

## FACTORS AFFECTING PSYCHOLOGICAL DYNAMICS OF ESPORTS ATHLETES

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**Abstract:** Dozens of years ago, it was not easy even to consider playing video games as a career path. Following immense development in the last decade, esports has become a luxurious, enjoyable, and profitable industry. It has now become a fascinating, appealing industry for young people. Despite the media glorifying the industry, so much pressure, obligation, and factors would turn a seemingly fun and simple occupation into a stressful line of work, contrary to how the media and the public perceive this industry. This article will dive deeply into what is going on behind the scenes, using the study case method, in which the Author is directly involved in the esports industry of the Dota 2 game. Following the observations, it can be concluded that esports athletes are heavily affected by external demands, media scrutiny, daily routine, habits, nutrition, and internal conflicts within the team's environment.

**Keywords:** *games; industry, esports; athletes, sports, psychology, dota.*

### INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, the growth of the Esports industry seemed like it would never stop. A viewer base that could reach millions of 1.22 billion USD market valuation in 2022, a figure that is still expected to rise in the coming years. Many well-known brands have embraced esports as a preferred entertainment industry for brand promotion. The image of a 16-year-old teenager playing video games while being watched live by thousands of people inside a stadium and millions of people streaming it, competing for millions of dollars, may be confusing to some. However, the reality is that it is a recurring yet still magnificent phenomenon in the esports industry.

Dota 2 is among the most profitable, attractive, and long-lasting game titles among many esports titles and various genres with varying fanbases. Affecting Psychology has played a significant role in the growth of the esports industry. Dota was the very first esports game to reach a million-dollar prize pool, and while that amount may appear minuscule in recent times, it was unimaginable in the early stages of the esports industry growth, indirectly triggering the growth of other game titles. Aside from that, the fact that it was everlasting as a title, a game that can consistently achieve 600,000 unique players daily years after its release, deserves praise. Since 2015, the prize pool of Dota's most significant annual tournament,

known as The International, has consistently surpassed tens of millions of dollars each year.<sup>ii</sup> Every year, The International, often shortened as TI, invites 18 to 20 of the world's best Dota teams to compete in a single grand event.

Despite the glamour of the esports industry, its players' magical backstories, and the fanbases' enormous enthusiasm to welcome this event, many things that happened behind the scenes went unnoticed. The pressure to win from the fans and management, the intensely long hours of practice, the sacrifices that players have to make in their personal lives, the conflicts that occur internally in teams, and a myriad of reasons, the commitment that an individual needs to make to become a professional player is often unimaginable, yet forgotten by the public.

The Bootcamp period before a tournament can last months and requires players to visit a practice facility determined by management. Here, they would have an intense regiment during boot camp. Players are expected to wake up at a particular time, then play individual practice sessions (known as pubs) and team practice sessions (known as scrims) every day. One practice match lasts around 20 minutes and could go on for over an hour. Each player is expected to play at least 4-5 pubs a day, and frequently that number could inflate to 10 or even 15, with an additional 4-8 scrims each day. They could spend around 5 to 16 hours in front of a computer screen, playing with intense concentration. In some instances where they are busy, players often do not have time to leave the room or even their chairs. Once every few days during this period, teams often have a discussion session with their coach to talk about their performance during these practice sessions, what strategies they should be practicing more on an individual or team basis, along with their expectations working with each other, how well can they perform? A few teams often have a day of rest each week, where they are not obligated to practice as a team or individually. They are still bound to either exercise or take a walk around the city and relieve some of this stress and excessive screen time. Maintaining players' mental health conditions is becoming increasingly common, but it is still not something every team does. After the boot camp period, players still go through a similar daily routine in the early stages of the tournament. During TI11 in Singapore, the organizers ensured all the teams and players arrived at the hotel a week before the official tournament matches started, a practice to prevent jet lag for the newly arrived players from distant regions. Each team is often given one room per player and three extra rooms, two for team staff and one for the coach. On top of their private spaces, organizers often provide a practice room where they would be provided six sets of PCs. They play their pubs and scrims in this room and attend team meetings.

There are other responsibilities for teams before the tournament starts. Players to fulfill, such as interviews with the media and photoshoots with the organizers. While it is common for some players to refuse to give interviews, they are obligated to join the photoshoots and attend a signing session with fans mid-way through a tournament.



*Figure 1. Team Practice Room*

Before playing in the arena in front of a live audience, teams compete directly from their practice rooms, playing 4 to 6 official daily matches, often with no free time to leave their practice rooms. However, there is a plentiful supply of carbonated beverages and snacks such as potato chips and chocolates. Apart from the junk food already provided, there are days when someone from management needs to go outside and buy food for the team, delivering it to the practice room for them to consume there, as some players are frequently too focused on their games to leave the room to eat.

After the group stages, players start competing in the arena, where they often hear the crowd react with cheers, applause, or even jeers when they make mistakes. It is undeniable that these crowds affect player performance. Even the most consistent, all-conquering teams in the group stages often underperform, looking nervous and shaky when playing in front of a live stage in the atmosphere of the arena. A few players have confessed that playing in front of a crowd is a unique, special feeling, but this does not take away the fact that they are nervous about it still. Teams still need to practice at this stage, but with the travel time to the arena, the post-game interviews, and more things that could happen in an event, they will naturally have less time to practice. This daily rhythm repeats itself until the end of the tournament or until they are eliminated. Being an esports athlete is not easy between the packed schedules and the immense scrutiny and pressure from media and management.

## **METHOD**

This research is done with the case study method. The researcher does a direct, systematic observation to analyze the phenomenon in the field. This observation is done through (1) behavior observation, (2) interviews, and (3) documentation studies.

The following research is written descriptively and will elaborate on the criteria and behavioral patterns of the subjects, which include esports athletes competing professionally in the game Dota 2. Their and the team's names will be anonymized for security and privacy reasons.

Data gathered in this research will then be further analyzed through a systematic literature review and comparing the trends occurring in the field directly to past research.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

As someone who works in this industry and a staff of one of this year's competing teams of TI11 in Singapore last October, Author realized that the immense commitment and activities that an individual goes through to become a professional player could significantly impact an individual's psychological condition. At this moment, the Author wrote the analysis I could give of all five of the Author players in the Author's team.

### Case Study

Among the five players I know and interact with daily, Grigoriy is the most talented and unstable player, as he is the youngest. The Dota community recognizes Grigoriy for his aggressive and confident playstyle. Still, if we ever met him in real life, we would realize he is shy and often confused at communicating his needs and wants. Grigoriy gets upset over simple things, such as the AC not functioning or people questioning and underestimating his opinions. He would, naturally, vent the bitter emotions he often has through playing Dota. After grumbling, instead of trying to solve his problems, he would play up until late at night and wake up close to noon the day after. This behavior pattern might indicate that he struggles to differentiate Dota as a game and his professional career (Brock, 2017).

Video game addiction often could cause symptoms like ADHD, a lack of mental stability, and the inability to inhibit impulses (Stockdale et al., 2018). Stockdale's research also points out that young adults of Grigoriy's age are at the highest risk of receiving video game addiction. It is difficult to differentiate if Grigoriy is just intensely passionate about Dota that he would play or practice for hours or if he is just a game addict that's so talented he turned it into a career. It is pretty common to see an intense focus in people with game addictions when they are playing (Zastrow, 2017), and the rationalization of a professional player that is unable to differentiate the game he plays as a career or as a form of entertainment can also cause psychological problems (Calilois, 2017). While Stockdale's parameters have not yet been directly tested on Grigoriy, if we assume that he has a gaming addiction, it is undeniable that his career has affected his individual development.

After a loss in an official match, Grigoriy's emotions are often spotlighted by management, tournament broadcasters, and even the general public. There are usually photos of himself being highlighted in the official broadcast, with an empty, confused expression on his face. Behind the pressure he feels, Grigoriy often cannot control himself after feeling intense emotions, such as disappointment from a defeat. Despite his visible burst of emotion after a loss, Grigoriy is still unable to confess or elaborate his feelings to management or his friends. Often, he would spend some time alone while smoking a cigar, which, although unhealthy, can reduce stress on a short-term basis (Kober et al. 2017). His erratic behavior towards his teammates and the team's management after each game, based on the results, is a sign that he lacks impulse inhibition, one of the symptoms of ADHD (Sibley, 2017), which could potentially be caused by video game addiction (Hemenover, 2018).

Next up, we have Vladimir. More confident than Grigoriy, Vladimir and the latter are close friends; they share a relationship similar to two siblings, and often they would speak in their native language, just the two of them. Grigoriy, usually a closed individual, is often more

open when conversing with Vladimir, and the two often help each other through some of their struggles. Vladimir, however, is very attentive to his appearance and how the public perceives him. He is self-conscious, and several times he has complained directly to the team manager or Vladimir if there is a photo of him on social media that he deems unworthy of how he perceives himself. To quote him, "I do not look cool enough in that picture." As he is self-conscious, management, including Vladimir, must pay extra attention to posts featuring him or his interviews, worrying it would affect his performance. As a player, Vladimir needs to meet up with the media and photo sessions as part of his responsibility, even though he tries his best to avoid those. Excessive self-consciousness is often a sign of an anxiety disorder (Muris et al. 2017), commonly appearing in individuals who limit their social interaction and have prolonged exposure to screens (Teng, 2021), both of which Vladimir does have. His lifestyle as an esports player has affected his development and behavior.

Next up, we have Felix, one of the eldest players on the team. Unlike his teammates, Felix prefers to analyze his games over other practice matches, as he plays the least amount of pubs amongst his teammates and often becomes a point of conflict between him and his teammates, where he is often judged as someone who does not practice anywhere near enough, adding additional stressors. Despite his lack of practice time, he still spends most of his free time in the practice room. If anything, Felix spends the most time there compared to his teammates, only leaving to return to his private room. He hardly even leaves the room when it is time to eat; even when there are no matches that he needs to play, Felix prefers it if people bring him some takeout food, or just snack on the chocolates and carbonated drinks available in the practice room, forgetting that he needs to eat more nutritious food than that. Often, games that require intense focus and take a lot of cognitive processes to play would reduce appetite and would cause players to alternate to easier-to-consume, low-nutrition food that is easier to access compared to eating a full meal (Nagata et al. 2021), and we could notice this pattern in Felix. The overconsumption of sugar that all the players are prone to, be it from eating chocolates or drinking carbonated drinks, could increase obesity and affect their behavior on a social and emotional level (Jacques et al. 2019), even increasing the probability of depression (Hu et al. 2019), or ADHD could appear due to sugar overconsumption (Farsad-Naeimi et al. 2020).

Among the other two players, we have Ilya, the eldest player and captain of the team. Ilya is the most experienced player in the squad and is often the most vocal and active in calling shots for the team. The closed-off, introverted stereotype of esports players does not apply to all players, and it does not apply to Ilya. He is open, talks to people a lot, throws jokes here and there, and spends most of his free time talking with his friends, mainly players from other teams, or taking a walk around the city. The Author is pretty close with him, as he is also an open and approachable person; often, he would say that he is bored spending too much time in the practice room and wants to talk as we walk around and talk about many things. He confessed that he missed his hometown and told about his relationship with his partner and family and everything sacrificed to be a professional player. From his graduation from university, dropping out in the third year due to his laziness and gaming addiction, despite being a maths Olympiad champion in high school, to leave his country to avoid compulsory military service to be a professional player. Ilya is commonly the most stable,

composed, and mature player in the squad, and despite this maturity, even he has confessed that he is addicted to Dota, missing out on many chances in his life because of this addiction. One of the signs of Gaming disorder Ilya has is that he prioritizes video games over other things in his life. Be it his family, social life, education, or more, all of these aspects are affected by his Gaming Disorder (Palanichamy et al., 2020). Regardless, Ilya still realizes how lucky he is to be a good enough player to compete professionally.

The last player in the squad, Hans, is perhaps the most expressive person. When not practicing, Hans would go down to the hotel lobby and talk to players from other teams. After games, he would spend a lot of time traveling and looking around the city, relieving his fatigue by sightseeing. He appears to be the most passionate player, and no matter the result, he is always eager to discuss his strategies and performance during each game. Hans shares a few similarities with Ilya, as the two are the most mature. They require the least attention from the managers as they eat on time, do not smoke, and exercise consistently while still getting enough rest. The public and the management have a consensus that Hans is a fun player and a friendly person. Hans and Ilya are reminders that no matter how busy, we can still live healthy lives with proper self-management.

### **Psychological Dynamics of Esports Players**

These five players, with different characters, ages, and habits, still have to be isolated in one room for tens of hours each day, with consistent exposure to screens, an inconsistent diet, and often a lack of rest would have to find a way to cooperate, regardless of their stress. There are thousands of people watching, be it live or streaming the games from home to add up to the stressors they already have, and players are aware that they are being watched. Regardless of these pressuring factors, players need to be still able to perform and play at a high level.

Competing in esports requires a lot of psychological skills. An athlete needs to remember information, control their impulse, and plan and observe things systematically without losing focus when playing (Himmelstein et al. 2019). Successful performance in competitive esports is achieved when a player knows about the game they play, can strategize accordingly, make quick and precise decisions, avoid distractions, face harassment and abuse from the media and public, coordinate well with teammates, adapt to every situation faced in the game, while still having a positive mindset despite facing so many stressors (Palanichamy et al. 2020). Many factors can affect a player's psychological state, eventually affecting performance.

During this year's TI, it must be said that this team performed far below public expectations. Many people deemed that they were eliminated too early. Psychologically, the little things that happen and the exposure they receive behind the scenes contribute to their underperformance. Here are a few factors that could serve as a stressor to esports athletes that could potentially affect their performance that happened this TI.

### **Sleep & Rest**

For athletes to perform at a high level, rest and sleep are essential things required to optimize the necessary hormones to reduce stress, as well as maximize their cognitive processes and memory usage (Bibi et al. 2019); these two things are crucial for esports athletes (Doherty, 2019). The sleep they go through must be of sufficient quantity and quality to

positively impact their performance. It is common for esports athletes to over-practice while under rest, and this could affect performance (Pedraza-Ramirez, 2019). Without sufficient rest, there is a chance that their cognitive underperformance could increase significantly.

### **Media Pressure**

Social media is a crucial part of our everyday lives, and each player is directly influenced by it (Leis, 2022). Because most of the esports viewer base is online, a player's exposure to what the community is talking about them on social media and how each action they make will be under scrutiny will affect their cognitive performance and decision-making.

### **Nutrition & Fitness Level**

Overconsumption of sugar and caffeine is a common trend among esports athletes to reduce their high-stress levels (Leis, 2022). Ironically, consuming these foods would minimize reaction time and increase impulse, directly interfering with their performance as professional players (Watson et al., 2018). Apart from that, teams with a consistent exercise routine also show a consistently better pattern of reaction times when compared to those who do not (Watson et al., 2018).

### **Environmental Disturbances**

When an athlete is in an environment where they are expected to perform to the highest level, the smallest of discomforts, such as uncomfortable temperature, hardware issues, and frame rate drops, can affect reaction time, cognitive performance, and decision-making process, which is crucial in this industry, and would therefore hence affect performance directly (Leis, 2022).

Each of these factors would contribute to players' performance. Therefore, each of these factors must be paid attention to by management and players if they want to ensure that they can play at an optimal level.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is imperative to consider that the pressure, obligations, and factors that an esports athlete experience could affect their health physically or mentally. From the packed schedules, external demands, the internal conflicts inside a team, the social isolation they must endure, their nutrition and practice habits, to the constant pressure that fans and media bring upon them should they watch the games. This pressure could create conditions where an individual might lose focus, act impulsively, and affect performance. A stable mental state for an esports athlete is crucial to their performance; despite the high working hours, consistent pressure, and exposure they receive, an individual must take care of all of these aspects of their health to meet those demands and perform at an optimal level.

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