"You gotta understand the context of this though": Preliminary insights on perceptions of trash talk across esport communities

Sidney Irwin
Central Queensland University
44 Greenhill Road, Wayville SA
sidney.irwin@cqumail.com

Anjum Naweed, Michele Lastella
Appleton Institute, Central Queensland University
44 Greenhill Road, Wayville SA
anjum.naweed@cqu.edu.au, m.lastella@cqu.edu.au

INTRODUCTION

Esports has become a thriving digital environment where spectators congregate together, through online streaming services, to watch their favourite professional player, or team, compete (Hamilton et al., 2014; Xiao, 2020). As a growing environment, research has been attentive towards understanding the consumptive needs of esport spectators (Qian et al., 2020; Tang et al., 2020). Though this research has primarily focused on spectatorship during esport tournaments, studies have also acknowledged the use of public, online forums as an effective medium for fans to support and engage in their favoured communities (Brown et al., 2018; Cheung and Huang, 2011). These online forums serve as an *information media* where consumers can gather, discuss and debate topics relevant to esports (Kow and Young, 2013; Xiao, 2020). Of particualar note, Cheung and Huang (2011) observed how spectators use these forums to react and "judge" behaviours which can go against the social norms shared within given esport communities. One example of a divisive practice is trash talk.

Trash talk is a contentious act where the boundaries and attitudes towards its practice tend to differ across conventional sporting communities (Conmy et al., 2013; Rainey and Granito, 2010; Trammel et al., 2017). Trash talk is also known to be a prevalent part of casual video gaming culture, although its lacks direct contribution to gameplay (Nakamura, 2012), meaning that trash talking does not enhance individual gaming skill. However, research into the perspectives of trash talk in esports is currently very limited.

This study aimed to examine what factors govern perceptions of trash talk in esports. Specifically, this study investigated trash talk across three popular First Person Shooter (FPS) esport communities – *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* (CS:GO) (Hidden Path Entertainment, 2012), *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2015) and *Rainbow Six: Siege* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2015). Adopting methods from previous forum-based research (Cheung and Huang, 2011; Hawkins and Filtness, 2017), this

project obtained data by collecting quotes within online, public esport forums, primarily via Reddit. A total of 1,724 comments were gathered. Inclusion and exclusion methods to extract data were formulated based on key terms used in previous literature (e.g. Eveslage and Delaney, 1998; Rainey, 2012) and distinctive jargon observed within the esporting communities (Seo, 2013). Using NVivo (a software used for qualitative analysis), data were categorised through descriptive coding (Saldana, 2014), then analysed thematically (Gibson and Brown, 2009) to identify distinctive relationships between elements of trash talk in esports.

Overall, the preliminary results revealed multifaceted discussions in accordance with five broad themes, each of which were interpreted as factors which governed trash talk in esports. These were as follows:

1. Forms of Trash Talk Witnessed in Esports;

2. Discussion on the Social Norms of Trash Talk;

3. Consideration of Cultural and Social Influences;

4. Reflection of Community and Personal Bias towards the Practice of Trash Talk; and

5. Interpretation of Esport Narratives and the Personas of Professional Players.

The first theme captured moments when professional players engaged in trash talk both in (e.g. during the tournament) and out (e.g. on social media) of the game. The second theme identified how the acceptability or unacceptability of a given instance of trash talk varied, and revealed that this depended on various factors such as the time and place of occurrence, the context underlying its practice, and when it was considered to become "excessive". The third theme pointed to understandings of the multicultural and professional environment of esports as factors influencing whether professional players engaged in trash talk. The fourth theme revealed that the opinions of trash talk shared through online forums were guided by various individual factors. This included one's personal experience of trash talk when playing online, social identification and "fandom" within esport teams (e.g. expressing a favoured view of trash talk if it was directed or exchanged by a professional player who was admired by the community), and the tendency to debate the similarities or differences between esports and conventional sports. The last theme revealed that trash talk formed and promoted rivalries between esport teams and developed "story arcs" which could continue across tournaments. These rivalries were discussed through simulations of "hero" and "villain" personas, and underlined apparent intimacies between among professional players.

While preliminary, these insights go some way to revealing the nuances and complexity of trash talk in FPS esports. These findings can be used to guide future research to triangulate and broaden the understanding of trash talk in esports.

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.

Anjum Naweed is is an associate professor of Applied Cognitive Science at the Appleton Institute for Behavioural Science in South Australia. He received his PhD in psychology from Sheffield University, United Kingdom. His focus on decision-making and knowledge representation is concerned with the relationship between people and technologies, tools, environments, and systems, beginning with the user experience.

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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