Motives behind trash talk in esports: A consumer perspective through self-determination theory

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INTRODUCTION

The practice of trash talk, where taunts and insults are directed towards others in a competitive scene, has been a topic of wide debate across casual video gaming, conventional sport and esporting literature. These debates argue the acceptance of trash talk through the morality behind its use (Dixon, 2018; Kershnar, 2018), in reflection to the values of sportsmanship (Duncan, 2019; Hilvert-Bruce and Neill, 2020) and its boundaries between being a form of light-hearted mockery or towards toxic behaviour (Cook et al., 2019; Cote, 2017; Kordyaka et al., 2020). Within these discussions, the motives behind trash talk have been a recognised, yet overlooked aspect in investigating trash talk behaviour.

To date, video gaming and conventional sporting literature has touched on various motives of trash talk including to distract (Johnson and Taylor, 2020; Ring et al., 2019), reduce an opponent's confidence (Nguyen and Zagal, 2016; Kniffin and Palacio, 2018) or to provide humour and entertain others (Duncan, 2019; Ortiz, 2019). Encapsulating professional players behaviour and consumer perspectives has been effective in understanding the relationship between operational rules and social norms shared in competitive gaming (Johnson and Abarbanel, 2022; Thiborg and Carlsson, 2010; Lee et al., 2022; Irwin and Naweed, 2020). However, in the context of motives associated with trash talk, this is currently limited. The aim of this study then was to form a classification on the types of motives affiliated with trash talk how they are perceived in esports.

Self-determination theory (SDT) has been previously applied in esports research to gain an understanding of professional player and spectator consumptive goals (Hong et al., 2022; Qian et al., 2020; T'ng et al., 2022). SDT posits that motivation is driven by three psychological needs: Autonomy, the freedom to choose personal endorsement and feel in control of their own behaviour, Competence, the desire to master one's capacities and skills, and Relatedness which is to establish close emotional bonds and attachments with other people (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Through satisfying these needs, SDT further argues that behaviour is determined through two motivations – Intrinsic (acting towards personal values) and Extrinsic (behaviour

endorsed through prospect of rewards) (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Succinctly, SDT considers individual's motivations through both one's personal goals and the influence of external factors. As it is evident that trash talk is motivated through various social, psychological, and competitive factors, SDT was chosen as the guiding theoretical framework of this study.

To form a classification, online surveys were created to gain consumer perspectives of trash talk across a variety of esport games and communities. Each survey further consisted of consumer specific questions differentiated by spectators, industry worker or professional players. A total of 591 responses were gathered for data collection with 521 classifying themselves as spectators, 15 industry workers and 55 professional players between 18 to 52 years of age ($M = 24.64$, $SD = 4.88$). Qualitative data was coded in NVivo using descriptive coding (Saldana, 2014) and then a thematic content analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to support and build on current literature on the motives behind trash talk.

Overall, the results identified six core motives, each with their own associated sub-themes; to g*ain a mental advantage, insult, aid teammates, aid oneself, promote hype,* and for *amusement*. To *gain a mental advantage*, trash talk is used as a strategy to lower the opponents in-game performance, whether by distracting, intimidating, "tilt," provoke or to reduce the rival's confidence. Consumers negatively associated trash talk when used to *insult* by offending, abusing or humiliating others. Though traditionally seen as an act against one's opponent, respondents observed that trash talk can be used to *aid teammates* by improving the mood of the group. Similarly, trash talk can be used to *aid oneself* and sustain personal needs by gaining confidence, relieving stress, a means to boast about their skills and to build their professional brand or image. In esports, industry workers and professional players could trash talk to *promote hype* and increase viewership and lastly, trash talk can be used for *amusement* when it is less focused on the competitive needs of consumers but rather to entertain, make light-hearted jokes and socialise with others.

The results of this study extend research on consumer behavioural in esports and highlights themes which aligns with SDT to interpret trash talking motives. By doing so, this study opens further discussions on professional conduct in esports and aids in distinguishing acceptable or unacceptable behaviour expressed and witnessed across these gaming communities.

BIO
Sidney Irwin is a PhD candidate at the School of Health, Medical and Applied Sciences at Central Queensland University. She received her bachelor of psychological science (with Honours) from the same university. She is currently working on a dissertation exploring more on the psychological aspects of esports.

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Dr. Michele Lastella is sleep researcher at the Appleton Institute for Behavioural Science at CQUniversity Adelaide, South Australia. His primary area of expertise is sleep, recovery, sport psychology, psychological well-being and performance. Being a former elite athlete Dr. Lastella brings experience from both an athlete perspective as well as a researcher's perspective. He has worked with several elite sporting

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