



Stressors and coping among esports coaches

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ABSTRACT

Esports coaches are integral to the development, performance, and overall success of esports players. Sharing the same high-pressure environment, they are likely exposed to similar stressors that can affect not only their effectiveness as coaches but also their personal well-being. Despite their critical role, esports coaches often lack access to structured development programs and support systems. To inform future research enabling tailored intervention strategies for coaches, this study explored the stressors faced by esports coaches and the coping strategies they employ. Drawing on data from semi-structured interviews with 12 male esports coaches, this study reports stressors associated with coaches navigating performance and interpersonal demands (e.g., underperforming players, player attitudes), organizational demands (e.g., organizational pressure), social exposure (e.g., social media comments), and boundaries of personal and professional life (e.g., work-life balance). Coaches discussed fostering a supportive environment, rest as a relational and professional practice, and managing focus, emotion, and meaning to cope with stressors. Findings demonstrate similarities with previous research on esports players and coaches in traditional sports, highlighting a combination of work-related and personal stressors. Esports coaches placed less emphasis on social stressors but highlighted the role of personal stressors. Insights underscore the need for research examining personal (e.g., gender) and situational factors (e.g., organizations), and practical interventions such as communication training and better support to reduce burnout and improve stress management. Ultimately, understanding and addressing these stressors can optimize coaches' well-being and professional development, leading to better support for players and improved performance.

1. Introduction

Esports has emerged as a global phenomenon, becoming a significant sector within the entertainment and sports industries (e.g., [Jin & Besombes, 2024](#)). As esports continues to expand, highlighted by its recent inclusion in future Olympic events, there is growing interest in understanding the dynamics within esports teams. While research has been conducted with athletes and coaches in traditional sports (e.g., [Norris et al., 2017](#)), research in esports has primarily focused on esports players (for a review, see [Leis et al., 2024](#)). Like traditional sports coaches, esports coaches have many responsibilities, including strategy formulation, performance management, team cohesion, and skill

development (e.g., [Watson et al., 2024](#)). Although some stressors may be shared across esports and traditional sports, the competitive environments likely present distinct challenges and stressors, requiring different coping and intervention strategies (e.g., [Leis et al., 2022](#); [Poulus et al., 2022a](#)). Esports players may encounter structured coaching for the first time, creating issues such as limited communication, role ambiguity, and intra-team conflict (e.g., [Leis et al., 2024](#)). Teams may lack organizational support or established structures, and esports coaches often have limited development opportunities or support systems ([Sabtan et al., 2022](#)), which can expand their responsibilities and affect stress management and coping. In addition, the digital environment and constantly evolving nature of esports further complicate coordination,

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performance, and team cohesion (e.g., Jin & Besombes, 2024; Leis et al., 2024). As esports represents a novel field for sport psychology, evidence-based practices for esports coaching remain less established than those for traditional sports (e.g., Cottrell et al., 2019; Leis et al., 2021). Despite their importance, esports coaches' experiences have received limited attention (Watson et al., 2022). To better understand coaches' experiences and inform evidence-based practice, this study aims to explore the stressors experienced and coping strategies used by esports coaches.

1.1. Theoretical framework

One of the principal theoretical frameworks used to explore stressors and coping in esports and traditional sports is transactional stress theory, as outlined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). Stress, from a transactional standpoint, is contingent upon individuals' appraisals of stimuli (Lazarus, 1966). This process involves primary appraisal, where individuals assess the stimuli's relevance to their beliefs, values, goals, and situational intentions, and secondary appraisal, where individuals evaluate their perceptions of control, available resources, and coping likelihood. When a stressful appraisal of harm/loss, challenge, or threat is made, cognitive and or behavioral coping strategies are required (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Stressors can be defined as "environmental demands (i.e., stimuli) encountered by an individual" (Lazarus, 1999, p. 329) and can be categorized as those that are primarily associated with competitive performance (competitive stressors), organizational factors (organizational stressors), and non-sporting life events (personal stressors; Arnold & Fletcher, 2012; Fletcher et al., 2006). Various categorizations of coping exist (e.g., Crocker et al., 2015; Nicholls et al., 2016; Nicholls & Polman, 2007), and to facilitate comparison, Nicholls et al. (2016) proposed a three-factor model comprising mastery coping (e.g., efforts to gain control over stressors, e.g., problem-focused coping, approach coping, goal setting), internal regulation (managing internal resources, e.g., acceptance, emotion-focused coping, avoidance-focused coping), and goal withdrawal (discontinuing goal pursuits, e.g., mental disengagement, behavioral disengagement, venting emotions).

1.2. Stress and coping in coaching

Sports coaching has been widely reported as a stressful occupation (for reviews, see Norris et al., 2017; Potts et al., 2023). Given coaches' influence on athletes' performance, well-being, and development, research exploring coaches' experiences has grown significantly in recent years. Despite continuing research, more in-depth exploration of coaches' experiences is needed (Potts et al., 2019). Coaches experience stressors related to their own performance (e.g., high standards, self-criticism) and that of their athletes (e.g., underperformance, injury), as well as organizational (e.g., administration, finances), contextual (e.g., job security, limited resources), interpersonal (e.g., expectations of others), and intrapersonal challenges (e.g., lack of control) (Norris et al., 2017; Potts et al., 2022). These demands impact coaches' professional and personal lives, influencing job satisfaction and well-being (e.g., Stebbings et al., 2011; Bentzen et al., 2016). For instance, Carson et al. (2018) suggested that mental health and well-being of high-performance coaches are influenced by workload (amount of work in given time), control (autonomy in decision-making), reward (financial and social acknowledgment), fairness (predictability and equity of the organization), community (social interactions and support), and values (coaching philosophy). Research on esports players, though not focused on coaches, has highlighted stressors including performance (e.g., defeat, performance pressure), team (e.g., communication issues, poor cohesion), social (e.g., audience interactions), organizational (e.g., scheduling conflicts, low prize money), and personal stressors (e.g., balancing commitments, job insecurity) (Leis et al., 2024).

To manage stress, sport coaches reported using a range of coping strategies, including problem solving, seeking social support, and

temporarily escaping the stressful environment (Norris et al., 2017; Potts et al., 2023). More specifically, these strategies included communication with stakeholders, delegation, self-reliance, and in some cases, avoidance tactics such as alcohol use or taking holidays (e.g., Norris et al., 2017; Olsen et al., 2020). Problem-focused coping appears particularly relevant for coaches who are highly conscientious or perceive greater control over the stressor (e.g., Folkman, 1991), highlighting how coping strategies interact with personal and contextual factors.

To our knowledge, however, no studies have specifically examined stressors and coping among esports coaches. Many of the demands placed on esports coaches resemble those experienced by coaches in traditional sports (e.g., Norris et al., 2017). For example, esports coaches manage all stages of the competition cycle, including establishing team culture, designing training programs, developing strategies, organizing practice, monitoring in-game communication, providing post-game feedback, and reviewing performance (Bubna et al., 2023; Watson et al., 2024). They must also adapt to game updates, roster changes, evolving audience and stakeholder expectations, long practice hours, and player behaviors (Bubna et al., 2023; Sabtan et al., 2022; Watson et al., 2024). Research highlights the importance of healthy long-term coach development, emphasizing the need for tailored education and growth opportunities (Watson et al., 2022).

1.3. Study purpose

Although research on traditional sports coaches has highlighted the importance of understanding coaches' stressors and coping strategies (Norris et al., 2017), esports coaching remains underexplored. Existing studies have primarily focused on coaching practices and challenges in specific contests, such as League of Legends (Watson et al., 2022) or broader coaching practices in esports (Sabtan et al., 2022). As a result, limited attention has been given to how esports coaches across different games experience and manage stress. Addressing this gap is important for understanding the demands of esports coaching and the strategies used to cope with them. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore esports coaches' experiences of stressors and coping strategies across multiple esports. Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions: 1) What stressors do esports coaches experience?; 2) What coping strategies do esports coaches employ to cope with stress?

2. Methods

This qualitative study explored the stressors and coping strategies of esports coaches. The study adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki and the American Psychological Association (APA) ethical guidelines and received ethics approval from the lead author's university ethics board.

2.1. Research philosophy

This study was informed by the first author's constructivist philosophical stance, which is underpinned by an ontology that recognizes the subjective and socially constructed nature of experience (e.g., Burr, 1995). Aligning with this perspective, we employed semi-structured interviews to enable participants to express their unique perspectives on coaching in esports. Rather than seeking a singular truth, this approach allowed for the co-construction of meaning between researcher and participant. Through this lens and reflective thematic analysis, we explored the stressors esports coaches experience and the coping strategies they employ in response to the specific demands of their context.

2.2. Researcher positionality

Each of the five named authors held complementary positions relative to the research. To enhance transparency, we present the research

team member's backgrounds and experiences. The first (1), second (2), third (3), and fifth (5) named authors have varying research and applied experience in esports (community-level to high performance). Consequently, these authors hold a degree of cultural insiderness (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) that enriched contextual understanding and sensitivity to domain-specific language. The fourth author (4), with limited esports familiarity, served as a cultural "outsider" (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), which, together with author (2), allowed them to act as critical friends (Smith & McGannon, 2018), challenging assumptions, offering alternative interpretations, and supporting analytical rigor.

2.3. Participants

A total of 12 male esports coaches participated ($M = 29.3$, $SD = 6.3$ years; see Table 1), identifying as head coach ($n = 7$), performance coach ($n = 4$), and coach ($n = 2$), with three coaches holding dual roles (e.g., head coach and performance coach). Coaches described their performance levels as semi-professional ($n = 4$) and professional ($n = 8$), with one professional coach having recently transitioned to coaching in amateur esports. Their esports coaching experience ranged from 2 to 13 years ($M = 6.6$, $SD = 3.7$), with five coaches having backgrounds in traditional sports coaching ($M = 2.9$, $SD = 4.7$ years; e.g., football, rugby, snowboarding, swimming). While nine coaches focused on coaching a single esport, others supported multiple esports titles, including League of Legends ($n = 7$), Valorant ($n = 3$), Overwatch ($n = 2$), Apex Legends ($n = 2$), Rocket League ($n = 1$), Defense of the Ancients 2 ($n = 1$), StarCraft 2 ($n = 1$), PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds ($n = 1$), and World of Warcraft ($n = 1$). Coaches worked across various leagues, such as the League of Legends EMEA Championship, the League of Legends Championship Series, and the first and second divisions of the League of Legends European Regional League. Nine out of 12 coaches were officially affiliated with teams, and three were freelancers. Ten coaches were paid, with one unpaid and another funded by a coaching development organization. Work formats varied, including remote ($n = 3$), in-person ($n = 4$), and hybrid ($n = 5$). The participants were geographically diverse, originating from and/or residing in Germany ($n = 3$), France ($n = 1$), Canada ($n = 2$), the U.S. ($n = 2$), the UK ($n = 2$), and Malta, Ireland, India, and Poland ($n = 1$ each).

2.4. Sampling

Participants were purposefully recruited and sampled, as outlined by Patton (2002), utilizing a combination of outreach to esports clubs and leveraging social media platforms such as X. Participants were required to meet the following criteria: 1) actively coaching in esports or previously coaching while currently seeking a team, 2) being at least 18 years old, and 3) proficiency in English or German. Although no specific gender or performance level was specified during recruitment, only male coaches from high-performance esports expressed interest in

participating. Participants were then recruited by reaching out to esports coaches.

2.5. Procedures

Once we had obtained informed consent, participants engaged in a semi-structured interview via their preferred communication platforms (e.g., Discord and TeamSpeak), with only the participant and interviewer present to ensure privacy. Interviews took place between March and May 2024. At the start of each interview, the interviewer welcomed participants, explained the study's aim and procedure, and addressed any questions. After providing participants with a definition of stressors and coping strategies ("While stressors refer external and/or internal demands that tax or exceed your personal resources, coping is defined as thoughts and actions to manage these demands"), the recording was started. During interviews, an evolving mind map noting "S" for stressors and "C" for coping strategies was developed for each participant and used to support conversational flow and identify points for follow-up probing. Interviews averaged 77.2 min ($SD = 13.2$), totaling 15 h and 28 min of audio data. After each interview, demographic information was collected and stored securely.

2.6. Interview guide

Semi-structured interview guides were constructed for the purpose of the present study based on recommendations by Kallio et al. (2016) and built on the transactional conceptualization of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The interview guide was developed collaboratively by the first and last named authors to explore how esports coaches experience and make sense of stressors and coping strategies in relation to their coaching role (see interview guide on the Open Science Framework: https://osf.io/n7azb/?view_only=99e112225a5e44dc97eaf2a3679f8a50). Interviews began with questions about how participants came to coach in esports and a description of a typical day in their coaching role (e.g., "Can you please walk me through a typical day in your role as a coach?"). These questions helped to build rapport and identify areas to explore further. The interview guide included two open questions on stressors and coping strategies: "In your role as a coach, what are the stressors you commonly encounter?" and "How do you try to deal with stress in your coaching role?" Follow-up questions (e.g., "What stressors have you encountered related to managing a team?") were used to gather further information where necessary. After creating a first draft of the interview guide, it was reviewed by the first and last named author and piloted with one esports coach who met the inclusion criteria (68.1 min). No changes were required following the pilot interview, however, during subsequent interviews, the interview guide was refined interactively in response to data collected. For example, prompts were added asking participants to describe a typical day in their role and to elaborate on stressors beyond esports.

Table 1

Sample characteristics and interview duration.

ID	Pseudonym	Age	Sport coaching experience (years)	Esports coaching experience (years)	Self-rated performance level	Interview duration
1	David	31	0	5	P	71.5
2	James	29	0	6	P	83.0
3	Lucas	26	0	10	P	55.1
4	Max	31	2	2	P	86.0
5	Pablo	39	8	13	P	81.1
6	Phil	42	14	5	P	99.2
7	Thomas	28	0	5	P	83.1
8	Alex	32	0	13	P to A	95.1
9	Lee	21	0	5	SP	74.5
10	Mark	21	0	3	SP	61.1
11	Nathan	25	9	4	SP	69.1
12	Ryan	27	2	8	SP	67.4

Note. Player's names are pseudonyms.

P = professional; SP = semi-professional; A = amateur.

2.7. Data analysis

After completing data collection, all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by the first author using Microsoft Word™. To protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned during transcription. Data analysis was ongoing throughout data collection, allowing the researchers to respond to emerging insights. Following a reflexive thematic analysis approach, transcripts were read repeatedly, with interpretative notes and reflections recorded (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Initial codes were developed inductively in MAXQDA Plus (2020) and guided by the participants' meanings. After the first author drafted codes, themes, and illustrative quotes, these were reviewed and refined through discussions with the last-named author. Agreed-upon themes were then reviewed by the second author. Existing frameworks (e.g., Leis et al., 2024; Nicholls et al., 2016) were later used to support, not structure, the themes, ensuring the final categories remained grounded in the coaches' own accounts. Finally, the fourth author reviewed the stressor and coping categories, further refining the themes, and all German quotes were translated into English by the bilingual lead author. To enhance accuracy of the translation, short de-identified excerpts intended for publication were cross-checked using ChatGPT. Outputs were used only to compare phrasing nuances, with the final translation determined and verified by the lead author.

2.8. Methodological rigor

To enhance methodological rigor, we conducted semi-structured interviews that balanced structured inquiry with the flexibility to capture participants' individual experiences (e.g., Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). An initial interview guide, developed from relevant literature, was refined interactively after early interviews to improve question clarity and conversational flow. During each interview, notes were taken on coaches' experiences, contextual details, and initial impressions, providing valuable reference points that enriched subsequent data analysis. The analysis conducted by the first author was discussed with the last author, who acted as a critical friend (e.g., Smith & McGannon, 2018; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). This process fostered reflexivity by encouraging the first author to question assumptions and consider alternative interpretations. We also present negative cases, intentionally including data that does not align with dominant themes, to further nuance our interpretations (e.g., Patton, 2002). We also aimed to provide thick descriptions, including substantial participant quotes to represent their voices and the nuances of their experiences (e.g., Patton, 2002). Findings were triangulated by comparing identified themes with the raw data and relevant literature (e.g., Norris et al., 2017; Potts et al., 2022), collectively enhancing the rigor and credibility of our analysis. The interviewer's prior experience in esports facilitated rapport-building and supported the co-construction of meaning during interviews. At the same time, awareness of potential insider bias and socially desirable responding informed the use of probing strategies, with participants encouraged to explain experiences in their own words and provide detailed accounts.

2.8.1. Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was addressed in line with established qualitative criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (e.g., Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Credibility was supported through iterative engagement with the data, including repeated listening to interview recordings, systematic coding using MAXQDA, and the presentation of preliminary findings within the research team and at multiple academic conferences to obtain critical feedback. Transferability was facilitated through detailed descriptions of participants, esports titles, competitive levels, and organizational contexts, alongside thick description and extensive participant quotations. Dependability was enhanced through transparent documentation of data collection and analysis, reflexive note-taking, iterative refinement of the interview

guide, and public availability of the guide via the Open Science Framework. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive practices and collaborative analysis, including critical dialogue between authors with varying degrees of esports insiders and outsiders.

3. Results

This section presents an interpretive account of esports coaches' stressors and coping strategies, highlighting how they make meaning of their roles amid the dynamic interplay between performance demands, interpersonal relationships, organizational structures, and personal contexts.

3.1. Stressors

The coaches discussed stress as an embodied and relational experience shaped by their responsibilities to both the team and individual players, the organizational environment, and broader social and personal factors. Four interrelated themes captured these experiences: navigating performance and interpersonal demands; negotiating organizational demands; interpreting social exposure; and navigating the boundaries of personal and professional life.

3.1.1. Navigating performance and interpersonal demands

Coaches described navigating a persistent tension between the pursuit of competitive outcomes and the relational demands of supporting players as people. This stress was not limited to in-game results, and deeply entangled with the emotional labor of holding space for others' well-being while remaining accountable for performance. As David explained:

The biggest stressors for me is how individuals are dealing with things. I feel a lot of responsibility for making sure that individuals are supported, and how they're like, their careers, and all their personal stuff.

Coaching was constructed as an inherently relational role, combining performance guidance with emotional support. Coaches felt responsible not just for performance outcomes but for players' experiences: a dual burden pronounced by disengaged or resistant players. Interpersonal misalignments were seen to disrupt team functioning and amplify stress. For example, Ryan reflected on the distress he felt when team dynamics pulled players away from shared goals:

That causes some degree of stress for me, because to a certain degree, my responsibility is to make sure that team is pushing towards their objective, which is competition, is winning, and those types of things. And so it causes me stress to a certain degree, because I need to, it's part of my responsibility to help alleviate this.

Phil echoed this sentiment, describing the emotional toll of working with players who were dismissive of coaching:

Nothing is worse than having a team where you have the wrong people. I've had players who were less than what I hoped for. [...] You can tell the other person doesn't even want to listen to you because they think they are much better than anyone else in the room. Then it becomes incredibly stressful and unpleasant to work.

The emotional weight of misalignment, whether due to ego, lack of maturity, or value conflict, was intensified by structural constraints, such as contracts and limited turnover. As Ryan described: "You are just screwed if you take the wrong people, and you could be then locked in that contract for six months. And there's no, there's no way out of it." Coaches also experienced cross-cultural and contextual challenges. Thomas reflected on the hierarchical Korean esports culture, noting stress and tension: "I had a shit ton of stress on the first month or two, because I wanted it to work so much. I saw there were setbacks and everything. I felt anger, I felt stress." These reflections show how coaches

internalized team struggles as personal failure, blurring professional and emotional boundaries.

Many coaches, like David, described a deep empathy for players, especially during personal hardships, such as a relationship breakup or performance slump. Coaching extended far beyond strategic feedback to involve emotional care:

One of the biggest stresses for me is that I feel a lot of empathy and weight for individual players. Even if they're not retiring, [if] a player that is going through some shit [...] that causes me a lot of stress, because I think about them a lot.

Coaches described their role not only as facilitators of performance but also as emotional anchors, often managing players' distress while handling their own privately. Nathan highlighted the challenges of working with players who arrived at the professional level without prior coaching experience:

Unlike traditional sports, where if you wanted to play football from a young age you get a coach from day one, and you're very used to working with a coach, in esports, predominantly, you don't really get a coach. If you really want to get one, it's never really enforced on you. At the more organized and competitive levels, usually having a coach is common, but players are still very unsure about how much value that coach brings. Sometimes, one of the biggest challenges is getting the buy-in [and having] logical, adult, mature conversations with players, because many of them, again, esports isn't the most mature industry.

3.1.2. Negotiating organizational demands

Coaches constructed organizational stress as emerging not from isolated events, but from persistent misalignments between institutional expectations and the lived realities of coaching. A recurring thread was the perceived disconnect between decision-making roles and the day-to-day demands of team development. Mark described his frustration with leadership unfamiliar with the environments:

People are completely clueless. They did whatever, got a bunch of money, wanted to go and do esports, and they have no idea what happens or what's going on. They don't understand how professional teams or environments work, how even a company works, anything, right. And that comes with its own issues. I mean, I've had crazy stories where people would make random, random changes out of nowhere, not consulting anyone.

Coaches framed these disruptions as products of systemic ignorance, which undermined team cohesion and made their roles more reactive, uncertain, and emotionally taxing. Some noted that the absence of structured expectations created ambiguity around performance criteria and job security. Thomas reflected on how the undefined scope of coaching roles often extended far beyond tactical and developmental support:

I had to do like management, like organization skills, or like just making sure, you know, my players go from point A to point B, organizing everything, all just like booking scrims myself [...]. The job is very hard. You should not do it if you're gonna get overwhelmed.

The role of the coach was co-constructed through their interactions with players and through their adaptive responses to institutional gaps. Blurred boundaries created stress and identity challenges, as coaches navigated expectations that demanded logistical management, team care, and organizational mediation.

Travel was another recurring stressor, though interpretations varied. While often viewed as a logistical burden, David reframed it as meaningful and energizing:

The interesting thing for me is that I think a lot of people would say travel is a big stressor for them. I love travel. I love being on the road with my teams, and so that's almost, for me, [...] like a perk.

Another organizational tension was the lack of formal development infrastructure for coaching in esports. Coaches articulated how the absence of clear career pathways, validated coaching models, or recognized coaching standards created feelings of uncertainty and devaluation. Nathan reflected:

There's not enough research to fully understand what coaching looks like in esports. We understand what coaching looks like in traditional sports [...] because coaching can be evidenced in education, in business, or even life coaching. However, esports is such a unique, different context [...], I don't think coaching looks the same.

Coaches described the pioneering nature of esports coaching as both exciting and a source of increased precarity and stress. Financial strain and job insecurity were frequently mentioned as compounding these pressures, with several coaches suggesting that passion for the role could be exploited within unsustainable economic models. Ryan put it bluntly: "I mean, it pays piss poor, right? The hourly return is rubbish." David echoed the fragility of employment: "The industry is volatile. Watching that has caused me a lot of stress. Just thinking about what happens if I wake up next week, and the job is gone, or somebody else gets my position." Instability was also described at the entry level, where breaking into esports often involved unpaid labor, financial hardship, and emotional exhaustion. David's experience captured this early struggle:

I had no money for anything. It was hard. I was exhausted because I'd be doing volunteer work, networking all day, bartending at night. There was a lot of periods of time where I was like, I don't think this is even possible for me to break into esports, it's too fucking hard.

3.1.3. Interpreting social exposure

While less central to their accounts than internal or organizational challenges, some coaches reflected on the social stressors linked to the public-facing nature of esports, such as fan scrutiny, interactions on social media, and expectations related to content visibility. These demands were not uniformly experienced as distressing but for some, social feedback, particularly through direct messages, was unexpectedly hostile. Marek recounted being taken aback by the intensity and aggression of fan responses: "[People] will make threats to you in DM [direct message], simply. [...] It's really surreal. The first time it happened to me, I was genuinely shocked, because it's not something I ever expected to receive." Exposure to external audiences was often framed as intrusive, blurring boundaries between public and private life. Some coaches felt unprepared for the hostility that accompanied online visibility, while others minimized or distanced themselves from social media. Thomas, for example, described little interest in external perception and instead emphasized a protective focus on team dynamics:

One thing that never really troubled me, but I know it troubles a lot of people, is the external pressure [from] social media. [...] Just the fact that there's a lot of people watching you and everything right now. I guess maybe sort of a disposition to not really care about anything outside of my team. [...].

Some coaches disengaged from fan interaction, treating external feedback as irrelevant to their role. Content creation, often tied to organizational expectations for brand visibility, was acknowledged as a mild but consistent source of tension. The stress stemmed not from fear of judgment but from the pressure to remain relevant and professional within a crowded digital space. As Thomas explained: "There was no pressure in that sense. The only pressure I felt was when I was posting for the company for the marketing part. That was the only stress, because I wanted to be relevant for the esports environment." Across accounts,

nervousness or performance anxiety linked to public viewership was largely absent, suggesting that competitive visibility was normalized within their coaching identity. For some, public exposure introduced unexpected and personal threats; for others, it was treated as noise to be filtered out.

3.1.4. Navigating the boundaries of personal and professional life

Coaches consistently described how the demanding nature of esports coaching blurred the boundaries between work and personal life, leading to persistent mental engagement with their roles beyond official hours. Thomas captured this experience of relentless cognitive occupation:

I thought about the game nonstop. I got zero breaks on the first two months [...]. At the beginning, I would try to go to sleep and then I would think about, 'Oh man, I need to do that tomorrow' in terms of coaching and everything. I would take a note and [I would] have so many notes, and I would take a shit ton of time to fall asleep.

Coaches discussed how stress infiltrated private moments, at times disrupting rest and personal relationships. Thomas reflected on the cognitive load during his partner's visit:

My girlfriend came to visit for two weeks, and I could not really give her any attention, because I was like, what happened? If the block went wrong, like the scrims went wrong that day, I would think ... What can I do to make it better? What went wrong? Who do I need to speak to?

A recurring theme was the tension between commitment and self-care. Thomas described feelings of guilt when taking breaks: "Relaxing and everything probably would have made me feel very guilty." Practical challenges were also highlighted, such as unpredictable schedules and limited labor protection. Mark explained:

Private plans are very difficult to carry out. Due to the fast-paced nature of esports, relevant information often becomes available only 2–3 months in advance. [When we want to plan a vacation], we find ourselves in a situation where I have to say, 'I'm sorry, I can't provide any details in advance, we have to plan as we go'. It has a significant impact on them and affects the relationship. The same goes for the large time investment that esports requires. Labor laws and all that, but they are not enforceable in esports. One works between 60 and 80 hours during intensive training weeks with the team, sometimes even more, which is often not paid.

Coaches reported mental exhaustion linked to their schedules and responsibilities. Phil emphasized the intensity of coaching multiple teams and leagues, particularly during peak seasons: "It's very difficult to get a manageable schedule for that work-life balance, let alone avoiding burnout." He further noted the emotional strain of isolation during extended periods away from his family:

Spending a week or two with a bunch of 18–20 somethings, no disrespect to them, I'm generally always the dad. [...] Not having even a social connection, despite the fact I can FaceTime my wife and my son. Coming back, I think part of my potential burnout is just not being able to kind of, I guess, be my authentic self with my social connections.

Furthermore, Ryan emphasized cognitive fatigue from constant problem-solving:

Your brain can't work infinitely. It's only got finite energy. If you spend all day solving difficult problems and you come home and you've got to solve difficult problems, default core emotional challenges, you simply don't have the cognitive energy to manage it.

3.2. Coping

Efforts to manage stressors related to three themes: Fostering a supporting environment (to facilitate collaboration and promote team success); rest as a relational and professional practice (to promote recovery and sustain well-being); and managing focus, emotion, and meaning (such as reframing and focusing on controllable factors to cope with high-pressure situations).

3.2.1. Fostering a supporting environment

Coaches framed the creation of a supportive team environment as an ongoing, relational process, that was shaped through intentional communication, value alignment, and mutual commitment. Rather than viewing support as top-down guidance, coaches positioned it as something co-constructed through open dialogue, emotional transparency, and player autonomy.

A central theme was the normalization of difficult conversations. Coaches described open communication as a protective mechanism that reduced ambiguity and prevented minor tensions from escalating. For Pablo, transparency reflected care:

When you say, 'When there is a problem, we care about you a lot so we aren't going to dance around the conversation, we are going to hit this conversation head-on because we want to see you successful and thrive.' When you set it up in that way early on, when those conversations start to happen, it's more of a sense of appreciation. [...] When you're blindsided by that conversation, it feels like you're being attacked.

Coaches framed confrontation as an act of care, turning potential conflict into collaborative alignment. Marek emphasized the cost of avoidance: "If you don't talk about a problem, it doesn't mean it goes away; it just means you're the only one processing it. That will boil up to resentment at some point, and now we have a really big problem." Open communication, scheduled meetings, and team reflection practices became practical ways to ensure emotional safety and support performance. During disruptions (e.g., roster changes), coaches used shared values and structured evaluations to re-anchor the team. Nathan also encouraged player reflection as part of collective learning:

Instead of jumping straight into the review, I'll get the players to write a one- or two-line reflection on what the game was like. How did they feel during the game? [...] I always ask them to reflect on the game [immediately afterward], so they have time to process what is important.

Rather than imposing solutions, coaches facilitated dialogue, empowering players to become more reflective and resilient. Coaches also worked to de-individualize pressure, particularly around mental blocks and setbacks, framing stress as part of the shared competitive journey rather than a personal failing. This collective framing offered psychological relief, reinforcing team solidarity and normalizing difficulty. Relationship-building and individual attunement were central strategies. Phil mentioned using his own background to connect meaningfully with players:

One of the things that has worked well for me in team settings is being able to find individual points of connection. So, if this player is not interested in mental performance support, because I have a strength and conditioning background, maybe I can connect with him in the gym.

Such personalized rapport was described as central to gaining buy-in. Coaches highlighted recruiting players aligned with team values as a form of stress prevention. Supporting players' emotional and professional development reduced conflicts and eased relational demands on coaches. Creating space for player autonomy and shared ownership was also key to team resilience and coach well-being. Thomas explained: "It is way easier when everybody shares the same goal and everybody

figures out the plan of action fix things, rather than [telling someone] to figure it out on their own, because you have like this whole buy-in."

3.2.2. Rest as a relational and professional practice

Coaches described rest not as individual downtime, but as a relational and professional negotiated practice, shaped by team demands and notions of professionalism. Nathon framed rest as essential for supporting players' performance, emphasizing the value of taking breaks to recharge and return to play more focused. Similarly, Phil reported post-event recovery as essential for maintaining his role as an emotional anchor for the team, framing rest as a form of strategic recalibration:

For me, I think just sort of the letdown from a big event and all of the emotions and needing to be, I guess, the rock there for the team ... finally coming home, and just being able to, I guess, go out of sort of an avoidance mentality of I'm here to do a job and finally actually be able to come into my own body, that day was spent doing very little other than trying to get some sunshine, fresh air, a little bit of mobility, because I knew I needed to physically and mentally recover.

Coaches framed restorative practices (e.g., exercise, gaming, cooking, or meditation) as negotiated rather than assumed, often taking a backseat to players' needs. Lucas emphasized how he prioritized his team before his own rest:

I just make sure everyone has the best time they can and I just see it as work. But for me personally, then it's fine. I'll just read a book. I'll watch a movie. I'll hit the gym, whatever. That's all fine. Yeah, I just want to be able to turn off my mind from work for a bit.

Phil discussed rest as a proactive investment in long-term resilience, particularly during less intense periods: "I'm trying to go by the adage of fixing your roof when it's sunny out, not when it's raining." At times, coaches only rested when prompted by others. Phil noted that his team sometimes intervened to ensure he took breaks, sending messages to encourage him to step away from work to proactively support his well-being and prevent burnout.

3.2.3. Managing focus, emotion, and meaning

Coaches described managing stress by shaping their perceptions of roles, emotions, and relationships. Coping involved negotiating focus, detachment, and meaning, often prioritizing team needs over personal emotion. Coaches frequently positioned themselves as the team's emotional anchor, suppressing their own reactions to maintain stability. Thomas articulated this sense of duty:

It's your job to be a bit detached from everything so that you can be calm and like, you know, if the players are overhyped or like, over activated, you bring them down, if they're under the activities, you bring them up.

Participants described this strategic detachment not as emotional avoidance, but as a leadership stance adopted to support team performance and well-being. Thomas acknowledged this commitment as part of a broader belief system, emphasizing that the team's success mattered above all else. Coaches also drew on deep personal identification with esports as a buffer against burnout. David reflected: "Despite all of this stress, the way I was able to deal with it was largely because of embracing and nurturing my love for the industry itself." Some coaches managed external criticism by focusing on meaningful input. Phil kept a list of people whose opinions mattered to him to filter out irrelevant negativity, while Alex dismissed most online criticism as unimportant. Coaches reframed their work through broader purpose, with Phil noting: "I'm making an impact beyond just helping these kids win a tournament. [...] seeing some of that appreciation and understanding from the clients I've worked with has really taken a lot of that stress off." Feeling valued and having purpose was highlighted as an important psychological

resource. Coaches discussed that gratitude and recognition from players or colleagues could reduce resentment or emotional fatigue. Support systems, including friends, family, partners, and professional networks, were central to managing stress. David stated:

If I know that I'm hitting a stress point, I'll use my friends. [...] It's like, hey, I'm really stressed out, I need a little bit of support right now [...] So I'm proactive about seeking support, if I feel like work is very stressful.

Sharing, receiving new perspectives, and learning through books, videos, and conversations helped coaches maintain their identity and gain a sense of control in an uncertain industry.

4. Discussion

The present study provides insight into the stressors esports coaches experience and the coping strategies they employ. Coaches described stressors stemming primarily from performance expectations (e.g., underperforming players), interpersonal dynamics with players (e.g., player attitudes), and broader organizational structures (e.g., limited autonomy). Social exposure, such as fan scrutiny or content visibility expectations, was less prominent. These stressors were often interconnected and frequently affected personal lives (e.g., work-life balance), with some coaches reporting exhaustion or burnout when stress was not effectively managed. Coping was described as a dynamic process, encompassing the creation of supportive environments (e.g., open communication), the use of rest and recovery as both relational and professional practices (e.g., exercise, gaming), and strategies for managing focus, emotions, and meaning (e.g., embracing the passion for esports, social support) to navigate the demands of the role.

4.1. Stressors

Our findings align with stressors identified in the broader esports literature, including research among players (e.g., Leis et al., 2024; Poulus et al., 2022b). Previous research has highlighted stressors such as performance pressure (e.g., Leis et al., 2022; Poulus et al., 2022b), lack of player effort (e.g., Poulus et al., 2022c; Smith et al., 2019), and job insecurity (e.g., Leis et al., 2023; Sabtan et al., 2022). Coaches in our study also emphasized performance pressure and responsibility for player outcomes, and differed in their prioritization of stressors. For instance, public-facing stressors such as social media criticism appeared less salient for esports coaches compared with sport coaches (e.g., Hodge & Smith, 2014) and esports players (e.g., Smith et al., 2019). This may reflect differences in role demands and experience, with coaches potentially having developed resilience through prolonged exposure to external critique, whereas players' public image and personal identity might be more directly tied to such feedback. Comparable stressors have been reported in traditional sport coaching, including interpersonal tensions, organizational demands, and role ambiguity (e.g., Norris et al., 2017; Potts et al., 2019). In line with Carson et al.'s (2018) model of workplace well-being, esports coaches described heavy workloads that impeded work-life balance (workload); limited autonomy due to multiple responsibilities (e.g., logistical and team management tasks) and organizational misunderstandings (control); inadequate financial compensation (reward); top-down decision-making with minimal consultation (fairness); navigating success-driven environments while supporting challenging player attitudes (community); and prioritizing player needs over their own well-being (values). Coaches in our study highlighted challenges with player buy-in and attitudes (relatedness), high performance expectations, frequent roster changes, and an unprofessional organizational structure (autonomy), all of which may undermine their sense of competence. These unmet needs mirror those associated with lower job and life satisfaction and reduced psychological well-being (e.g., Bentzen et al., 2016).

While long-term consequences have been documented among

eSports players (e.g., Birch et al., 2024; Poulus et al., 2024) and sports coaches (e.g., Altfeld et al., 2015; Didymus, 2017), this is the first study to indicate such effects among eSports coaches. These outcomes may reflect coaches' broader responsibilities, older age profiles, and the sustained, relational nature of their team involvement (e.g., Davis et al., 2024). They may be particularly pronounced at higher levels of performance, where more experienced coaches or those facing greater expectations experience intensified emotional demands, extended working hours, and situational pressures such as ambiguity and rapid change, paralleling stress profiles in traditional sport (Altfeld et al., 2015; Didymus, 2017). In this sense, burnout among eSports coaches underscores both the contextual and relational nature of stress and its co-construction through ongoing interactions between roles and environments (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

4.2. Coping

Coaches described coping strategies that were personally and contextually meaningful, with communication emphasized as particularly important. Communication served as instrumental/received support (e.g., solving problems with players or staff; Freeman et al., 2014) and perceived emotional purposes (e.g., seeking support from family and friends; Zimet et al., 1988). While similar strategies have been demonstrated among eSports players (e.g., Poulus et al., 2022c; Smith et al., 2019), communication appeared more vital for coaches, reflecting the emotional demands of their leadership role. In line with previous research (Olsen et al., 2020), however, eSports coaches seem to place greater emphasis on changing the stressor (e.g., open communication, goal-setting) than use of relaxation techniques (e.g., breathing relaxation, taking a break). For instance, coaches valued environments that fostered shared understanding, open dialogue, and emotional transparency, and they actively sought to cultivate such environments. The internal regulatory strategies used by eSports coaches (e.g., reframing, shifting perspective) indicated a reflective, long-term approach to coping, potentially shaped by their experience and leadership roles. Whereas sport coaches reported limited use of relaxation strategies (Olsen et al., 2020), coaches in the present study described rest as a relational and professional practice, negotiated within team dynamics and often prompted by others. They frequently positioned themselves as the team's emotional stabilizers, reframing stress as a collective challenge rather than an individual burden. Furthermore, perceptions of available social support were critical (e.g., Freeman, 2020), aligning with previous findings among coaches (e.g., Ferreira et al., 2024; Norris et al., 2022). As in traditional sport (e.g., Didymus et al., 2021), social support in this study buffered stress and enabled the co-construction of resilience (e.g., Freeman, 2020). In contrast to previous research among coaches (Olsen et al., 2020), eSports coaches rarely mentioned preventive behaviors such as planning for different scenarios. This difference may reflect variations in the interview guide, conversational flow, or the dynamic nature of the eSports environment. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Olsen et al., 2020), goal withdrawal strategies were seldom mentioned, suggesting that coaches maintained strong commitment despite ongoing challenges, likely reflecting the high personal investment required in full-time or passion-driven eSports roles. Moreover, our findings echo evidence that coaches lacking adequate coping resources are more vulnerable to stress and burnout (e.g., Baumann et al., 2024), with well-being closely tied to psychological need satisfaction (Norris et al., 2017). Collectively, the strategies indicate that coping among eSports coaches extends beyond stress management to preserving a coherent sense of self within a volatile environment.

4.3. Strengths and limitations

This study is the first to provide insights to the experiences of professional and semi-professional eSports coaches. Using a qualitative interview design, we prioritized in-depth exploration of coaches'

experiences of stress and coping. The findings are shaped by the research team's interpretive positioning and the co-construction of meaning during interviews, which informs both the insights generated and the boundaries of the conclusions drawn. However, the study did not explore the experiences of women or less-experienced coaches (e.g., Potts et al., 2024) whose personal (e.g., level of experience) and situational factors (e.g., eSports organization) may shape stress and coping differently. The ways in which we analyzed stressors and coping strategies carries a risk of misclassification. For instance, job insecurity could be framed as an personal stressor closely tied to performance or as a personal stressor due to its broader impact. In addition, the research did not examine factors such as appraisals, or the frequency, intensity, and duration of stressors (e.g., Potts et al., 2024), nor did it assess the effectiveness of coaches' coping efforts (e.g., Nicholls et al., 2016). While this study presents both stressors and coping strategies, their alignment was not explored. Because some strategies (e.g., communication) were applied across multiple stressors, analyzing these relationships in detail would have risked losing focus on the coaches' actual experiences, which was the primary goal of this first study. Although participants mentioned experiencing burnout, the absence of specific exploration of burnout prevents firm conclusions. Even though rigorous qualitative methods were employed, recruitment via X without prior rapport-building may have shaped the nature and depth of coaches' responses, and should be considered when interpreting the findings.

4.4. Implications for practice

The findings of this study suggest several practical implications for supporting eSports coaches. Since team communication was reported as a key factor in coaches' experiences, interventions that promote constructive feedback and clear communication could be valuable. In addition, coaches should recognize the importance of support systems, ranging from personal networks to online platforms (e.g., Discord) that enable exchange with peers. Given the symptoms of burnout reported, practitioners should acknowledge the considerable pressure coaches face, despite their passion for the role. Some stressors may be inherent in eSports coaching, making stress reduction unrealistic. However, strategies that help coaches to reappraise stressors as challenges rather than threats may be more effective (e.g., Potts et al., 2024). Evidence-based approaches such as cognitive-behavioral interventions (e.g., Didymus & Fletcher, 2017), mindfulness-based training (e.g., Hägglund et al., 2022), and rational emotive behavior therapy (e.g., King et al., 2024) could be facilitated by qualified support staff such as sport/clinical psychologists where resources allow (e.g., Swettenham et al., 2024). Given that eSports teams may have limited finances, collaborations or sponsorships may help alleviate coaches' workloads and enable task delegation. For example, employing analysts to manage complex scrim and match data would allow coaches' to focus on technical, tactical, and interpersonal aspects of their work. Building on evidence that avoidance coping is linked to burnout in eSports players (e.g., Poulus et al., 2024) and recognizing that coaches may neglect their own self-care, resilience training and coping skills development should be prioritized (e.g., Poulus et al., 2023; Sharpe et al., 2024). Fostering a shared vision, common goals, and mutual values among players and staff could enhance intervention effectiveness, while greater involvement of coaches in organizational decision-making processes, such as player selection and team management, may be beneficial. Similarly, organizations and federations must recognize their role in shaping coaches' experiences and in influencing performance and well-being outcomes (e.g., Frost et al., 2024).

4.5. Future research

As coaches play a crucial role in shaping the performance, well-being, and development of eSports players (e.g., Watson et al., 2024), future research should place greater emphasis on coaches. Research

could build on the insights provided by this study by further exploring the experiences of coaches across diverse gender identities, performance levels, and esports titles (e.g., Leis et al., 2024). To gain more comprehensive understanding, researchers could engage with coaches over extended periods, incorporating methods such as observational studies within coaching environments or diary studies that track coaches' experiences over time (e.g., Cote et al., 2024; Potts et al., 2024). A more detailed examination of stressors, including how they are appraised and their frequency, intensity, and duration, would also be valuable (e.g., Arnold & Fletcher, 2021; Didymus, 2017). Further, investigating the effectiveness of coping strategies and testing the efficacy and effectiveness of interventions will be valuable. We also recommend the exploration of the role of social support as a protective factor (e.g., Moen et al., 2024) during coaches' stress transactions. Intervention studies could explore the impact of networking opportunities for coaches, psychoeducation programs, or resilience interventions, to better understand their role in reducing stress and enhancing well-being.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the stressors esports coaches experience and the coping strategies they employ. Coaches reported navigating performance and interpersonal demands, organizational demands, social exposure, and work-life demands, while drawing on coping strategies such as fostering a supportive environment; prioritizing rest; and managing focus, emotion, and meaning. These findings highlight the importance of tailored support to protect coaches' well-being and enhance their capacity to facilitate player development.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Oliver Leis: Writing – original draft, Validation, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Dylan R. Poulus:** Writing – review & editing, Validation. **Michael G. Trotter:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology. **Faye Didymus:** Writing – review & editing, Validation. **Laura D. Swettenham:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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