

LUSITANOS LET’S GO! From Banal to Joking Nationalism in Portuguese Esports Spectatorship

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Abstract—This study examines the role of national identity, humour, and competition in esports spectatorship, focusing on Portuguese viewers during the Overwatch World Cup 2023 Qualifiers. Using thematic analysis of Twitch chat and a post-match interview, we explore how nationalism manifests in ironic colonial nostalgia, trash talk, and sportification. Viewers adapted football culture, invoking Cristiano Ronaldo’s name and demanding a national anthem moment. Additionally, critiques of nepotism emerged, highlighting community concerns over team selection. Findings suggest that esports spectatorship serves as a space for performative identity negotiation, where historical and cultural references are repurposed for competitive engagement. This study contributes to discussions on digital communities, nationalism in esports, and the intersection of sports culture and gaming, offering insights into how audiences create meaning in competitive gaming environments.

Index Terms—Esports, nationalism, Twitch chat, spectatorship, sportification, online discourse

I. INTRODUCTION

Esports has become an important arena for the performance of national identity, blending elements of traditional sports fandom, digital interaction, and gaming subcultures. As international competitions grow, national sentiment is reinforced not only through structured tournaments but also informally by spectators in online spaces. Esports has increasingly adopted structures and rituals from traditional sports, reinforcing the sportification of gaming [6]. This study aims to examine how national identity, humour, and competition are expressed by Portuguese esports spectators during the Overwatch World Cup 2023 Qualifiers (OWWC), through analysis of live Twitch chat interactions and a post-match interview. In Portugal, the Portuguese Football Federation (FPF) has actively embraced esports as part of its national sporting identity positioning competitive gaming alongside football, and other sports. In 2023, the FPF launched the campaign “It Will Never Be Only a Game”¹, promoting esports as competitive, strategic, and nationally representative.

While institutional efforts like those of the FPF Esports division signal a push for greater recognition and investment in competitive gaming, nationalism in esports is not shaped solely by governing bodies. Spectators themselves play a critical role in defining how national identity is expressed, performed, and contested in digital spaces. Drawing on over two hours of Twitch chat logs and post-match interviews, this study applies

thematic analysis [1] to identify patterns of national sentiment, humour, and competition in the context of Portuguese esports spectatorship. Online communities engage in both serious and ironic expressions of national sentiment, drawing on banal nationalism [3] and joking nationalism [2] to frame their engagement. Some references to nationality take on formal, structured expressions of pride, while others use irony, satire, and historical allusions to express support in ways that are simultaneously self-aware and emotionally invested.

The sportification of esports [6] amplifies these dynamics but also introduces exclusionary practices [7]. While esports is often framed as global and inclusive, digital communities can reinforce boundaries around national belonging. Although this study focuses on the Portuguese context, the findings may offer insights for understanding how national identity is negotiated in digital gaming cultures more broadly.

By examining the ways in which Portuguese spectators engaged with national identity during the OWWC qualifiers, this paper explores the intersection of esports fandom, sportification, and digital nationalism. It situates institutional efforts, such as the FPF’s campaign, alongside grassroots spectator discourse, highlighting how national identity in esports is shaped both from the top down and the bottom up.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study employs qualitative analysis to explore Twitch chat interactions during Portugal’s matches in the OWWC qualifiers. The dataset includes approximately two hours of extracted chat logs², which were manually coded and categorised. The dataset consists of 98 utterances extracted from Twitch chat viewers that were either written in Portuguese or specifically referred to the Portuguese team. As this study employs qualitative thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s approach [1], the number of utterances assigned to each theme is not the focus of the analysis. In line with qualitative principles, themes were identified based on their relevance and meaning, rather than frequency, as thematic analysis does not require repetition for a pattern to be considered significant. Additionally, a post-match interview with the Portuguese team captain was analysed to identify patterns of national discourse. The themes identified include A) Nationalism as Ironic Colonial Nostalgia; B) Nationalism as Trash Talk; C) Nationalism as (Ironic) Sportification; and D) Nepotism as Failure.

²Extracted Twitch chat messages was limited to Portuguese team matches. Video available on <https://www.twitch.tv/videos/1823068266>

¹<https://tinyurl.com/5bmj7sty>

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Nationalism as Ironic Colonialism Nostalgia

One of the dominant themes in the chat was the ironic appropriation of Portugal's colonial history to express national pride. Chat users humorously referenced Portugal's historical exploits in Africa and Brazil, reframing these past events as a form of competitive spirit in esports.

"We're going to steal the gold!"
"Portugal aka gold stealers"
"Portugal gonna steal the win like they stole Brazil's natural resources"

References to Brazil's gold, 'stealing' wins, and the invoking of colonial conquest in the context of an esports match display an exaggerated rhetoric unlikely to be read as sincere nationalist pride. The absurd mismatch between the context (a team-based first-person shooter match) and the historical allusions points to ironic nationalism – a deliberately playful and hyperbolic invocation of national myths. These expressions mirror what Rothenburger [11] identifies as ironic nationalism: a mode where individuals appear to critique or mock nationalism while still participating in it emotionally. Likewise, Bruhn and Doona [2] describe "joking nationalism" as a way to engage with contradictions in national identity without overtly resolving them, using humour to render pride socially acceptable. Rather than covert, routine references to the nation (as in banal nationalism, see [3]), these comments were performative and attention-seeking. They also appeared to mock Portugal's colonial history while simultaneously drawing energy from it to support the national team. This dynamic continued with references to African colonialism:

"ANGOLA IS OURS"
"Well history has shown us that we're good at capturing but not at keeping..."
"Nothing beats Portugal capturing an African country"
"Now we just need to keep that African country."
"NOBODY BEAT US IN AFRICA (except England and african people)"[sic]

In this case, the humour is more explicitly visible in the self-deprecating and contradictory phrasing – particularly the final parenthetical, which simultaneously mocks imperial bravado and acknowledges the reality of colonial failure. These references were also tied to the OW map being played at the time – Numbani, a fictional African city. The gameplay objective involves capturing and holding a point, which a viewer satirised by saying: "Now we just need to keep that African country." This tongue-in-cheek reference to both historical and in-game conquest reinforces the ironic tone – where the joke hinges on the mismatch between past and present, between serious colonial history and fun esports metaphors. Historical references were also used to evoke a sense of identity in exaggerated terms:

"LUSITANOS LETS GO"
"WE'RE ALJUBARROTA"
"CONQUISTADORS DUDE"

These comments draw on symbolic and militaristic terms from Portuguese history, but in the context of Twitch chat during a video game, they take on a parodic flavour. Rather than earnest historical reverence, they dramatise support for the team using national references too inflated for the context to be sincere, which again suggests playful, reflexive nationalism. These mention Lusitania, the ancient word for the region which is now Portugal; Aljubarrota, which refers to a battle which took place in 1385 in which Portuguese fought off the Spanish; and equating the Portuguese OW team with the Conquistadors (colonialists). Not all comments were necessarily critical of nationalism or colonial history. However, the tone, exaggerated framing, and gaming context support an interpretation of these utterances as ironic or joking rather than celebratory. As [2] and [11] both argue, irony enables communities to play with national identity in ways that affirm belonging while avoiding the appearance of naïve patriotism. This ambivalence is part of what makes joking nationalism so powerful – it masks emotional investment with comedic detachment. Thus, the colonial past becomes a problematic but symbolically potent resource, and humour evolves to negotiate the discomfort and pride that accompany cheering for one's nation at a global event. Rather than trivialising history, these segments engage with it playfully, allowing fans to make sense of who they are (or want to be) in the esports world.

B. Nationalism as Trash Talk

Trash talk is a common element of competitive gaming, and in this context, it became intertwined with national identity. Portuguese fans playfully challenged the traditional narrative of their country's small size by directing it at their opponents instead. One viewer emphatically declared, "DENMARK SMALL NATION," flipping the common Portuguese sentiment of inferiority into a form of competitive banter. The phrase reflects a deeply ingrained discourse in Portugal, where the notion of being a "small country" is often used to rationalise both limitations and achievements [5]. By reframing this narrative, Portuguese spectators asserted national pride while engaging in the lighthearted antagonism typical of esports culture.

While it is true that Denmark is geographically smaller than Portugal, the cheerer's statement reproduces a self-reflective irony that subtly challenges the cultural narrative of Portugal as a small country. Within Portuguese custom, it is typical to acknowledge the nation's small size [5], but by flipping this convention and highlighting Denmark's smaller geography, two underlying points emerge: 1. Despite being geographically smaller, Denmark has a much stronger economy and is among the wealthiest nations in the European Union. 2. Denmark's dominance in the competition – as the clear favourite, with multiple renowned OW streamers and professional players – necessitated a form of 'trash talk' to reaffirm Portugal's

underdog position. This playful inversion of a deeply rooted narrative underscores the complex ways in which national identity and competitive dynamics intersect in the gaming community.

"Let's cosplay D. Afonso Henriques [PT-flag]".

The above segment is particularly interesting as it denotes an attempt to combine (ironic) nationalism and the geek culture surrounding esports. In it, a viewer suggests a cosplay performance of D. Afonso Henriques, the first King of Portugal, who ruled between the years 1139 and 1185 and thus is a national figure central to nationalism in the country. Being the main medieval figure in Portuguese history and a king who is associated with winning battles against other tribes, it is not surprising that he would personify the virtual battle of trash talking another country.

C. Nationalism as (Ironic) Sportification

The anthem was mentioned in the Twitch chat at the beginning of the matches as it is customary for the anthem to be played and sang by the national teams before international football matches (or matches of other sports). So, in the absence of the official organisers sanctioning enough time before the matches began for both anthems to be heard, the Portuguese viewers took it upon themselves to correct this. The multiple interactions referring to this (1) asked when the anthem was going to be heard, (2) reproduced the lyrics of the national anthem on the Twitch chat, and (3) repeated some of the lyrics at the end of the final match (which Portugal won) to reinforce the national pride sentiment.

Many mentions related to football referred to Cristiano Ronaldo. Comments like "When does Ronaldo play?" or "RONALDO IS GOING IN NOW" as well as jokes around football rules which are not applicable to esports like "Penalty for Portugal" and a version of *Put me in, coach* translated into esports lingo: "if Portugal does not win, put me in the server mister" because esports teams typically operate and communicate from Discord servers.

This theme revealed an awareness of the sportification of esports, i.e. the adoption of language, structures, or aesthetics from traditional sports [6], by making reference to various elements of (Portuguese) football culture. For instance, by "demanding" the anthem to be sang before the match and by using the chat to "sing" the words, the Portuguese viewers were effectively critiquing the sportification process and also taking part in the sportification process. Portuguese viewers were not only cheering for the Portuguese team but were negotiating national identity by using humour and elements of a well-established sport in the country (football) while making sense of a new sport and broadcast medium that borrows structures and aesthetics from traditional sports like football.

D. Nepotism as Failure

As expected, some viewers engaged in critiquing the teams, even those they are cheering for. Some of the critiques related to game-specific choices such as the characters that players were using in the match. Most of the critiques however

were accusations of nepotism. A note on translations: The word *cunha* was kept in its original due to the specificity it carries. In Portuguese, "cunhas" is a colloquial term often used to describe nepotism or leveraging personal connections to gain an unfair advantage, like getting a job or a spot at the OW national team. Thus, the word carries a pejorative meaning – even though it can be uttered in jest, recognising that this is part of the Portuguese culture. In this context, it was used as an insult to the players who supposedly benefitted from connections to land a spot in the national team.

"When the Portuguese team stops being made of cunhas, Portugal will achieve something."

"Cunhas don't win matches Portugal!!!!!!"

"Just typical of Portugal"

"The group of buddies at the arcade"

"In the old days there were really good players in the Portuguese team, what happened? Is this just a team of cunhas?"

The above segments illustrate the views of multiple spectators who seem to corroborate the first one to bring the topic of *cunhas* earlier in the match. One user generalises the nepotism problem as "typical" of the country, while another employs nostalgia for "his time" in which good players made up the national team, as opposed to what they were seeing during that match. The feeling that the team was failing due to nepotism within a small group of friends, presumably those responsible for picking the players to make up the national OW team. Funnily enough, the team won the final match and this comment was added by a user in jest: "Actually it seems *cunhas* win some matches, I apologise". Related to the theme of nepotism as failure, one of the players in the Portuguese OW team for OWWC'23 was of Asian descent (Chan "HK3" Ieong-tin³) and his inclusion in the national team apparently caused some controversy in the community:

"How is there a guy from Hong Kong in the Portuguese team?!"

"'Portugese'[sic] tank"

Relatedly, one Twitch chat viewer referred to one of the casters, who was also of Asian descent, using racist slurs: "here's the chink⁴ [...] oh look the chink came back." Both of the statements denote a gatekeeping sentiment apparently rooted in nationalism but evidence of a more exclusionary nature (tribalism) of which Hayday and colleagues talked [7]. Although this slur wasn't used against Portuguese team player HK3, it does not seem unlikely that this could easily happen – especially if Chan "HK3" Ieong-tin would have performed poorly during any of the matches.

³<https://liquipedia.net/overwatch/HK3>

⁴The word *chinoca* in Portugal is nuanced. In the context it is used, it is perhaps not meant as an insult but still hurtful to those of Asian heritage. Portugal's colonial and trade history with Macau dating back to the 1500s means a large number of Asian descendants have settled in Portugal.

IV. ANALYSIS OF POST-MATCH INTERVIEW

The patterns of national identity and sportification observed in the Twitch chat also extended to post-match discourse⁵. This section analyses how the Portuguese team captain framed national identity in his post-match interview, further reinforcing themes of belonging and competitive pride. The use of deixis, such as referring to athletes of one's own country as "our", "us", reflected a construction of belonging through nationalism [8]. The use of deixis was present both in the Twitch chat evidence and during the post-match interview, that is, it was present throughout the communication related to the Portuguese team performance in the OWWC. Deixis, sportification of esports, and national pride were particularly evident in the post-match interview at the Wild Card challenge where Portuguese team captain David "EGO1" Bandarra likened his teammate's performance to that of the nation's iconic footballer: "This man is our Ronaldo" [9]. This reference to Cristiano Ronaldo provides insight into two key phenomena: 1. First, it reinforces findings from previous studies [10] showing that Overwatch esports can evoke national pride in the context of a global competition such as the World Cup. 2. Second, it highlights the sportification of professional gaming – not just in the aesthetics and organisational structures of esports teams and tournaments but also ingrained in the culture and the discourse of its participants.

V. CONCLUSION

Esports spectatorship has emerged as a space where national identity is continuously shaped, contested, and performed. In the context of international competitions, national sentiment is not only reinforced through direct expressions of support but also transformed through humour, competition, and the blending of traditional sports culture with digital gaming discourse. This study has shown that nationalism in esports is not a fixed or singular phenomenon but rather a fluid and performative process, where audiences draw on historical narratives, sports conventions, and digital communication practices to engage with their teams and opponents.

The findings illustrate how spectatorship operates on multiple levels. At times, subtle, everyday references to nationality reinforce a sense of belonging in ways that resemble traditional sports fandom. However, in online spaces, nationalism is also playfully exaggerated, taking on ironic and self-aware tones that allow spectators to both embrace and critique national identity.

Viewers repurpose historical events, colonial legacies, and sports tropes to make sense of their team's performance, sometimes through friendly rivalry, sometimes through exclusionary rhetoric. This playful engagement highlights how digital spaces offer a unique context for negotiating nationalism, one that is neither fully serious nor entirely detached from deeper cultural narratives.

⁵Video segment of the post-match interview available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5MFPx1r354Q>

The increasing sportification of esports further amplifies these dynamics. As competitive gaming adopts the structures and aesthetics of traditional sports, it also inherits many of the tensions surrounding national representation, team selection, and community gatekeeping. Esports may be marketed as a global and inclusive phenomenon, but at the same time, spectators actively construct boundaries around national identity, determining who belongs and who does not. This study found moments where national pride led to exclusion, particularly when viewers questioned the legitimacy of certain players based on ethnicity or linguistic fluency. Such moments underscore the dual nature of nationalism in esports—it can foster a sense of community and shared identity, but it can also reinforce barriers and hierarchies within gaming culture.

Beyond esports, these findings contribute to broader discussions on how national identity operates in digital spaces. Online platforms enable new forms of audience interaction, meaning-making, and community formation, but they also bring new challenges in regulating inclusion and exclusion. Future research should examine how different competitive gaming communities, across various regions and game genres, navigate national identity and belonging. Additionally, as esports continues to professionalise, it is worth exploring how stakeholders—such as teams, tournament organisers, and streaming platforms—engage with the shifting role of nationalism in gaming culture.

Ultimately, this study underscores that esports is more than just entertainment; it is a cultural site where national identity is performed, reinterpreted, and contested in real time. In this digital arena, audiences do not simply observe competition; they actively shape the narratives surrounding it, drawing on the past, engaging with the present, and influencing the future of national discourse in gaming.

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