong, 2022).

Lessons from Traditional Sports

Insights from the development of mental health guidelines in traditional sports offer significant value to the esports industry. As noted by Liddelow et al. (2022), thirteen position statements, officially endorsed by global sports organisations and governing bodies, such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC), were published between 2016 and 2020 (Moesch et al., 2018; Reardon et al., 2019; Schinke et al., 2018). These frameworks have laid a strong foundation for safeguarding athletes mental health and fostering psychological well-being in competitive environments. Liddelow et al. (2022) highlighted the success of community-based participatory research in creating mental health guidelines for sports, emphasizing stakeholder collaboration and expert agreement as crucial elements. However, directly adapting traditional sports frameworks to esports presents unique challenges. The digital nature of esports introduces distinct stressors such as extended screen exposure, virtual team interactions, online abuse, and the overlap between competitive play and casual gaming (Sharpe & Birch, 2024). Additionally, while traditional sports benefit from established support systems and professional health networks, the esports sector is still developing its professional infrastructure, necessitating carefully tailored implementation strategies.

Study Aims

Evidence-based guidelines are essential to ensure that the esports ecosystem is well-equipped to protect and promote the mental health and well-being of its players, coaches, and leaders. The present study addresses this critical gap by aiming to develop and evaluate the feasibility of implementing evidence-based mental health guidelines specifically designed for the esports ecosystem. These guidelines must meet three essential criteria: they must be (a) grounded in the needs and preferences of the esports community, (b) practical and acceptable across various esports contexts, and (c) implementable at all levels of the ecosystem. To achieve these objectives, the study addresses three fundamental research questions: (1) What are esports stakeholder preferences for the content, purpose, and scope of mental health guidelines? (2) What are stakeholders' perceptions of the acceptability, usability, communication, and monitoring of mental health guidelines in esports? (3) Are the implementation strategies of esports organisations effective? Why, or why not?

Methods

Framework

The development of mental health guidelines for the esports sector will adopt the Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) framework (Minkler et al., 2003). The CBPR approach integrates knowledge and action to drive societal change, with the aim of improving health and health-related outcomes for a community-defined issue. This framework emphasises collaboration between researchers and stakeholders, ensuring that all parties involved in the project are engaged throughout the research process. By acknowledging the unique perspectives and contributions of diverse stakeholders, CBPR fosters inclusivity and shared decision-making at every stage of the research.

In the context of this study, the CBPR framework ensures that the esports community—including players, coaches, organisational representatives, and mental health professionals—actively participates in defining the research methods, conducting the research, and applying the findings. This collaborative approach promotes the co-design of the project, enabling stakeholders and researchers to engage in one another's activities and strengthen the long-term sustainability of the initiative. CBPR has been successfully applied in previous health-related projects, including developing mental health guidelines for community sports in Australia (Liddelow et al., 2022) and traditional sports mental health literacy Ahead of the Game' (Vella et al., 2021). Similarly, this framework provides a robust foundation for creating internationally relevant mental health guidelines tailored to the unique challenges and needs of the esports ecosystem.

Guideline Development Process

The development of these international esports mental health guidelines will adhere to best-practice recommendations and procedures for guideline creation, drawing on resources such as the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council Guidelines for Guidelines (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2016), the Grading of Recommendations, Assessment, Development and Evaluations framework (Guyatt et al., 2011), and the Appraisal of Guidelines Research and Evaluation instrument (Brouwers et al., 2010). These frameworks ensure a rigorous, evidence-based, and transparent approach to guideline development. See Figure 1 for the proposed study timeline.

Patient and Public Involvement

In alignment with the CBPR framework (Liddelow et al., 2022; Minkler et al., 2003), six phases involving the end users of the guidelines (i.e., esports stakeholders) and experts in mental health and esports will be conducted to address the research questions and develop the

guidelines. Esports stakeholders, including players, esports organisations, tournament organisers, and game publishers, will play an integral role throughout the development of the guidelines (Phases One - Four) and their implementation and evaluation (Phase Six). This collaborative approach ensures that the guidelines are informed by the perspectives and needs of those directly impacted.

Phase One: Focus Groups with Esports Stakeholders

To address the first and second research questions, we will explore the preferences of esports stakeholders regarding the content, purpose, and scope of mental health guidelines for the esports ecosystem. This phase will gather insights from a diverse range of stakeholders, including players, esports organisations, tournament organisers, and game publishers, to ensure the guidelines are reflective of the needs and priorities within the esports community.

Participants and Sampling

We will use a purposive sampling strategy to recruit participants for focus groups, with each group consisting of four to six participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Smaller focus groups are expected to generate richer discussions and are easier to manage (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The participants will include key stakeholders within the esports ecosystem, such as elite e'athletes (Poulus et al., 2024), amateur players, amateur tournament organisers, international esports organisations, and game publishers. In line with the broader aim of this project, we will recruit individuals from these diverse stakeholder groups to ensure comprehensive representation.

To gain an in-depth understanding of esports stakeholder preferences, we will sample participants from various contexts, including different game titles, competitive levels, geographic locations, and experiences with mental health. Specifically, participants will be recruited globally. Esports organisations and groups with prior engagement in mental health

initiatives and those with limited or no experience in this area will be purposely sampled to capture a wide spectrum of perspectives.

Potential participants will be identified through the networks of the research team, as well as publicly available information (e.g., esports organisation websites, social media platforms, and professional directories). The lead researcher will make initial contact with a representative from an esports stakeholder (e.g., team manager, event organiser) via email or social media. This message will outline the research team, the aims of the project, and the details of participation. A participant information sheet will be attached to this email. The identified representative will be encouraged to share the information with relevant stakeholders within their organisation or community. Interested participants will be asked to send their contact details to the lead researcher, who will follow up to confirm participation. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the focus group.

Methods

All focus groups will be conducted virtually via video conferencing platforms to accommodate the global nature of the esports community and ensure accessibility for participants in different geographic locations. Each focus group will be scheduled at a time convenient for its participants and is expected to last between 45 and 60 minutes. The sessions will be facilitated by two members of the research team and audio-recorded for transcription and analysis.

To mitigate the potential drawbacks of virtual discussions, rapport will be established with participants at the beginning of each session through casual conversation about their experiences in esports (e.g., favourite games, recent tournaments, or their role within the esports community). The facilitators will introduce the project, explain its objectives, provide an overview of their own backgrounds, and address any participant questions before commencing the formal discussion (Braun & Clarke, 2013). A semi-structured interview

schedule has been designed by the research team to guide discussions and encourage participants to share detailed insights. The focus groups will explore four main topics: (a) the need for the proposed guidelines, (b) the scope of the guidelines, (c) the purpose of the guidelines, and (d) the implementation context (see supplemental material).

All recorded focus groups will be transcribed verbatim. The number of focus groups will be determined by the principle of information power, ensuring sufficient depth and diversity in the data collected (Braun & Clarke, 2021). However, it is anticipated that at least 10 focus groups will be conducted, with participants representing a variety of roles, geographic regions, and esports titles to ensure broad representation and meaningful insights.

Analysis

After transcription, the data will be analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This approach allows for the identification and interpretation of patterns and themes within the data, providing deep insights into esports stakeholders' perspectives. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings and ensure methodological credibility, the research team will engage in peer debriefing through both formal and informal meetings. During this process, team members will act as "critical friends," encouraging reflective discussions and exploring alternative interpretations of the data (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

An audit trail will document key decisions made during data collection and analysis. This trail will include details of coding, theme development, and any methodological adjustments, ensuring transparency and rigour throughout the research process. This approach will support the production of a robust and reliable account of esports stakeholders’ preferences and perceptions regarding the proposed mental health guidelines.

Phase Two: Delphi Study with Experts

To complement Phase One, a Delphi study will be conducted with international experts in the fields of mental health and esports. The Delphi technique is a structured research process where questionnaires are distributed across multiple rounds to a panel of experts, with the goal of achieving consensus on a specific topic (Barrios et al., 2021; Beiderbeck et al., 2021). This study will focus on synthesising expert opinions regarding the scope and content of mental health guidelines for esports, as well as the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders, including game publishers, tournament organisers, and esports organisations, in mental health prevention, promotion, and care.

Methods and Analysis

The Delphi process will follow the steps outlined by Keeney et al. (2011) for health research, and the considerations detailed by Shortt et al. (2019) for the 'e-Delphi approach.' This modified Delphi process allows for flexibility in the number of rounds required to achieve consensus, as opposed to the classical Delphi process, which typically involves four rounds and is conducted in person (Donohoe et al., 2012). The 'e-Delphi approach,' conducted online and often anonymously, is increasingly preferred due to the global nature of participants and advancements in technology (Donohoe et al., 2012). In line with this approach, the Delphi study will use a sequential mixed-methods design, where the data collection and analysis from each round inform the subsequent rounds. A minimum of two rounds will be conducted, though no more than four rounds are anticipated. The consensus threshold for this study will be set at 80%, consistent with the recommendations of Keeney et al. (2011), who suggest a range of 70% to 80% as appropriate for achieving consensus in health-related research. This iterative and flexible approach will ensure that expert insights are thoroughly captured and refined to develop robust and actionable mental health guidelines for esports.

Round One

To gather expert opinions on the roles and responsibilities of various stakeholders in mental health prevention, promotion, and care within esports, an online form will be created using Qualtrics. Participants will be asked to respond to six open-ended questions covering these areas. For example, participants will be asked: "In your opinion, what are the major considerations in providing mental health care to those involved in non-elite/recreational esports? Please elaborate on why." Another question will inquire, "Which esports bodies (e.g., game publishers, community organisations, tournament organisers, national governing bodies) should be responsible for mental health care in esports, and what should their role entail?". Once responses are collected, qualitative analysis will be conducted. Team members will engage in peer debriefing as "critical friends" throughout the analysis process to ensure rigour and transparency. Content analysis will be applied, grouping responses with the same or similar explicit meaning. This process will be conducted for each of the six open-ended questions.

Following the grouping of similar statements, the research team will review the findings and determine whether each group of statements can be collapsed into a single statement or if multiple statements are required to reflect distinct concepts. Individual statements that do not align with any groups will be retained in their original form.

The finalised list of statements will be organised into categories based on the initial questions (e.g., mental health prevention, promotion, or care). This categorisation will be reviewed by the research team to ensure that the statements accurately represent the raw data and expert input. This process will set the foundation for subsequent rounds of the Delphi study.

Round Two Onwards

The minimum requirement for a Delphi study is two rounds (Keeney et al., 2011). Following the qualitative data collected in Round One, the second round and any subsequent rounds will adopt a quantitative approach to reach consensus. Participants will first be

presented with a written overview of the findings from Round One, summarising the themes and statements that emerged from the initial qualitative analysis. Participants will then be asked to rate each statement on two 4-point Likert scales: one assessing their level of agreement with each statement (e.g., ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree), and the other evaluating the importance of each statement for inclusion in the guidelines (e.g., ranging from very important to not important at all). An open-ended textbox will also be provided for participants to offer additional comments or considerations.

Once all responses are collected, the data will be analysed quantitatively using frequencies and descriptive statistics in SPSS (v.26). Any statement that achieves 80% consensus—defined as 80% of participants selecting either 'strongly agree' or 'agree' on the agreement scale, or 'very important' or 'important' on the importance scale—will be accepted as having reached consensus and excluded from subsequent rounds. Any statements that do not reach the agreed-upon consensus level will be collated and carried over to the next round. In each subsequent round, participants will also receive a summary of the previous round, detailing which statements reached consensus. This process will continue until a predetermined sufficient number of statements achieve consensus, typically within three rounds, as recommended for most Delphi studies. This iterative process ensures that the final set of guidelines reflects broad expert agreement on the key elements necessary for esports mental health guidelines (Keeney et al., 2011).

Phase Three: National Consensus Meeting

Following the engagement with esports stakeholders and the collection of expert opinions through the Delphi study, the evidence gathered from these two phases will be synthesised alongside existing research in the field of esports and mental health (via scoping or systematic review). This synthesis will inform the development of draft guidelines that

address the needs and priorities identified. Phase Three represents the final step in addressing the first research question and serves as the foundation for refining and validating the proposed guidelines in subsequent phases.

Expert Guideline Development Committee

To ensure the guidelines meet the requirements of evidence-based guideline development and align with the needs of esports stakeholders, an expert guideline development committee will be established. This committee will oversee the overall development of the guidelines (see Phase Three for more details) and ensure their quality, relevance, and applicability to the esports context. The committee will include a diverse range of representatives from key expert stakeholders in mental health, esports, and related disciplines. These may include representatives from esports organisations, governing bodies, game publishers, international mental health organisations, and expert clinicians and researchers specialising in mental health, esports, and sports psychology. The committee's composition will prioritise breadth of representation and expertise rather than a specific size, ensuring that key areas of mental health, esports operations, and guideline development are thoroughly addressed. This diverse and specialised committee will play a critical role in shaping guidelines that are practical, evidence-based, and aligned with stakeholder needs.

Participants

Members of the expert guideline development committee, along with other members of the research team, will be invited to participate in the guideline development process. Their involvement will ensure that the guidelines are informed by expert knowledge, research insights, and practical considerations, contributing to a robust and comprehensive set of esports mental health guidelines.

Methods

The evidence gathered in Phase One (focus groups with stakeholders) and Phase Two (Delphi study with experts), along with relevant literature either authored by the research team or contributed by committee members (e.g., Leis et al., 2024), will be synthesised by the research team. This synthesis will provide a comprehensive foundation for guideline development. All members of the guideline development committee, along with the research team, will convene for a two-day meeting at a mutually agreed-upon location. The purpose of this meeting will be to collaboratively, (a) review the evidence supporting guideline development, ensuring that stakeholder perspectives from Phases One and Two are fully integrated, (b) discuss, refine, and finalise the scope and purpose of the guidelines, and (c) develop a set of draft guidelines.

Each proposed guideline will be subjected to a real-time vote by committee members. Members will vote on two aspects:

1. Whether a specific area of interest (e.g., player education or organisational responsibilities) should form part of the guidelines.
2. The exact wording and content of the draft guideline, are based on the evidence.

For a guideline or area of interest to reach a consensus, a minimum of 80% agreement will be required. Areas or guidelines that do not reach this threshold will be discussed further and, if appropriate, amended and re-evaluated. Any guideline or area that fails to achieve 80% consensus after discussion will be excluded from the draft guidelines.

Two research team members will serve as "scribes" during the meeting, documenting the discussions, decisions, and rationale behind the guidelines to ensure transparency and accountability in the process. This collaborative effort will result in a robust draft of esports mental health guidelines.

Phase Four: Follow-Up Focus Groups with Stakeholders

To address research question two, follow-up focus groups will be conducted with esports organisations, including local and national governing bodies, to explore their perceptions of the draft guidelines. As in Phase One, the CBPR framework will be employed to ensure that stakeholder input remains central to the refinement and validation of the guidelines.

Participants and Sampling

A purposive sampling approach will be used to assess the acceptability, feasibility, and usability of the draft guidelines (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Esports organisations and stakeholders who participated in Phase One will be re-contacted and invited to participate in these follow-up focus groups. This will allow the research team to verify whether the draft guidelines address the needs and priorities identified during the initial stakeholder engagement. Additionally, new esports organisations and stakeholders who did not participate in Phase One will be recruited to provide fresh perspectives and ensure diverse input.

Recruitment will aim to include organisations and stakeholders representing different roles (e.g., players, coaches, tournament organisers, and publishers), geographical locations (e.g., metropolitan and regional areas), and contexts (e.g., grassroots and competitive esports). Publicly available information and contact details (e.g., organisational websites, and social media) will be used to identify potential participants. All participants will be contacted via email or social media, and a $20 retail voucher will be provided as compensation for their time. Focus groups will be conducted virtually, with each group consisting of four to six participants to ensure manageable and in-depth discussions consistent with Phase One. The number of focus groups conducted will be guided by the concept of information power (Braun & Clarke, 2021), ensuring that the breadth and depth of data collected are sufficient to refine the draft guidelines. These follow-up focus groups will play a critical role in ensuring the draft guidelines are practical, relevant, and aligned with the needs of the esports community.

Methods

As in Phase One, focus groups will be facilitated by two members of the research team using semi-structured interview guides. The discussions in this phase will focus on the following key areas: 1) Acceptability of the guidelines, for example, “What do you think of the guidelines?”, 2) Usability of the guidelines, for example, “How would your organisation implement the guidelines?”, 3) Communication of the guidelines, for example, “How do you think the guidelines should be communicated to esports organisations?” and 4) Monitoring of the guidelines, for example, “In your organisation, who should be responsible for ensuring the guidelines are implemented?”. This targeted approach will allow participants to provide detailed feedback on how the guidelines can be effectively integrated into practice at different levels of the esports ecosystem.

Analysis

To explore stakeholders’ perceptions of the acceptability, feasibility, and usability of the draft guidelines, reflexive thematic analysis will be used to analyse the data and identify patterns, consistent with the approach outlined in Phase One (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This analysis will provide valuable insights into how the guidelines can be refined to meet the needs of the esports community and support their successful implementation.

Phase Five: Feedback from Experts

Following the feedback collected from stakeholders in Phase Four, the Guideline Development Committee will be reconvened via a Delphi study to evaluate and consider the proposed revisions to the draft guidelines.

Methods and Analysis

The Delphi process described in Phase Two will be applied in this phase, following a sequential mixed-methods design. The data collection and analysis from each round will inform subsequent rounds, ensuring that the revisions to the guidelines are refined iteratively.

Expert panel members will be presented with the proposed changes to the draft guidelines based on stakeholder feedback. Using a 4-point Likert scale (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree), participants will quantitatively rate their level of agreement with each proposed change. Additionally, participants will be able to provide qualitative feedback on the changes through open-ended textboxes, allowing them to suggest further refinements or raise concerns.

In the final section of the Delphi study, participants will be asked to rank the order in which they believe the guidelines should be presented. The same consensus threshold of 80%, as outlined in Phase Two, will be used to determine whether changes to the guidelines are accepted. Statements or changes that fail to achieve consensus will be re-evaluated, revised if necessary, and included in subsequent rounds. This process will ensure that the final set of guidelines is both informed by stakeholder input and reflects the consensus of expert panel members. It will also provide clear priorities for the presentation and implementation of the guidelines within the esports community.

Phase Six: Implementation Case Studies

The final phase of developing and refining the guidelines involves conducting implementation case studies with esports organisations. This phase aims to evaluate the experiences, barriers, constraints, and opportunities encountered during the implementation of the mental health guidelines. It directly addresses the final research question: *Are the implementation strategies of esports organisations effective? Why, or why not?*

Participants and Sampling

The research team will collaborate with key industry stakeholders, including international esports organisations and game publishers, to identify organisations where the implementation of the guidelines is likely to be influenced by contextual factors such as geographic location, organisational size, available resources, and competitive level. A purposive sampling strategy will be employed to ensure that the implementation is assessed across a range of contexts. It is anticipated that approximately 10 esports organisations or publishers will be recruited for this phase. The research team will work closely with these organisations to facilitate and monitor the implementation process.

Methods

Following the case study approach outlined by Stake (Stake, 1995; White & Cooper, 2022), multiple data sources and collection methods will be used to evaluate the implementation of the guidelines. Each esports organisation will maintain an activity diary to record all implementation activities, their impacts, and any challenges encountered during the process. Additionally, participants will have the opportunity to provide feedback on areas of the guidelines that require improvement or refinement through one-on-one interviews conducted during the implementation phase. At the conclusion of the implementation period, all individuals involved in the process will be invited to participate in a focus group. These focus groups will explore (1) individual experiences of implementing the guidelines, and (2) the perceived effectiveness of their implementation efforts. By utilising multiple sources of evidence, this phase will enhance the internal validity of the study and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the implementation process. This approach will capture diverse perspectives and insights, offering valuable feedback to further refine and optimise the guidelines for broader use in the esports sector.

Analysis

For qualitative data, the analysis and trustworthiness procedures used in Phases One and Four will be applied in this phase. Reflexive thematic analysis will be conducted to identify patterns and themes in the data, ensuring rigor and credibility through peer debriefing and an audit trail. The multiple data sources collected during the case studies, including activity diaries, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups, will be triangulated for a comprehensive combined data analysis. This triangulation will enhance the validity of the findings by allowing for cross-verification of insights gathered from different perspectives. Variations within each case study (*within-case*) and differences between case studies (*between-case*) will be explored to identify relationships between implementation strategies and their outcomes. This approach will provide a nuanced understanding of the factors that influence the effectiveness of the guidelines across diverse esports organisations and contexts, informing recommendations for broader implementation.

Discussion

This study presents a comprehensive approach to developing the first international mental health guidelines for the esports sector, addressing a critical need identified by recent research showing concerning rates of mental health challenges among esports athletes (Birch et al., 2024). By employing a rigorous six-phase methodology grounded in Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), the study ensures that the resulting guidelines will be both evidence-based and practically implementable across the esports ecosystem. The decision to utilize CBPR as the foundational framework reflects a deep understanding of the complexities inherent in the esports landscape. Unlike traditional sports, where mental health frameworks have evolved over decades of research and practice, esports presents unique challenges that require innovative approaches to guideline development. The collaborative nature of CBPR aligns perfectly with the esports ecosystem's interconnected structure, where success depends on effective coordination between multiple stakeholders; while, the strength of this research

lies in its methodological robustness and inclusive approach. The combination of focus groups, Delphi studies, and implementation case studies allows for iterative refinement of the guidelines while maintaining scientific rigor. By engaging diverse stakeholders—from players and coaches to tournament organizers and game publishers—the study ensures that multiple perspectives and needs are considered throughout the development process. This comprehensive engagement strategy is particularly important given the unique characteristics of the esports environment, where traditional sports mental health frameworks may not fully address the sector's specific challenges.

Methodology and Implementation

The multi-phase design of this study represents a significant advancement in esports research methodology. Each phase builds upon the previous one, creating a robust foundation for guideline development that considers both theoretical frameworks and practical implementation challenges. The integration of stakeholder feedback at multiple points ensures that the guidelines remain grounded in real-world applicability while maintaining scientific validity. Likewise, the focus group component of the research is particularly innovative in its approach to gathering diverse perspectives. By conducting virtual sessions across different time zones and geographical locations, the study captures a truly global perspective on mental health needs in esports. This international scope is crucial given the inherently global nature of esports competition and the varying cultural approaches to mental health support across different regions.

The implementation case studies phase represents a particularly valuable component of the research design. By conducting detailed evaluations of how organizations implement the guidelines across different contexts, the study will provide crucial insights into the practical challenges and opportunities that arise during implementation. This real-world testing phase

will help identify potential barriers and enablers to successful adoption, allowing for refinement of the guidelines before broader dissemination. The case studies also offer an unprecedented opportunity to examine how different organizational structures within esports impact mental health support implementation. From large, well-established esports organizations to grassroots community groups, the varied contexts will provide valuable insights into how guidelines can be adapted and scaled across different operational models. This adaptability is crucial for ensuring the guidelines' relevance across the entire esports ecosystem. The research design acknowledges the rapid evolution of the esports industry. By incorporating multiple feedback loops and revision phases, the guidelines can be updated and refined as new challenges emerge and the industry continues to develop. This flexibility is essential given the dynamic nature of esports and the ongoing technological advances that shape competitive gaming environments.

Limitations and Future Impact

Nevertheless, several limitations warrant consideration. First, there is a risk of self-selection bias, as organizations already prioritizing mental health may be more likely to participate in the study. This could lead to underrepresentation of perspectives from organizations that may be more resistant to implementing mental health initiatives. Second, time constraints faced by stakeholders, particularly in grassroots or volunteer-led organizations, could impact participation rates and the depth of engagement. To address these limitations, the research team will implement strategies to make participation as convenient as possible, including flexible scheduling for focus groups and streamlined data collection methods. Whilte another significant consideration is the potential impact of regional differences in mental health awareness and support infrastructure. The global nature of esports means that organizations operate within vastly different cultural and regulatory contexts regarding mental health. The guidelines must be sufficiently flexible to accommodate these differences while maintaining consistent core principles for mental health support.

The digital nature of esports competition also presents unique challenges for mental health support implementation. Unlike traditional sports, where in-person support systems are the norm, esports requires innovative approaches to delivering mental health services in virtual environments. The guidelines must address how organizations can effectively provide support through digital platforms while maintaining professional standards and ensuring accessibility. As such, the study's emphasis on creating guidelines that are both evidence-based and practically implementable represents a significant advancement for the esports sector. By developing frameworks that account for the unique characteristics of esports—including digital competition environments, virtual team dynamics, and the overlap between competitive and casual gaming—these guidelines will fill a crucial gap in current practice. Furthermore, the guidelines will provide a foundation for developing specialized mental health support systems tailored to the distinct needs of the esports community, empowering stakeholders at all levels to promote and protect mental health effectively.

The potential impact of these guidelines extends beyond individual organizations. By establishing standardized approaches to mental health support in esports, this research could influence policy development at national and international levels. Game publishers, tournament organizers, and governing bodies may use these guidelines to inform their policies and regulations, potentially leading to more comprehensive mental health protection across the industry. Additionally, the guidelines could serve as a catalyst for developing specialized training programs for mental health professionals working in esports. The unique stressors and environmental factors identified through this research will help inform the development of targeted interventions and support strategies specific to the esports context.

Conclusion

This research marks a significant step toward establishing comprehensive mental health support within esports, addressing a critical need identified in recent studies. The resulting guidelines will not only support individual esports athletes but also provide clear frameworks for coaches, parents, performance staff, tournament organizers, and game developers to promote mental health within their spheres of influence. Additionally, this work acknowledges the need for mental health professionals who understand the unique demands of esports, ensuring that interventions and support systems are appropriately tailored to this distinct competitive context.

Author Note

As researchers in the esports mental health field, we believe this work represents a critical turning point in how the industry approaches player well-being. Through our combined experience working with esports organizations and athletes, we have observed firsthand the urgent need for standardized mental health guidelines. The prevalence of mental health challenges we've encountered in our work, particularly among young competitors, has been concerning and often overlooked by traditional sports psychology frameworks. Our decision to pursue this research was influenced by numerous conversations with players who described feeling isolated in their struggles, despite competing in a highly connected digital environment. We've witnessed the paradox of esports athletes being simultaneously hyperconnected through technology yet lacking accessible, structured mental health support systems. This disconnect between digital connectivity and emotional support has repeatedly emerged as a crucial area requiring attention.

While developing this research protocol, we were particularly struck by the enthusiasm from esports organizations when discussing potential mental health guidelines. Even organizations that had never implemented formal mental health support expressed strong interest in evidence-

based frameworks they could adapt to their specific contexts. This eagerness suggests that the esports community recognizes the importance of mental health support but has been lacking the tools and guidance to implement it effectively. In our view, the success of these guidelines will ultimately depend on their ability to bridge the gap between academic research and practical implementation. Drawing from our experience working with various esports stakeholders, we believe the CBPR approach adopted in this study offers the best opportunity to create guidelines that are both scientifically rigorous and practically applicable. The integration of stakeholder perspectives throughout the development process should help ensure that the resulting guidelines address real-world needs while remaining feasible to implement across different organizational contexts. Looking forward, we hope this research will catalyze a broader conversation about mental health in esports and lead to more comprehensive support systems for players at all competitive levels. The rapid growth of the esports industry makes it imperative that we establish these foundations now, before mental health challenges become even more prevalent within the competitive gaming community.

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Figure 1. Proposed timeline for studies