

# PORTRAYALS OF ESPORTS IN MAINSTREAM AUSTRALIAN NEWS MEDIA

Esports, Australianness and beating New Zealand: Portrayals of esports in the mainstream  
Australian news media.

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**Abstract**

With the growing global popularity of esports, the practice is receiving newfound coverage in the mainstream media. The media plays an important role as an information disseminator for its consumers, setting the agenda of what to think about and how to think about it. While research has investigated the practice and spectatorship of esports, little is known about how esports portrayed in media representations. The Australian mainstream media provides an interesting case, reflecting the core sport values integral to the Australian national identity. With esports embodying values of both gaming and sport, a thematic analysis was conducted to investigate how esports was portrayed in the Australian mainstream media. Esports was portrayed in 6 main ways as: an investment opportunity, having societal impacts, sport-like, entering the mainstream, professionalised and underdeveloped in Australia.

*Keywords:* esports, sports, Australia, media, culture, identity, nationalism

**Esports, Australianness and beating New Zealand: Portrayals of esports in the mainstream Australian news media.**

With the recent rise of esports in the past decade, it is unsurprising that the global phenomenon has begun to garner considerable mainstream media coverage (Jenny et al., 2016). Furthermore, a wider acceptance of esports is being seen across the media landscape, with outlets that had previously shunned esports, like *ESPN*, easing their stance and incorporating esports material into their coverage (Burroughs & Rama, 2015). Thus, practice and phenomenon of esports is being relayed to a broader audience. This recent media coverage likely provides the first impression of esports for those previously uninformed. Among other political, social and cultural factors, news media performs an important role in setting the public agenda (Hughes et al., 2010). Taking the role of an information disseminator for new issues, events and phenomena, mainstream news media outlets are the source that often first make the general public aware of trends initially bound by the niches which spawned them (Conrad, 1997; Nicholls 2011). Consequently, mainstream media also shapes the public's perceptions and understanding of these emergent trends and technologies, providing not only information but also interpretative frameworks (Nelson et al., 1997; Rooke & Amos, 2014); the exclusion and inclusion of content frames and presents particular renditions of reality. This content framing is often informed by national identity, with the media reflecting and reinforcing a country's core values (Due, 2011). With this in mind, Australia and the way its news media covers esports becomes an interesting case.

The media has long held a symbiotic relationship with sport, each relying on the other for their own success (Wenner, 1998). In particular, this relationship is well pronounced in Australia, in part due to the country's self-identification as a sporting nation, stemming from the

importance of sporting prowess in the distinction of an Australian identity from the British (White, 1981; Anderson, 2006). In this sense, core sporting values are also important values in the expression of Australian national identity (Geertz, 2000). As Nicholson et al. (2016) highlights, the degree to which a concept does or does not align with the Australian sporting values can determine whether something is acceptable in Australian culture. Such values represent a conundrum regarding the representation of esports in the media, as the practice embodies a convergence of sporting and video gaming elements (Macey & Hamari, 2018). Debate surrounding esports in various circles, including academia (Hallman & Giel, 2018), proclaims that the concept of esports is oxymoronic by nature; a practice built on two sets of values seemingly at odds with each other. Physicality (Jenny et al., 2016), motor skills (Hilvoorde & Pots, 2016), embodiment (Ekdahl & Ravn, 2019) and fandom (Thiborg, 2009) are just a sample of the concepts evoked in these discussions surrounding esports. While it is evident that the academic corpus has worked to understand esports as a practice (Taylor, 2012), define it and identify its spectating motivations (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017), comparatively little work has been conducted surrounding how esports is perceived by the public, particularly those who are outsiders to the esports community.

Thus, this chapter does not seek join the debate surrounding the relation between esports and sport or attempt to propose a classification. Rather, it seeks to investigate how esports is portrayed in Australian news media considering how deeply sporting values are ingrained in the country's culture and national identity (Mewett, 1999). Such insight can help to further understand the ways in which esports is normalised or marginalised in the mainstream as it continues to gain popularity. While it is inaccurate to suggest that mainstream news media directly determines and reflects public opinion on esports, "media accounts express relevant

values and beliefs, help confer legitimacy to or discredit particular groups by treating them as part of the mainstream or as marginal, and therefore indirectly affect which perspectives do or do not ultimately come to dominate collective discourse and decision-making” (Priest, 2006). If we are to try and understand how individuals are initially positioned to think about esports, we must look at the ways it is framed and presented in mainstream news media coverage. Additionally, this insight may also identify how perceptions and attitudes towards sport has changed. With increasing reliance on technology in the production and spectacle of spectator sports (Bale, 1998), the undeniable disruptive nature of esports in sporting discourse as an entirely computerised practise may identify ways in which sporting values have shifted.

This chapter addresses the need for research on this topic and presents a study conducted to identify portrayals of esports in the mainstream Australian news media. Roughly 11 years’ worth of Australian media coverage regarding esports was analysed, culminating in the identification of 6 major themes. Further examination of these themes identified the influence of core Australian values in their portrayals, particularly those relating to sport.

**Methods**

The study was based around a thematic analysis of 229 articles mentioning esports published in the Australian news media from the first mention of the term in March 2008 until May 2019. 16 major Australian news outlets were selected to provide a comprehensive sample that would broadly cover various readership demographics across the country. The selected outlets were chosen to represent publications on the metropolitan and national level, in print and online, private and government owned, and tabloids and broadsheets. Television and radio news outlets were excluded from the sample due to the lack of comprehensive coverage archives. Furthermore, Hughes et al., (2011) asserts that print publications often set the agenda for coverage in other mediums.

Table 1

*Publication sample*

<b>Publication Name</b>	<b>Ownership</b>	<b>Audience</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Format</b>
The Advertiser	News Corp Australia	Adelaide (South Australia)	Print	Daily tabloid
The Age	Nine Entertainment Co.	Melbourne (Victoria)	Print	Daily compact broadsheet
The Australian	News Corp Australia	National	Print	Daily broadsheet
Australian Broadcasting Company (ABC) News	Government	National	Online	News website
Brisbane Times	Nine Entertainment Co.	Brisbane (Queensland)	Online	Online newspaper
Canberra Times	Nine Entertainment Co.	Canberra (Australian Capital Territory)	Print	Daily compact broadsheet
Courier Mail	News Corp	Brisbane	Print	Daily tabloid

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	Australia	(Queensland)		
Daily Telegraph	News Corp Australia	Sydney (New South Wales)	Print	Daily tabloid
The Herald Sun	News Corp Australia	Melbourne (Victoria)	Print	Daily tabloid
The Mercury	News Corp Australia	Hobart (Tasmania)	Print	Daily tabloid
News.com.au	News Corp Australia	National	Online	Online newspaper
Northern Territory News	News Corp Australia	Darwin (Northern Territory)	Print	Daily tabloid
Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) News	Government <sup>1</sup>	National	Online	News website
Sydney Morning Herald	Nine Entertainment Co.	Sydney (New South Wales)	Print	Daily compact broadsheet
WAToday	Nine Entertainment Co.	Perth (Western Australia)	Online	Online newspaper
The West Australian	Seven West Media	Perth (Western Australia)	Print	Daily Tabloid

While other studies investigating representations in the Australian media have based their publication samples on circulation figures (Hughes et al., 2010; Hughes et al., 2011; Nicholson et al., 2016), this study did not exclude relatively small publications for the sake of representing the local news of each Australian state and territory. This was deemed important, considering the grassroots efforts of small, scattered local esports communities (Keiper et al., 2017). If coverage concerning these more modest endeavours is to be captured, then sampling by circulation is inappropriate. For example, the Northern Territory News has a relatively small average daily circulation of 53,000 despite being the major metropolitan newspaper for the Northern Territory (“NT News – News Corp Australia,” n.d.). Such an approach also helps shed light on state-based differences in esports representations.

Content aggregator *Factiva* was used to search and collect the articles, using the search query “esports”, alongside alternative spellings “e-sports” and “eSports”. Since many of Australia’s media outlets are owned and syndicated by either *Nine Entertainment Co.* (formally *Fairfax Media*) or *News Corp Australia*, duplicate articles published in multiple publications were manually excluded from the data set, with the earliest appearance of the article remaining. Articles that used the term “esports” in ways other than as “a form of sport where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems” (Hamari & Sjöblom, 2017) were also excluded. Articles directly concerning esports and those mentioning esports in passing were both included in the analysis. PDF files of each article were downloaded from *Factiva* and imported into qualitative coding software *NVivo 12*, sorted by publication date, then subjected to a thematic analysis.

This analysis method was informed by guidelines developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) for its comprehensiveness and ability to consolidate large data sets. The analysis lead with an initial familiarisation of the data, which involved the reading of each article. Following this, each article was systematically coded for themes concerning the presentation and portrayals of esports. Besides the content of these articles, the tone of writing was also taken into account in the coding process. These codes were consolidated and categorised against each other, following which a process of axial coding informed by Straussian grounded theory methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) was conducted to explore relationships between these categories. This led to the generation of 6 key themes. The articles were then read and coded again, this time with these key themes in mind to ensure they were broadly representative of the data set.



## Results

Six major themes were generated from the thematic analysis. Although presented independently here, these themes inform each other to varying extents. This will be elaborated on in the discussion section. From the analysis, esports was presented in the Australian mainstream media coverage as:

*An investment opportunity:* Portrays esports as an untapped opportunity for business investment among multiple entities external to esports.

*Having societal impacts:* Suggests that the growth of esports will have broad impacts on Australian society, both positive and negative.

*Entering the mainstream:* Presents esports as increasingly becoming normalised and known by the general public.

*Underdeveloped in Australia:* Presents esports in Australia as underdeveloped in comparison to mostly Northern Hemisphere countries and regions.

*Sport-like:* Portrays esports as possessing qualities similar to traditional sports in terms of practice, spectatorship and industry.

*Professionalised:* Portrays esports as a profession, evolved beyond an activity of leisure. Esports careers were presented as viable options with various professions within the esports industry.

### **An investment opportunity**

This was the most prevalent theme throughout the 229 analysed articles. The recognition of esports as an opportunity to conduct business occurred early in the surveyed media coverage, first appearing in an August 2009 article. Here, a producer for a competitive gaming event organiser speaks of esports audiences as a target for advertising.

*“With our model, we've taken [competitions] out of LAN cafes and we've put them into TV studios – and as soon as you do that, you create something for spectators to watch, players want to take part in and sponsors can use to advertise their products.”* (The Age, 20/8/2009)

In this theme, esports was presented as an untapped market of an elusive demographic that could be accessed through investment. Most commonly, this demographic was portrayed as youthful, with the term ‘millennial’ often being used to describe the esports audience. Other coverage was more specific in their descriptions, with a range of “14 to 34 year olds” commonly recurring. This youthful market was presented as attractive in two main ways: as a target for advertisers and as a way for existing organisations to broaden their existing demographic reach. In particular, this was mainly in relation to sports organisations, which were reported as investing into esports to reach a technologically engaged, young demographic who were perceived to lack interest in traditional sports. The majority of this coverage started appearing from May 2017 onwards, following the purchase of two esports teams in the *Oceanic Pro League (OPL)* by *Australian Football League (AFL)* clubs, following in the footsteps of overseas sporting organisations.

*Crows chief executive Andrew Fagan said the fast-expanding eSports industry would augment fan reach, the club’s brand and its commercial platform, intersecting the areas of technology, media and entertainment.* (The Advertiser, 18/5/2017)

This diversification through esports appeared to be a part of a larger push for Australian sporting organisations to reach new audiences following a perception that existing sporting outlets have reached “*peak capacity*” (The Age, 19/12/2018). Esports was often grouped with other recent alternative sporting ventures, such as AFL Women’s (AFLW) and AFLX, designed by the AFL to capture a female and international audience respectively.

*... the Crows have added baseball, Esports, AFLW and an expanding media operation working beyond sport.* (The Advertiser, 1/3/2019).

Beyond simply purchasing esports teams, sporting organisations were often reported as offering professional facilities and support to their esports teams and players. These facilities and opportunities were presented as a way to draw on the existing elite expertise of these sporting organisations to elevate their newly acquired esports entities beyond the levels that they could achieve before.

*“We will bring our expertise in elite and professional sport to strengthen the team across all areas, including a particular focus on player welfare and development.”* (The Advertiser, 9/12/2017).

Besides interest in esports as an investment opportunity from an industry perspective, other coverage noted a growing interest in esports on a governmental level. While expressed governmental interest in esports appeared in coverage as early as May 2017 following the first forays of Australian sporting organisations into the esports industry, the majority of coverage

appeared starting in June 2018 after the announcement of the *Melbourne eSports Open*, an esports exhibition event birthed from a partnership between *ESL* and the Victorian state government. The event was often portrayed as an attraction that would “*bring a whole new demographic of tourists to Melbourne*” (Herald Sun, 24/6/2018), resonating with the diversification motivations of sports industry involvement. Through tourism, the event was presented as a substantial boost for the local Victorian economy. Prior to the announcement of the *Melbourne eSports Open*, the success of esports as a tourist attraction overseas appeared in coverage surrounding the rising popularity of esports globally, alongside early considerations of local government-lead esports events. Additionally, much coverage surrounding local government interest in esports portrayed a sense of competition between Australian cities to establish themselves as the “national esports capital”. This was often portrayed as a rivalry between Sydney and Melbourne, with Sydney having hosted the majority of recent major esports events in Australia and Melbourne hosting the largest national event.

*MELBOURNE will stage Australia’s biggest annual video gaming tournament this year in a bid to become the eSports capital of the nation.* (Herald Sun, 3/8/2018)

Unsurprisingly, most of the coverage concerning this came from Victorian publications reporting on the Melbourne eSports Open. More recent coverage presents other benefits of esports to governments beyond tourism and economics. Coverage from the Northern Territory presents governmental interest in esports as a way to reduce crime among youth in the state’s second largest city, Palmerston.

*“Positive activities, such as eSports, present an opportunity for young people to be engaged in a safe, regulated and supervised environment.”* (Northern Territory News, 8/12/2018)

Aside from generating income through direct investment into the esports industry, gambling opportunities surrounding esports were also picked up in the coverage. The first article of this coverage centred around Australia’s largest gambling company, *Tabcorp*, partnering with an American start-up to start offering wagering on esports tournaments. The esports market was portrayed as having grown large enough to warrant investment into esports wagering, targeting new demographics. Alongside the rapid growth of the esports industry, the satellite esports gambling industry was also presented as quickly growing. The opportunities for investment into esports gambling in Australia were presented as alluring, based on lucrative figures from overseas esports gambling.

### **Having societal impacts**

Throughout the coverage the phenomenon of esports was presented as having broader societal impacts. The majority of these impacts concerned children, who were perceived as the most prominent demographic which engages with esports.

As has been previously noted, the organised, supervised elements of esports were seen as beneficial for bringing at-risk youths off the streets and into a positive environment, reducing crime and anti-social behaviour. Another positive impact that appeared in the coverage presented esports as a productive form of gaming, particularly for school children. This type of coverage predominately surrounded the introduction of extracurricular esports programs in Australian

schools. Here, esports was presented as a way to harness school children's existing interest in gaming and apply it in a supportive school sporting context.

*“The kids are going to play anyway,” Smart said. “To have it as an organised competition is similar to netball and football — you play for a team, there's scoring and points.”*

(The Advertiser, 19/5/2018)

By engaging in gaming as an organised sport activity, it was anticipated that school children would learn valuable life skills in a similar manner to traditional sports. Through this portrayal of esports as a productive form of gaming for school children, 'regular' gaming was implied as unproductive, being a solitary, anti-social activity without the beneficial sporting elements of esports. In this sense, through esports, gaming was transformed from an unproductive activity to a productive one.

Conversely, esports was also portrayed as luring people away from playing traditional sports, presenting the sedentary aspects of esports as unhealthy and against the core values of sports. The majority of this sentiment was concentrated in opinion pieces questioning the legitimacy of esports possibly appearing at the Olympics. Through the growing popularity of esports, it was perceived that sport would become devalued or even defiled.

*For most Australia children an interest in sport is inevitable (if you unplug the PlayStation).* (The Sydney Morning Herald, 22/12/2018).

*The International Olympic Committee should not accept the popularity of electronic sports as a signal to adopt eSports to the Games. It should take up the challenge to get people away from computer consoles to play real sports. (The Advertiser, 12/8/2017).*

Even in coverage surrounding the success of professional Australian esports players, esports was also presented as a distraction from other productive activities like study and traditional sports. Most of this position appeared in relation to the parents of young Australian esports professionals expressing scepticism or concern towards their child's choice of career.

*Mr Dennis said he was supportive of Sam's passion for eSports, provided his school marks didn't drop and he played a team sport outside as well. (The Mercury, 14/10/2018)*

Concerns surrounding the violent content of esports titles featuring shooting-based gameplay also appear in the coverage. Again, much of this coverage surrounded children and centred around how exposure to violent esports content would impact them. In particular, this coverage centred around the possibility of esports appearing at the Olympics. The concern here was twofold – a fear of children being negatively influenced by this exposure to violent content and the Olympics' image being tarnished.

*Dr Joanne Orlando, a researcher on children's use of technology with Western Sydney University, says parents and the community are worried about the violent element in games.*

*And the International Olympic Committee says violent video games will never be a part of the Olympics.*

*"It's a concern for the Olympic Committee that they don't want to bring that kind of narrative of killing into the Olympic Games," Dr Orlando said. (ABC News, 1/6/2018).*

While the economic prospects of esports gambling was presented as profitable, coverage often portrayed esports gambling negatively. Fears surrounded esports becoming a gambling gateway for young fans. Companies investing directly into the esports industry were keen to distinguish themselves from the satellite esports gambling industry, deflecting the associated stigmas. Here, an executive of an Australian online esports matchmaking platform stresses that their services were centred around skill-based prize pools, rather than luck-based wagering.

*'But Mr Abl is quick to distance himself from gambling, even though eSports Mogul users buy digital coins to form a prize pool to compete with other users. They can then exchange winnings for cash if they wish.'* (The Sydney Morning Herald, 4/2/2016)

Distain for esports gambling also appeared in the coverage on a governmental level. While reported as technically illegal in all Australian states apart from the Northern Territory, off-shore online gambling services and a lack of regulation made enforcement difficult. The South Australian and New South Wales state governments have been both reported has cracking down on unregulated esports betting, with SA explicitly reported as rejecting proposals to legalise the practice. Again, the main concerns surround youth involvement in esports gambling. Fears of gambling encouraging the formation of organised crime syndicates around esports was also reported in the coverage. This was presented as detrimental to the industry through the possibility of match-fixing, something previously reported overseas.



**Sport-like**

Another theme which appeared consistently throughout the range of coverage was the portrayal of esports as having sport-like qualities. Regardless of how the coverage presented esports in relation to sport, the broad consensus suggested that esports at least somewhat embodied elements of traditional sports. The most common way this theme manifested was through the use of illustrative sports comparisons to illustrate the concept of esports for the uninitiated. These illustrative comparisons also appeared early in the coverage, first being used in a July 2008 article to convey the high salaries of South Korean esports players, as well as their celebrity status and intense training.

*The life of a pro game player in South Korea is not unlike those of sports stars. They earn six-figure salaries, play for corporate-sponsored teams and live with their teammates. The typical daily regime of a pro StarCraft player includes up to 10 hours' practice, plus interviews, photo shoots and paid appearances. (The Herald Sun, 16/7/2008).*

Sport comparisons were made to explain esports over a wide range of topics, including spectating motivations, rules of play, professional careers, fandom, organisational structure, industry, player skillsets, strategy and popularity. Overall, these comparisons worked by relating esports to established sporting conventions, turning an alienating concept into something familiar. Even among articles arguing against the idea of esports as a sport, similar comparisons were made with sports to illustrate sport-like elements of esports. However, these comparisons were instead framed as deceptive, with an underlying emphasis on a required element of physicality needed for an activity to be considered a sport. Additionally, these articles often

grouped and compared esports with activities often placed at the fringes of the sport definition, such as rock climbing, surfing, chess and darts. This coverage mostly centred around the possibility of esports appearing at the Olympics. In some opinion pieces, the sport-like aspects of esports were portrayed as distracting the *International Olympics Committee* from considering other, more deserving non-conventional sports for inclusion in an upcoming Olympics. Leading from this sentiment, it was alleged that the inclusion of esports at the Olympics would set the precedent for other seemingly trivial activities to be also included.

*If eSports makes it onto the schedule for the 2024 Olympics or any time thereafter, what comes after that - sprint karaoke, putt-putt golf and teams hide-and-peek? (The Sydney Morning Herald, 22/12/2018)*

Articles portraying esports as a sport also did not claim that esports were sport-like in terms of its physicality, with many of these articles construing other sport-like elements of esports as being more important. Specifically, these articles commonly deemed esports was a sport due to its alignment with sporting culture, both from a player and spectator perspective. The idea of being able to support your country through esports was a common manifestation of this. Other portrayals evoke sporting narratives of training hard to be able to represent your country on the international stage.

*Esports deserves its place in sport's showpiece event, argues Scott Wenkart. It's the pinnacle of sporting achievement. Representing your country in a sport you've dedicated your*

*life to. Pulling on your nation's colours because you've earned the right.* (The Sydney Morning Herald, 3/10/2017)

On a similar note, esports was presented as an alternative outlet for the expression and engagement in sporting culture. In some cases, it was presented as a sporting outlet for videogame fans who held little interest for traditional sports throughout their life and struggled to understand the allure of spectator sports.

*Finally, here was a game I understood. A game I could follow.* (The Herald Sun, 4/2/2018)

Other articles presented esports as an alternate way to fulfil professional sporting desires for those lacking in aptitude or suffering from injury. This type of coverage mainly occurred after the purchase of esports teams by *AFL* clubs, which lead to esports players competing under the banner of iconic Australian sporting institutions.

*"I grew up as a big Essendon fan, so to be part of the Essendon Football Club, it was a surreal feeling."* (ABC News, 26/7/2018)

Also following the acquisition of esports teams by *AFL* clubs was the development of rivalries between esports teams, mirroring those found in the *AFL*. These rivalries were presented as a positive thing for Australian esports, fostering competition among these newly

acquired teams and would help esports become more sport-like and drive a sense of localised team fandom.

*IT is not quite a fiery MCG blockbuster between Collingwood and Carlton yet, but a new sporting rivalry is brewing in Melbourne. eSports clubs Bombers and ORDER are confident their rivalry will one day be among the biggest in Melbourne's sport. (The Herald Sun, 25/1/2018)*

Furthermore, the opportunity to engage in established Australian sporting rivalries with other countries were presented in a similar fashion.

*Plus, we might even get to beat New Zealand at something, and really, isn't that what being Australian is all about? (The Herald Sun, 19/1/2018)*

### **Entering the mainstream**

Esports was also presented as making progress towards receiving mainstream recognition, expanding beyond a niche interest. This started in early coverage from 2008, which portrayed esports as a niche interest starting to be pushed through to the mainstream by several new and established esports organisations. Although portrayed as well established in Asian countries like South Korea, it was implied that mainstream recognition in the West was needed for the practice to be legitimised.

*... when will "eSports" mature from being some esoteric, nerdish peculiarity of the technophile East, and reach the mainstream media of the West? (The Canberra Times, 19/7/2013)*

Often, esports was portrayed as entering the mainstream through empirical figures presenting the broad popularity of esports, such as large viewership numbers and industry's value. Emphasising these figures, comparisons were often made to those of other popular media like spectator sports and television shows, highlighting ways in which esports were comparable or surpassed them.

*A semi-final in the League of Legends World Championships in Beijing last year played for a capacity crowd of 80,000 at the Bird's Nest Olympic stadium and an online audience of more than 80 million, putting it second only to the Super Bowl in spectator numbers. (The Australian, 20/4/2018).*

The growing trend in esports adopting traditional sporting conventions was also used to highlight esports' growing mainstream appeal. In particular, the play of esports in iconic sporting venues was used to portray esports as becoming popular and sport-like enough to warrant the use of these places.

*This weekend in a stadium built for the 2000 Sydney Olympics, an event like none seen before in Australia has drawn gamers from around the world competing for glory. (The Herald Sun, 6/5/2017)*

Another way that esports was presented as becoming mainstream was the portrayal of esports as defying negative stereotypes of associated with gaming. In particular, it was emphasised that esports professionals were not simply “*anti-social, maladjusted nerds who dwell in basements in the eerie glow of their computer screens*” (The Herald Sun, 3/4/2018). Rather, this type of coverage presented esports players as social, professional, mature and fit individuals who regularly travelled as a part of their career. By shedding existing stigmatised stereotypes of gaming culture, esports was presented as well-adjusted, serious profession. The anecdote of gaming ‘moving out of the basement’ was commonly used to evoke this.

Also defying stereotypes was the portrayal of esports as being engaged with by people beyond the stereotypical “teenaged boy” demographic. In particular, it was stressed that esports fans were generally older than one would expect and that a sizable number of fans were female. These assertions often did not draw from figures derived from esports itself, but rather extrapolated from broader gaming practices. Through this, esports was presented as no longer a niche interest.

*I imagine you’ve seen headlines about e-sports for the past couple of years and thought it’s something that is niche, the video-game audience is mainly teenage boys, right? Well not quite. Even at events I hear middle-aged men say the first they heard of it was through their kids. However, the facts stand that 47 per cent of Australian gamers are female. And the average age for viewers on Twitch is 35. (The Australian, 20/4/2018)*

However, despite coverage portraying esports as entering the mainstream, articles reported issues which had become apparent through esports rapid growth. In particular, those presented were portrayed as pernicious remnants of broad gaming culture and industry that would need to deal with if esports is to truly become an accepted mainstream entertainment media. Commonly highlighted issues related to gender, namely a lack of female representation in esports as a profession and hostility directed towards female esports players. While these issues were not presented as inherent to esports, they were presented as ingrained in gaming culture and consequently also an issue for esports as a derivative of gaming. As a result of this negativity towards women in gaming culture, it was reported that female gamers were less likely to pursue esports as a profession out of fear of harassment. Additionally, in these articles reporting on these gender issues, the esports demographic was presented as teenaged and male, in contrast to more diverse representations previously mentioned. While these issues were presented as major hurdles for esports, the esports industry was reported as actively working to overcome them.

*“Of course bullying will occur — we are dealing with a demographic of competitive teenagers with access to social media. However, the league has a zero tolerance policy on it.”*

(ABC News, 11/5/2017)

### **Underdeveloped in Australia**

Despite a perceived shift towards the mainstream, the coverage reported esports in Australia as underdeveloped, particularly in comparison to esports in the northern hemisphere countries, where esports was presented as well established, popular, lucrative. Overall, it was presented that esports was a phenomenon that developed overseas and had started to come to

Australia as a part of its growing global popularity. In early coverage, the Australian esports scene was presented as passionate as scenes overseas, albeit on a smaller scale in terms of earnings, prize pools, industry, professional opportunities and viewership. As coverage continued, certain developments in international esports were reported as landmarks in the advancement of overseas esports scenes. These landmarks were used as a metric to measure the progression of Australia's esports scene, which in all cases was used to highlight how far behind Australia was in comparison to major esports regions like of North America, Europe and Asia. Some of these landmarks included the purchase of an esports team sports industry figures, the hosting of a prestigious esports event, and the salaries of national players.

*Australia is catching up on the popularity of eSports, but is years behind other countries. Owning an eSports team is common in the US, with many basketballers or footballers owning stakes in a team. (The Age, 29/10/2016)*

*'ADELAIDE has set a Australian precedent - landing a professional eSports team in a trend set by global franchises from Philadelphia 36ers to Manchester City.'* (The Advertiser, 18/5/2017)

Contributing to this delayed development of Australian esports were issues depicted as uniquely Australian, compounded by each other. Australia's distance from the major northern hemisphere esports regions was portrayed as a natural geographical disadvantage when combined with a poorly perceived national internet infrastructure, leading to uncompetitive high latency conditions when trying to play against international opponents. As a result, coverage



reported that Australians were forced to play against mainly Australian opponents, causing underperformance when competing internationally.

*But he says eSports' greatest challenge in Australia is internet speeds. "Australia is quite a distance behind," he said. "Last I checked we sat behind Slovakia in global internet speed rankings and general geographical spread." For a lot of Aussie pro gamers, it is difficult to compete on the world stage because the only opportunities they have are events they travel out to, and are generally soundly beaten due to lack of quality competition back home. (The Advertiser, 16/9/2018)*

In response to these issues, coverage reported that many skilled Australia esports professionals had moved overseas as a necessity to further pursue their careers. Although this exodus of Australian esports professionals was depicted as taking resources away from the development of Australian esports, the representation and presence of Australians in international esports was hoped to draw global attention to Australia as an esports region. Australian esports professionals working or competing overseas were presented as patriotic, taking pride in expressing their Australian identity on the global stage. This was not limited to players; Australian shoutcasters were often presented finding success overseas while promoting Australian esports in the process.

*Leslie has had to dial back his accent for the benefit of a global audience, but he is fiercely proud of Australia's growing gaming community. "I want people to know I'm Australian," Leslie said. "I'm gonna hurl at them a bunch of phrases they don't understand,*

*because I've got a country of 20-plus million people behind me, and I'm really happy that I'm able to represent them. It's huge.*" (The Australian, 23/1/2018)

Reflecting the Australian esports struggle was a portrayal of Australian esports teams as underdogs going into major international competitions. Teams from South Korea, the USA and China were presented as juggernauts with major sponsorship deals, salaried celebrity players and vast range of resources at their disposal, while Australian teams were presented as somewhat amateurish, lacking access to these resources with players working or studying on the side to support themselves. Despite the stacked odds, coverage was usually optimistic, suggesting that these underdog narratives would help draw attention to Australian esports if Australian teams are able to surpass international expectations. Although Australians winning major international events were rarely reported, simply placing among other established esports regions was worthy of celebration.

*'And South Korea. The team that's never lost a match in the history of this event. The team that will be Australia's first opponent in the elimination stage of this tournament. With the esports equivalent of David and Goliath awaiting his team, how is Australian head coach Jordan "Gunba" Graham feeling heading into the finals? Nervous? Scared? "Mission accomplished," Gunba said. Here's why. All these players wanted was a chance. This year they've got it'* (ABC News, 18/9/2018)

More recent coverage presented the setbacks of Australian esports in a somewhat positive light, asserting that these conditions have led Australian esports players to work hard and overcompensate for these disadvantages, creating valuable players.

*"What Australia has often been good at is while we're usually lower on athletes than other countries, we're often over-achieving because we're probably putting more emphasis on the psychology aspect of competition."* (News.com.au, 22/2/2019)

### **Professionalised**

Throughout the coverage esports was presented as achieving a level of professionalism and was no longer just an activity of leisure. The key distinction made was the transition of esports from hobby to a career. Specifically, the ability for esports players to be able to financially support themselves off esports was used to signal this notion. Although not as impressive as the earnings of international esports players, the act of making money playing video games competitively in Australia was still deemed important, even if not enough to support one's self with entirely. The travel to other countries to compete was also an integral aspect of esports professionalisation, presented like a rite of passage for new Australian esports professionals

*Twenty-year-old Bendigo gamer Tyler Reilly has never worked a "normal" job but now finds himself a pro player. "Playing is my job," he said. "I don't get paid a lot right now but I definitely think that is going to change. I only really started playing professionally in the last year and I've already competed in Poland and Malaysia"* (The Herald Sun, 6/5/2017)

The adherence to a work-like structure was further presented at distancing professional esports from hobbyist gaming. Being salaried while working set hours and interacting with other organisational figures was a commonly drawn on example to emphasise that playing esports had become a job. The time investment of players and the skills they acquire were also depicted as integral aspects of esports professionalisation. Specifically, the ability to invest ample time to develop the skills needed to compete at the highest level were depicted as unobtainable without financial support and was thus unachievable by those pursuing esports as a hobby rather than a dedicated career. This newfound professionalism in esports was often depicted as surprising for esports players, who themselves were portrayed as unaware of their own popularity. Through this, much of the legitimacy behind esports as a profession was expressed through the recognition of esports players as celebrities in the esports fandoms.

*Tyler "Tucks" Reilly, the captain of Chiefs CS:GO team, is still getting used to his status as an eSports celebrity. "This is one of the biggest events in the world so just having this come to Australia is huge," he said. "Everyone just comes up to us and asks for photos and signatures, it's crazy." (ABC News, 7/5/2017)*

Similarly, esports professionals were often reported as feeling legitimised after being treated as equals by other professional athletes. This coverage started appearing following the acquisition of esports teams by the *AFL*, who proceed to host their esports facilities in the same locations as their *AFL* facilities.

*"I was a little bit nervous when I first came here — we wouldn't fit in," he said. "But honestly, everybody has been so welcoming. It's so cool [having] a footy player coming up to you asking how your day is." He said many AFL players shared an interest in gaming. "Whether or not they're playing our game or a different game, there's something for us to relate to them on."*  
(ABC News, 26/7/2018)

Through the association with established sporting organisations, esports were portrayed as appearing legitimised to those initially unfamiliar with the phenomenon. Here, the mother of an esports industry figure was able to comprehend the concept of esports as a profession through its relationship with the *AFL*.

*"My mum was like, 'My son is now working for Essendon' and could see it in real terms. It was a real tangible thing she could explain to her friends and it gave me a bit of cred."* (The Herald Sun, 30/6/2018)

Major esports events were also presented as professional spectacles through their high production values and their visual and structural similarities to traditional sporting events. Much like how the defying of stereotypes was portrayed as helping esports gain mainstream acceptance, the same can be said about in regards to professionalisation. Through the defying of these immature depictions of gaming, esports was presented as a mature and refined form of gaming.

### **Discussion**

Based on the analysis, esports was presented as experiencing growth predominately through investment by external parties. Growth was commonly attributed to the facilities, support and funding provided by traditional sporting organisations, while little evidence of internal growth was portrayed, suggesting an absence of these resources from within the esports industry. From this influence, esports was portrayed as having developed signifiers indicative of traditional sports, ranging from its aesthetics, organisational structure, career progression, revenue streams and spectacle. Coverage surrounding the purchase of esports teams by AFL teams were particularly rich in these observations, noting that sporting organisations bought funding, support and facilities to these esports entities that they did not have prior, thus elevating them. Through this influence and support from external sources, esports was construed as moving into the mainstream and becoming professionalised thanks to these relations to traditional sports and its growing reminiscence of sports. Conversely, this suggested that esports would have remained a niche without external influence, with early coverage prior to this external interest in esports portraying esports as struggling to receive mainstream attention through their own endeavours.

Such observations reflect the notion within literature that esports has become sportified (Karhulahti, 2017; Cunningham et al., 2018; Heere, 2018). According to Lopez-Gonzalez and Griffiths (2018), “sportification is the process of incorporating the logics of sport to non-sporting contexts”. The most explicit way that this was highlighted in the results was the transformation of gaming as a vice to a productive activity. Here, the sportified elements of esports such as organisational structure, sociality, teamwork, wages and spectator spectacle were drawn on to highlight a stronger relation to sports than to gaming. Established negative stereotypes of gaming

were shown as being defied by esports, which worked to further solidify this perspective. Esports was portrayed as having matured beyond the trivial and potentially harmful pursuits of gaming as leisure, literally and metaphorically emerging from the basement. Sport, already a well-established and enjoyed of past-time Australians that traces back to the formation of the Australian national identity (White, 1981), was used as an understandable comparison to explain the concept of esports in the coverage, which in turn worked to present esports as a similarly professionally viable career. Such professional acceptance was seen in articles discussing how esports as a career became accepted among family members of esports professionals after the purchase of esports teams by sporting organisations and how these esports professionals were treated as equals by their traditional athlete counterparts.

Although debate surrounding whether esports could or should be considered a sport was varied in the coverage, the sportification of esports was pervasive throughout. Even among opinion pieces which portrayed esports as wrongly encroaching on sanctified sporting territories like the Olympics, this type of coverage still portrayed esports as having been professionalised through associations with sports and the efforts of sporting organisations to push esports into the mainstream sports limelight, albeit misguidedly and somewhat deceptively. This is an important point to highlight, as it reflects debates within sports management literature regarding sportification. Amongst the debate of whether esports should be researched in the scholarly field of sports and sports management, Heere (2018) asserts that approaching the conundrum such as a perspective ill-informed. Rather, he claims that the domain of sport is polymorphic and cannot be institutionally defined and that scholars should account for emergent sport-like activities and instances of sportification to further developments in sports management. While there was no unifying stance towards esports' status as a sport, it can be inferred from the analysed coverage

that the polymorphism of sport is indirectly portrayed. In almost all cases, sport is considered at least somewhat polymorphic in relation to esports. Although few articles outrightly claimed esports to be a sport, most presented esports as either a non-conventional sport, an alternative to sport or a false sport. Common among these representations was a notion of a sport-like quality to esports, which was portrayed both as a positive and negative aspect. This sport-like quality was presented as allowing esports to fit into traditional sporting contexts and could be organised and managed in a similar manner. Even coverage portraying esports as a false sport still presented it in this way, suggesting that it would detract from other non-conventional sports. Although esports was presented as underserving of mainstream acceptance in comparison to other marginalised sport-like activities, these articles presented a polymorphic (albeit more limited) impression of sport and suggests that esports was managed and organised like a sport.

Acceptance of esports as a legitimate professional pursuit in the coverage stemmed from how well esports was perceived to align with core Australian values. Specifically, values regarding sport in Australian culture and national identity were most commonly drawn on, likely reflecting the ambiguity surrounding the status of esports as a sport, as well as the general difficulty to define sport (McBride, 1975). Articles opposing the idea of esports being portrayed and promoted as a sport highlighted the ways in which they perceived esports differed from traditional sports the most. This often manifested as lack of physicality in esports. This concern was mostly expressed in relation to children, who were perceived as a major esports audience. In these articles, the engagement with esports was portrayed as a subtractive activity, rather than something that could be engaged with alongside traditional sports. By playing esports, it was thought that Australian children would not develop an “inevitable” interest in sport. While sporting pride is a value held by numerous nations and communities, Mewett (1999) claims that



sport is intrinsic of the Australian national identity. This impression stems the sporting prowess of Australian sports teams in comparison to British teams in the nineteenth century (White, 1981). The consistency at which Australians began to win sporting competitions against the colonial motherland birthed a perception among the colonies that Australian-raised “Britons” were more adept than those born in the British Isles, thus developing the one of the first notions of Australian nationalism (Horton, 2000). While the USA had fought for its independence, Australia continued to remain closely associated with Britain in terms of identity. This aptitude for sport thus acted as a way for a distinct Australian national identity to exist despite remaining a colony (Mewett, 1999). In this sense, esports was portrayed as unnatural and incompatible with core Australian values, even to the extent of potentially undermining what it means to be an Australian.

Conversely, coverage presenting esports as a productive activity highlighted ways in which esports was compatible with Australian sporting values. This was commonly done by relating the positively portrayed elements of teamwork, communication and dedication found in esports to those similar found in traditional sports. Although no articles attempted to deny that esports was a mostly sedentary activity, some articles supporting the legitimisation of esports as a sport presented it as irrelevant to the core values of sport. Alternatively, the sedentary nature of esports was presented alongside quotes from esports players or coaches outlining the importance they placed on physical conditioning and maintaining a healthy lifestyle to supplement their mental state and composure. Through this alignment with sporting values, esports was presented as a productive activity and further distanced from gaming, deflecting recent moral panic (Bowman, 2015) surrounding the effects of screen time on children (Gentile, 2011), gaming-related aggressive behaviour (Przybylski, 2014) and recent medical classifications of a “gaming

disorder” (“WHO | Gaming Disorder,” 2018). In turn, this presented esports as compatible with Australian culture, being portrayed as a sport or sport-alternative for a new, technologically engaged generation of Australians, offering the same benefits as traditional sports. Esports was also presented as a new medium to engage in traditional sporting rivalries, which were implied to be integral aspects of Australian sporting culture. Internationally, the opportunity to engage in the friendly pseudo-sibling rivalry between Australia and New Zealand (Smith, 2013) was described as “what being Australian is all about”; an example of a contemporary derivative of formative and still prominent Australian sporting rivalries (Maguire, 2011). Symbols of Australian sporting rivalry, such as *The Ashes* cricket series played against England, represent a “historic antagonism between the one-time ‘mother country’ and a young nation too long handicapped by an unnecessary sense of cultural cringe” (Smith, 2013). From its use as a way to push back against authoritarianism in colonial Australia, the importance of national sporting rivalry has lasted into the present day and was presented as finding a new outlet through esports.

Throughout the Australian media coverage and portrayal of esports, it became clear that many elements of Australian culture and national identity, particularly those related to sporting, were evoked and reflected. Loss on the global stage is a normalised aspect of the Australian culture, stemming from the deaths of Australian troops on the shores of Gallipoli in a failed assault against the Turkish during the First World War in 1915; an event that is often attributed as further developing the notion of a distinct Australian national identity. Despite the mass casualties of the assault on Gallipoli, the loss of life was and continues to be celebrated nationally as a demonstration of the uniquely Australian “Anzac spirit<sup>2</sup>”; a manifestation of the stories recounting the unwavering bravery and mateship expressed by the Anzacs in the face of certain doom (Due, 2008). Furthermore, Gallipoli is presented as a failure experienced by

Australia, but not caused by it. Specifically, blame is usually directed towards the English commanders who directed the Anzac troops at Gallipoli, are often portrayed as misguided at best, or malicious at worst (Due, 2008). This deflection of blame has been noted as manifesting in various facets of contemporary Australian culture since, particularly in sports. Nicholson et al., (2016) describes how Australia's poor performance in the 2010 *FIFA World Cup* was dismissed within Australian media coverage as being the result of several external factors, stacking the odds against the *Socceroos* and downplaying their own shortcomings. Through their analysis, Nicholson et al. suggests that there is a precariously thin line which separates strong feelings of nationalism and inadequacy in relation to loss in Australian culture. While this nature to deflect blame works to establish Australian sports teams as competent, it in turn creates deeply ingrained expectations of success. In this sense, Nicholson et al. assert that losses are "translated as a threat to Australian national identity." Australians perceive themselves as held back by uniquely Australian issues outside of their control, yet their endeavours to overcome these disadvantages generates a great sense of pride and accomplishment, even in relative failure. On the other hand, the idea of such failures being a self-identified fault is seen as threatening to Australian values, and as such external factors are blamed instead and deemed "un-Australian" (Due, 2011).

Such aspects of the Australian national identity make it unsurprising that that admiration of and national self-identification as "the underdog" has been portrayed in numerous Australian narratives. Beyond the Anzacs, other Australian cultural icons reflect the 'Aussie battler' underdog ideal, such as bushrangers and convicts; victims of external, unfair authoritarian discrimination vehemently attempting to triumph against seemingly hopeless odds (Tranter and Donoghue, 2007). This notion of the Australian underdog was reflected heavily in the analysed

esports media coverage. While Australian esports players were consistently portrayed as talented, skilled, valued and overachieving, they were also paradoxically portrayed as rarely successful in international competitions. Like Nicholson et al.'s (2016) findings, blame for losses were shifted to external sources while the Australian players were presented as victims of unfortunate circumstances who competed unfazed regardless of these setbacks. The recipients of this blame were almost always either beyond or portrayed as beyond the control of the Australian esports players and industry, ranging from geographical isolation, poor internet speeds, few opportunities for local competition and the juggernaut status of major international esports regions. Through this, the impact of losses was downplayed and were often construed as somewhat impressive when considering these setbacks. Winning was often not presented as the only form of success, with a desire to demonstrate Australian esportsing prowess to the world being a goal in itself. This also manifested in the international pursuits of non-player esports professionals, demonstrating a strong desire to express patriotism and draw attention to Australian esports. Australia, among other countries of minor global political power, view international sports as an outlet to prove their prowess and fortify their national identity (Sack and Suster, 2000). Based on these observations, the same can be said of Australian esports as portrayed in Australian mainstream media coverage.

### **Conclusion**

While debate continues in academia and elsewhere surrounding the legitimacy of esports being classified as a sport, Gratton and Taylor (2000) suggests that the broad acknowledgement of an activity as a sport is in part dictated by its acceptance within the media or sporting agencies. This chapter has provided insight into how the Australian public is positioned to perceive esports through the portrayal of the practice in mainstream Australian news media. Through the thematic analysis of 229 Australian news articles from 2008-2019, it was evident that much coverage of esports was made in relation to sport. Although the literature has investigated esports as a gaming future (Wagner, 2006; Seo and Jung, 2014; Burroughs and Rama, 2015) it was largely presented as a sporting future in the analysed coverage. It became clear that while the portrayals of esports were varied, they were based on how well they aligned with Australian sporting values. This notion was a common thread throughout the six major themes that were generated from the thematic analysis. These six themes portrayed esports as an investment opportunity, having societal impacts, sport-like, entering the mainstream, professionalised and underdeveloped in Australia.

From a business perspective, esports was presented as future direction for the established sports industry to expand into, appealing to a young, more technologically savvy audience. Esports was seen by sporting organisations as an avenue to diversify and reach to a new, perceived elusive demographic. Through similarities with sports and the relative youth of esports, external investors saw esports as a logical and fitting diversification while also working to shape esports in the image of sport; something with an established record of success (Griffiths, 2017). On a governmental level, the subsidisation of esports reflects a similar acceptance of sporting values and benefits (Gratton and Taylor, 2000). Through this association with traditional

sporting organisations, esports was portrayed as legitimised and professional. The appearance of esports events in traditional sporting places and references of the growing presence of esports in the mainstream media presented esports as entering the mainstream, despite being held back by a number of remnant issues of its gaming progenitor.

It was widely presented that esports was sport-like to a certain extent. Through these sport-like elements, esports was portrayed as a new outlet to express patriotic Australian sporting narratives and provide a potentially new and comforting experience for those who had no previous interest in traditional sports. By engaging in patriotic sporting rituals and behaviours through esports, Australian esports fans gain a sense of belonging for the first time in a country that expresses nationalism through sports (Cumming, 2018). The reported underdevelopment of the Australian esports industry aligned with the concept of the Australian underdog, presenting Australian esports professionals as talented, yet unsuccessful due to external factors unique to Australia. Overall, the societal impacts of esports were heavily framed around sporting values. The sport-like nature of esports was not entirely seen positively, however. For example, the potential for esports to appear at important sporting events like the Olympics was portrayed as drawing attention away from and undermining the value of “real sports”. In positive portrayals, the sport-like elements of esports were perceived as having a positive impact on gamers and young people. While some articles conceded that esports was sport-like in some respects, a perceived lack of physicality was drawn on to definitively quell any notion of esports belonging within the definition of sport. Although some proponents debate that the motor skills needed to manipulate a mouse and keyboard constitute this necessary requirement for physicality (Hilvoorde & Pot, 2016), even some esports players and organisers struggle to articulate how elements of sporting physicality manifest in their practice (Witkowski, 2012). Other coverage

placed less emphasis on the element of physicality and presented esports as a sport based on its other sport-like attributes.

As previously mentioned, it is important to note that while the Australian news media may portray esports in these ways, these observations should not be interpreted as direct representations of how Australians perceive esports. As Denmark (2005) asserts, Australians maintain a “love-hate relationship” with the media; while they rely on it for information, they also are highly sceptical, stemming from a belief that Australian media ownership is overly concentrated. Rather, the mainstream news media portrayals presented in this chapter should be thought of as informing *what* Australians think about (Cohen, 1963) and *how* to think about it (McCombs, 1997). While it is assumed that the media holds influence over the thoughts and attitudes of its consumers, these media effects are not comprehensively understood and the extent of their influence is the subject of debate (McQuail, 2005). With this in mind, future research may find it fruitful to directly investigate individuals’ thoughts and perceptions towards esports. The media sets the agenda for notable issues and topics in the community (McCombs, 1997). From the analysis presented in this chapter, it is clear that esports has become a part of this agenda with various portrayals. What is yet to be seen is how this information is processed by news consumers.

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**Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> While owned by the Australian government, the *SBS* also generates profits from commercial activities, such as advertising and sales (“Faqs: SBS Corporate,” n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> Although “Anzac” stands for Australian and New Zealand Army Corps., Due (2008) suggests that the term has come to represent uniquely Australian values and ideas when used in Australia.