The boundaries of competitive discourse: An esport perspective between banter, trash talk and toxicity.

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INTRODUCTION

Communication is a fundamental part of multiplayer esports, yet understanding forms of competitive discourse has been a challenge in the literature. To date, research has identified banter, trash talk, and toxicity as forms of competitive communication. However, definitions and boundaries of these behaviours have been ambiguous and inconsistent. For example, Chang et al. (2023) defined toxicity and trash talk as forms of hostile communication, whereas Pujante (2021) observed that trash talk could be inoffensive and harmless depending on the circumstances, and Beres et al. (2021) noted that banter could be an acceptable form of trash talk if there is no malicious intent.

Of note, online video gaming communities have established social norms surrounding behaviours associated with competitive discourse, with recent research categorising diverse perspectives around its use (Kaye et al., 2022; Lim et al., 2024; Poeller et al., 2023). In esports research, Irwin et al. (2023) observed that spectator perceptions of trash talk are more accepting when the behaviour aligns with banter, but are frowned upon if it reflects toxicity, yet this was not explored in further detail. As a result, there is a limited understanding of how esport communities perceive and participate in banter, trash talk, and toxicity, presenting a critical research gap.

This research aimed to explore how esport consumers perceive and differentiate between banter, trash talk, and toxicity. To develop a classification, online surveys were conducted to gather spectators, professional players, and industry workers perspectives and social norms regarding trash talk across various esports. A total of 591 responses were collected from participants between 18 and 52 years of age ($M =$ 24.64, $SD = 4.88$). All data was analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to support and build on current literature.

Four core themes were identified, each with sub-elements that encompassed distinct and overlapping aspects between banter, trash talk and toxicity:

(1) Motivations behind player conduct: Participants identified three sub-motivations for competitive communication: (a) gaining a competitive advantage, often through trash talk; (b) harassing others, related to toxicity; and (c) creating positive interplay, including banter and trash talk, depending on further core themes.

(2) Contextual elements of the behaviour: Participants highlighted that differences between banter, trash talk, and toxicity based on *context* in: (a) discussions about player attributes, where trash talk and toxicity were seen as unacceptable when focused on personal traits rather than in-game skills; (b) the tone, when banter was light-hearted, trash talk could verge on serious or aggressive behaviour, resembling more apparent toxicity; and (c) the frequency of such behaviour in-game, where excessive conduct is considered toxic.

(3) Influence of consent: While the first two themes are widely discussed in the literature, participants noted that banter and trash talk can be distinguished from toxicity when they happen through mutual consent and voluntary interaction among players. Notably, toxic behaviour involved actions outside of this shared consent and social context. Trash talk and banter were viewed as exchanges that could be reciprocated, with participants taunting each other in turn without crossing the line into harassment or harm.

(4) Rapport between players: In this theme, banter and trash talk were perceived as ways to build rapport among friends, teammates, and even rivals, indicating that social norms might not always reflect the competitive nature of the game. Participants also described trash talk as a sign of camaraderie between teammates and opposing players. Conversely, toxicity signified a lack of rapport shared between players before the match.

The findings provide a nuanced view of how consumers perceive different types of competitive communication. Additionally, future research can extend the themes to include other forms of behaviour highlighted in current literature but not explored in this study, such as trolling or cyberbullying (Hilvert-Bruce and Neill, 2020). By defining clearer boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable competitive discourse, esports tournaments and video game developers can better establish guidelines for such behaviour.

BIO
Sidney Irwin is an early career researcher at the School of Health, Medical and Applied Sciences at Central Queensland University. She received her doctorate from the same university. Her focus is on forms of unsportsmanlike conduct in esports and is expanding her expertise towards esport psychology, human factors and user experiences. She has a qualitative research background and has grown her field of research towards rail, forestry and shiftwork sectors.

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