

Is is toxic? Banter? Or just talking shit? Applying the AACTT framework to understand trash talk behaviour in esports

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INTRODUCTION

The success of esports has stimulated the formation of various subcultures which continue to grow in popularity and professionalism. As such, written rules and regulations are implemented to set a standard for how professional players can and cannot behave. Within the digital environment, esports consumers engage in social media to critique, debate and define social norms. While study of the normative rules in esports has been a topic of broad discussion (Carter et al., 2015; Naweed et al., 2020), investigating the nuances of specific practices requires further attention.

One practice in esports governed primarily by social norms is *trash talk*. Formally known as the use of taunts and insults as a means to gain competitive advantage. The definition of trash talk has thus grown and become non-consensual in both conventional sports (Conmy et al., 2013; Rainey and Granito, 2010; Trammel et al., 2017) and video gaming literature (Cook et al., 2017; Cote, 2015; Kordyaka et al., 2020; Nakamura, 2012). Furthermore, understanding *trash talk* in esports is currently limited. Focusing on the First-Person Shooter (FPS) genre, this study used public forum data to investigate what forms of trash talk are evident in esports.

Use of public, online forum data has been recognised as an effective method to encapsulate perspectives within video gaming and esports culture (Cheung and Huang, 2011; Sparrow et al., 2020). This study adopted a convergent approach (Creswell, 2014) and investigated the forms of trash talk observed and discussed in Reddit (an online media forum) within three FPS esports communities – *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* (Hidden Path Entertainment, 2012), *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2015) and *Rainbow Six: Siege* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2015). Across the three esports, 61 cases of trash talk were collected for analysis.

To gain an overview of the main themes, all data was analysed through NVivo deductively using Pesseau's et al.'s (2019) AACTT framework to examine how, why and to what end esports spectators specify trash talk behaviour. In this framework,

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behaviour is defined and governed according to its *Action, Actor, Context, Target* and *Time* aspects. *Actions* are the observed behaviour witnessed by consumers whilst the *Actor* is the individual performing the action. *Context* is the physical, emotional or social setting where the action is performed and *Targets* are the individuals the actor performs the action towards. Lastly, *Time* is the period when the action taken place. The AACTT framework provided a novel and constructive approach to unpack the plethora of comments collected during this study.

Through the lens of the ACCTT framework, *Actions* were the observed practices of trash talk witnessed by spectators. These captured moments were usually the starting point of discussion. Consumers observed that the act of trash talking can come from different *Actors*, including professional players, coaches and stage talent (i.e. commentators, desk hosts). The *Context* of trash talk occurred in real life settings (i.e. face-to-face, during live interviews) or in the digital environment (i.e. through social media or within the video game). However, it was also observed that the context of trash talk was associated with either being direct or indirect. The *Target* of trash talk were often professional players of the opposing team. Lastly, *Time* is when the act occurred, with focus being before, during or after a match.

The results of this preliminary analysis and first application of the ACCTT framework to esports revealed that it has potential to provide meaningful insights into how esports consumers implement these proponents of AACCTT towards acts of trash talk to examine and delineate its practice. In turn, understanding the impact of each AACTT element has towards the social norms of trash talk can allow researchers to further distinguish behaviours among esports spectators and professional players.

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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