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Trash Talking in Soccer: What It Tells Us About Human Nature

Diana Almallah, Max Amram, Kerry Harper

Introduction and Methods:

Our research group posed the question: **What role does aggression play in organized soccer?** We studied people's history with aggression, and more specifically, trash talking throughout their experiences playing soccer, with hope that it would shed light on aggression in organized sports.

We created a 25 question survey and sent it to coaches and players at the NCAA, club, high school, and intramural levels. The survey was also sent out to players via social media networks. The survey questioned players on their own experiences with trash talking, and what they thought attributed to aggressive behavior in sports.

Themes From Literature:

- **Instrumental Aggression:** refers to a premeditated aggressive action that is carried out in order to achieve a specific goal.
 - Males often view aggressive acts as an exercise in control over others, brought on by a challenge to their self-esteem or integrity. Men are more likely to view their aggressive acts as positive.
- **Social-learning theory:** (Bandura, 1973; Silva Sc Conroy, 1995) states that athletes approve and adopt aggressive behaviors by observing others, by relating aggression with rewards, and/or based on their expectations of the cost versus benefit available in the immediate situation.
- **Social desirability effect:** a type of response bias that is the tendency of survey respondents to answer questions in a manner that will be viewed favorably by others.

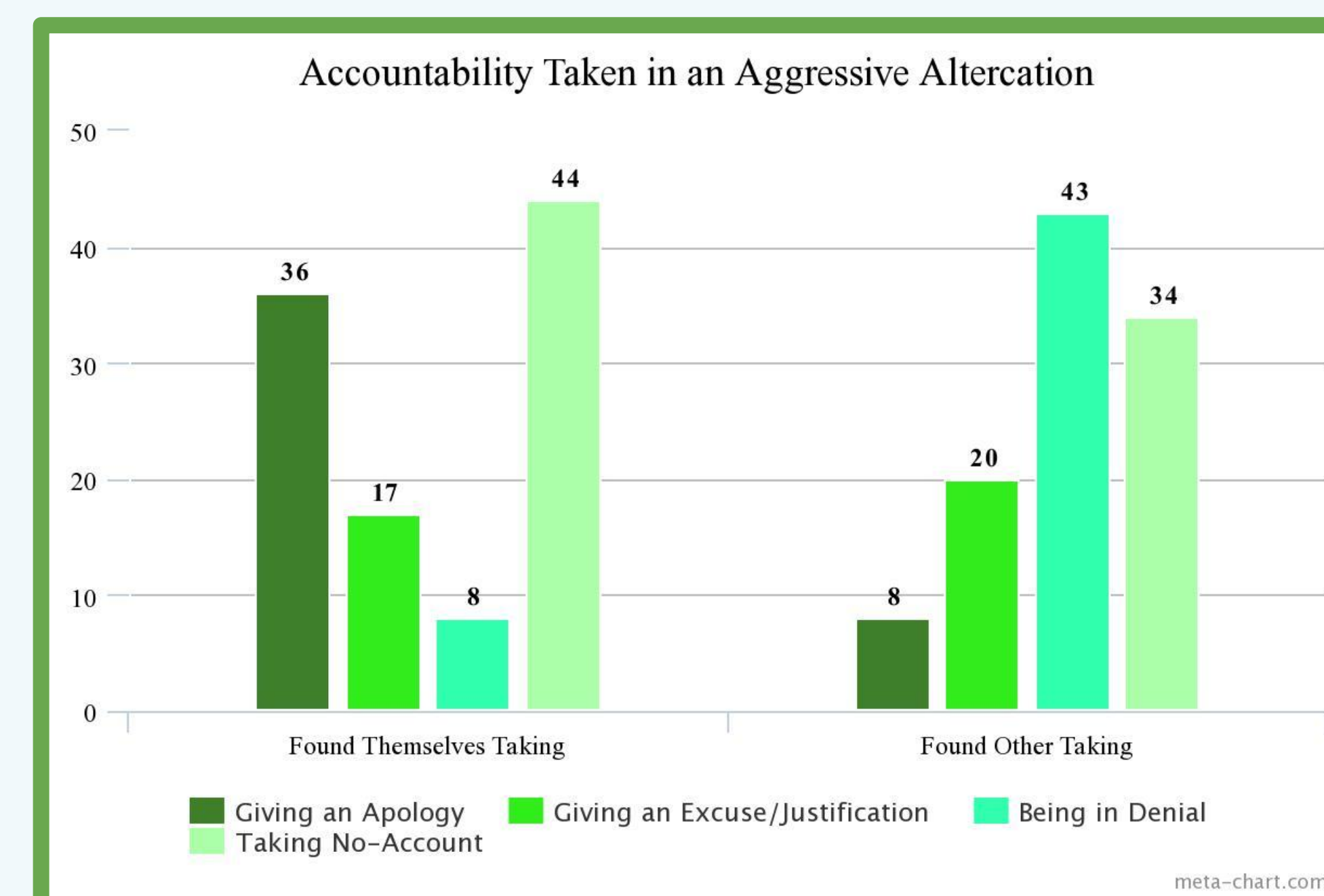
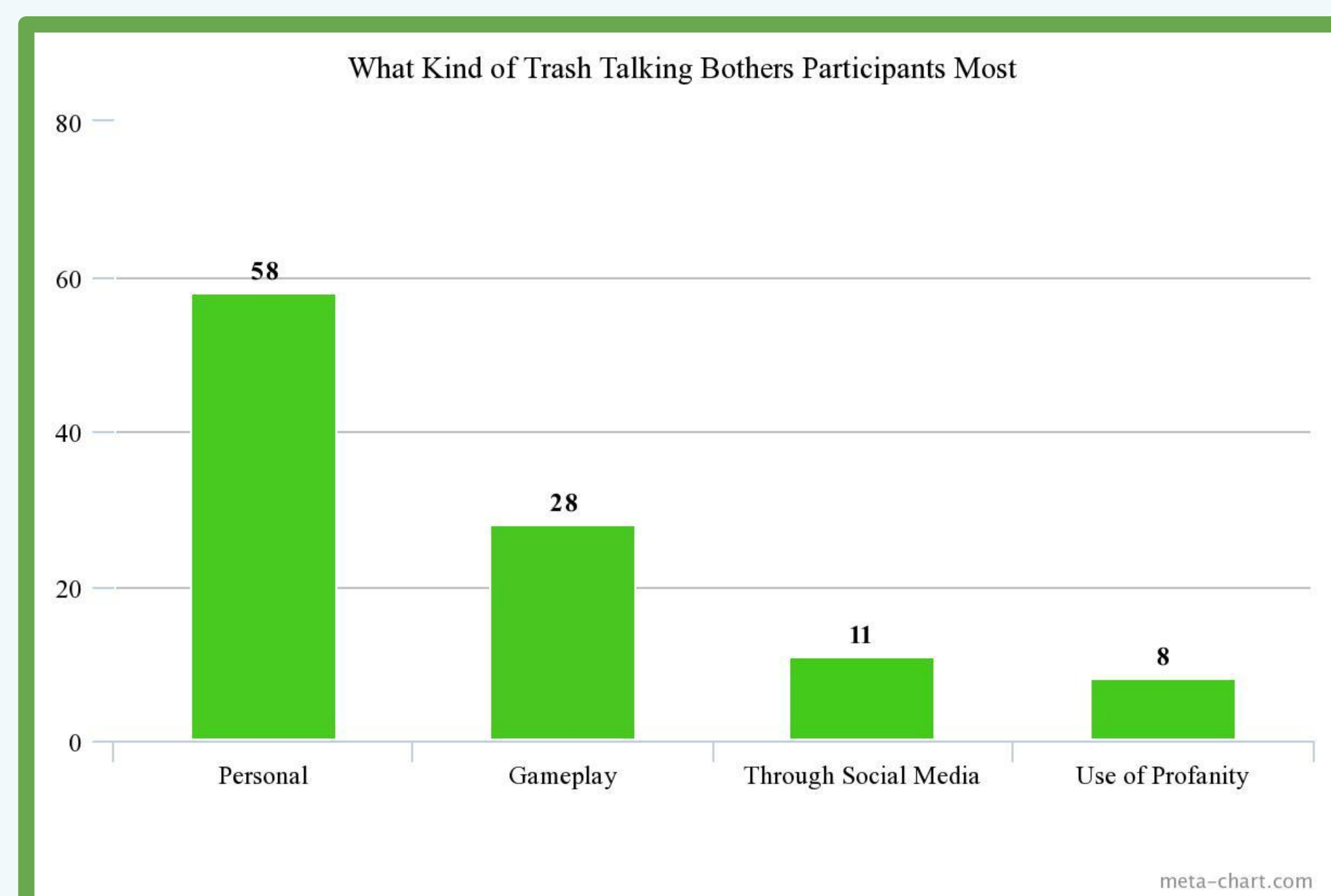
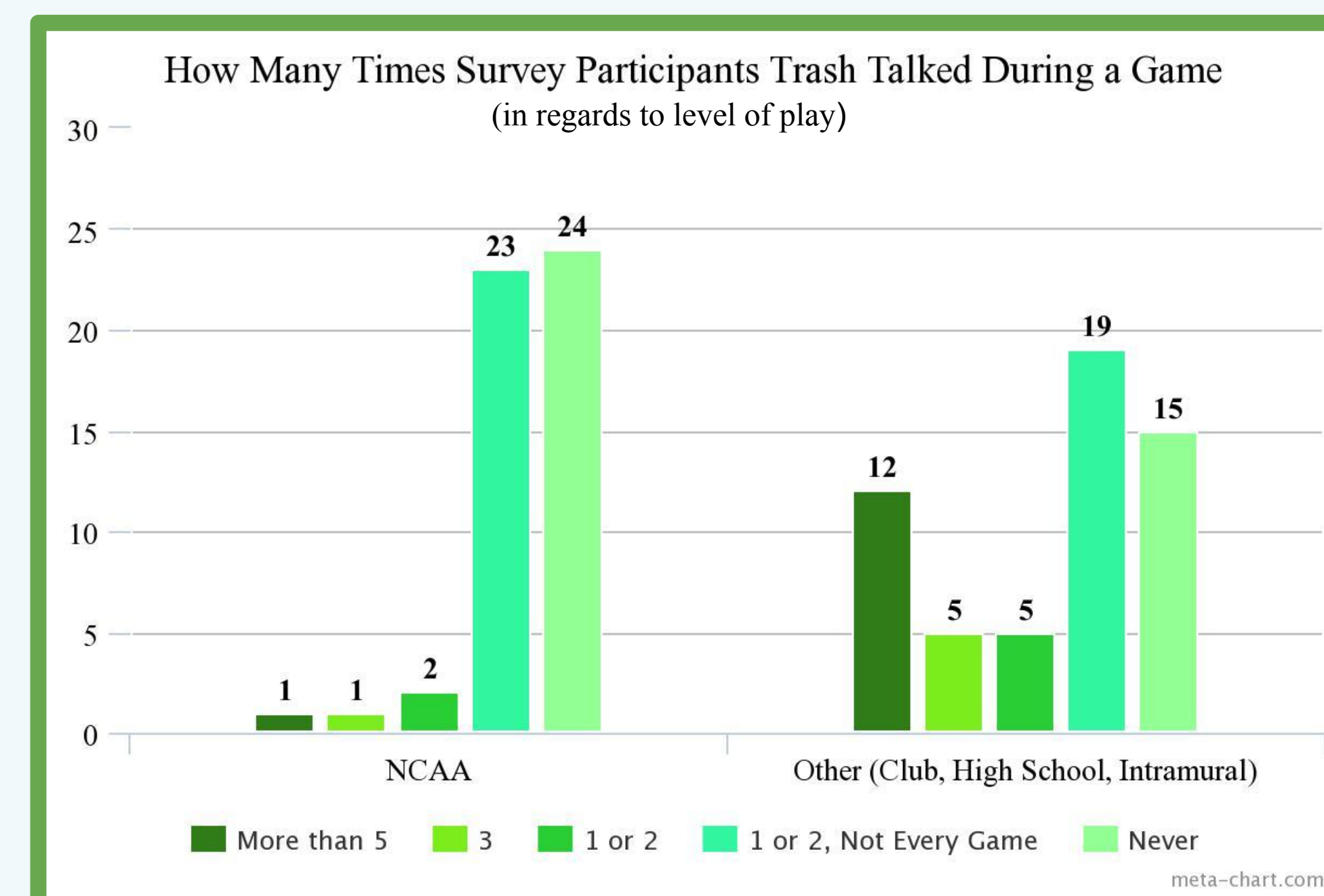
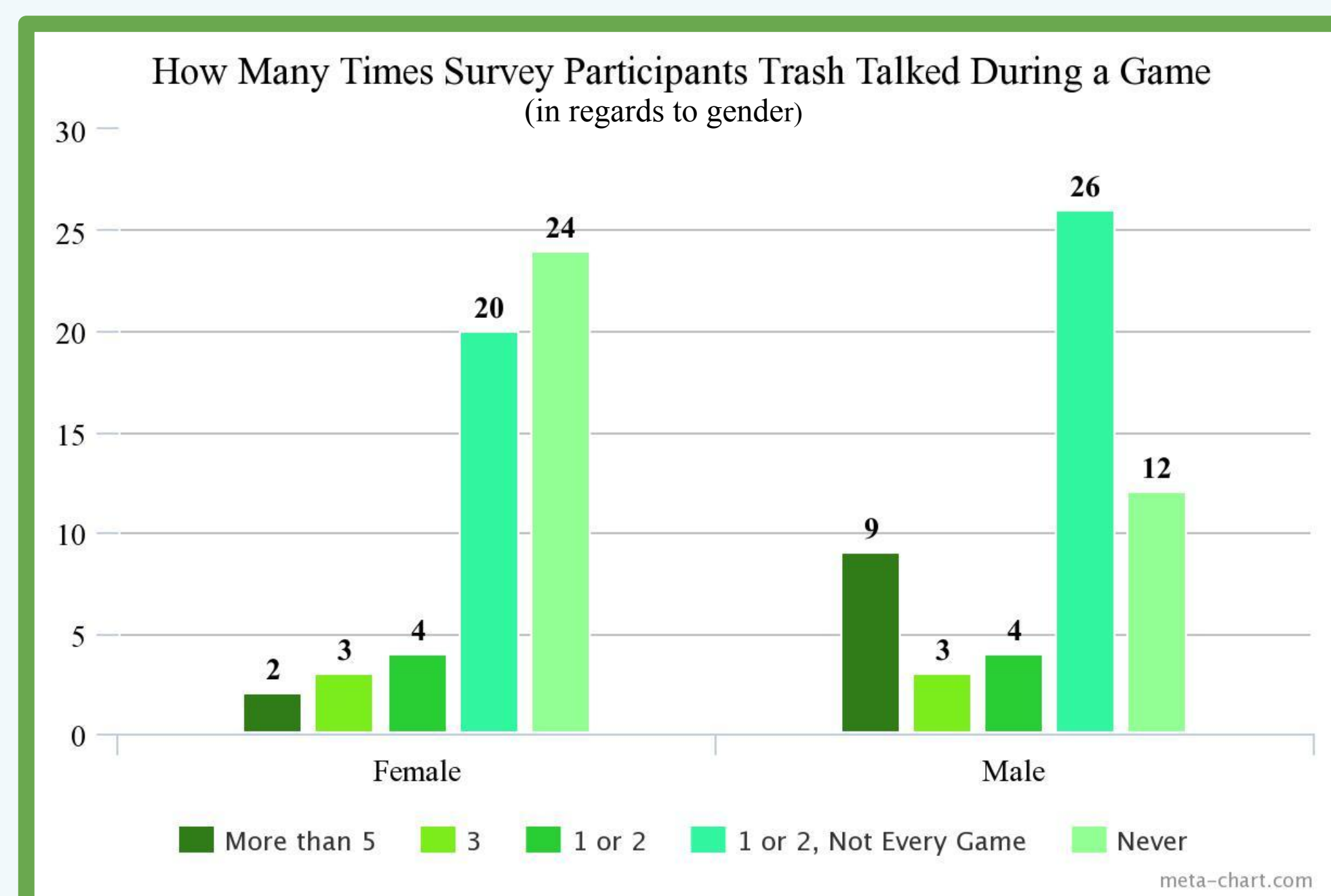
"Sports are generally a place where we can use our strength and **aggressiveness outwardly**... Competitiveness drives a lot of us as well, and when we feel our **self-control**, strength, skill or any other aspect being challenged **we naturally defend ourselves- and in sport it is through aggression.**"

-Participant #56



Survey Findings:

- The survey received responses from 54 males and 52 females
- 51 of the respondents play on an NCAA team and 55 play on either a club team, high school team, or league
- The average participant has been playing soccer for 12.6 years
- 74.3% of participants stated that trash talking does not heavily affect their gameplay
- 68.9% of participants have seen instances of trash talking in international play or professional teams
- on TV, online, or locally
- 75.5% of participants have received a red or yellow card but only 31% stated that it was intentional



Examples of Trash Talking Submitted by Survey Participants:

"Take me out to dinner before **you get handsy with me**"

"I have said '**Scoreboard**' when we are winning."

"I would **refer to skills and abilities** that the other player lacked and try to hammer in his head that he isn't a good player."

"**Look at the score**, shut up."

"Usually has to do with **them messing up**. 'Nice balllllll' with a slow clap maybe"

"**Relax** you're not even good"

References and many more examples of participant responses to the question "why or why not do you think aggressive behavior, verbal and physical, in organized sports is a part of human nature?" can be found through the **QR code**.



Displays the words that were most used in answering the question: "Why or why not do you think aggressive behavior, verbal and physical, in organized sports is a part of human nature?"

Conclusions:

- Since the goal of the game is to win, it is often hard to differentiate which actions are considered aggressive as competitive sports encourage and legitimize bold actions that assert dominance over the opponent. This points to the instrumental aggression seen through the given examples of trash talking, wherein deliberate insults were given as a means to get under an opponent's skin, and gain an edge. As suggested by the social learning theory, if players see a benefit or reward for aggressive play, they will adjust the way they play.
- We found that trash talking in organized soccer is more common among males than females, which complies with the idea of men viewing their aggressive acts as positive.
- In the case of an aggressive altercation, there were considerably more participants who reported that they took accountability by giving an apology than there were participants who reported the aggressor taking accountability by giving an apology. These findings can be related back to the social desirability effect.
- Most participants found that personal trash talking bothers them the most. This may be due to players feeling that there is a fine line between competitive banter and a personal attack. Our findings show that there is a standard for aggression in soccer, that being that aggression is only tolerated in the context of the game.
- Competitive environments seem to make people more aggressive. Also important to notice is that NCAA players have more rules, are more tightly refereed, and have more to lose by being penalized. Therefore, they are typically less aggressive than those playing with nothing to lose.