Harassment or light-hearted? Examining the normative rules of trash talking in CS:GO esports

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INTRODUCTION

To date, the growth of esports has attracted and formed sporting organizations, governing bodies, and computer gaming companies to establish teams and events across different esporting genres. Much like traditional sports, the popularity of esports has become a focus of ever-growing research, primarily to understand the culture norms shared across professional players and spectators. While esports are governed by detailed rules and regulations across specific games (Taylor, 2012), the social norms of "trash talking" are governed by unwritten and normative rules shared across diverse communities. Thus, investigating the practice of trash talking is complex, but made even more by a lack of consistency in its nomenclature and non-consensual definitions in current sporting literature. Implementing an overarching theoretical framework of Practice theory, which examines how humans are shaped and/or can shape the *structure* (e.g., history, power relations and culture) within a given system (Myers, 2017; Ortner, 2006), this research focused on understanding the normative rules of trash talking within *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* (CS:GO) esports (Hidden Path Entertainment, 2012).

Thirty hours of online observations of CS:GO esport tournaments via Twitch and semi-structured interviews among esport spectators ($n = 15$) were undertaken using a qualitative design. In line with previous esporting/livestreaming literature, all data were analysed and triangulated through systematic application of open, axial, and selective coding (Cheung and Huang, 2011; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). To facilitate an open and interpretive understanding of trash talking during analysis, current definitions of trash talk were obtained from sporting and video gaming literature to formulate markers of its practice.

The findings revealed that while trash talking has conventionally been perceived through *verbal* conduct, in esports, *non-verbal* methods of trash taking abound. These could be *physical* (e.g. hand gestures), communicated by professional players at opposing sides of the stage. However, trash talking could also be *virtual*, an aspect

unique to esports where players manipulate in-game mechanics to express practices, such as "teabagging." Through online media such as Twitter or during pre-match interviews, professional players evidently engage in trash talk to stimulate motivation for themselves, or promote hype for spectators. From a spectator perspective, consumers may draw on this to promote shared experiences and social identification with esport althetes. Trash talking was also expressed between members of the CS:GO community, with esport stage talent, including commentators, hosts and desk analysis taunting players, or spectators virtually "heckling" them in online streaming chat rooms.

The findings extend the current literature base on the various forms of trash talking evident in CS:GO esports. Through Practice theory, trash talk can be interpreted as an ostensibly distinctive and appealing aspect within the CS:GO community. While its practice has been apparent in past games of the Counter Strike series, the social conventions among casual players have grown and shifted towards the professional CS:GO esports scene. The findings suggest trash talking norms are dialectical and alter based on context and motive. For instance, malicious trash talk or personal attacks are proscribed themes which diminish the spectator experience though light-hearted *banter* may be a permissible symbol of respect between players. Given the absence of substantive literaure, the insights in the way trash talking is observed and debated in esporting literature warrants further investigation.

BIO
Sidney Irwin is a PhD candidate at the School of Health, Medical and Applied Sciences at Central Queensland University. She received her bachelor of psychological science (with Honours) from the same university. She is currently working on a dissertation exploring more on the psychological aspects of esports.

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Dr. Michele Lastella is sleep researcher at the Appleton Institute for Behavioural Science at CQUniversity Adelaide, South Australia. His primary area of expertise is sleep, recovery, sport psychology, psychological well-being and performance. Being a former elite athlete Dr. Lastella brings experience from both an athlete perspective as well as a researcher's perspective. He has worked with several elite sporting organisations such as the Australian Institute of Sport and South Australian Institute of Sport examining sleep, recovery, and performance.

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