"Where there is trash talk, there is a story and excitement" – A symbolic convergence approach towards understanding trash talk, narratives and spectator perspectives in FPS esports.

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INTRODUCTION
The growing popularity of esports has stimulated an increasing body of research aimed at understanding the consumptive needs of spectators. This research has investigated why individuals watch esports (Pizzo et al. 2018; Qian et al. 2020) and examined key factors contributing to their engagement across esport communities (Jang and Byon 2020; Macey et al. 2022). One noteworthy observation is how esport spectators could be captivated by the narrative and storytelling components shown during esport broadcasts (Newman et al. 2020). These elements can potentially engage the audience through professional players' journeys, personas, and rivalries, enhancing their investment in the esport (Pu et al., 2021; Xiao, 2020). In addition, spectators witness these narratives and share them through social media platforms, serving as a medium for fans to exchange views, debates, and analyses of esport practices (Brown et al. 2018; Xue, Newman, and Du 2019). However, prior research has primarily investigated narrative themes through single case studies, which inherently limits the generalisability of the findings (Felczak 2022; Xue, Newman, and Du 2019). As a result, there is a large and potentially significant knowledge gap regarding the formation and growth of esport narratives which could be addressed by exploring broad player conduct.

One area that could be explored is the role of trash talk (i.e., taunting others in a competitive environment) in construction of narratives to captivate spectators. Though conventional sporting literature has highlighted the effect of trash talk in creating fan engagement (Kassing 2020) and narratives (Johnson and Taylor 2020), its influence on esports has yet to be thoroughly investigated. While previous studies have briefly discussed this topic (Irwin, Naweed, and Lastella 2021, 2023), a better understanding of this phenomenon is needed. This study explored spectators perspectives towards trash talk in constructing and forming narratives in esports.

Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) (Bormann 1985) was used as a theoretical framework to explore spectator perspectives towards trash talk and interpersonal narrative dynamics. SCT posits that shared narratives create a collective identity among certain groups. The core elements in SCT include fantasy themes (which pertain to the previous narratives, often through specific characters, settings and actions shared within a group), fantasy types (recurring fantasy themes), fantasy chaining (the sequential development of narratives), dramatising messages (how specific language in narratives emotionally engage group members), and rhetorical vision (forming group perspectives which emerge from these shared narratives) (Bormann 1985). Whilst these shared narratives and emotional involvement continue, they lead to 'symbolic convergence,' which unifies individuals and contributes to a collective identity. As previous conventional sporting literature has noted that trash talk between athletes constructs shared narratives and emotional engagement among spectators, SCT provided a framework to explore these themes in esports.

The use of public online forum data has been acknowledged as an effective means of encapsulating perspectives within video gaming and esports culture (Sparrow et al. 2020; Xue, Newman, and Du 2019). In this study, a convergent approach (Creswell 2014) was adopted to investigate the perspectives of trash talk within three FPS esport communities *Counter Strike: Global Offensive* (Hidden Path Entertainment 2012), *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment 2015) and *Rainbow Six: Siege* (Ubisoft Montreal 2015). Using the social media platform, Reddit, a total of 1,724 comments were gathered. Analysis was twofold; the first conducted a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to identify fundamental elements associated with trash talk in esports, and the second applied a conceptual content analysis (Bengtsson 2016) to deductively align these elements within SCT.

Through SCT, *fantasy themes* are specific examples of stories, rivalries, and memorable trash talk exchanges witnessed in esports. Across Reddit threads, spectators posted links, clips and images of professional player trash talk to form online discourse. In addition, *fantasy types* were evident when spectators reflected and quoted well-known trash talk incidents within current discussions. *Fantasy chaining* was evident in both single cases between players (i.e., when spectators share a back-and-forth exchange between player's provocation and response) and through rivalries between players/teams which extended across esport tournaments. *Dramatising messages* were shown through verbal exchanges from professional players whereby spectators commented on the use of specific jokes, banter and trash talk by individuals. Whilst certain trash talk was identified to enhance a spectator's shared symbolic reality, it could also alter its context where toxic language could deter and cause conflict within groups. The application of these elements formed various *rhetoric visions* towards forming shared engagement and investment across spectators towards the esport scene. As esports continue to attract growing audiences and become established as a mainstream form of entertainment, findings from this study could leverage insights to inform marketing and engagement strategies to promote positive 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.

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