

Safeguarding Competitive Gamers: A Review of Esports Governance and Regulatory Frameworks

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ABSTRACT

Esports have rapidly grown into a billion-dollar global industry. However, this exponential growth has revealed significant governance and regulation issues. Unlike traditional sports, which are overseen by well-established federations, esports governance is scattered, with power mainly held by game publishers and developers. This raises concerns about legitimacy, stakeholder involvement, and transparency. Issues related to integrity, such as doping, match-fixing, underage betting, and sponsorship, highlight the urgent need for robust governance frameworks. This study, thus, aims to analyze the evolving landscape of esports governance and regulatory frameworks. It utilized Scopus AI's analytical features to conduct a literature review and systematically map the research field. The findings reveal that esports governance is transitioning from publisher-led oversight to network administration organization (NAO) and multistakeholder models, which emphasize inclusivity, transparency, and athlete welfare. Persistent issues such as intellectual property dominance, weak anti-doping enforcement, and fragmented sponsorship governance remain critical barriers. Emerging themes highlight a consistent scholarly focus on governance and law, rising attention to player health and wellbeing, and discussions of unified governance frameworks that integrate legal, ethical, and global standards. This study contributes to esports governance literature by consolidating fragmented research into a coherent conceptual framework. It provides policymakers, regulators, industry stakeholders, and scholars with a roadmap to develop harmonized regulatory systems that balance commercial growth with integrity and athlete protection. Safeguarding competitive gamers requires transitioning to holistic, ethically grounded, and internationally harmonized governance frameworks that promote fair play and transparency.

Keywords: Esports governance, Regulatory frameworks, Athlete welfare, Integrity and compliance.

INTRODUCTION

Esports have rapidly evolved into a global cultural and economic phenomenon, attracting millions of players and spectators worldwide. With revenues already surpassing some traditional sports, esports have transformed from a leisure activity to a billion-dollar global industry. Nevertheless, its rapid growth has also revealed governance and regulatory challenges that demand a closer look from the academic and policy spheres ([Candeo et al., 2025]). Unlike traditional sports, which operate under long-established federations, esports lack a unified regulatory framework. Its governance power is mainly concentrated in the hands of game publishers and/or developers. This has resulted in fragmented, inconsistent, and often opaque governance structures that undermine the democratic process, legitimacy, stakeholder representation, and accountability ([Candeo et al., 2025]; [Peng et al., 2020]; Chao, 2017).

Integrity issues further complicate this governance landscape. Competitive gaming can pose physical and mental health risks ([Candeo et al., 2025]). Simultaneously, the rapid growth of esports betting has introduced risks such as underage gambling, match-fixing, and financial exploitation (Grounds, 2024). Areas like gender equity,

doping prevention, and safeguarding mechanisms remain underdeveloped within current governance approaches ([Kelly et al., 2022]; [Hutchinson et al., 2025]). Previous studies have proposed potential frameworks, including integrated policy processes, multistakeholder models, and self-regulatory regimes ([Kelly et al., 2022]; Suri & Kaur, 2024). However, despite these suggestions, the esports industry continues to face fragmented oversight, community skepticism toward governing bodies, and uneven power dynamics between publishers and other stakeholders ([Rizzi et al., 2019]; [Heidenreich et al., 2024]). While esports scholarship is rapidly growing, the area of esports regulation and governance is still relatively underexplored. Against this backdrop, the study seeks to analyze the evolving research landscape, identify conceptual clusters through mapping, highlight foremost topic experts, and trace emerging themes in the field by conducting a Scopus-based review of regulatory frameworks and governance issues in esports.

This study makes several contributions to the existing body of knowledge. First, it consolidates scattered research into a coherent framework, providing a structured overview of governance and regulatory challenges in esports. Second, it creates a concept map that highlights the primary topics and concepts in this field, along with their interconnections. Third, it identifies emerging themes and potential directions for improving governance and regulatory frameworks. This study aims to contribute to the theoretical development of esports governance research, offering policymakers, industry stakeholders, and scholars a more precise roadmap for protecting competitive gamers.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: the second section details the methodology, outlining the use of Scopus AI research tool for data collection and analysis; the third section presents findings derived from the key outputs of the Scopus AI on esports governance and regulatory challenges; the fourth section discusses emerging themes and conceptual contributions; and the last section concludes with implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

METHODOLOGY

This study conducted a literature review using Scopus AI, an advanced feature of the Scopus database that integrates artificial intelligence to synthesize, map existing research, and interpret research landscapes. Scopus AI was chosen because it draws on the peer-reviewed content from the Scopus database, ensuring that its outputs are grounded in reliable, authoritative literature. The purpose of this methodology was to provide a comprehensive overview of the research area, including the identification of key themes, gaps, and emerging trends that contribute to the theoretical development of esports governance studies. The data was retrieved on 19 August 2025 to ensure the inclusion of the most up-to-date scholarship at the time of analysis.

A Boolean search strategy was used to capture the breadth of literature at the intersection of esports regulation, governance, policy, compliance, and integrity. The search string applied was:

("regulatory framework" OR "governance" OR "policy" OR "legislation") AND ("esports" OR "electronic sports" OR "competitive gaming" OR "gaming industry") AND ("compliance" OR "regulation" OR "oversight" OR "standards") AND ("stakeholder" OR "organization" OR "association" OR "entity") AND ("ethics" OR "fair play" OR "integrity" OR "transparency").

This query generated a dataset that included peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and book chapters, offering a diverse and comprehensive corpus for analysis. The Scopus AI generated multiple analytical layers, as illustrated by the diagram in Figure 1:

Summary – This section synthesizes the central governance and regulatory themes in esports, highlighting persistent issues such as fragmented governance, lack of transparency, and integrity issues related to betting, doping, and inclusivity ([Candeo et al., 2025]; [Peng et al., 2020]).

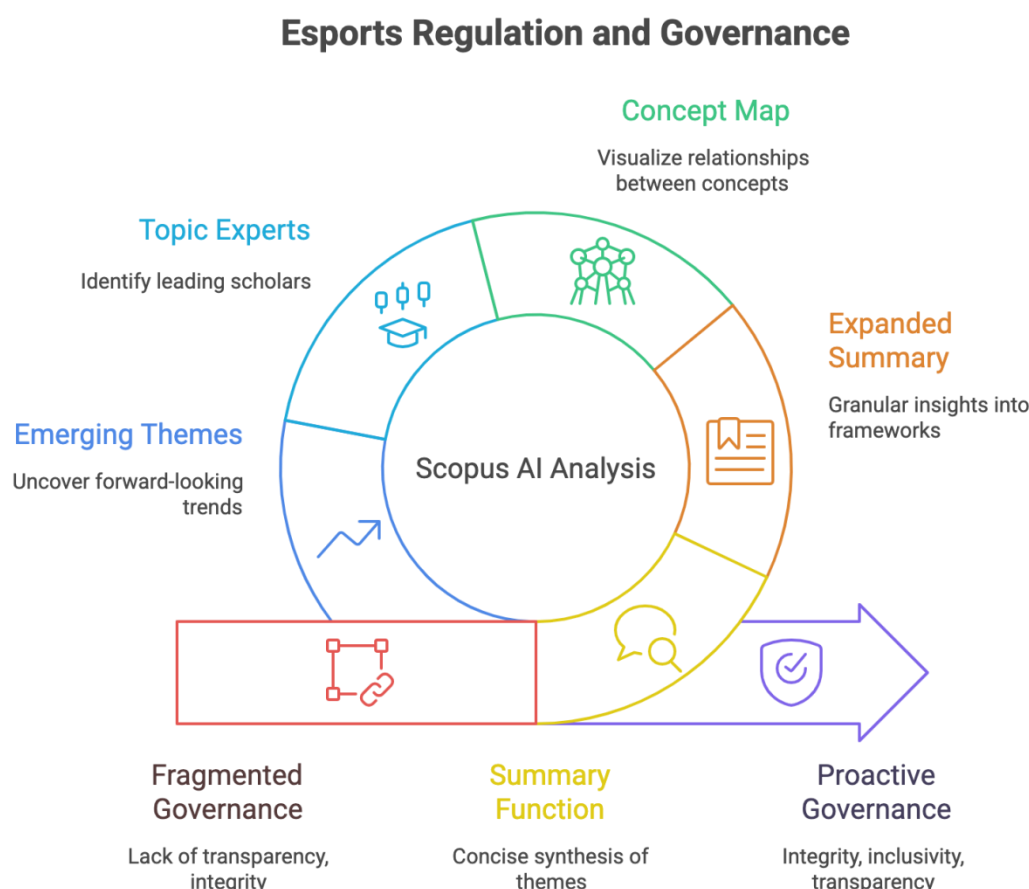
Expanded Summary – This section provided more detailed insights into specific governance frameworks and regulatory approaches proposed in the literature as viable alternatives to the current game publisher-centric structures, including the Integrated Policy Process model, Network Administration Organization (NAO) model, and multistakeholder approaches ([Kelly et al., 2022]; [Hutchinson et al., 2025]).

Concept Map – This feature visually illustrated the main research themes within esports governance, i.e., regulatory frameworks, governance structure, and athlete welfare, and their interconnections. Each of the themes is further linked to sub-themes, including sustainability, sports integrity, good governance, stakeholder engagement, network governance, manipulation, rule enforcement, and policy making. These connections facilitated a clearer understanding of how governance gaps intersect with the legal, ethical, and organizational dimensions of esports regulation.

Topic Experts – This function identified leading scholars, such as Peng, Dickson, and Kelly, who have consistently contributed to shaping the esports governance research agenda ([Peng et al., 2020]; [Kelly et al., 2022]).

The Emerging Themes – This section highlighted several progressive directions in esports governance studies. These included the increasing emphasis on harmonizing regulations across jurisdictions, integrating ethical betting practices into governance frameworks, and emphasizing player health and well-being as central pillars of regulatory oversight (Grounds, 2024; [Heidenreich et al., 2024]). This thematic evolution highlights a shift to proactive protectionist governance frameworks aimed at protecting competitive gamers. The diagram in Figure 1 also shows a contrast between Fragmented Governance, characterized by a lack of transparency and integrity, and Proactive Governance, characterized by inclusivity, transparency, and integrity. It illustrates how the Scopus AI search tool can systematically analyze esports governance and regulation issues, moving from identifying fragmented governance structures toward proactive, inclusive, and integrity-driven governance models.

Figure 1.1



Made with Napkin

Based on this method, the study not only mapped the existing research landscape but also identified conceptual and practical gaps in esports regulation. By integrating the Scopus AI advanced features, the review ensures that the findings are both theoretically robust and practically relevant, offering policymakers, industry stakeholders,

and researchers a more precise roadmap for safeguarding competitive gamers through effective regulatory frameworks.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the Scopus-based review offer several key outputs. This part of the paper will focus on Summary and Expanded Summary, Concept Map, and Emerging Themes—to provide a multidimensional view of esports governance and regulatory challenges.

Insights from the Summary & Expanded Summary

The findings from the Summary and Expanded Summary disclose that esports governance presents unique challenges that are significantly different from traditional sports governance. One of the critical challenges includes a lack of standardized structures and regulations. Unlike traditional sports, which are regulated and governed by well-established organizations or federations, such as FIFA or the IOC, esports governance is heavily influenced by game publishers, resulting in fragmented frameworks and imbalanced power dynamics ([Candeo et al., 2025]; [Peng et al., 2020]). This concentration of authority in game publishers raises concerns about the democratic process and the legitimacy of governance. It also raises the issue of representation for other stakeholders, as publishers act not only as regulators but also as profit-driven entities. As esports continues to grow, the absence of a unified structure underscores the need for regulatory innovation that prioritizes transparency, accountability, and shared governance ([Kelly et al., 2022]). In this respect, a recent theme emerging is that the governance framework is gradually evolving from a lead organization-governed network, dominated by publishers, toward a Network Administration Organization (NAO) model, which would allow for more balanced stakeholder participation ([Peng et al., 2020]). Nevertheless, progress remains uneven, as illustrated by a study on collegiate esports governance, which offers examples of diverse stakeholders, including universities, student groups, and commercial entities, that provide rules, competition structures, and oversight (Suggs, 2022). This suggests that governance models can adapt, but formal recognition and integration are necessary to prevent the perpetuation of fragmented practices.

Another legal consideration that further complicates esports governance and regulatory efforts is the ownership of intellectual property by publishers, which restricts external regulation (Chao, 2017). Game publishers hold significant power through their control of intellectual property and their ability to license their games for competition. They are the primary regulators, controlling their games' rules and events through licensing agreements with the event organizers. These create potential conflicts of interest, integrity, and fairness issues, as they can both regulate and host their own competitions. While international organizations such as the International Esports Federations and the Global Esports Federation exist, they lack the authority of the traditional esports bodies and often rely on game publishers to operate ([Peng et al., 2020]).

Moreover, specific integrity concerns within the esports landscape demand urgent attention. The surge in esports betting has heightened the risks of underage gambling, match-fixing, and financial exploitation (Grounds, 2024). Issues surrounding gender and inclusivity, as well as doping, reveal the inadequacy of current governance approaches in addressing the multifaceted vulnerabilities in esports ([Kelly et al., 2022]). Legal gaps exist in enforcing integrity measures. While traditional sports operate under the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA), esports lack equivalent enforcement capacity, creating inconsistencies in compliance and leaving athletes vulnerable (Belyaeva, 2025). Sponsorship governance also remains underdeveloped, producing what scholars describe as a “wild west” environment characterized by limited oversight and potential exploitation of vulnerable groups ([Hutchinson et al., 2025]). Ethical implications were also strongly emphasized. Scholars emphasize the importance of incorporating transparency, neutrality, and anti-corruption safeguards into esports governance to align it with broader principles of good practice in sport and international law (Shinohara, 2023).

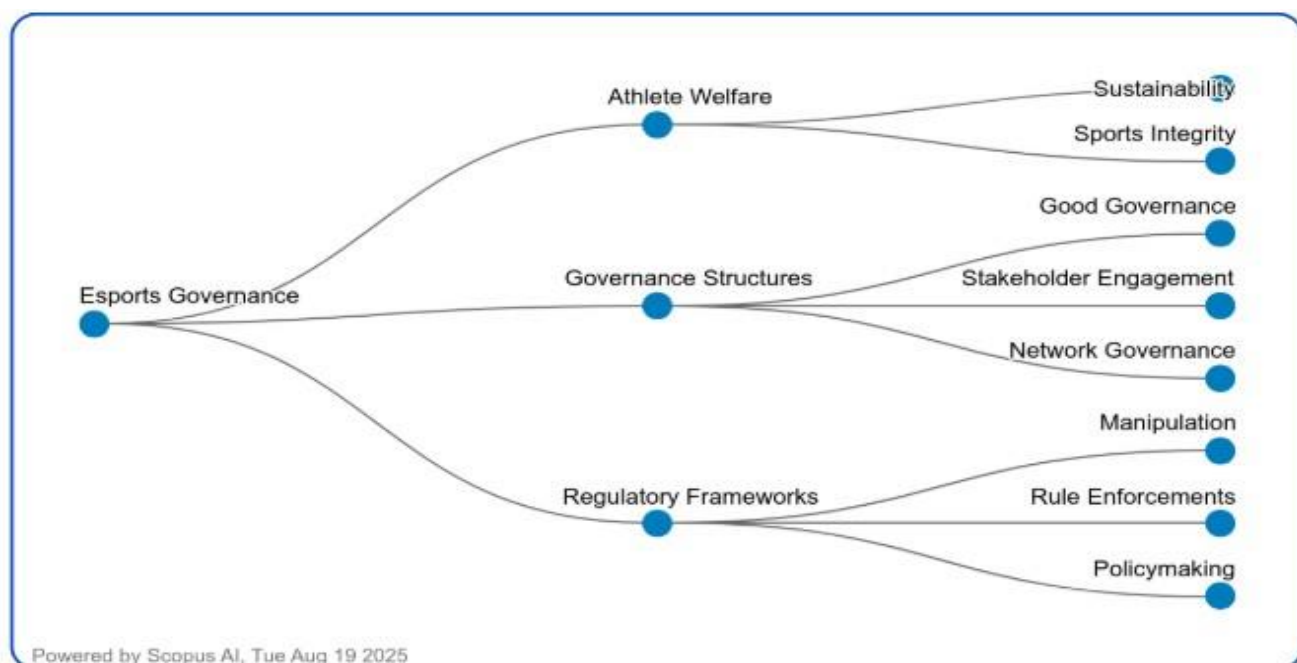
The well-being of competitive gamers has also emerged as a critical concern. Health-related risks, including physical strain, mental fatigue, and burnout, underscore the need for regulatory safeguards ([Candeo et al., 2025]). Excessively long training hours, inadequate rest, and mental pressures necessitate suitable health law frameworks to protect players. This echoes the obligations of states and organizations under international human rights law (Lapis, 2024).

Additionally, the economic dimension of esports governance reflects both opportunities and challenges. While the industry offers lucrative sponsorship and betting markets, parallel risks exist in the form of consumer exploitation, gambling addiction, and underage participation (Grounds, 2024). Governance in many esports games has been described as paternalistic and top-down, affecting players' professionalization and labor conditions ([Ma et al., 2022]). Such dynamics underscore the tension between promoting economic growth and upholding ethical responsibility. It reinforces the need for balanced regulatory frameworks that safeguard competitive gamers while sustaining industry development.

The Summary and Expanded Summary analyses demonstrate that safeguarding competitive gamers necessitates transitioning beyond fragmented, publisher-centric governance to inclusive and proactive frameworks. This involves harmonizing legal and ethical standards, reinforcing health protections, and ensuring that economic opportunities are balanced with social responsibility. The review demonstrates that while scholars have proposed models such as multistakeholder and NAO governance, significant regulatory gaps remain. Bridging these gaps will be essential to ensure the long-term integrity and sustainability of esports.

Insights from the Concept Map

Figure 2: Concept Map



The concept map generated by the Scopus AI research tool provides a visual representation of the interconnected themes within esports governance. At the core is Esports Governance, which branches into three primary dimensions: Athlete Welfare, Governance Structures, and Regulatory Frameworks. Each of these dimensions is further linked to other sub-themes, which show the complexity of the regulatory and governance landscape.

The Athlete Welfare dimension emphasizes sustainability and sports integrity. It highlights the need to safeguard the physical and mental well-being of competitive gamers while ensuring fair competition. Governance structures are connected to good governance, stakeholder engagement, and network governance. This underscores the importance of inclusivity, transparency, and collaborative approaches that extend beyond the dominance of game publishers. Finally, Regulatory Frameworks branch into manipulation control, rule enforcement, and policymaking. This reflects the challenges of maintaining integrity, implementing anticorruption measures, and the need for creating coherent and enforceable rules for the industry.

All in all, the concept map illustrates that esports governance is not a linear process, but a multi-layered and dynamic system that requires balancing athlete protection, structural inclusivity, and robust regulatory oversight. It highlights the interdependence of ethical, organizational, and policy considerations, providing a roadmap for moving from fragmented governance toward proactive and sustainable models of regulation in esports.

Esports Governance

The governance of esports is complex and evolving, shaped by a range of stakeholders and regulatory challenges that distinguish it from traditional sports. The current governance structures are still growing, with various parties exploring potential frameworks to oversee the rules of play, competitive structures, and community development (Suggs, 2022). This environment illustrates both opportunities for institutionalization and the risk of inconsistent governance, as different stakeholders bring varying interests and objectives. The lack of a standardized system has created uncertainty for players and organizations. Hence, reinforcing the need for integrated governance models.

Esports Governance and Athlete Welfare

With the growth of esports, challenges, particularly in relation to issues of integrity and participant well-being, are also growing. Scholars warn that the lack of consistent frameworks creates vulnerabilities, including risks of doping, match-fixing, mental health issues, and excessive commercialization (Kelly, Derrington, & Star, 2022). Moreover, the intellectual property ownership in the hands of game developers and publishers provides them with considerable authority in shaping and influencing esports activities. This is compounded by the fact that non-state regulatory frameworks in many regions primarily drive governance. (Abanazir & Shinohara, 2024). This reliance on non-state actors raises questions about the adequacy of existing systems to safeguard competitive gamers. It highlights the urgent need for best-practice policies explicitly tailored to esports.

Governance within esports is often described as top-down and paternalistic, whereby publishers exert significant control over rule-making and enforcement aspects (Ma, Gui, & Kou, 2022). This control has created a regulatory landscape that prioritizes publisher interests over broader player welfare concerns. In addition, the absence of independent oversight means that governance decisions affecting players' health, well-being, and career sustainability are made primarily through corporate mechanisms rather than athlete-centered regulatory bodies ([Peng et al., 2020]). Such a framework poses risks to the players, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation, burnout, and unequal bargaining power.

Esports governance has been described as the “wild west,” which illustrates concerns regarding athlete welfare due to a lack of laws or controls. Sponsorship deals, for example, remain largely unregulated. They involve partnerships with unhealthy or controversial brands with little oversight to protect vulnerable players from undue influence (Hutchinson, Peng, & Gillooly, 2025). This imbalance highlights the limitations of fragmented governance and inadequate stakeholder representation in failing to incorporate the voices of athletes into the decision-making process. Without systematic checks and controls on commercial partnerships and industry practices, player welfare is often subordinated to profitability, which will further deepen the power imbalance between publishers, sponsors, and athletes.

In addition to commercial aspects, esports governance also struggles with adapting traditional sports frameworks to the digital landscape of competition. Existing governance concepts in sports, such as anti-doping rules, player unions, and structured oversight, are not easily transferable to esports, as private entities and competitions own intellectual property that spans multiple jurisdictions ([Candeo et al., 2025]). This misalignment highlights the need for dedicated esports-specific frameworks that address the unique vulnerabilities of competitive gamers. Scholars argue that as the industry matures, frameworks must shift from publisher-driven regulation toward inclusive, multistakeholder governance models that explicitly prioritize athlete welfare ([Peng et al., 2020]).

Scholars have recognized that the well-being of competitive gamers is a major governance priority. The rapid growth of esports has attracted young and often vulnerable players, many of whom face health risks related to long training hours, mental stress, and exposure to addictive behaviors (Kelly, Derrington, & Star, 2022). Governance models that fail to implement robust welfare protections will exacerbate these vulnerabilities. The evolving move toward a network administration organization (NAO) model suggests a promising shift, as this structure would broaden participation and accountability while compelling publishers to comply with collective standards for player protection ([Peng et al., 2020]).

Future directions emphasize the importance of integrated governance frameworks that merge multistakeholder collaboration with athlete-focused welfare initiatives. Research calls for greater exploration of player

perspectives and lived experiences, as well as harmonized international regulations to reduce fragmentation and safeguard athletes across jurisdictions ([Candeo et al., 2025]). Governance reforms must incorporate education, responsible sponsorship policies, and well-being standards to build a sustainable esports ecosystem. Ultimately, safeguarding competitive gamers requires a transition from fragmented, commercially driven oversight to holistic, inclusive, and ethically grounded governance systems that place athlete welfare at the center of esports regulation.

Esports Governance Structures

The governance structure in esports is a critical aspect of the industry's development and sustainability. It has become a topic of increasing importance due to the industry's rapid growth and the need for clear regulations and authoritative governing bodies. The governance structures are shaped by the industry's unique digital and commercial foundations, which are significantly different from the traditional sports models. Existing research highlights that the current governance structure is best described as a lead organization-governed network, in which authority is concentrated in the hands of game publishers who control competition rules, tournament formats, and disciplinary measures ([Peng et al., 2020]). This proprietary model grants publishers both regulatory and commercial authority, leaving limited room for independent governance bodies to operate. It establishes a paternalistic, top-down governance structure that prioritizes corporate interests over player representation (Ma, Gui, & Kou, 2022)

However, the dominance of publishers has led to increasing fragmentation, as other stakeholders, including sponsors, tournament organizers, and player associations, seek greater influence in decision-making processes. This contestation has pushed esports governance closer toward the network administration organization (NAO) model, which envisions broader stakeholder collaboration by including regulators, players, teams, sponsors, and tournament organizers with more distributed authority ([Peng et al., 2020]). Despite this shift, the absence of formalized governance mechanisms creates instability, as power struggles between publishers and other stakeholders undermine the establishment of clear, accountable structures. Without collective oversight, the governance of esports risks remaining reactive and inconsistent, rather than strategic and sustainable. As such, governments and international institutions are increasingly seen as crucial players in facilitating a more cohesive governance model. Their involvement is necessary to address integrity issues and ensure sustainable development ([Peng et al., 2020]; Abanazir & Shinohara, 2024)

From a policy perspective, existing traditional sports governance frameworks are inadequate for addressing the specific needs of esports. Issues such as intellectual property control, digital integrity (e.g., cheating and match manipulation), and transnational competitions complicate the application of conventional models ([Candeo et al., 2025]). Scholars stress the need for dedicated esports governance frameworks that move beyond borrowing from traditional sport and instead respond to the digital, commercial, and cultural realities of competitive gaming. Importantly, there is a growing recognition that player perspectives and lived experiences must inform governance design, particularly in relation to health, welfare, and fair representation ([Candeo et al., 2025]). Scholars have also called for an integrated governance model that includes a multistakeholder approach and individual responsibilities to address the challenges. This model emphasizes the representation of all key stakeholders in decision-making processes and responsible decision-making (Hutchinson, Peng, & Gillooly, 2025). The establishment of players' associations is seen as another potential solution to player welfare and advocates for better regulations. These associations can play a crucial role in negotiating with event organizers and game developers to ensure fair treatment and support for players (Paravizo & de Souza, 2021).

Overall, the literature suggests that while esports governance structures are evolving, they remain highly fragmented, with publishers holding disproportionate control and other stakeholders struggling for representation. To safeguard competitive gamers effectively, governance must transition from a lead-organization model dominated by publishers toward inclusive, multistakeholder frameworks that embed principles of transparency, integrity, and welfare protection. Future governance structures must also incorporate harmonized international regulations, clear sponsorship guidelines, and stronger athlete representation to strike a balance between commercial imperatives and sustainable industry development.

Esports Governance and Regulatory Frameworks The legal and regulatory dimension of esports presents another critical linkage. Esports governance faces various regulatory challenges. The existing literature emphasizes the urgent need for an enforceable framework to address these issues. Without enforceable legal frameworks to ensure compliance, the shift toward whatever new model of governance risks stalling, leaving regulatory oversight fragmented and uneven across jurisdictions.

One of the growing concerns is match manipulation, which includes match fixing, software cheating, illegal betting, doping, and performance enhancement. The current frameworks for addressing match manipulation in esports face several unique challenges due to the absence of a central governing authority, as well as fragmented and inconsistent regulations across different regions and games ([Rizzi et al., 2019]; [Candeo et al., 2025]). Some countries have begun to adapt their legal frameworks to include esports and have integrated regulations to prosecute unlawful activities, including those in esports competitions. However, the overall regulatory landscape is inconsistent globally ([Rizzi et al., 2019]). While the traditional sports anti-match manipulation measures may offer a foundation for esports, they are not entirely suitable on their own due to the distinct nature of esports. Esports are susceptible to technological vulnerabilities, including those related to software, hardware, and data manipulation. Esports integrity policies, thus, must be tailored to address the specific technological context and develop appropriate infrastructure to combat match manipulation effectively. Belyaeva (2025), for instance, argues that anti-doping regulation in esports cannot be effectively enforced under existing international sport codes and instead requires a sport-specific legislative framework tailored to the digital environment. Belyaeva (2025) has highlighted the need to develop legal frameworks that address the unique aspects of esports, including technological restrictions and the proportionality of sanctions for violations. Engaging players and other stakeholders in the regulatory process is also essential to help tailor regulations that are both effective and accepted by the community (Schuber, Gure & Haller, 2024).

Another critical dimension of esports governance is rules enforcement, which often operates under a top-down and paternalistic model. In many instances, the game developers and publishers serve as both regulators and commercial entities, controlling rule enforcement. (Ma, Gui, & Kou, 2022). While this ensures compliance with the rules set by the developers and publishers, it raises concerns about fairness, legitimacy, and accountability, as publishers' economic interests may not always align with safeguarding players' welfare or ensuring transparency in governance. This highlights a tension between proprietary control and the principles of democratic governance.

These findings suggest that traditional sports regulatory models are insufficient for esports, particularly due to their reliance on intellectual property law, the globalized nature of online environments, and the rapid evolution of commercial practices in this sector. Unlike conventional sports federations, esports regulation often operates outside state structures, making non-state governance by publishers and tournament organizers the dominant mechanism ([Candeo et al., 2025]). This arrangement highlights the need for harmonized regulatory frameworks that bridge the gap between corporate authority and player interests.

In summary, the linkages between esports governance and regulatory frameworks highlight both the structural challenges and the emerging opportunities for safeguarding competitive gamers. Governance structures must evolve toward inclusive, transparent, and enforceable regulatory frameworks that address the various issues arising from the distinct features of esports. Future research and policy development should focus on harmonizing international standards, enhancing publisher accountability, and embedding multistakeholder participation to ensure esports develop as an ethically governed industry. Future efforts should also focus on creating a centralized regulatory authority, enhancing legal frameworks, and investing in integrity initiatives to ensure the sustainable development of the esports industry.

Emerging Themes in Esports Governance and Law

A consistent theme emerging in the literature is the sustained focus on esports governance and law, reflecting the industry's ongoing struggle to establish robust and legitimate regulatory frameworks. Governance studies consistently highlight integrity-related issues such as match-fixing and doping, which undermine the status of esports as a professional sport ([Candeo et al., 2025]). Furthermore, the legal recognition of esports as a

legitimate sport remains inconsistent globally, which limits its access to institutional funding, structured governance, and international protections ([Peng et al., 2020]). The persistent focus on these issues underscores the importance of continually developing and refining governance structures to ensure athlete protection, promote fair play, and foster the broader professionalization of the industry.

A rising theme in esports governance research encompasses the areas of sponsorship regulation, player well-being, and the evolving power dynamics between stakeholders. Scholars have increasingly drawn attention to the influence of sponsorships from unhealthy or ethically questionable brands, which expose young audiences to potential harm (Hutchinson, Peng, & Gillooly, 2025). Additionally, areas concerning the health and safety of competitive gamers have become central governance concerns (Kelly, Derrington, & Star, 2022). These rising concerns are linked to the existing nature of governance, where publishers hold significant authority yet fail to systematically address the welfare of athletes (Ma, Gui, & Kou, 2022). The escalation of these debates underscores an urgent need for regulatory responses that strike a balance between commercial growth and ethical responsibility. This suggests that multistakeholder governance models, which foster collaboration and representation from various esports stakeholders to address issues and opportunities, and incorporate ethical standards collectively, will enhance athlete welfare and promote a sustainable ecosystem that benefits all involved.

The novel theme identified in recent scholarship is the emergence of unified governance frameworks in esports. While governance has traditionally been fragmented and publisher-driven, scholars are now beginning to explore the potential of comprehensive, global regulatory systems that integrate legal, ethical, and policy standards ([Candeo et al., 2025]). The novelty of this theme lies in its emphasis on harmonization and recognition of esports as a transnational industry that requires consistency across jurisdictions. A unified governance framework would not only enhance compliance but also reduce instances of corruption, unethical behavior, and regulatory loopholes. Moreover, integrating ethical and legal standards across regions would promote fairness, transparency, and trust within the esports ecosystem. From this, the following hypotheses can be proposed: a unified governance framework in esports will enhance compliance and reduce instances of unethical behavior, and integrating legal and ethical standards across different regions will promote global consistency in esports governance.

Collectively, these emerging themes demonstrate both the continuity of foundational governance concerns and the evolution of new directions in esports regulation. The consistent focus on governance and law underscores the importance of legitimacy and fairness. At the same time, rising concerns about ethical and integrity issues, as well as athlete welfare, reflect the industry's growing complexity and visibility. The exploration of harmonized governance frameworks signals a forward-looking shift, as researchers and policymakers increasingly recognize the need to build holistic, transnational governance structures for esports.

Overall, these findings indicate that safeguarding competitive gamers necessitates an integrated approach, combining the refinement of existing governance mechanisms with innovative strategies to address new and emerging challenges. Establishing robust governance frameworks that align with integrity, legal recognition, sponsorship ethics, and global consistency will be crucial to ensuring the sustainable growth and professional legitimacy of esports.

CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted that the governance and regulatory landscape of esports remains highly fragmented, with power disproportionately concentrated in game publishers and developers. Key findings reveal persistent challenges surrounding integrity, legitimacy, and transparency, particularly in relation to match-fixing, betting, doping, and inclusivity. While the literature acknowledges potential governance innovations, such as the Network Administration Organization (NAO) model and multistakeholder approaches, progress remains uneven. It is mainly constrained by intellectual property ownership and commercial imperatives. Emerging themes demonstrate a consistent focus on law and governance, with a rising attention to sponsorship ethics and player welfare, as well as explorations into unified governance frameworks, all of which underscore the urgent need for systemic reform.

Theoretically, this review contributes to esports governance scholarship by mapping the research field, integrating dispersed studies into a coherent conceptual frame, and identifying new clusters of inquiry such as unified governance frameworks and player-focused welfare standards. Practically, the findings emphasize the necessity of regulatory innovations that harmonize international standards, integrate ethical safeguards, and embed multistakeholder participation to ensure sustainable and legitimate industry development. These insights provide a roadmap for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and international organizations seeking to safeguard competitive gamers while fostering the growth of esports as a professionalized and respected global industry.

Nevertheless, the study faces limitations. As a Scopus-based review, it is constrained by the scope of indexed literature, meaning non-English or region-specific policy documents and grassroots governance practices may not be fully represented. Additionally, while Scopus AI offers valuable analytical tools, reliance on its algorithmic outputs may introduce biases in theme identification and clustering. The absence of primary data, particularly from players and other stakeholders, also limits the granularity of welfare-focused insights.

Future research should address these gaps by incorporating qualitative perspectives from players, coaches, and community representatives to contextualize governance structures in lived experiences. Comparative cross-jurisdictional studies are also necessary to examine how different legal systems approach esports governance, with a particular focus on harmonization across borders. Moreover, empirical studies on the effectiveness of emerging governance models, such as unified global frameworks, would provide evidence-based insights into their viability. Exploring the intersections between technology, law, and governance, particularly in the areas of intellectual property and digital integrity, will further strengthen the field of study.

All in all, safeguarding competitive gamers requires a transition from the current fragmented, publisher-driven oversight to holistic, inclusive, and ethically grounded governance systems. By aligning theoretical development with practical policy solutions, the esports industry can evolve into a sustainable, transparent, and athlete entered ecosystem that balances commercial growth with social responsibility.

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