E-sports and Its Unique *Geng* (PunchLine) Culture
Take League of Legend Pro League as an example

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ABSTRACT

The outbreak of covid-19 was in late 2019. This epidemic has been a test of competitive sports all over the world but e-sports, as a new type of digital sport, has obviously withstood the test. 2018 has been a year of e-sports outbreak in China, and in 2020, the population of e-sports market has exceeded 145 billion[4]. Despite the epidemic, the industry is still in the stage of rapid development. and E-sports culture is also developing. One of the most unique aspects of e-sports culture is its unique geng (punch line) culture which is a Chinese term. With 54.1% of users between 19 and 24 years old, the unique "punch line" culture of gaming is having a profound impact on young people. As a subculture, the geng culture is gradually becoming more popular due to the unprecedented traffic bonus.

Keywords: *E-sports, Subculture, LPL, E-sports player.*

1. INTRODUCTION

After iG e-Sports Club won the finals of the 2018 League of Legends global tournament in 2018, China's E-sports fever reached an all-time high, accelerating the formation of more professional leagues and the entry of capital. One of the most striking is the League of Legends and its leagues. League of Legends is a Moba-type computer online game in which teams of five play against each other to overthrow each other's base tower and win. The continental division of the League of Legends competition is called League of Legend Pro League (hereafter referred to as LPL). After the iG e-sports club won the global championship in 2018, LPL ushered in new vitality and unprecedented popularity.

On the night of the iG e-Sports Club's victory, countless gengs were born. According to Chang Jiang and Tian Hao, the Internet has "interactivity, low threshold and high freedom" and "abundant sources of material", which provides perfect conditions for the spread of gengs of e-sports competitions born on the Internet.

This study focuses on e-sports users, so the sample is composed of LPL fans. The sources of samples include the e-sports fan base, e-sports topics on major forums and software that broadcast e-sports matches.

2. "*GENG*"

Language is the carrier of culture, and buzzwords reflect the current political, economic, cultural and social conditions to a certain extent. The so-called *geng* itself is also a kind of language. It is usually regarded as an online buzzword and an expression recognized by game users. Internet buzzwords are supposed to be freely created by internet users and should be young and cultured. *Geng* itself has all the characteristics of online buzzwords, which also reflects the ecology of e-sports to a certain extent. The frequent changes of *geng* humorously reflect the psychology and emotions of game users and show the vitality of game culture[10].

Geng itself is also an internet buzzword and a youth subculture developed in new media. According to Stuart Hall, a British sociology professor, it also refers to "perverse" or challenging communities or lifestyles that continue to appear within the framework of social stratum structure. Subculture is something opposite to mainstream culture[9]. E-game culture itself is also a subculture, its explosion is a cybernetic carnival in cyberspace. The unique *geng* culture of e-game is full of mockery and youth rebellion, which fills the loneliness of young people in the face of the rapid development of the internet and the rapid change of things. The subcultural nature of *geng* is, to a certain extent, a way for young people to vent their loneliness. When young people come together to create and spread the word, and gather on

online forums related to *geng*, it is a kind of group warming[3].

However, ordinary internet buzzwords do not encapsulate *geng*. We need to separate *geng* from ordinary buzzwords. *Geng* are more narrative than ordinary internet buzzwords. They are created together with an activity and are the high-level summary of the activity. *Geng* spread not only as a buzzword, but also as the event itself. It can be used as an adjective, a phrase, or event. *Geng* culture has developed to such an extent that even short word like *geng* have a very complex composition. Words that are not related in the language, and even words that are grammatically incorrect when combined together, can be combined to form *geng*, and it is impossible to see *geng* just as ordinary internet buzzwords.

Geng is a very complex linguistic combination, which is the decomposition and reorganization of language and even words[9]. For example, the famous *geng* of the game competition: *guang chang*. In the early days, Ming Kai, a famous LPL player, laughed at each other's players on the public screen of in-game chat: "If you play so badly, don't play the game, go home and raise pigs!" Soon after, Ming Kai caused 4396 points of damage to enemy hero in a very important match, which is an unusually low number for professional competitions. Therefore, Ming Kai was mocked by game users who didn't like Ming Kai. They use Mingkai's ridicule style as an excuse (i.e., the pig farm manager). This means that Ming Kai is the worst of all bad players. It became his nickname. Four years later, Gao Tianliang claimed to be a fan of Ming Kai and won League of Legends World Championship in 2020. However, after winning the world championship, Gao Tianliang experienced a downturn and caused 4397 points of damage to enemy heroes in a single match. He was added to his idol Ming Kai's nickname by game users who don't line Gao Tianliang because he caused more damage than "1 point". In Chinese, adding "one point" to "*chang* (factory)" becomes "*guang*". Therefore, Gao Tianliang's contestants also have a *geng*.
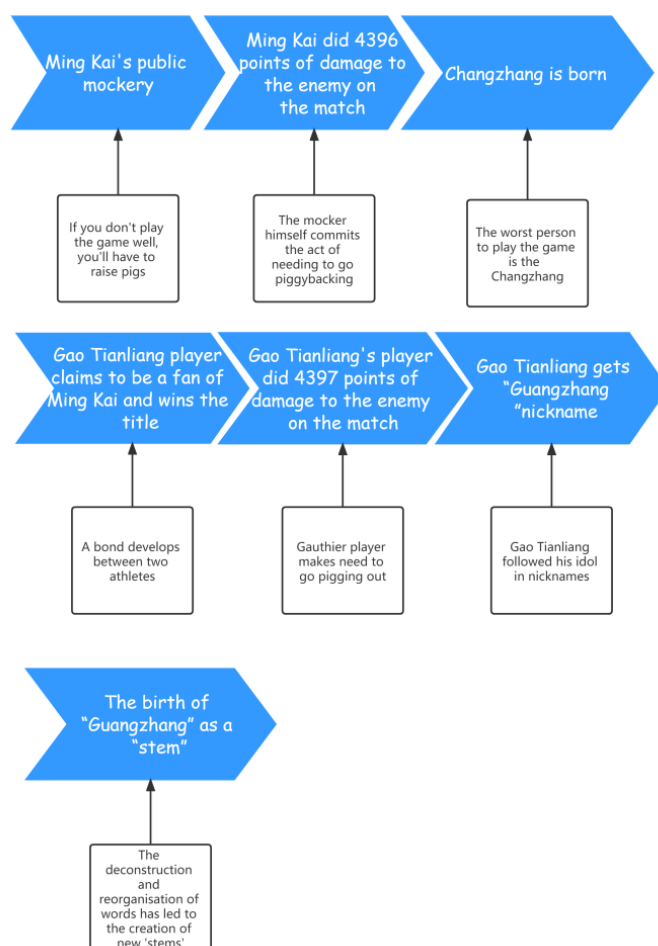

Figure 1 The process of geng production

Geng can be expressed not only in words, but also through films, audio, pictures and even emojis, which makes them more diverse than online languages. This is one of the differences between *geng* and ordinary Internet buzzwords.

3. ANALYSIS OF *GENG*

3.1. E-sports users, e-sports fans and geng

As shown in table 2, only 31% of the fans said they rarely use *geng*, while the others had their own favorite or preferred *geng*. This shows the importance of *geng* in the communication of e-sports and related information exchange. In the game fan groups I have joined, there is *geng* on almost every page of the chat log. To a certain extent, *geng* has promoted the development of e-sports culture and accelerated the spread of e-sports. However, *geng* itself is an uncontrolled and very free youth subculture.

The culture of *geng* is a significant part of the spread of game information and cultural communication. Users and fans recognize and rely on *geng* as a subculture of e-sports culture.

In this study, ordinary users and fans use three types of *geng*, namely those generated by professional players, those generated by League of Legends live games, and those generated by fans. These *geng* have both positive and negative sides, but through interviews with some fans, most respondents said that negative news seems to be the most effective side of LPL's *geng*. One interviewee said reluctantly, "it's true that the LPL has a lot of negative news and a lot of gossip about the players, but there's nothing we can do about it. The overall education level of players is not high, and they are very young."
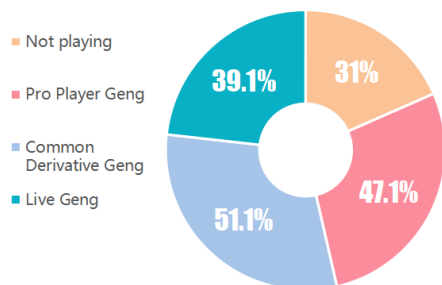

Figure 2 Types of e-sports users playing with *geng*

3.2. Electric campaigners and geng

Until the end of 2021, the youngest player in the top league like LPL was under the age of17. Until today, the minimum age of e-sports players has not been raised to 18. After raising the age threshold of professional e-sports players, the average age of some e-sports clubs, such as the current RA e-sports club players, is only 20 years old. Due to the low age and the low level of education received even before completing compulsory education, the cultural knowledge reserve of e-sports athletes is insufficient, and their quality and moral

cultivation are very poor, which is not enough to support a sound personality. E-sports is another high-income industry for young people and celebrities. Top clubs and top players earn a lot of money. A young and high-income star player with less sound personality who becomes famous overnight is easy to expand and lose himself. This is one of the biggest reasons for many game scandals.

The game scandal is one of the largest suppliers of *geng*. Although fans and users disagree on the negative news, most people understand the LPL scandals. The lack of friendliness between game users and fans is also a source of LPL's negative "stigma". When you look at various forums, there are almost always friendly *geng* produced by netizens, referring to non-LPL players or live games. Due to the influence of traditional sports, the high treatment of e-sports players and the very high level of negative press, the tolerance of e-sports users and fans to e-sports players who lost the game is very low. Three games, even if only one of the two games lost, will also set off a fishy storm in the online world. In contrast to players, e-sports users and fans lack goodwill and alliance regulation, which makes the e-sports fan culture originated from subculture more primitive, freer and malicious.
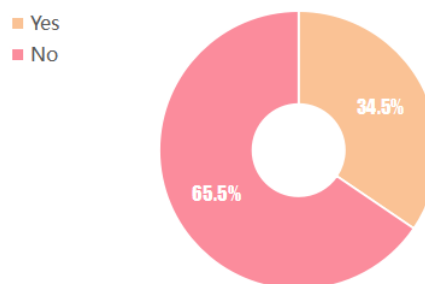

Figure 3 Do e-sports users play with *geng*

3.3. KOLs and geng

The LPL officially entered league in 2019. Compared with the too serious playing style in the past, the current playing style of it is more relaxed but also more aggressive. Furthermore, IG e-Sports Club then won the LPL World Championship for the first time at the end of 2018. After the end of the 2018 World Championship, the public opinion of LPL has changed a lot compared with before. It has become harsher and more complicated. With the start of the pan-entertainment era, LPL has brought its unique *geng* culture into the lives of millions of game fans and users. In the early days of *geng* culture, *geng* was still light-hearted and mostly used for fun or satire, but now *geng* culture has a new function of spreading and even creating negative news.

Up to now, e-sports media has not developed as

soundly as the traditional sports media. In the face of huge traffic bonuses and the influence of market economy, e-sports KOLs are in a state of blossoming and symbiosis with demons. Every day, game media are creating and outputting *geng*, and even official LPL accounts (such as LPL tournament mafia) are dedicated to exporting *geng* generated by LPL in the game and life. With the development of games, the popularity of e-sports and the age of the first batch of players, some e-sports users and e-sports lovers pursue entertainment and love games, but they are not interested in the quality of the game itself. The emergence of entertainment, friendships and discussion is in line with the trend of the times, but it has also had a negative impact. These KOLs are to blame for the expansion of the negative aspects of the game *geng* culture.

As the information source of most game users and fans in this study, see Table 4. Game KOLs have a significant impact on the public opinion of the game. However, most KOLs are clearly unaware of their social responsibility. In 2020, unscrupulous game media reported past events and misunderstandings between Leyan and League of Legends anchor Baozi. In 2020, the past events of Baozi, the anchor of Leyan and legend alliance, and the misunderstanding in the live broadcast were reprinted and spread by unscrupulous game media, creating the first negative geng in Leyan's life. We cannot deny that Leyan has done some bad things, but he suffered from online violence at the age of 18. Even during the live broadcast, he made unreasonable actions due to the bad guidance of the game media, resulting in psychological imbalance.

Most game KOLs only take traffic as the only standard, without thinking, spread negative *gengs,* and even create negative game *gengs*, lacking a certain sense of social responsibility.
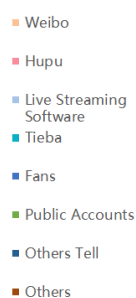

Figure 4 Sources of news and information for e-sports users

4. THE VALUE OF GENG IDENTITY

4.1. The emotions and identity of geng

E-sports culture was born as a subculture. It is opposite to the mainstream culture and elite culture, and

has experienced a difficult early stage with its own persistence and efforts. Confronting the reality is the unique point of development for the development of e-sports culture in China. Throughout its history, LPL was born in 2013, when China's e-sports was developing. Although e-sports is still a niche concern, it had already passed the time when mainstream culture was vilifying it. Even after the difficult early years, it is still niche and unproductive, and lacks of focus on LPL gaming culture which is still an online subculture only existing on the internet, and all kinds of subcultures are rooted in LPL game culture. Even though games are becoming more mainstream, it is not free from subculture.

Geng culture is a very important part of e-sports culture, where people use or co-create, a *geng* to focus on one thing at a time, quickly uniting e-sports users and e-sports fans. E-sports is inherently alienated from reality, and the subculture it generates is more alienated from reality than other subcultures. This is why e-sports users and fans swirling around in e-sports culture feel more isolated. This is where *geng* plays a role of unity and aggregation. The formation of *geng* culture is based on game culture, reflecting the hotspots of the culture, the flow and the ecology, and gathering people with common concern. Under the banner of *geng*, e-sports users and fans alleviate the loneliness of e-sports culture, which is still a subculture, and share their emotions and find their identity together[3].

Geng culture can be regarded as a branch of e-sports culture, which is essentially a kind of communication of e-sports, and its spiritual core and value proposition deviate from the mainstream. The attention, use and pursuit of *geng* by e-sports users and fans is essentially the identification and follow of e-sports culture. Most of the heavy e-sports users collected in this study are under 30 years old, while there are few e-sports users and fans over the age of 30[7]. These people are the natives of the internet and the fastest recipients of new things, but they are also the people who are most oppressed by mainstream culture and dogma[10]. Therefore, they do not hesitate to choose an internet subculture such as *geng* culture. If online subcultures such as e-sports culture are the spiritual "ivory tower" for teenagers and young people, then cultures such as *geng* culture, which spreads, expresses and reflects the cultural ecology of their lives must be the "ivory tower". It releases the pressure of teenagers and the oppression of mainstream culture on them, *geng* culture is undoubtedly a good space for self-paralysis.

4.2. Attitudinal expressions of geng

The development of *geng* culture is a rebellion against the mainstream culture and elite culture, but subculture still depends on the mainstream culture[10]. Despite the opposition against mainstream culture, with the popularity of e-sports and the growth of e-sports

audience, the acceptance of e-sports culture has improved, and the "stalwarts" of e-sports often appear in the mainstream propaganda. *Geng* culture is gradually integrating into the mainstream culture and fighting against it.

For example, a number of official and mainstream sports media used the "yyds" stunt in their headlines on many occasions. The term "yyds" originally refers to the eternal gods, blurted out by Teng yangtianxia (now in prison), a former LPL pro and former League of Legends anchor, while watching Uzi's game. Due to the helpless tone and flirtatious expression of the anchor, this video quickly spread. The whole video looks very interesting and full of sarcastic meaning. Teng yangtianxia's original line is: woods, eternal God. The original meaning of the phrase is far from the meaning of t the later *geng*, but it is still a hot *geng* out of the ring.

One interviewee in this study once said: "I don't think *geng* is very funny, but it's boring to have no *geng* at all, and most of them are vulgar. Most *geng* are just bad jokes." Most *geng* are not out of good intentions, and users may not like them, but they are inseparable from *geng*.

The original meaning of game *geng* is mostly ridicule and parody with strong elements of criticism and self-deprecation. *Geng* includes the rebellion of teenagers and young people against authority, their dissatisfaction with reality and their confusion in the face of rapid economic and cultural development. The narrative nature of the *geng* allows groups of people with the same confusion find a partner when facing the world.

5. CONCLUSION

With the advancement of the internet, e-sports has gradually integrated into the mainstream traditional sports. But main subcultural attributes of e-sports culture hinders the development of e-sports to the mainstream traditional sports to a certain extent. However, the path of e-sports to traditional sports will not be blocked by these reasons. League of Legends has been adopted as a sport for the 2022 Asian Games in Hangzhou[4]. As a digital sports model e-sports became an official project of the Asian Games, the International Olympic Committee also continued to discuss e-entry and cooperate with five international sports associations and game manufacturers to produce. E-sports is upgrading in the promotion and transformation to traditional sports industry.

E-sports has become more and more popular, and the headline e-sports events can get very high attention. However, the subcultural nature of e-sports culture has become an obstacle to integration. In the early days of e-sports, *geng* was a very quick way to get around, and also an easy way to be remembered, making e-sports more familiar. However, as gaming evolves into a traditional sport, it may be necessary to abandon some subcultures in the early game culture.

LPL has raised the starting age of players and hopes to strengthen the management and education of them. As e-sports moves closer to traditional sports, e-sports players need to move closer to traditional sports athletes as well. E-sports has moved from pure commercial competition to traditional sports arena[4]. Facing the integration of e-sports and traditional sports, e-sports culture and *geng* culture may face some challenges.

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