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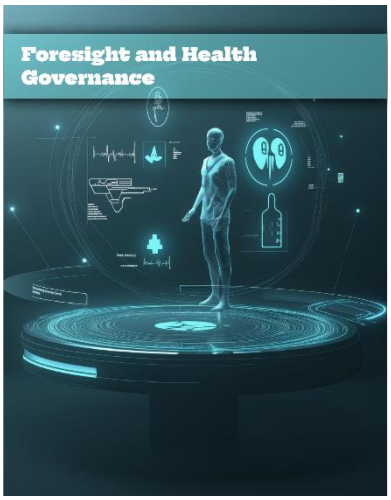

Lived Experience of Electronic Sports: A Phenomenological Study of Motivations and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted with the aim of exploring the lived experiences of electronic sports (e-sports) players in Iran and providing a phenomenological analysis of their motivations and challenges. The statistical population included active e-sports players in Iran who were selected purposefully using the theoretical sampling method. The inclusion criteria were active experience in this field, willingness to participate in the study, and the ability to articulate personal experiences. In total, 17 participants (4 women and 13 men) with an average age of 25 years and between 4 to 12 years of experience in e-sports were examined. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. To ensure credibility and dependability, the trustworthiness criteria proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1985)—including prolonged engagement in the field, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking—were applied. Findings revealed that the lived experiences of players can be analyzed across three main dimensions: (1) Lived Experiences (self-concept and identity, emotional experiences, cognitive and skill development, and escapism and role-playing); (2) Motivations for Participation (game appeal and dynamics, social and global interactions, economic and professional opportunities, accessibility and usability, and emotional and motivational effects); and (3) Challenges Encountered (personal challenges, financial and economic barriers, technical and infrastructural problems, social and familial obstacles, and competitive and professional difficulties). The results indicate that electronic sports provide a multidimensional and complex experience for players, which, while offering numerous opportunities, also presents diverse challenges.

Keywords: Information and Communication Technology (ICT), Electronic Sports (E-sports), Traditional Sports, Lived Experience, Phenomenology.

Introduction

The evolution of technology has redefined the structure of social, cultural, and economic interactions, giving rise to new forms of competition, recreation, and identity formation in the digital age. One of the most significant phenomena emerging at the intersection of technology, entertainment, and management is electronic sports (e-sports), which has evolved from an informal recreational activity into a global industry involving millions of players, viewers, and investors. E-sports represent a

digitally mediated competitive domain in which participants engage in organized gaming activities that combine elements of play, strategy, and performance within virtual environments (Cunningham et al., 2018; Miah, 2017). As a field of management study, e-sports not only encompass the technical and commercial aspects of digital gaming but also engage with complex psychological, ethical, and regulatory dimensions (Okamoto, 2021; Rosell Llorens, 2017).

From a phenomenological standpoint, e-sports represent a new modality of human experience that fuses virtual immersion with real-world emotions, ambitions, and social dynamics (Sakamoto, 2022; Van Manen, 2016). The lived experience of players extends beyond mere gameplay, reflecting deeper psychological processes of identity construction, social belonging, and emotional gratification (Cote et al., 2023; Fayyaz et al., 2025). With the expansion of digital technologies, players increasingly navigate between real and virtual worlds, developing digital selves that often mirror or contrast their offline identities (Qi et al., 2024). This dual existence blurs traditional boundaries between sport and play, discipline and leisure, and self and avatar—raising critical questions about motivation, behavior, and the socio-cultural impact of digital competition (Park & Mahony, 2024; Parry, 2019).

Globally, the e-sports industry has experienced exponential growth, with significant managerial implications in the domains of branding, organizational behavior, and human resource development (Widjaja et al., 2024). It has created employment opportunities for professional players, coaches, streamers, event organizers, and content producers, contributing to the development of a multimillion-dollar ecosystem. However, this rapid expansion has also introduced managerial challenges related to governance, ethics, and sustainability (Camngca et al., 2024; Czakó et al., 2023). The absence of clear regulatory frameworks in many countries has led to concerns regarding player welfare, digital labor rights, and fair competition (Qi et al., 2024).

From a social and ethical perspective, e-sports raise questions about inclusivity, gender equality, and the distribution of power within virtual environments. Studies have shown persistent gendered inequalities and exclusionary practices in digital sport communities, where women often face stereotyping and limited opportunities for participation and recognition (Cote et al., 2023; Rogstad, 2023). Addressing these issues requires a more inclusive management approach that recognizes e-sports as both a cultural and professional field shaped by intersectional identities (Fayyaz et al., 2025; Kashcha et al., 2022). Furthermore, the social dimensions of gaming communities highlight how collective identity, teamwork, and global connectivity can foster new forms of transnational cooperation and cultural exchange (Miah, 2017; Widjaja et al., 2024).

At the same time, the ethical and legal regulation of e-sports presents considerable challenges for policymakers and managers. Drawing from broader discussions of administrative transparency and anti-corruption frameworks, it becomes evident that digital governance in e-sports requires similar safeguards as those in traditional institutions (Hajizadeh, 2024; Motahar, 2023). Just as legal scholars emphasize the necessity of criminalizing administrative corruption to ensure fairness and accountability in public systems (Baqeri Komarolia, 2016; Fakouri, 2022; Rajabi et al., 2021), equivalent ethical and institutional structures are needed to preserve competitive integrity in digital sports (Qi et al., 2024). Issues such as manipulation, cheating, and exploitative sponsorship arrangements parallel the problems of governance and transparency in public administration (Alvani, 2019; Davoudi et al., 2020).

In countries such as Iran and Afghanistan, the legal discourse surrounding administrative health and integrity provides a useful conceptual foundation for understanding the management of digital systems (Abbasi, 2018; Dadfar, 2021; Heidari, 2020). These frameworks, built on Islamic jurisprudential principles, emphasize the ethical responsibility of institutions and

individuals in maintaining fairness and public trust (Nabi Sharifi, 2019; Ne'mati & et al., 2022). Applying similar principles to the domain of e-sports can help establish ethical standards for competitive behavior, data management, and commercial transactions (Ashouri, 2021; Hosseini, 2019). In particular, the concept of administrative health—defined as transparency, accountability, and rule-based behavior—parallels the need for ethical governance and fair play within e-sports organizations (Abdulrahimian & et al., 2019; Davoudi et al., 2020).

The intersection of technology and governance has also been explored in the context of anti-corruption legislation, where the Merida Convention (UNCAC) serves as a global benchmark for institutional accountability (Baqeri Komarolia, 2016; Vatankhah & Nazari Monazzam, 2016). The emphasis on preventive strategies, legal enforcement, and cultural transformation within administrative systems can be extended to the regulation of e-sports ecosystems (Goldoust Jouybari et al., 2022; Marjani & Mirabbasi, 2020). Likewise, studies have shown that transparency, clear institutional responsibilities, and independent oversight mechanisms significantly enhance the ethical management of emerging sectors (Motahar, 2023; Seifi, 2020). In digital competitions, this translates into developing guidelines for player contracts, anti-doping policies (digital equivalents), and responsible sponsorship frameworks (Czakó et al., 2023; Qi et al., 2024).

The philosophical question of whether e-sports can be classified as “real sports” remains a contested issue among scholars. Some argue that the absence of physical exertion disqualifies e-sports from being categorized alongside traditional athletics (Parry, 2019), while others highlight the presence of skill, discipline, teamwork, and cognitive engagement as sufficient criteria for inclusion (Okamoto, 2021; Rosell Llorens, 2017). The phenomenological and experiential aspects of digital competition further blur this distinction. Sakamoto’s analysis, for instance, illustrates how e-sports evoke sensory and emotional responses similar to those found in physically embodied sports, albeit within technologically mediated frameworks (Sakamoto, 2022). Thus, the emphasis in contemporary research has shifted from definitional debates to understanding the lived experience of e-sports participants (Fayyaz et al., 2025; Van Manen, 2016).

This lived experience encompasses psychological satisfaction, social belonging, and emotional regulation—all of which play critical roles in players’ engagement and retention (Cunningham et al., 2018; Widjaja et al., 2024). The gratification theory framework has been applied to e-sports to explain how players derive enjoyment, identity affirmation, and interpersonal connection through sustained participation (Fayyaz et al., 2025). Similarly, research indicates that emotional investment and nostalgia are among the strongest predictors of continued involvement in gaming communities (Cote et al., 2023). Players often construct social networks that mirror real-life relationships, while virtual environments offer an arena for emotional expression and psychological relief (Kashcha et al., 2022; Qi et al., 2024).

However, the e-sports ecosystem also faces structural and ethical risks. The increasing commercialization of digital gaming has given rise to exploitative practices, unequal access to resources, and professional instability (Czakó et al., 2023; Rogstad, 2023). In addition, players are exposed to health challenges such as cognitive fatigue, addiction, and psychological distress resulting from competitive pressure and excessive screen exposure (Camngca et al., 2024; Park & Mahony, 2024). From a policy perspective, scholars advocate for integrated frameworks that address both individual wellbeing and systemic integrity through technological regulation, ethical training, and public awareness (Davoudi et al., 2020; Qi et al., 2024).

The management of e-sports also intersects with economic and developmental dimensions. Research demonstrates that national performance in e-sports correlates with indicators of social and economic development, including digital infrastructure, education, and innovation ecosystems (Kashcha et al., 2022). This suggests that e-sports are not only cultural

phenomena but also reflections of broader modernization processes. Countries with strong institutional frameworks and technological advancement exhibit higher levels of professionalization and international competitiveness in digital gaming industries (Qi et al., 2024; Widjaja et al., 2024).

At the organizational level, e-sports institutions must balance technological innovation with ethical responsibility. Theories of good governance and administrative accountability—traditionally applied in public administration—can be effectively extended to the management of digital sports organizations (Abdulrahimian & et al., 2019; Alvani, 2019). Transparent decision-making, anti-corruption safeguards, and stakeholder engagement ensure that the growth of e-sports aligns with principles of fairness and sustainability (Fakouri, 2022; Motahar, 2023). Furthermore, ethical frameworks rooted in Islamic jurisprudence provide valuable guidance for societies navigating the moral complexities of digital transformation (Ne'mati & et al., 2022; Rajabi et al., 2021).

In recent years, scholars have emphasized the importance of cross-disciplinary research in understanding e-sports as a multifaceted social phenomenon. Integrating insights from criminology, psychology, law, and management enriches the analysis of digital culture and governance (Heidari, 2020; Marjani & Mirabbasi, 2020). Comparative studies on corruption prevention and administrative ethics offer conceptual parallels to the management of integrity in virtual environments (Goldoust Jouybari et al., 2022; Seifi, 2020). Moreover, the phenomenological approach provides a human-centered perspective that focuses on the subjective meanings and lived experiences of players rather than mere statistical outcomes (Sakamoto, 2022; Van Manen, 2016).

Overall, the synthesis of legal-ethical discourse on transparency and the emerging body of literature on e-sports demonstrates a shared concern for integrity, equity, and accountability in rapidly evolving digital systems. As both public administration and digital gaming rely on trust-based social contracts, lessons from anti-corruption frameworks can inform ethical governance models for e-sports organizations (Davoudi et al., 2020; Fayyaz et al., 2025; Hajizadeh, 2024).

Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore the lived experiences, motivations, and challenges of e-sports players in Iran using a phenomenological approach to uncover the psychological, social, and managerial meanings underlying their engagement in electronic sports.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach using Colaizzi's phenomenological strategy. Phenomenology, as a qualitative research approach, provides a theoretical and interpretive framework for examining and understanding individuals' lived experiences of various phenomena. The purpose of this study was to explore and interpret the meaning of the lived experience of electronic sports (e-sports) players in Iran, focusing on their participation in this environment and the factors influencing it.

The study population included active e-sports players who were purposefully selected using the theoretical sampling method. The inclusion criteria consisted of having active experience in e-sports, willingness to participate in the study, and the ability to express personal experiences. Efforts were made to ensure diversity among participants in terms of age, gender, skill level, and preferred game types to capture a wide range of perspectives. The final sample included 17 participants, determined based on the principle of theoretical saturation, meaning that data collection continued until no new information emerged and all relevant concepts and themes were fully developed.

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews. In this type of interview, a set of general guiding questions was used, while participants were given freedom to elaborate on their individual experiences. Interviews were conducted either in person or online (depending on participant conditions) and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. At the beginning of each interview, the purpose of the study was explained, and informed consent was obtained. The interview questions focused on participants' experiences in e-sports, their motivations, challenges, the impact of this experience on their lives, and its personal meaning. During the interviews, the researcher used follow-up and probing questions to explore participants' experiences in depth and gain a comprehensive understanding of their perspectives.

To enhance the credibility and dependability of the study, the trustworthiness criteria proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1985) were applied to evaluate the validity and reliability of the findings. To improve credibility, several strategies were used, including prolonged engagement in the research field, persistent observation, triangulation (interview method), peer debriefing, and member checking. In the member checking process, research findings were shared with participants, and they were asked to comment on the accuracy and completeness of the results. This helped ensure that the interpretations truly reflected participants' experiences and allowed for necessary revisions when needed.

To increase transferability, purposive sampling was used, and the research context and limitations were described in detail. Rich and direct quotations from participants were included in the report so that readers could relate to their experiences and assess the extent to which the findings might be applicable to other contexts. To enhance dependability, external auditing was conducted, in which three independent experts in the research field reviewed and evaluated the entire research process and its findings. This procedure helped strengthen the study's credibility and ensured that findings were logically derived from actual data. All stages of the research process were thoroughly documented. To ensure confirmability, the researcher continuously reflected on and minimized the influence of personal beliefs and values on the research process and findings. Additionally, triangulation was used to further reduce researcher bias.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method involves several stages, including reading and rereading transcribed interviews, identifying initial codes, grouping these codes into subthemes and main themes, and ultimately interpreting the themes to present a comprehensive narrative of participants' lived experiences. In this study, after transcription, the interview texts were carefully examined, and initial codes were identified based on key statements related to the research topic. These codes were then organized into subthemes and main themes according to shared meanings and interrelationships. Finally, the identified themes were interpreted using direct quotations from participants to construct a comprehensive account of the lived experiences of e-sports players.

Findings and Results

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the study participants. A total of 17 e-sports players participated in this study. Among them, 4 were women (23.5%) and 13 were men (76.5%), indicating greater male participation in this field. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 32 years, placing them primarily in the youth and early adulthood categories. Their experience in e-sports ranged from 4 to 12 years, reflecting considerable engagement in the field. In terms of education, participants held diplomas to bachelor's degrees, representing a moderate to high level of educational attainment. The average daily gaming time among participants ranged from 1.5 to 5 hours. The highest level of daily gaming (5 hours) was observed among some participants, indicating a high level of involvement in e-sports.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

No.	Gender	Age	Experience (Years)	Education	Average Hours of Play per Day
1	Male	25	5	Associate Degree	3
2	Male	22	6	Diploma	3.5
3	Female	30	10	Bachelor's Degree	2.5
4	Male	27	5	Associate Degree	3
5	Female	20	4	Diploma	4
6	Male	24	6	Associate Degree	5
7	Male	29	9	Bachelor's Degree	3
8	Male	21	5	Diploma	3.5
9	Male	26	6	Diploma	4
10	Male	23	7	Diploma	3.5
11	Male	28	8	Bachelor's Degree	2.5
12	Male	32	10	Bachelor's Degree	2
13	Female	19	4	Diploma	1.5
14	Male	25	7	Bachelor's Degree	3
15	Male	22	7	Diploma	2
16	Female	27	9	Associate Degree	2.5
17	Female	30	12	Bachelor's Degree	2

The findings of this study were analyzed within three main axes—"Lived Experiences," "Motivations for Participation," and "Challenges Ahead"—and, in what follows, each stage of Colaizzi's method (which consists of seven stages) and the results derived from it are presented.

In the first stage (Horizonization), all data collected from the interviews were examined equally, and every sentence or meaningful phrase within participants' lived experiences was extracted as a potentially important datum. At this stage, no datum was prioritized over another, and an effort was made to review all aspects related to users' experiences, motivations, and challenges without bias. This stage led to the extraction of the initial codes.

In the second stage (Phenomenological Reduction), the extracted data were refined. Concepts with similar meanings were aggregated, and concepts lacking analytical significance were removed. At this stage, the researcher endeavored to bracket presuppositions about electronic sports and to base the analysis solely on the perceptions and lived experiences of participants. In this stage, 139 concepts were extracted.

In the third stage (Clustering of Meanings), the identified concepts were categorized into related groups, and 38 subthemes were identified with the following titles: "Virtual Identity and Persona; Sense of Control and Freedom; Confidence Development; Sense of Success and Progress; Affective Attachment; Cognitive and Strategic Skills; Inspiration from Professional Players; Creativity; Excitement and Competition; Learning and Innovation Experience; Escapism; Experiencing Diverse Roles; Game Appeal; Game Dynamics; Social Interaction; Global Connectivity; Financial Opportunities; Career Opportunities; Easy Access; Ease of Use; Nostalgic Experiences; Role of Advertising; Interest and Curiosity; Time Management and Gaming Addiction; Decreased Concentration in Other Life Domains; Physical Problems; Psychological and Emotional Problems; Financial Barriers; Volatility of the Gaming Market; Technical Problems; Weak National Infrastructure; Social and Familial Problems; Negative Societal Attitudes; Gender Discrimination; Legal Problems; Sanctions; Structural Problems; Career Path Problems."

In the fourth stage (Identification of Main Themes), the overarching themes were consolidated through an in-depth analysis of the data and an examination of the relationships among the identified concepts. The interview data showed that users' experiences in electronic sports are influenced by multiple factors that can be examined within three principal dimensions: Lived Experiences ("Self-Concept and Identity; Emotional Experiences; Cognitive and Skill Development; Escapism and Role-Playing"), Motivations for Participation ("Game Appeal and Dynamics; Social and Global Interactions;

Economic and Professional Opportunities; Accessibility and Usability; Emotional and Motivational Effects"), and Challenges Ahead ("Individual Challenges; Financial and Economic Barriers; Technical and Infrastructural Problems; Social and Familial Barriers; Competitive and Professional Problems").

In the fifth stage (Textual Description), the findings related to each of these themes are presented using participants' quotations. The results of this study indicate that electronic sports provide users with a multidimensional experience that can be analyzed across four focal areas: Self-Concept and Identity, Emotional Experiences, Cognitive and Skill Development, and Escapism and Role-Playing. In what follows, the findings for each of these dimensions are presented based on the interview data.

Self-Concept and Identity: For many users, electronic sports provide a space to construct a digital identity and experience personas different from those in the real world. Users leverage this space to create and modify personas, select play styles, and make autonomous decisions. The sense of control over the destiny of in-game characters and the freedom to act within competitions allow them to inhabit roles different from those of their everyday lives. One participant stated, "In the game, I decide who I am and how I am seen. This freedom, which I rarely experience in the real world, feels completely tangible to me in games." In addition, users noted that electronic sports increased their self-confidence and strengthened their ability to make rapid decisions and confront new challenges. As one professional player put it, "When I win a tough competition, I feel like I can overcome challenges in real life too. These games have really taught me how to think and act quickly."

Emotional Experiences: Alongside identity construction, electronic sports exert profound effects on users' emotions. Many participants referred to feelings of success and progress in games and regarded them as a motivational driver to continue competing. One user reported, "Every time my skill improves or I win a difficult competition, I feel real progress, as if I've moved a step forward in my personal life." Moreover, some users described strong emotional attachment to game characters, noting that narrative developments and in-game defeat or victory can have deep emotional impacts. One player remarked, "Game characters are like real friends to me. When one of them is defeated in the story or dies, I feel as if I have lost someone close to me."

Cognitive and Skill Development: Electronic sports also serve as a platform for users' cognitive and skill development. Rapid decision-making, resource management, and strategic thinking are among the skills that users cultivate in this environment. Some professional players noted that observing top-tier players and analyzing opponents' strategies helped them professionalize their own decisions. One participant stated, "I always try to get inspired by professional players and implement their strategies in my own play. This approach has helped me perform better in online competitions." In addition, users reported enhancing their creativity in character design and adopting novel tactics, thereby enabling them to find innovative solutions in complex situations.

Escapism and Role-Playing: Finally, many users view electronic sports as a way to escape the real world and reduce life stressors. Some players cited mental relaxation and immersion in the digital realm as primary reasons for their continued participation. One participant said, "Sometimes games are like a refuge for me. When I'm overwhelmed by life's stress, I enter the game world and distance myself from reality for a while." The opportunity to inhabit roles that are inaccessible in real life also creates a sense of adventure and the experience of alternative lives for many users. One user stated, "In games, I can experience roles that are never possible in the real world; this is exciting and enjoyable for me." These findings suggest that,

beyond entertainment, electronic sports function as tools for identity formation, cognitive growth, the strengthening of individual skills, and mental relaxation.

The findings of this study indicate that users' motivations for participation in electronic sports can be examined across five main dimensions: Game Appeal and Dynamics, Social and Global Interactions, Economic and Professional Opportunities, Accessibility and Usability, and Emotional and Motivational Effects. In what follows, the findings related to each of these themes are presented using data obtained from the interviews.

Game Appeal and Dynamics: Many participants cited appealing graphics, challenging gameplay, professional-quality music, and the use of new technologies as the main factors attracting them to electronic sports. A professional player stated, "The design of games and their visual effects really impress me. Sometimes I spend hours just looking at a game's details and enjoying them." Users also emphasized the variety of game genres, opportunities to experience new content, and competitive dynamics as important motivational factors. One gamer said, "One of the best things I love about games is the constant updates and new challenges that always keep me engaged. I never feel like a game has become repetitive for me."

Social and Global Interactions: One of the most important motivations for users to participate in electronic sports is connecting with other players and forming new friendships. Forming professional teams, joining gaming communities, and participating in online tournaments were all cited as reasons for users' sustained engagement in this domain. One participant noted, "I have friends whom I met only through gaming. We formed a team and play together every day. This sense of cooperation and competition is very enjoyable for me." In addition, the opportunity to connect with international players and to learn about different cultures was identified as another key motivation. A professional gamer stated, "Competing with players from different countries and learning their play styles is truly exciting for me. I've even made some friends in other countries through online games."

Economic and Professional Opportunities: Beyond entertainment, electronic sports have emerged as an economic and professional opportunity for some users. Many players have been able to generate income through game streaming, securing sponsorships, and participating in global tournaments. One professional player explained, "I earn income through streaming my gameplay. Watching me play is entertaining for others, and through this I've managed to create a steady income." In addition, some users view electronic sports as a career pathway and work in the industry by teaching and coaching others. A gaming coach stated, "Playing isn't just a hobby for me; I train other players and earn income this way. This has become a profession that has grown significantly in recent years."

Accessibility and Usability: Another important motivation for users' participation in electronic sports is the ease of access to games and the ability to compete without the need for physical venues. Users noted that electronic games are accessible anytime and anywhere and do not require complex equipment. One player said, "It's really important to me that I can play whenever I want. I don't need to go anywhere or have special facilities—just a PC or console is enough." Furthermore, ease of installation and setup, along with the availability of online guides for faster learning, were identified as additional motivational factors. One user remarked, "When a new game is released, there are thousands of guides and tutorials online that help me learn it very quickly and make progress."

Emotional and Motivational Impacts: In addition to their competitive and professional features, electronic sports generate numerous emotional and nostalgic experiences for users. Many participants referred to shared memories with friends, emotional moments, and connections with game characters as among the most significant motivations for their

continued participation in this space. One long-term player stated, “Some games are not just entertainment for me—they are part of my childhood and teenage memories. Every time I play them, I feel a special sense of nostalgia.” Moreover, game advertising and marketing play a crucial role in encouraging users to try new games. One participant said, “Whenever a new game is released, its advertisements appear everywhere, and that makes me curious to try it.” Additionally, some users described their interest in the world of games and the discovery of new content as their main motivation for participation. One gamer explained, “Every game feels like a new world I want to explore. This curiosity makes me constantly seek new experiences.”

Ultimately, the findings of this study indicate that electronic sports users encounter multiple challenges in their professional journey, which can be categorized into five main dimensions: individual challenges, financial and economic barriers, technical and infrastructural problems, social and familial obstacles, and competitive and professional difficulties. The following sections present findings related to each theme based on interview data.

Individual Challenges: Many users reported that time management and preventing gaming addiction are among their most significant challenges. Several participants admitted that they spend excessive time playing electronic games, which affects other aspects of their lives. One player stated, “Sometimes I get so absorbed in the game that I lose track of time, and this causes me to fall behind on other important tasks.” Moreover, reduced concentration in other areas of life, physical issues such as joint and vision problems, and psychological effects like stress and anxiety caused by intense competition were also identified as major personal challenges. One user shared, “When I have an important match, I get very stressed, and it even affects my sleep and daily life.”

Financial and Economic Barriers: High hardware and gaming equipment costs were reported as one of the main challenges for e-sports users. Many participants noted that competing at a professional level requires powerful equipment and constant upgrades, which demand substantial financial investment. A professional player explained, “To compete at a high level, I always have to upgrade my system, but gaming equipment is very expensive, and that makes it hard for me.” Furthermore, fluctuations in the gaming market and rising prices of in-game items were identified as additional economic barriers. One player mentioned, “The price of gaming equipment changes every day, and some in-game items are very costly, so sometimes I feel like I have to spend a lot of money just to stay competitive.”

Technical and Infrastructural Problems: E-sports users face various technical infrastructure challenges, the most critical of which are low internet speed, sudden disconnections, and poor quality of domestic servers. Many participants stated that these problems decrease the quality of gaming experiences and make competitions unfair. One user said, “Sometimes in the middle of an important match, the internet cuts out, and all my effort goes to waste. It’s really disappointing.” In addition, several users referred to the country’s weak infrastructure in providing stable services and the lack of professional facilities for players. A professional gamer stated, “In our country, access to some global servers is restricted, and that prevents us from performing well in major international tournaments.”

Social and Familial Obstacles: Many participants pointed to society’s and families’ negative perceptions of electronic sports, stating that the lack of acceptance of this activity as a legitimate profession or beneficial form of recreation is one of their major barriers. One participant explained, “My family and relatives think gaming is just a meaningless pastime; they don’t understand that it can be a serious profession.” Moreover, some users discussed cultural barriers and gender discrimination, arguing that women still face restrictions in participating in professional e-sports competitions. One female

gamer said, “In many tournaments, women’s participation is rarely seen, and some male players still don’t take female gamers seriously as competitors.”

Competitive and Professional Problems: Another major challenge for users is the absence of supportive regulations, the impact of international sanctions, and the lack of a defined professional development pathway for players. Many professional gamers noted that electronic sports have not yet been recognized as a formal and stable industry, which limits financial and legal support for players. One participant stated, “Unlike traditional sports, there are still no clear support systems for professional e-sports players, and we have to invest in our own progress.” Additionally, sanctions and international restrictions have prevented Iranian users from accessing certain global services and tournaments. One professional gamer remarked, “We can’t participate in many international tournaments or even run some online games smoothly because our access is restricted due to sanctions.” Moreover, the absence of a stable career path and the lack of support programs for talented players were identified as further professional challenges in this field.

Table 2. Lived Experiences, Motivations, and Challenges of Participation in Electronic Sports

Concepts	Sub-Themes	Main Themes
Creating a digital identity, ability to alter persona, feeling different from the real world, experiencing diverse characters	Virtual Identity and Persona	Self-Concept and Identity
Ability to choose playing style, control over character’s destiny, sense of autonomy, independence in in-game decisions	Sense of Control and Freedom	
Increased confidence in decision-making during gameplay, sense of empowerment in facing new challenges	Confidence Development	
Feeling of success in games, skill improvement, enhanced performance under competitive conditions	Sense of Success and Progress	Emotional Experiences
Attachment to in-game characters, emotional connection, affective influence of game narratives, emotional impact of victory or defeat	Emotional Attachment	
Rapid decision-making, improved analytical and strategic skills, resource management, critical thinking in complex situations	Cognitive and Strategic Skills	Cognitive and Skill Development
Inspiration from professional players’ abilities, learning professional strategies, motivation for high-level competition	Inspiration from Professional Players	
Creating and modifying game characters, personalizing the experience, building unique storylines, innovation in play style	Creativity	
Challenge and competition, desire for superiority, motivation for improvement, testing skills under various conditions, ability assessment	Excitement and Competition	
Learning new skills from games, indirect learning, acquiring practical strategies, improving problem-solving abilities	Learning and Innovation Experience	
Escaping real-world problems, achieving mental relaxation, immersion in the digital world, relief from life stressors	Escapism	Escapism and Role-Playing
Experiencing diverse roles within games, simulating digital life, playing roles unattainable in the real world	Experiencing Diverse Roles	
Stunning graphics and visuals, smooth and challenging gameplay, engaging and captivating stories, memorable and likable characters, professional music and sound design, use of new technologies	Game Appeal	Game Appeal and Dynamics
Diversity and variety of games, ability to play in different genres, existence of healthy and exciting competition, continuous updates and new content, dynamic environments	Game Dynamics	
Team formation and group play, participation in online gaming communities, attendance at online events and tournaments, building friendships and connections with like-minded individuals, sense of belonging to the gaming community	Social Interaction	Social and Global Interactions
Communication with global players, understanding different cultures, exchange of experiences, competition with professional gamers, expansion of international relations	Global Connectivity	
Earning income from gaming, attracting sponsors and financial support, building a personal brand within games	Financial Opportunities	Economic and Professional Opportunities
Turning gaming into a job or career, fame and recognition in the gaming world, gaming education and coaching, participation in international tournaments	Career Opportunities	
Easy and quick access to games, ability to play across multiple platforms, no need for physical space, play anytime and anywhere	Easy Access	Accessibility and Usability
Online tutorials, practical guides, ease of installation and setup	Ease of Use	
Shared memories with friends, nostalgic gaming moments, emotional connection to in-game characters, sense of revisiting memories	Nostalgic Experiences	Emotional and Motivational Effects
Impact of advertisements in attracting new players, influential game marketing, impact of promotional events on game selection	Role of Advertising	
Interest in gaming and e-sports, curiosity about new and trending games, desire to explore and experience new gaming worlds	Interest and Curiosity	
Difficulty managing time, gaming addiction, reduced productivity in other activities, effect of gaming on academic and occupational performance	Time Management and Gaming Addiction	Individual Challenges

Difficulty concentrating on daily tasks, reduced productivity, interference with daily activities	Reduced Focus on Other Life Areas	
Visual fatigue, joint pain caused by prolonged play, increased spinal strain	Physical Problems	
Stress from competition, depression following defeat, heightened psychological tension	Psychological and Emotional Problems	
High costs of hardware and in-game items, need for continuous investment in modern equipment	Financial Barriers	Financial and Economic Barriers
Increasing prices of gaming equipment, difficulties in purchasing games, instability of in-game prices	Gaming Market Fluctuations	
Poor internet quality, game latency issues, sudden disconnections, need for constant hardware upgrades	Technical Problems	Technical and Infrastructural Problems
Weak internet services, lack of professional facilities, limited access to international servers	Weak National Infrastructure	
Lack of family acceptance, social pressure, disregard for gaming as a legitimate profession	Social and Familial Problems	Social and Familial Barriers
Negative public attitudes toward gaming, cultural barriers, lack of general acceptance of e-sports	Negative Societal Attitudes	
Limited access for women to professional competitions, unequal facilities in tournaments, low female participation	Gender Discrimination	
Issues related to intellectual property, absence of supportive regulations, problems with contracts and players' rights, legal ambiguity of e-sports	Legal Problems	Competitive and Professional Problems
Restrictions on purchasing games and equipment, account bans, difficulties in entering global competitions	Sanctions	
Lack of domestic sponsors, unequal opportunities and development, instability of teams and organizations, absence of educational and professional structures	Structural Problems	
Lack of clear career pathways, absence of support programs for talented players, career instability, lack of transition planning	Career Path Problems	

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this phenomenological study revealed that the lived experiences of Iranian e-sports players are complex, multidimensional, and deeply intertwined with psychological, social, economic, and technological factors. Through thematic analysis, three overarching domains emerged—lived experiences, motivations for participation, and challenges encountered—each reflecting unique insights into how individuals construct meaning within the virtual arena. These results contribute to the expanding scholarly dialogue on the psychosocial and managerial dynamics of e-sports by linking individual experiences with broader theoretical and institutional frameworks (Cunningham et al., 2018; Fayyaz et al., 2025; Rosell Llorens, 2017).

The first domain, *lived experiences*, encapsulated four interrelated subdimensions: self-concept and identity, emotional experiences, cognitive and skill development, and escapism and role-playing. Participants described e-sports as a transformative medium for self-expression and identity formation, often enabling them to construct digital selves that diverge from their offline personas. This finding aligns with the humanistic phenomenological perspective proposed by Van Manen, emphasizing that lived experience represents the intersection of subjective perception and social embodiment (Van Manen, 2016). The players' accounts of autonomy, competence, and self-efficacy within virtual environments mirror the motivational constructs described by Fayyaz et al., who found that gamer satisfaction mediates continuous play intention through intrinsic gratifications such as achievement, immersion, and social relatedness (Fayyaz et al., 2025). Similarly, the formation of a distinct "digital identity" in e-sports corresponds with the theoretical insights of Cote et al., who argued that virtual sports communities foster identity exploration, performance, and social validation (Cote et al., 2023).

Moreover, the emotional dimension of e-sports engagement highlighted how gaming serves not merely as entertainment but as an emotionally resonant experience characterized by nostalgia, attachment, and affective investment. Participants reported emotional highs following victory and empathy toward in-game characters during narrative loss, echoing the observations of Sakamoto, who described e-sports as an emotionally embodied experience akin to traditional sports yet mediated through digital interactivity (Sakamoto, 2022). These findings reinforce the notion that emotional engagement in

e-sports constitutes a core component of players' psychological satisfaction, paralleling the affective gratifications identified in the uses and gratifications framework (Cunningham et al., 2018; Fayyaz et al., 2025).

The findings also supported the role of e-sports as a platform for *cognitive and skill development*. Participants frequently cited the acquisition of strategic thinking, rapid decision-making, and problem-solving abilities through repeated gameplay. This is consistent with the work of Qi et al., who emphasized that digital technologies in sports cultivate mental agility and coordination while introducing new ethical and wellbeing considerations (Qi et al., 2024). Moreover, the idea of e-sports as a "learning arena" for innovation and creativity resonates with Miah's concept of "Sport 2.0," which conceptualizes digital sports as hybrid environments that merge entertainment, education, and technological engagement (Miah, 2017).

Finally, the escapism and role-playing dimension underscores the psychological function of e-sports as a coping mechanism and a means of managing stress, isolation, and existential pressure. Participants described entering the virtual world as an act of mental refuge, where they could experiment with new roles and experience freedom otherwise unavailable in real life. This mirrors the existential interpretation of digital play as a form of "self-transcendence" within virtual boundaries (Sakamoto, 2022; Van Manen, 2016). Such findings also align with Park and Mahony's work, which emphasized that e-sports provide emotional catharsis and identity experimentation for younger demographics under social stress (Park & Mahony, 2024).

The second major domain of this study—*motivations for participation*—revealed five key motivators: game appeal and dynamics, social and global interactions, economic and professional opportunities, accessibility and usability, and emotional and motivational impacts. The aesthetic and interactive appeal of games emerged as a central attractor, consistent with Cunningham et al.'s conceptualization of e-sports as a highly designed digital spectacle that merges play with mediated performance (Cunningham et al., 2018). The participants' admiration for visuals, sound design, and immersive gameplay echoes findings from Widjaja et al., who demonstrated that perceived entertainment value and dynamic content significantly enhance player loyalty and retention (Widjaja et al., 2024).

Social interaction was another prominent motivator, as participants highlighted the importance of community belonging, teamwork, and international connection. E-sports offer an opportunity for transnational networking, where friendships and collaborative identities transcend geographical borders—a trend supported by Kashcha et al., who found a positive relationship between social connectivity and a nation's overall e-sports performance (Kashcha et al., 2022). These findings further validate Cote et al.'s emphasis on inclusivity and community-building within e-sports ecosystems, particularly among collegiate and professional gamers (Cote et al., 2023). Additionally, the role of global connectivity reflects Miah's argument that digital sport has redefined the meaning of "spectatorship" and participation, turning gaming into a social practice of co-creation (Miah, 2017).

Economic and professional motivations also played a major role in participants' engagement, as many viewed e-sports as both a livelihood and a pathway toward personal branding. Consistent with Qi et al.'s findings on digital economies in sports, players in this study identified sponsorship, streaming, and coaching as emerging professional opportunities (Qi et al., 2024). Widjaja et al. similarly highlighted the business dimensions of e-sports, noting that economic incentives such as prize pools and sponsorships are powerful determinants of sustained engagement (Widjaja et al., 2024). However, these opportunities coexist with uncertainty and unequal access, echoing Czakó et al.'s caution that the rapid commercialization of e-sports has

outpaced regulatory frameworks, creating vulnerabilities related to financial transparency and fair competition (Czakó et al., 2023).

Accessibility and usability also emerged as motivators that distinguish e-sports from traditional sports. Participants valued the ability to play anytime and anywhere, free from spatial constraints, and praised the availability of online tutorials and resources that facilitated skill acquisition. These experiences reflect the democratizing potential of digital platforms in expanding access to sports-like activities (Camngca et al., 2024; Park & Mahony, 2024). Moreover, they align with Okamoto's argument that the essence of e-sports lies not in physical exertion but in cognitive and technological engagement, which broadens the inclusivity of sports participation (Okamoto, 2021).

The third main domain—*challenges encountered*—encompassed personal, financial, technical, social, and professional barriers. On the personal level, participants reported time management difficulties, gaming addiction, physical strain, and emotional stress. These findings correspond with prior research identifying psychological fatigue and burnout as prevalent issues among competitive gamers (Czakó et al., 2023; Qi et al., 2024). Additionally, Park and Mahony noted that the absence of institutional health safeguards in e-sports exacerbates mental health challenges and increases the risk of long-term dependency (Park & Mahony, 2024).

Financial and economic barriers were also significant, as high hardware costs and unstable market prices limited opportunities for many players. This concern parallels the broader literature on inequality in access to digital technologies (Camngca et al., 2024; Qi et al., 2024). Players' experiences of restricted access to international competitions due to economic constraints and sanctions echo Rogstad's findings on structural barriers in gendered and geographic participation (Rogstad, 2023). Furthermore, these challenges align with administrative and governance studies emphasizing that systemic inequalities—whether in sports or public institutions—emerge when transparency and resource allocation mechanisms are weak (Davoudi et al., 2020; Hajizadeh, 2024).

Technical and infrastructural problems, particularly inadequate internet quality and unreliable servers, were among the most common frustrations reported by participants. These findings highlight the significance of digital infrastructure as a determinant of e-sports competitiveness (Kashcha et al., 2022). They also resonate with Camngca et al.'s study of ICT underutilization in public projects, where weak infrastructure undermines efficiency and performance (Camngca et al., 2024). Similarly, players' inability to access global servers due to national restrictions reflects broader structural deficiencies in digital governance (Hajizadeh, 2024).

Social and familial barriers, such as societal stigma and lack of recognition for e-sports as a legitimate profession, remain persistent obstacles. Participants reported that family members and communities often perceive gaming as a wasteful or morally questionable activity. This mirrors Parry's critique of cultural bias, where e-sports are excluded from traditional definitions of sport due to outdated perceptions of physicality and productivity (Parry, 2019). Likewise, gender-based discrimination continues to limit participation opportunities, particularly for women, consistent with Rogstad's and Cote's findings on systemic gender inequality and the underrepresentation of female players in professional e-sports (Cote et al., 2023; Rogstad, 2023).

Finally, competitive and professional barriers—including the absence of regulatory support, unclear career pathways, and the impact of international sanctions—pose significant challenges to the sustainable development of the e-sports industry in Iran. These constraints parallel findings in administrative management research, where lack of institutional frameworks and

enforcement mechanisms hinders growth and legitimacy (Alvani, 2019; Baqerzadeh et al., 2024). Just as administrative corruption undermines governance, opaque contractual practices and sponsorship disparities in e-sports compromise professional fairness (Fakouri, 2022; Marjani & Mirabbasi, 2020). To ensure integrity and sustainability, e-sports management requires ethical codes, transparent sponsorship systems, and legal protection for players—principles derived from anti-corruption and administrative accountability frameworks (Baqeri Komarolia, 2016; Davoudi et al., 2020; Motahar, 2023).

Taken together, these findings indicate that e-sports are far more than a form of digital recreation; they represent a microcosm of modern socio-technical dynamics. The players' lived experiences reflect broader trends in digital transformation, globalization, and cultural adaptation. The coexistence of opportunity and vulnerability within the e-sports ecosystem illustrates the dual nature of digital progress—empowering yet unequal, innovative yet unregulated (Czakó et al., 2023; Qi et al., 2024). By interpreting these experiences through both phenomenological and managerial lenses, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of e-sports as an emerging domain of organizational and human development (Fayyaz et al., 2025; Van Manen, 2016).

This study, while providing valuable insights into the lived experiences of Iranian e-sports players, is limited in several respects. First, the qualitative and phenomenological nature of the research restricts its generalizability to broader populations. The participants were selected purposively, and although demographic diversity was maintained, the findings primarily reflect the subjective perspectives of a limited group. Second, the study focused exclusively on Iranian players, and therefore, cultural, political, and infrastructural factors specific to Iran may have influenced the findings. Third, due to the self-reported nature of interviews, participants may have underreported negative experiences such as addiction or family conflict. Additionally, this research did not include longitudinal data, preventing an analysis of how experiences and motivations evolve over time.

Future research should expand upon these findings by adopting mixed-method approaches that combine qualitative phenomenology with quantitative analyses of behavioral patterns and performance metrics. Cross-cultural comparisons between countries with varying degrees of e-sports institutionalization could provide deeper insights into how cultural, economic, and policy factors shape players' experiences. Longitudinal studies could trace the developmental trajectory of professional gamers to understand the long-term psychological and social effects of digital competition. Furthermore, future studies should explore gender differences and inclusivity mechanisms within the e-sports ecosystem, as well as the intersection between ethical governance and digital labor rights. Examining the influence of governmental policies, digital infrastructure, and economic incentives on the sustainability of the e-sports industry would also enhance managerial understanding and inform future regulatory frameworks.

Practically, the findings of this study highlight the need for multi-level interventions involving policymakers, e-sports organizations, and educational institutions. National and regional bodies should develop ethical and legal guidelines to protect players' rights and ensure transparency in sponsorships, contracts, and competition management. E-sports organizations should establish health and wellbeing programs to address issues of mental stress, gaming addiction, and ergonomic health. Training programs focusing on digital literacy, teamwork, and strategic decision-making could enhance professional development and reduce burnout. Finally, promoting societal awareness about the legitimacy and potential of

e-sports as a career path—through media representation, public education, and family engagement—can foster broader acceptance and contribute to the sustainable growth of this emerging industry.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Written consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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