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Article

"I Don't Believe Any Qualifications Are Required": Exploring Global Stakeholders' Perspectives Towards the Developmental Experiences of Esports Coaches

Matthew Watson [1,*], Michael G. Trotter [2], Sylvain Laborde [1] and Thomas M. Leeder [3]

[1] Department of Performance Psychology, German Sport University Cologne, Am Sportpark Müngersdorf 6, 50933 Köln, Germany; s.laborde@dshs-koeln.de
[2] School of Health and Welfare, Halmstad University, 301 18 Halmstad, Sweden; michael.trotter@hh.se
[3] School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia, Norwich Research Park, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK; tom.leeder@uea.ac.uk
* Correspondence: matthew.watson@stud.dshs-koeln.de

Abstract

Esports is a global industry, with coaches widely regarded as having a pivotal role in facilitating player development and enhancing performance. Despite this, limited research has investigated the developmental experiences of esports coaches and how they are valued by diverse stakeholder groups. Consequently, the aim of this research is to explore global stakeholders' perspectives towards the developmental experiences of esports coaches. Data were collected via a qualitative online survey completed by 98 participants, representing 28 nationalities, across six esports stakeholder groups (head coach, assistant coach, player, team manager, performance staff, analyst). Following a reflexive thematic analysis process, three themes were generated: (1) Speaking the same language: the importance of playing and knowing the game; (2) Walking the walk: the need for coaching experience to demonstrate competency; and (3) Formal professional learning and development: a bone of contention. By understanding how diverse stakeholders value different developmental experiences, the findings offer unique insights into the contested nature of coach development in esports. This research contributes to the esports coaching literature and provides a foundation for future empirical research into this emerging area, with recommendations and implications for esports coach education and practice discussed.

Keywords: esports; coach learning; coach development; sport coach education; player-to-coach transition; professional learning and development; good coaching; digital technology

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1. Introduction

The presence of a formal coach has been a traditional feature of organised sport, with the coaching role primarily focused on the delivery of structured training provision to enhance sporting performance and holistic development regardless of the domain (Cruickshank & Collins, 2015; Lyle & Cushion, 2017). However, as sport continues to diversify and evolve, there is a pressing need to interrogate how coaching is understood and enacted across a more diverse range of contexts. Indeed, emerging and non-traditional performance environments, including action/adventure, lifestyle, and electronic sports (esports) have established themselves outside of institutional frameworks, and all possess unique social dynamics and cultural norms that pose important questions regarding what constitutes effective coaching within these environments (Abbott et al., 2022; Ellmer et al., 2024; Leeder

& Beaumont, 2025). Of these alternative sporting contexts, esports (i.e., the organised and competitive play of certain video games; Pedraza-Ramirez et al., 2020), presents a unique case due to its accelerated growth as a global participatory, entertainment, and competitive activity which has significant implications for several stakeholders, including players, coaches, and individuals involved in the day-to-day activities of esports teams (Scholz, 2020).

Despite gaining mainstream media attention, esports continues to evolve and exhibit volatility as the industry strives to establish models and practices that are both economically sustainable and supportive of long-term performance (Scholz, 2020). To enhance the potential for success, teams have increasingly attempted to adopt high-performance structures that mirror traditional sporting environments (Pedraza-Ramirez et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2021), with coaches now a standard feature of the competitive esports landscape across a multitude of games (Watson et al., 2022). Within esports, coaches are regarded as instrumental figures in preparing players for competition and are typically tasked with roles such as analysing gameplay, devising strategic game plans, improving team communication, and goal setting (see Hedlund et al., 2021; Sabtan et al., 2022). There are also growing expectations that coaches support players' physical and mental health, including offering advice on issues such as routines and sleep hygiene (Abbott et al., 2022; Bonnar et al., 2023). In short, esports coaches operate within complex social and micro-political environments inclusive of diverse player expectations, challenging group dynamics, and emotional labour (Pedraza-Ramirez et al., 2024; Watson et al., 2022).

While the presence of coaches in esports mirrors that of other sporting domains, the conditions in which they operate significantly differ. Esports is built around commercially driven video games owned by publishers, who design them to entertain and retain players through sophisticated challenge and feedback mechanisms that support self-directed mastery (Gee, 2005). As a result, high-level players often engage in years of individualised practice without exposure to structured coaching or organised team play (Abbott et al., 2022). Games are predominantly played online, with communication between players often limited to text or audio channels. Consequently, coaches work with highly skilled, autonomous learners who may be unfamiliar with pedagogical coaching practices or group processes (Ellmer et al., 2024), and often do so in digital environments that restrict informal relationship-building. This late-stage introduction may partially explain the discrepant views of coaches reported in the limited existing literature, where some players describe coaches as valuable resources, while others express skepticism or view their expertise as incomplete (Abbott et al., 2022; Poulus et al., 2022). The delayed exposure to team coaching contrasts with many other sports, where coach–athlete relationships are typically established earlier in face-to-face and guided or coach-led learning settings. Of course, it should be noted such relations can still be developed within a virtual environment if appropriate coaching approaches are used (see Eagles & Callary, 2023). Yet, further complicating the esports coaching landscape are frequent game and competition changes enacted by publishers with little notice, which can necessitate impromptu changes in team strategy and preparation (Watson et al., 2022). Taken together, these conditions suggest that coaching in esports requires a context-specific skillset, underscoring the need for targeted research into the developmental experiences of coaches in this unique environment.

Although coaching within esports has begun to witness widespread growth and traction, esports coaches remain largely absent and overlooked within the developing esports literature base (Watson et al., 2022). This is somewhat surprising, given the increased recognition that esports coaching is a viable career pathway and a major factor behind enhanced performance (Brock, 2023; Watson et al., 2024). The limited research that does exist primarily considers the lived experience of coaches and suggests that esports coaches must

negotiate a range of challenges, including a pervasive pressure to win and being ill-prepared to deal with broader personal issues within their players' lives (Swettenham et al., 2024a; Watson et al., 2022). Crucially, there remains a lack of critical exploration into how coaches build and evidence expertise, with the prevailing discourse being one which valorises a playing background as a prerequisite experience for developing coaching competence (Swettenham et al., 2024b). One case study suggests that some renowned esports coaches do possess a professional playing background (Pedraza-Ramirez et al., 2024), yet media articles highlight how others who lack this experience instead refer to the importance of having an analytical mindset or a love of teaching as crucial factors behind their success (see Revell, 2021; Tan, 2023). In the absence of formalised professional development opportunities, there is currently no codified pathway into esports coaching, which means coaches must navigate their own learning through informal and often inconsistent means (Watson et al., 2022). These divergent attributes and ad hoc journeys into coaching reflect a broader ambiguity surrounding what constitutes a valuable developmental experience in esports coaching.

It has been proposed that one of the primary functions and responsibilities of a coach is to "learn and reflect" in addition to engaging with "continued and planned professional development" (Dieffenbach & Thompson, 2023, p. 10). For sport coaches, professional development can occur within a diverse range of formal, informal, and non-formal settings (Dieffenbach & Thompson, 2023; Walker et al., 2018), with the literature to date frequently referring to the idiosyncratic process of learning to coach (Stodter & Cushion, 2017; Nash, 2023). Appreciating that coaching and learning are inherently connected (Trudel et al., 2022), discussions around what forms of learning are valued, perceived to be valuable, or in fact disregarded from the perspective of multiple stakeholder groups are not always visible within the sport coaching literature (Rynne et al., 2024). This argument is especially true within the context of esports, where there is a lack of research on the coaching process broadly (Sabtan et al., 2022; Watson et al., 2022, 2024), and limited understanding on esports coach development (Ellmer et al., 2024).

Although existing research has begun to explore performance-related aspects of esports, such as training effectiveness (Abbott et al., 2022), talent development (Bubna et al., 2023), and perceived determinants of success (Poulus et al., 2022), there has been little attention given to understanding the developmental experiences of esports coaches and whether these are perceived to be valuable from diverse stakeholder groups. This would seem important, given the existing skepticism towards the role of the esports coach and whether they are considered credible (Abbott et al., 2022; Poulus et al., 2022). It is important to appreciate that the learning and developmental experiences of coaches which are *valued* most by sporting stakeholders might not be those which are most *valuable* (Rynne et al., 2024). Therefore, it cannot be assumed that within esports, all stakeholders "place the same value on learning both as a process and for the knowledge and skill content to be gained" (Dieffenbach & Chroni, 2023, p. 53). Hence, understanding these perspectives would appear worthwhile, given that a variety of personal and professional decisions are made *by* and *for* coaches based on what developmental experiences are valued (see Rynne et al., 2024). An enhanced appreciation of these perspectives and their origins is crucial for informing future coach education initiatives, professional development programmes, and standards concerning esports coaching as a profession (see Ellmer et al., 2024; Sabtan et al., 2022; Watson et al., 2022, 2024).

Consequently, the aim of this research is to explore global stakeholders' perspectives towards the developmental experiences of esports coaches. By situating contemporary issues related to coach learning and development within the context of esports, this study adds to the limited body of empirical research in this area, provides a foundation for future

inquiry, and highlights context-specific considerations crucial to the design and evaluation of coach education in this domain.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design

Positioned within the interpretivist paradigm, this research follows principles of social constructionism, with a focus on understanding how individuals (i.e., stakeholders within esports) construct knowledge through a combination of individual and social factors, as opposed to seeking one universal objective truth (Burr & Dick, 2017; Potrac et al., 2025). Specifically, social constructionism accounts for how produced knowledge interacts and evolves within specific cultural contexts (Young & Collin, 2004). Therefore, from an epistemological perspective, it is assumed that knowledge is co-constructed through subjective interactions (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), shaped by the social, historical, and cultural contexts in which individuals live and work (Potrac et al., 2025). Furthermore, a relativist ontological position is adopted, which recognises the existence of multiple realities and attempts to explore individuals' subjectivities (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Given the study's aim to explore global stakeholders' perspectives towards the developmental experiences of esports coaches and to align with the stated paradigmatic position, a qualitative methodological approach was deemed appropriate to understand individual meaning, subjectivities, and processes (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

2.2. Data Generation

Following the adopted methodological approach, an online qualitative survey was administered as the data collection method to obtain in-depth and nuanced perspectives from esports stakeholders (Braun et al., 2021). Although sometimes misunderstood, qualitative online surveys can be used to generate rich and focused data with regard to individuals' perceptions and practices, while possessing several participatory and practical advantages such as affording participants increased autonomy and anonymity, overcoming geographical barriers, and generally being less labour-intensive (Braun et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2024). To provide participants with enhanced flexibility and to adopt a wide-angle lens when exploring social phenomena (Braun et al., 2021), online surveys are becoming an increasingly utilised method of qualitative data collection within sport coaching research (Davis et al., 2025). Indeed, when considering the global esports ecosystem and digital fluency of participants, an online qualitative survey was considered an appropriate data collection method for the present study.

Created using Google Forms, the qualitative online survey included a combination of open-ended topic-based questions, in conjunction with a small number of closed demographic items which were divided across five distinct sections. This survey was developed as part of a wider research project exploring what constitutes effective coaching within esports. Initially, participants were exposed to and reviewed a participant information page during the first section of the survey which outlined the research background and aim, ethical considerations, and completion instructions. Informed consent was obtained at the end of this first section before participants could access the survey in its entirety. The second section contained demographic questions, collecting information related to participants' age, gender, and nationality. The third section then explored participants' background of their main stakeholder role within esports (i.e., their years and level of experience within that designated role). The fourth section consisted of five topic-based questions (see Table 1) which were designed to address the wider project focus and elicit detailed responses on participants' perceived roles, characteristics, developmental experiences, and effective

coaching practice in esports (Braun et al., 2021). The survey ended with a final section providing participants with the opportunity to include any additional comments if desired.

Table 1. Online survey topic-based questions.

Topic-Based Survey Questions
1. What do you believe the role of a coach is within esports?
2. What do you think are the behaviours and characteristics of 'good' esports coaches?
3. What qualifications and/or experience do you think good esports coaches possess?
4. How would you define effective coaching within esports? Please provide examples if you can.
5. How would you measure and/or evaluate coaching effectiveness within esports? Please provide examples if you can.

2.3. Participants, Sampling, and Recruitment Procedure

Following institutional ethical approval from the lead author's university, participant recruitment occurred via the lead author sharing a link to the online survey on their personal social media platforms (e.g., X, LinkedIn), email correspondence, and posting within online esports communities on Discord. Therefore, sampling within this research can be best described as purposeful, where participants were chosen so as to gain as much knowledge as possible about the desired topic area (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Specifically, participants were eligible if they were over the age of 18 and had experience in a designated stakeholder role within a competitive esports context. Appreciating that sampling is an on-going process within qualitative research, and purposeful sampling is a general description (Sparkes & Smith, 2014); elements of convenience-based and snowball sampling were present to enhance the sample size. Indeed, sample size within qualitative online survey research is complex, with no one-size-fits all template available (Braun et al., 2021). However, it is recommended that the sample size be dictated by a multitude of factors, including the research aim, breadth of topic, and practical implications (Braun et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2024). In total, 98 participants, representing 28 different nationalities across six esports stakeholder groups, were recruited (see Table 2). These stakeholder groups are outlined and briefly described below:

- Head coach: Typically leads the team's strategic direction, oversees training, and guides in-game decision-making.
- Assistant coach: Supports the head coach and may take on specific duties such as individual player development and game analysis.
- Player: Competes in matches using game-specific skills and knowledge, engaging in regular training activities to support this.
- Team manager: Manages a range of team-related organisational tasks such as scheduling, travel logistics, recruitment, and budgeting.
- Performance staff: Includes support roles such as sport psychologist and performance coach, the latter a common role in esports that typically requires expertise in one or more areas of sports science (e.g., mental skills, nutrition, and/or group dynamics; Watson et al., 2021).
- Analyst: Collects and interprets gameplay data, both from their own team and opponents, to inform strategy and identify areas for improvement.

Given that the study's aim, sample specificity, richness of participant responses, and thematic analysis strategy supported a strong 'information power' (Malterud et al., 2016), a sample of 98 participants was considered appropriate.

Table 2. Participant demographic information.

Individual-Level Variables	*n*	Percent	Mean	SD
Age	98		27	6.83
Gender				
Male	86	87.76		
Female	11	11.22		
Prefer not to say	1	1.02		
Nationality (28)				
American	12	12.24		
Argentinian	3	3.06		
Australian	1	1.02		
Belgian	2	2.04		
Brazilian	1	1.02		
British	18	18.37		
Bulgarian	1	1.02		
Canadian	3	3.06		
Croatian	1	1.02		
Czech	1	1.02		
Danish	1	1.02		
Dutch	8	8.16		
Finnish	1	1.02		
French	7	7.14		
German	9	9.18		
Greek	2	2.04		
Italian	3	3.06		
Malaysian	1	1.02		
Maltese	1	1.02		
Nepalese	1	1.02		
Peruvian	1	1.02		
Polish	6	6.12		
Scottish	1	1.02		
Slovenian	2	2.04		
South Korean	1	1.02		
Spanish	3	3.06		
Swedish	5	5.10		
Turkish	1	1.02		
No answer	1	1.02		
Highest Level of Education				
Doctoral Degree (e.g., Ph.D., Ed.D.)	3	3.06		
Master's Degree (e.g., M.A., M.Sc., M.B.A.)	24	24.49		
Bachelor's Degree (e.g., B.A., B.Sc.)	22	22.45		
Associate Degree (e.g., A.A., A.S.)	7	7.14		
Postgraduate Certificate/Diploma	4	4.08		
Secondary/High School diploma or equivalent	35	35.71		
Primary/Elementary school	3	3.06		
Role in Esports				
Head Coach	34			
Assistant Coach	8			
Player	22			
Manager	13			
Performance Staff	19			
Analyst	2			

Table 2. *Cont.*

Individual-Level Variables	*n*	Percent	Mean	SD
Years of Experience in Role				
Head Coach			5.41	3.29
Assistant Coach			3.13	1.13
Player			5.23	3.56
Manager			3.21	1.41
Performance Staff			4.79	2.19
Analyst			3	0.71
Highest Level of Experience				
S-Tier	36	36.73%		
A-Tier	19	19.39%		
B-Tier	20	20.41%		
C-Tier	11	11.22%		
D-Tier	10	10.20%		
No Answer	2	2.04%		
Main Game (14)				
League of Legends	41	41.84		
Counter-Strike	11	11.22		
Rocket League	9	9.18		
VALORANT	8	8.16		
EA Sports FC/FIFA	6	6.12		
Apex Legends	5	5.10		
Rainbow Six Siege	5	5.10		
Call of Duty	4	4.08		
Overwatch	2	2.04		
Fortnite	2	2.04		
DOTA 2	2	2.04		
Brawl Stars	1	1.02		
Sim Racing (e.g., iRacing, ACC, rFactor 2)	1	1.02		
NBA2k	1	1.02		
Coaching Qualifications (coaches only)				
None	34	34.69		
Nonformal esports coaching course participation	3	3.06		
Nonformal sports coaching course participation	1	1.02		
Credit-Bearing Bachelor's degree course on esports coaching	1	1.02		
FA Level 1 in Coaching Football (UK)	1	1.02		
Table Tennis C-License (Germany)	1	1.02		
Yes (Unspecified)	1	1.02		

Note: Highest Level of Experience classifications are based on Liquipedia (2025), a community-curated esports resource that categorises events into different tiers of competition:

- S-Tier: Major international tournaments with outstanding prize pools
- A-Tier: Prestigious tournaments that feature several top-tier teams and large prize pools
- B-Tier: High-level tournaments with smaller prize pools than A-Tier
- C-Tier: National tournaments below their top division
- D-Tier: Low-level regional competitions

2.4. Data Analysis

In aligning with the interpretivist paradigm and associated assumptions, a reflexive thematic analysis process was used to interpret the online survey data. Reflexive thematic analysis offers a theoretically flexible, yet rigorous, approach for identifying patterns of meaning across a dataset and is best suited to analysing individuals' experiences of and perspectives towards a social issue (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2016). More specifically,

reflexive approaches of thematic analysis increasingly recognises the inherent subjectivity within the analysis process, while embracing researcher reflexivity and appreciating the interpretive nature of coding (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Reflexive thematic analysis involves six iterative and recursive phases of familiarisation; coding; generating initial themes; reviewing and developing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and finally, writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021).

Initially, the lead and final authors engaged in a phase of familiarisation with the data through repeated analytical readings of all survey responses, critically engaging with the data to generate a sense of meaning and identify tentative ideas (Braun et al., 2016). Although responses to the five topic-based survey questions were treated as one cohesive dataset when engaging in the analytical process, increased attention was paid to participants' responses to the third topic-based question of the survey (see Table 1) given its enhanced relevance in addressing the research aim within this manuscript. Consequently, the lead and final authors met regularly during familiarisation and prior to coding to "consider different 'takes' on the data and open up new ways of thinking about them, rather than reach some consensus" (Braun et al., 2022, p. 29). Next, semantic (surface) and latent (underlying) level codes were created by the researchers collaboratively and reflexively, which were then applied to responses of interest to capture their essence and analytical relevance (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2016). In aligning with a reflexive approach, the coding process was unstructured and organic, with codes evolving over time to capture the researchers' deepening interpretation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Although the second and third authors were not immersed within the data, during the coding process these individuals acted as critical friends and offered guidance and comments on initial interpretations. Following an extensive coding phase, clustered codes were grouped together to initiate theme generation, which arrived later after prolonged data engagement (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The generated themes are representative of the subjective interpretations of the researchers and aim to demonstrate higher-level patterns and meaning (Braun et al., 2016). After further phases of theme development and refinement, three themes inclusive of subthemes were named to highlight the primary narrative before the write-up phase occurred (see Table 3). It should be noted that to enhance methodological rigour, generated theme summaries were shared with participants as a form of member reflections, with the aim to provide a practical opportunity to explore with participants the findings, which might yield additional insight (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Feedback from this process indicated that the themes resonated with participants' experiences.

As the name suggests, the notion of reflexivity forms a significant part of a reflexive approach to thematic analysis, where researchers must "reflect on their assumptions and how these might shape and delimit their coding" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 39). Reflexivity ensures that researchers are 'visible' within the research process, functioning as a form of quality control where individuals can outline their subjectivities and experiences while appreciating how this influences the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Braun et al., 2022). Consequently, it is important to acknowledge the backgrounds of the research team. The first author brings extensive experience as a coach and coach developer in esports, alongside previous roles as a player and professional coach in traditional sports and is a current researcher across both esports and sport contexts. The second author has competed as a high-level player in esports, coached in action sport environments, and is also an active researcher in both esports and traditional sports. The third author is an active researcher across esports and traditional sport domains, as well as a performance psychology practitioner. The fourth author has a practitioner and academic background in coaching and coach development within a traditional sport context. Hence, these lived experiences and insider knowledge have ultimately shaped and informed the processes of

participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis and should be disclosed (Braun et al., 2022).

Table 3. Theme and subtheme overview.

Theme	Subtheme
Speaking the same language: The importance of playing and knowing the game	A need to have played the game
	Elite playing experience commands respect
	Knowledge and understanding comes from playing the game
Walking the walk: The need for coaching experience to demonstrate competency	Playing experience can be overvalued
	Pedagogical skills and working with diverse groups
	Objective results prove coaching competency
	Teaching and coaching experience outside of esports
Formal professional learning and development: A bone of contention	Experiential knowledge surpasses formal education
	Formal education not an expectation
	Experience can be overrated
	Limited formal learning opportunities in esports

3. Results

As a result of the reflexive thematic analysis process across the dataset, three conceptual themes were generated to address the designated research aim: (1) Speaking the same language: the importance of playing and knowing the game; (2) Walking the walk: the need for coaching experience to demonstrate competency; and (3) Formal professional learning and development: a bone of contention. These generated themes are presented below and are supported by data extracts and analytical commentary.

3.1. Speaking the Same Language: The Importance of Playing and Knowing the Game

Across a multitude of sporting contexts, prior experience as an athlete or player is highly valued and often considered to be pre-requisite to becoming a coaching practitioner regardless of the domain. Within this research, several participants across diverse stakeholder groups shared this perception, by indicating that a playing background, preferably at an elite or high-performance level, is an important developmental experience for an esports coach.

> A coach who is highly skilled in the game makes a huge difference—to be honest, experience-wise, they should probably be a pro player at minimum or ranked top 0.1% in the game.
>
> (Participant 29, player)

> I think they [the coach] should have played the game they are coaching in for an extensive amount of time and have depth in working with players.
>
> (Participant 42, player)

> Having experience in anything algorithmy or problem solving related, paired up with elite game knowledge from first-hand pro player experience or extensive analysis of the esport.
>
> (Participant 45, analyst)

> Working with a lot of different players personality wise. Playing the game or at least having an understanding of the game at a high level.

(Participant 96, manager)

Specifically, it was argued that possessing prior experience as an elite player would enable an esports coach to obtain respect, be listened to, and ultimately more positively facilitate player engagement within their practice.

> Experience with the esport title they are coaching is a must. Players will gravitate and listen to those who know what they are talking about.
>
> (Participant 60, head coach)

> A solid background of the semi pro scene and in the pro scene would make an accomplished and well-liked coach, as well as multiple vouches.
>
> (Participant 87, head coach)

From the perspective of Participant 27, coaches who can demonstrate prior playing experience possess a 'badge of prestige', allowing them to be more relatable and in essence communicate more effectively with their players through sharing a similar background. It was believed that being able to highlight a developmental experience such as this enables a coach to stand out more in comparison to evidencing the obtainment of formal coaching qualifications.

> I don't think qualifications are necessary, but what can help a coach stand out from others is having experience in the type of game/esports world, so you can 'speak the same language' easier.
>
> (Participant 27, player)

Fundamentally, there was a strong perception that esports coaches with a playing background hold an ingrained knowledge of the game and the underpinning mechanics, skills, and strategies. This knowledge permits an understanding of the challenges and pressures that esports players face, while acting as a catalyst for a coaching philosophy to be developed and pedagogical methods adopted in practice.

> I don't think good coaches need to have played at, or coached at Tier 1 teams to be a good coach, but experience of being under pressure helps
>
> (Participant 39, performance staff)

> I think good esports coaches understand the challenges and needs of their players and usually have some personal experience as a player whether in traditional sports or esports. I think they also have lots of working experience which has helped them develop a framework or coaching philosophy that helps guide them.
>
> (Participant 73, manager)

> I think the most obvious one experience you need as coach is a deep and comprehensive understanding of the game you are coaching. You need to know the game mechanics, the meta, the strategies, the strengths and weaknesses of each character, the maps, the patches. You also need to know the game history, the competitive scene, the rules, the tournaments, and the opponents. You need to be able to analyse and explain the game in detail and provide constructive feedback and guidance to your players.
>
> (Participant 100, player)

Regardless of performance level, the value associated with participating as a player was emphasised, none more so than by Participant 58 (head coach), who perceived a playing background (in any sport/game context) to be the most significant and valuable developmental experience required to become an esports coach.

> I believe all coaches should have played in sports growing up or at least have a high interest in participating in sports. You can't be a coach without participating first.
>
> (Participant 58, head coach)

In summary, this theme has emphasised that akin to traditional sports, a playing background (preferably at an elite or high-performance level), is perceived to be a valuable developmental experience in becoming an esports coach. All stakeholder groups generally believed that prior playing experience permits an esports coach to possess game-specific knowledge, enabling them to build rapport and be empathetic towards the challenges and needs of their players. In some instances, these responses suggested that a playing background is a more valued developmental experience in comparison to alternative forms of learning (i.e., formal professional development).

3.2. Walking the Walk: The Need for Coaching Experience to Demonstrate Competency

Several participants placed inherent value on experiential learning through 'playing the game', which was generally perceived to be influential in becoming an esports coach. However, in contrast to this rhetoric, a select group of participants downplayed the importance of possessing a playing background.

> NOT being a player before becoming a coach. I'd say experience within real life coaching (in sports for example) but it's not a must have.
>
> (Participant 13, performance staff)

> I am not a firm believer that you have to be a former player in any way. Instead, I think you have to have a burning passion to help people.
>
> (Participant 90, performance staff)

In moving beyond the role of a playing background and the value of professional knowledge (i.e., game-specific skills and strategies), it was argued that esports coaches should have enhanced interpersonal knowledge (i.e., being able to work with others) through exposure to working with diverse groups.

> Experience is just working with an array of different people from different backgrounds, roles, experiences. If you can only coach one player or one team, then you're not a great coach, you just got lucky being able to synergise with that specific group of people.
>
> (Participant 1, head coach)

> There's a minimum amount of knowledge and skill at that particular game, which is necessary, but knowledge around actual coaching skills is more important once you get past that minimum threshold.
>
> (Participant 9, player)

> I have seen coaches from a variety of backgrounds, experiences, differing levels of competitive/educational experience all achieve results. What is important, is how well the coach fits the team and can create an environment in which players can improve. This can be across a variety of areas such as their interpersonal skills, strategical knowledge, ability to present information.
>
> (Participant 50, head coach)

Thus, coaching experience and working with different players, teams, and personalities over time were considered important developmental opportunities to help hone an esports coach's craft. However, a coach's ability to objectively demonstrate competition results functioned as a method to convert coaching experience into something perceived

to be more valuable when compared to formal professional development. Specifically, objective measures of success (i.e., demonstrable involvement with high-performance teams, duration of coaching experience, final league position, competition results) were seen as opportunities for esports coaches to prove their worth.

> It depends on the position and tier level of the team, but for certain levels you have to prove your value instead of having X qualification or experience in my opinion.
>
> (Participant 5, performance staff)

> For me, experience is more important than qualifications, I would expect good coaches to have been involved within the top organisations, have accomplishments they are able to show; have a minimum of 12 months experience within coaching specifically and ideally have a previous background as a player (not essential but ideal).
>
> (Participant 34, head coach)

> That's tough, some coaches without qualifications can be better than some coaches with qualifications. I think experience is better than qualifications, and you can find good coaches at every level of experience.
>
> (Participant 84, performance staff)

Building upon this sentiment, a coaching background was perceived to be a valuable developmental experience when aligned with the analogy of a ladder. For example, it was argued that if an esports coach could evidence a linear and progressive coaching trajectory, it verified their ability to coach.

> They have experienced both victory and defeat and have climbed up the ladder respectively. Due to the shortage of actual degrees on the matter, if you see a coach who has climbed from the lowest tiers of leagues gradually to the top, it means there is at least something they do right.
>
> (Participant 4, head coach)

> I am not a firm believer in you have to be a former pro player to then be coaching. However, I think experience up the ranks is important. Like traditional sports where you are coaching a position in the game and then you move up the 'ladder' until you show that you have the capabilities to become a coach.
>
> (Participant 41, performance staff)

Despite there being a clear appreciation for coaches who can demonstrate extensive and progressive coaching experience within esports, undertaking coaching and/or teaching roles within other sport and educational settings were also perceived to be valuable. It was suggested that these wider life experiences can support coaches in enhancing pedagogical skills and interpersonal knowledge.

> Experience coaching is important, but any applicable teaching or coaching experience is important and valuable.
>
> (Participant 6, head coach)

> I don't believe any qualifications is necessary for a good esports coach, but experience in sports coaching or teaching would help.
>
> (Participant 20, head coach)

> I don't think a good coach necessarily needs a specific qualification or experience, but I value the most the experience they have from different areas. For example, experience working with different groups or teams (from other sports,

> business). So that prior coaching they were active on different areas, gather different experiences, worked with people, lead some groups etc.
>
> (Participant 69, performance staff)

Alongside prior playing experience, it is evident that esports stakeholders believe esports coaches should be individuals who can evidence on-the-job exposure to the coaching role. However, it would appear that for coaching experience to be considered valuable, an esports coach needs to be able to objectively present a track record of success (i.e., involvement with high-performance teams, a progressive coaching pathway, competition results). Despite this, there was also an emerging belief that engagement with pedagogical roles outside of the esports milieu would support coaches in enhancing their interpersonal, as opposed to professional, knowledge base.

3.3. Formal Professional Learning and Development: A Bone of Contention

Within this research, several stakeholder groups seemingly overlooked formal professional learning as a valued developmental experience for esports coaches. Formal education, such as coaching qualifications and courses, were generally considered less valuable in comparison to knowledge obtained via practical experience (e.g., as a player or coach).

> I don't believe any qualifications are required to be a good coach period. The most important thing is your work ethic, having an open mind, and putting yourself out there, i.e., experience. We live in an age where everything is but a click away on the internet.
>
> (Participant 17, head coach)
>
> I don't think qualifications matter as much, mainly just experience in the game and leading a team.
>
> (Participant 47, player)
>
> There's no need for qualifications to be a good coach.
>
> (Participant 48, player)

Specifically, the relevance of knowledge obtained from formal education pathways (i.e., a university degree or elsewhere) was argued to be temporal in nature. Because the tactics and strategies adopted within many esports are constantly under reconfiguration as the game (i.e., the meta) evolves, information acquired from formal sources was perceived to lack value as it becomes 'outdated'.

> I think it takes a lot of life experience. I'd rather hear a story about a coach who had to look after younger siblings, or they ran a local sports team vs. they got a degree (the game meta will change each month, your stored knowledge won't be useful for long).
>
> (Participant 37, manager)

Interestingly, when discussing the process of identifying and recruiting head coaches within esports teams, it was highlighted that formal education qualifications were rarely expected, with specific personality traits and demonstrable practitioner experience(s) more desirable.

> Coaching qualifications are not the be all or end all. People learn in a range of ways; characteristics are much more important.
>
> (Participant 40, performance staff)
>
> I don't expect any formal qualifications/experience in my scene. . .these are the traits I'd look for: people skills (conflict resolution, likeable personality), technical

> game knowledge, and teaching skills. I appreciate playing skill as well, but it's not that useable if they aren't able to teach well. When I interviewed a dozen coaches for our season 2 team, I valued the coaches who were more proactive rather than reactive in their communication.
>
> (Participant 95, player)

A certain irony existed here, where teaching and coaching skills (i.e., pedagogy and the understanding of 'how' to coach) were highly desired, yet formal education as a relevant setting to develop professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal knowledge was neither expected nor valued. However, in some instances the prevailing discourse regarding the valorisation of naturally occurring developmental experiences was viewed critically. Indeed, several participants believed that engaging with formal professional learning and development opportunities represents evidence that an esports coach is proactive and consciously willing to enhance their practice.

> In esports there are a lot of people with qualifications, and I don't mind it. Experience will come, but everyone needs to start without it so for me it shows you're committed to the project itself.
>
> (Participant 3, head coach)
>
> Experience is extremely overrated. Especially lower-level experience does nothing, and some coaches are legitimate frauds as they don't spend any time actually trying to improve in coaching/knowledge like a player would spend time in a game. Any qualification from real world is good though. Be it coaching from real sports or a degree in teaching.
>
> (Participant 30, head coach)

Despite formal professional learning and development acting as a catalyst for the advancement of coaching knowledge, it was recognised that due to issues surrounding the professionalisation of esports coaching, there are currently limited formal esports coach education courses and tertiary level learning opportunities available.

> There is no industry standard qualification that defines a good esports coach. Experience with the specific game they are working within is a must to different degrees depending on the coaching role they fulfil.
>
> (Participant 44, head coach)
>
> I think it varies enormously depending on their role. As far as the 'performance' part is concerned, I think it's essential to have an excellent fundamental knowledge base to be able to teach it to the players. When you're working with such an uneducated population it's important to be able to explain in depth the mechanisms underlying their performance. For game coaches, there is currently no form of qualification, but managerial and organisational training would be very relevant at the very least.
>
> (Participant 72, performance staff)
>
> In terms of qualifications, at the moment I don't think it matters, although it could be something to take in consideration in the future when specific academic courses on esports are created.
>
> (Participant 80, head coach)

The perceived value, relevance, and expectation with regard to the formal professional learning and development of esports coaches proved to be a contentious topic across stakeholder groups. Although some participants challenged the prevailing discourse that experiential learning is a fundamentally 'better' developmental experience, in general,

formal coach education courses and tertiary level degrees were overlooked and devalued. Nonetheless, when considering that contemporary esports-specific coach education qualifications are globally scarce, it is perhaps unsurprising that formal professional learning and development is largely not expected when seeking to recruit esports coaches.

4. Discussion

In building upon the limited literature base which explores coaching and coach development within esports, this research has revealed the ego-centric culture which informs stakeholders' dispositions towards, and valorisation of, the different developmental experiences of esports coaches. At present, naturalistic and unmediated developmental experiences are uncritically assumed by a diverse range of stakeholders to be inherently 'better' than alternative opportunities (Ryou et al., 2025), with the perception that engaging with experiential knowledge is mandatory to becoming an esports coach. Thus, within the emerging field of esports, this study is the first of its kind to incorporate the voices of multiple stakeholder groups from across the globe to critically understand perceptions towards the developmental experiences of esports coaches. An enhanced appreciation of these perspectives is crucial for informing future professional learning and development programmes (see Ellmer et al., 2024; Sabtan et al., 2022; Watson et al., 2022, 2024). The findings are now situated and interpreted in relation to the existing sport coaching, coach development, and esports literature.

In line with wider sport coaching research (see Blackett et al., 2017, 2018; Leeder, 2024; Leeder & Beaumont, 2023; Rynne, 2014), it was evident that most stakeholder groups across the esports landscape attached substantial value and importance to game-specific knowledge obtained via previous playing experience. Sport coaching cultures are plagued with an overriding assumption that playing experience, preferably at an elite level, is a requirement to becoming a coach (Dieffenbach & Chroni, 2023; Nash, 2023; Leeder, 2024). Indeed, within this research, participants made frequent reference to how a demonstrable playing career functioned as a significant developmental experience which would enable an esports coach to understand game-specific mechanics, while facilitating the obtainment of respect and buy-in (Cooper, 2023; Rynne, 2014). However, the uncritical perception that playing experience seamlessly translates into enhanced coaching practice is an illusion attached to the coaching role which challenges what it fundamentally means to be a coach (Dieffenbach & Thompson, 2023). Experiential learning which occurs via a prolonged career as a player is associated with an understanding of the specific knowledge, strategies, and skills of a game or sport (see Blackett et al., 2017, 2018; Cooper, 2023; Leeder, 2024; Rynne, 2014; Watts & Cushion, 2017), that being the *what* or professional knowledge of coaching (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). Yet, this narrow view overlooks the development of the *how* and *why* (i.e., the inter- and intrapersonal knowledge required to coach appropriately and ethically, and facilitate athlete learning; Côté & Gilbert, 2009; Dieffenbach & Thompson, 2023). Relatedly, tacit knowledge (i.e., that which is developed through experience) may support context-specific decision-making, yet its implicit nature makes it difficult to evaluate or transfer to others (Nash & Collins, 2006). Overreliance on tacit knowledge is therefore problematic, as this may reinforce unexamined habits and limit a coach's decision-making ability. Instead, coaches must be able to flexibly apply different forms of knowledge in context (see Taylor et al., 2023), which underscores the need for developmental experiences that help coaches surface, scrutinse and add to their knowledge.

The 'you played therefore you can coach' discourse operates as a filter which saturates individuals' engagement with and perceptions towards available developmental experiences (Dieffenbach & Chroni, 2023; Stodter & Cushion, 2017). In mirroring the mainstream sports literature in terms of valued sources of learning (see Rynne et al., 2024), esports

stakeholders only saw the potential benefits of a coach possessing an extensive and evidenced career as a high-performance player, despite the possible challenges that relying solely upon this experiential form of learning might incur. The athlete/player-to-coach transition is often a "relatively swift process, facilitated by little to no formal professional preparation" (Chroni et al., 2020, p. 769), where individuals are frequently fast-tracked into coaching roles without engagement with formal coach education provision (Blackett et al., 2017, 2018; Leeder, 2024; Rynne, 2014). Consequently, individuals in this position generally replicate their most recent experiences of being coached, without critically reflecting upon whether such an approach, style, or philosophy is suitable for the players they are working with (see Dieffenbach & Thompson, 2023; Leeder & Beaumont, 2023; McMahon et al., 2020; Watts & Cushion, 2017). Prior to commencing a coaching role in esports, it is likely that individuals will have served an 'apprenticeship of observation' as a player through being coached and involved in that context, with these experiences having a pervasive influence on the development of dispositions towards both coaching and learning (C. J. Cushion et al., 2003; Watts & Cushion, 2017). For example, existing esports coaching literature has demonstrated that previously encountered and 'learned' coaching methodologies are often reproduced uncritically, which can result in maladaptive outcomes for players (see Abbott et al., 2022). Nonetheless, our findings suggest that esports stakeholders largely viewed a playing career, at the elite level or otherwise, as an important developmental experience for esports coaches to possess.

Moreover, this research also identified that esports stakeholders saw value in coaches evidencing longitudinal involvement in a coaching role. In short, developmental experiences including on-the-job exposure to coaching in esports and/or beyond were perceived to be valuable. Specifically, participants suggested that an esports coach needs to be able to objectively present a track record of success (i.e., involvement with high-performance teams, a progressive coaching pathway, competition results) which is "used as a litmus test of proof" to judge their competency (Dieffenbach & Chroni, 2023, p. 54). It is perhaps unsurprising that an extensive background in coaching was perceived to be a valuable developmental experience by esports stakeholders, considering that existing research has demonstrated coaches' preferences towards self-directed and contextualised opportunities to 'learn by doing', at the expense of alternative formal professional development programmes (e.g., Van Woezik et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2018). Indeed, recent research by Watson et al. (2022, p. 15) has highlighted how esports coaches embrace "informal and non-formal learning methods such as experiential learning... to orchestrate (monitor, notice, and co-ordinate) and harmonise their own existence as a coach", which subsequently supports their decision-making in competition settings.

Although objectively 'measuring' the coaching career of an esports coach was a common factor informing stakeholder perceptions, wider coaching and/or teaching experience either within or outside of the esports realm was also viewed as an opportunity for an individual to develop pedagogical skills and approaches. However, an overreliance on naturalistic on-the-job experiences (i.e., playing or coaching) as the primary source of coach learning will "reinforce certain ideological interpretations of knowledge and practice" (C. Cushion, 2019, p. 364). Coaches will develop distinct dispositions (i.e., attitudes, preferences) towards coaching approaches which are shaped by the effects of socialisation (Ryou et al., 2025; Watts & Cushion, 2017; Webb & Leeder, 2022) and influenced by the values of that coaching context, resulting in anecdotal 'what works' methodologies being applied (Lyle & Cushion, 2017). These anecdotal 'what works' approaches have been described as folk pedagogies (Bruner, 1999), referring to strongly held beliefs and assumptions that coaches possess with regard to both coaching and learning, derived from personal biographies and sociocultural norms.

Problematically, relying upon a self-directed curriculum may hinder an esports coach's development, as their learning isolation (i.e., relying on folk pedagogies, rather than new ideas) will restrict their potential to draw upon alternative approaches and practices (Ryou et al., 2025; Stodter & Cushion, 2017). We are already aware that within esports, research has highlighted that coaches are less holistic in their coaching practice in comparison to coaches in more traditional sports, often possessing technical knowledge but lacking appropriate pedagogical skills such as providing effective feedback (see Ellmer et al., 2024; Poulus et al., 2022). Esports coaches need to be able to "adapt their training methodologies to fulfil players' psychological needs" (Pedraza-Ramirez et al., 2020, p. 339), however, this is unlikely to happen if they are not exposed to new approaches and methodologies from external sources. Thus, although valued by stakeholders, a reliance upon learning in the 'workplace' as a developmental experience might insufficiently prepare esports coaches for the coaching role (Ryou et al., 2025), especially if their folk pedagogies remain "untouched by new knowledge" (C. J. Cushion et al., 2003, p. 224).

Perhaps the most significant discussion point within this research was the lack of perceived value, relevance, and expectation attached to formal professional learning as a developmental experience for esports coaches. Formal coach education courses and tertiary level degrees were generally overlooked and devalued in comparison to experiential learning. However, formal professional learning might best be viewed as a 'slow burn' which provides participating coaches with the skills needed to become self-reflective and critical, and meaningfully learn from previous developmental experiences (Nash, 2023). Problematically, an explicit focus on what individuals prefer with regard to coach development overlooks what they might need to hone their craft. Hence, it would be worthwhile for esports stakeholders to "let go of the embodied knowledge and skills developed through experience" (Dieffenbach & Chroni, 2023, p. 63), and move towards evidence–informed methods of formal professional development that facilitates critical reflection on previous experiences, which over time may be transferred into coaching competency. Coach education which incorporates reflection has the potential to support individuals in becoming critical readers of experiential learning and how this might inform the reproduction of coaching philosophies and practices (Chroni et al., 2020; Leeder & Beaumont, 2023; McMahon et al., 2020).

Of course, formal coach education is not immune to critique, with previous research highlighting issues associated with its additive nature, which limits its impact on coach learning and practice due to a wash-out effect (e.g., C. Cushion, 2019; Stodter & Cushion, 2017; Wood et al., 2023). Yet, coach education programmes are critical to the professionalisation of coaching (Lyle & Cushion, 2017; Nash, 2023). For example, contemporary research has begun to allude to how formal coach education is perceived to be useful by coaches, especially when learners are provided with choice and encouraged to engage in critical reflection, which may result in dispositional changes and modifications to practice (e.g., Cope et al., 2021; Webb & Leeder, 2022). Yet, it would be remiss to suggest that merely attending formal esports coach education will always result in changes to coach behaviour, given the idiosyncratic and sociocultural nature of learning to coach (Dieffenbach & Thompson, 2023; Stodter & Cushion, 2017). However, in echoing the recent sentiment of Ryou et al. (2025), rather than excluding and overlooking specific coach learning formats, which in the case of esports coaching largely appears to be formal professional development, it is perhaps more fruitful to exploit the synergies between diverse learning sources (i.e., playing and coaching experience, reflection, coach education) to maximise the potential for transformative learning to occur.

In closing this section, it is important to recognise that esports broadly, and esports coaching specifically, are still at an embryonic stage of development and professionalisation,

despite its growing popularity and increasing financial resources (Ellmer et al., 2024). Indeed, the 'traditional' sport coaching field is still facing its own challenges, with issues related to fast-tracking through coach education and into high-performance coaching roles ever present (see Blackett et al., 2017, 2018; Leeder, 2024; Rynne, 2014), coupled with the absence of established criteria for recognising coaching as a profession (Nash, 2023). While existing research supports the creation and dissemination of enhanced professional development opportunities within esports (Ellmer et al., 2024; Pedraza-Ramirez et al., 2020; Pedraza-Ramirez et al., 2024; Watson et al., 2022), it is important to acknowledge that the field currently lacks a clear regulatory structure and may be vulnerable to replicating some of the limitations observed in traditional coaching (e.g., endorsing ego- and sociocentric beliefs through promoting fast-track initiatives). Therefore, expectations with regard to what, when, and how change is implemented within esports coaching needs to be realistic, especially given the field's current tendency to be less regulated (Scholz, 2019).

5. Concluding Thoughts and Steps Forward

The aim of this research was to explore global stakeholders' perspectives towards the developmental experiences of esports coaches. The findings highlight the contested nature of coach development in esports, where diverse stakeholder groups perceived certain developmental experiences to be more valuable than others in the process of becoming an esports coach. In sum, experiential learning (e.g., through playing and coaching esports) were largely valorised at the expense of formal professional development opportunities. This general perception is perhaps unsurprising considering the relative infancy of esports and esports coaching specifically, alongside the paucity of empirical research available and the absence of established coach education frameworks. More speculatively, the voices of these stakeholders might reflect a general skepticism towards regulation that stems from the nuanced characteristics of the esports industry and culture, in which "there is no border; and there are no barriers" (Scholz, 2019, p. 113), where forms of governance (i.e., formalised professional development) are often challenged.

To date, esports coaches remain largely invisible within the developing esports literature base (Watson et al., 2022), meaning we know little about who they are and their learning and development, in addition to the perceptions that others (i.e., contextual stakeholders) have towards them. Consequently, this research has significantly contributed to this lacuna by illuminating diverse esports stakeholders' perceptions towards the different developmental experiences of esports coaches.

5.1. Recommendations and Implications for Practice

Considering the general appreciation amongst participants in this study for the need to develop coaching skills, often through practical experience or work in adjacent domains, there appears to be justification for expanding coach education provision in esports. However, the mixed views on qualifications expressed by stakeholders may reflect a skepticism towards classroom-based, 'chalk and talk' models (Barrett et al., 2021), particularly those delivered in decontextualised or asynchronous formats. As such, alternative forms of coach education should be prioritised that align more closely with the social and experiential nature of coaching and the bottom-up, collaborative ethos of esports (Scholz, 2020). For instance, situated learning approaches such as participation in communities of practice, which may help cultivate interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies, provide context-specific problem-solving skills and support the social capital that group-based education affords (Garner & Hill, 2017). Moreover, such approaches can be delivered through digital platforms familiar to esports professionals, making them both accessible and contextually relevant. Indeed, recent research has outlined how, if designed and delivered appropriately,

online coach education has the potential to facilitate autonomous motivation for coaches while facilitating deep learning (see Langdon et al., 2023; Murray et al., 2023). Ultimately, these methods not only align with evidence in coaching research but may also encourage greater engagement with professional development within esports by offering more tailored, practical, and socially embedded learning opportunities.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study has provided novel insights into stakeholder perspectives towards the valued developmental experiences of esports coaches, which contributes significantly to the existing literature base within esports broadly and sport coaching specifically. Nonetheless, there are several limitations within this research which should be acknowledged, with areas of future research identified. Firstly, despite the stated advantages of qualitative online surveys (see Braun et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2024), this was the sole data collection method used to obtain participants' self-reported perspectives at a singular point in time. Consequently, future research into esports coaching might consider drawing upon multiple data collection methods longitudinally to produce a pluralistic dataset which more holistically captures how perceptions and beliefs evolve over time. Moreover, although participants were diverse in terms of their stakeholder roles and nationalities, roughly only 11% of the sample identified as female. Following the recognition that esports environments are predominantly male-dominated and shaped by hegemonic masculinity (Rogstad, 2022), future research must strive to represent more coherently the experiences and voices of female stakeholders within esports coaching and beyond.

While existing scholarship argues that esports coaches require further opportunities to engage in formal professional learning and development (e.g., Ellmer et al., 2024; Pedraza-Ramirez et al., 2020), this research sheds light on why stakeholders within esports currently overlook and do not see value in formal developmental experiences. However, there is still an inherent need to understand the "impact of coach education on esports coaches' performance orientation, their personal and athletes' wellbeing, and ability to utilise athlete-centred pedagogies" (Watson et al., 2022, p. 15). Hence, as alluded to within the broader sport coaching literature (see C. Cushion, 2019), future research could look to incorporate objective data to record the coaching behaviours of esports coaches who have engaged with coach education provision, to ascertain its impact on both knowledge and practice.

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