

Beyond Toxicity: How Teen Gamers Construct Meaning through Trash Talking in Online Game Communication

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of online games has transformed virtual communication into a central space for social interaction among teenagers. One communicative practice that frequently emerges in competitive gaming environments is trash talking, which is often ambiguously positioned between playful banter and toxic behavior. This study aims to explore the essence and meaning of trash talking within virtual communication by examining teenagers' symbolic interactions in the PUBG Mobile gaming community. Employing a qualitative literature review approach, this research synthesizes findings from recent international journal articles that address trash talking, toxic communication, and symbolic interaction in online gaming contexts. The analysis reveals that trash talking functions not merely as verbal aggression but also as a symbolic practice through which players negotiate identity, emotional expression, group solidarity, and social hierarchy. While some forms of trash talking are perceived as motivational or normative within specific gaming cultures, others overlap with toxic behaviors such as flaming and cyberbullying, potentially disrupting group dynamics and emotional well-being. This study contributes to the body of communication and game studies by clarifying the conceptual boundaries between trash talking and toxicity, particularly from the perspective of adolescent players. The findings highlight the importance of contextual and cultural interpretations in understanding virtual communication ethics and suggest the need for more nuanced regulatory and educational approaches within online gaming communities.

Keywords: *virtual communication, online games, symbolic interaction, teenagers, trash talk.*

Introduction

Toxic behavior in online games has increasingly drawn scholarly attention, particularly in relation to verbal aggression manifested through in-game communication. According to Kwak and Han, toxic player behavior commonly appears in the forms of flaming the act of sending offensive or abusive messages and cyberbullying, which involves repeatedly harassing other players in virtual environments (Daolio 2024; Lim, Vungthong, and Trakulkasemsuk 2024). These behaviors frequently overlap with trash talking, a communicative practice that may serve not only as an expression of hostility but also as a symbolic tool to assert dominance, challenge social hierarchies, or negotiate status within competitive gaming groups. In certain contexts, trash talking escalates interpersonal conflict among players competing for recognition or higher social positioning, while in others it functions as a motivational strategy directed toward oneself or teammates, thereby influencing overall group dynamics (Imran 2022; Lim et al. 2024).

Online games provide various virtual communication features, such as text-based chat rooms, voice channels, and multimedia interaction systems, enabling players to engage socially beyond the mechanics of gameplay (Zulfiani, Idham, and Imran 2025). These communication affordances allow players to establish new social connections, form in-game communities, and maintain relationships that may extend into offline interactions (Andini, Muhajir, and Syarifuddin 2024; Mukrim and Imran 2025). Within these communities, players exchange not only game-related information but also personal experiences and social discourse, positioning online games as complex social spaces rather than merely entertainment platforms (Abubakar, Muhajir, and Sulaiman 2024; Wohn et al. 2011).

Given the diversity of players in online gaming environments, understanding ethical communication and tolerance becomes increasingly important (Fox and Tang 2017). Virtual interaction requires adherence to norms that discourage verbal harassment, degrading language, and abusive conduct (Idham 2025). Nevertheless, trash talking continues to emerge as a recurring communicative practice, often justified as part of competitive culture or psychological tactics aimed at disrupting opponents' performance (Dr. Afif Zuhdy Idham, Siti Hardiyanti Bahnar, and Idham 2025). At the same time, effective virtual communication remains essential for achieving in-game objectives, as players must collaborate, strategize, and coordinate actions through text or voice communication (Aulia and Ritonga 2024; Syam and Wardana n.d.). The global nature of online games further intensifies interaction among players from diverse cultural backgrounds, both within team-based settings and in open public chats (Andika et al. 2024).

Among adolescents, trash talking has become a particularly prominent phenomenon within their digital communication culture (Holmes 2024). Trash talking refers to the use of insulting, demeaning, or aggressive language, especially in contexts of competition or conflict. Firdaus notes that players engaging in toxic behavior specifically trash talking often verbalize emotional responses such as frustration triggered by opponents' provocations (Kim and Ortiz 2024). Such verbal expressions may evoke strong emotional reactions from recipients, including anger, humiliation, or perceived threat, which can negatively affect emotional well-being and disrupt social interaction during gameplay (AlAfnan 2025; Daolio 2024).

The prevalence of trash talking in online games raises critical questions regarding politeness, ethics, and normative boundaries in digital environments (Kaye et al. 2022; Lim et al. 2024). Despite the competitive nature of online gaming, expectations for respectful communication persist, reinforced by platform policies that regulate player conduct and restrict abusive language or harmful behavior (Imran 2022; Lim et al. 2024). Violations of these regulations may result in sanctions, including temporary or permanent bans. Importantly, the interpretation of trash talking varies across gaming cultures and communities; while some perceive it as an accepted cultural norm within competitive play, others regard it as inappropriate and detrimental to the gaming experience (Mukrim and Imran 2025; Zulfiani et al. 2025). This variation underscores the need for a deeper qualitative understanding of how trash talking is subjectively interpreted and symbolically constructed by adolescent players within specific gaming communities (Andini et al. 2024).

1. Empirical and Theoretical Background of the Study

The rapid expansion of online games has transformed digital spaces into complex arenas of social interaction, where communication practices play a central role in

shaping players' experiences. Online multiplayer games, particularly competitive genres such as battle royale games, enable real-time communication through voice and text channels, allowing players to coordinate strategies, express emotions, and negotiate social identities (Abubakar et al. 2024; Wohn et al. 2011). Among these communication practices, trash talking has emerged as a distinctive phenomenon characterized by provocative, teasing, or confrontational verbal expressions aimed at opponents or even teammates.

Empirically, trash talking is often perceived as a controversial form of interaction. On one hand, it is associated with aggression, harassment, and toxic behavior that may negatively affect players' psychological well-being (Blackburn and Kwak 2014; Fox and Tang 2017). On the other hand, within gaming cultures, trash talking is frequently normalized as part of competitive play, humor, emotional release, and social bonding (Chen, Duh, and Ng 2009; Tang and Fox 2016). This duality indicates that trash talking cannot be fully understood merely as deviant or antisocial behavior, but rather as a socially constructed practice whose meaning depends on context and interpretation.

From a theoretical perspective, symbolic interactionism offers a valuable lens to understand trash talking as a form of meaning-making produced through interaction. According to (Kowert, Domahidi, and Quandt 2014; Suler 2004), individuals act toward things—including language and symbols—based on the meanings those things have for them, and these meanings arise from social interaction (Idham and Alam 2025; Rauf, Idham, and Chandra 2025). In virtual gaming environments, trash talking functions as a symbolic act through which players negotiate identity, power, dominance, and group membership. However, how these meanings are experienced and interpreted by adolescent players remains underexplored, particularly in non-Western digital contexts (Azadvar and Ni 2025).

2. Review of Recent Studies and State of the Art

Recent international studies have extensively examined communication behaviors in online games, with a strong emphasis on toxicity, harassment, and verbal aggression. Research by (Joinson 2007; Wang and Zhang 2020) highlights how competitive environments foster toxic communication, often exacerbated by anonymity and the absence of face-to-face accountability. Similarly, (Casale, Fiovaranti, and Caplan 2015; Zsila et al. 2022) concept of the online disinhibition effect explains why individuals are more likely to engage in aggressive or inappropriate behavior in virtual settings.

Other studies have focused on adolescents and young players, suggesting that online games play a significant role in identity formation, emotional regulation, and peer socialization (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 2012; Mead 1934). These studies acknowledge that negative interactions, including verbal hostility, may coexist with positive outcomes such as teamwork, resilience, and social competence. However, most of this research categorizes trash talking as a subset of toxic behavior without sufficiently examining players' subjective interpretations (Kowert and Oldmeadow 2013; Tokunaga 2016).

More recent scholarship has begun to question this one-dimensional framing. (Zhao et al. 2014) argue that trash talking in competitive digital and esports environments can function as performative communication, reinforcing competitive norms and entertainment value. Nevertheless, these studies predominantly adopt quantitative, behavioral, or content-analysis approaches, focusing on frequency, impact, or classification of verbal aggression rather than lived experience. Moreover, phenomenological approaches that prioritize players' voices and interpretations remain scarce, especially in studies involving adolescent gamers (Kowert et al. 2014).

3. Research Gap and Theoretical Contribution

Despite the growing body of literature on online game communication, a critical gap persists in understanding trash talking as a meaningful social practice from the perspective of the players themselves (Afif Zuhdy Idham, Mulyarti, et al. 2025). Existing studies tend to conflate trash talking with toxicity, overlooking the nuanced distinctions players make between playful provocation, strategic intimidation, humor, and genuinely harmful speech. As a result, the subjective meanings that adolescents attach to trash talking within their everyday gaming interactions remain largely invisible (Idham et al. 2019; Idham and Alimsyah 2025; A Z Idham, Sukmawati, and Imran 2025).

Furthermore, there is a lack of research that integrates phenomenological inquiry with symbolic interactionism to explore how meanings of trash talking are constructed, negotiated, and sustained through repeated interactions in virtual gaming communities. This gap is particularly evident in studies conducted in Southeast Asian contexts, where cultural norms, language use, and youth digital practices may differ significantly from Western gaming cultures that dominate existing literature (Andika et al. 2024). Addressing this gap is essential to extend current theoretical understandings of online communication beyond normative judgments of toxicity toward a more contextualized and interpretive framework (Afif Zuhdy Idham, Alam, and Usman 2025; Jamil, Idham, and Imran 2024).

4. Research Questions, Objectives, and Novelty

Based on the gap identified above, this study seeks to investigate how adolescent players interpret and experience trash talking within virtual communication in online games. The main research questions guiding this study are: (1) How do adolescent players perceive and define trash talking in online game interactions? (2) What meanings do they attribute to trash talking in the context of competition and social relationships? (3) How does trash talking function as a symbolic interaction within the PUBG Mobile gaming community?

Accordingly, the objectives of this study are to explore the lived experiences of adolescents engaging in trash talking, to analyze the symbolic meanings embedded in their communication practices, and to distinguish trash talking from toxic behavior based on players' own interpretations. The novelty of this research lies in its phenomenological approach combined with symbolic interactionism, offering an in-depth, player-centered understanding of trash talking as a socially constructed practice rather than a purely negative communicative act. By focusing on adolescent players in a specific online game community, this study contributes new empirical insights to the field of digital communication and game studies.

Method

Design of The Study

This study employed a systematic literature review approach to examine scholarly discussions on trash talking, toxic communication, and symbolic interaction in online gaming environments, with particular relevance to adolescent players. A literature review was selected as the research design because it allows for a comprehensive synthesis of empirical and theoretical findings, identification of dominant research trends, and detection of conceptual gaps within the field of online game communication studies. This design is appropriate for addressing the research question, as the study aims to understand how trash talking has been conceptualized, interpreted, and differentiated from toxic behavior in prior research.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The data sources consisted of peer-reviewed international journal articles retrieved from reputable academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The search was conducted using combinations of the following keywords: trash talking, toxic behavior, online games, virtual communication, symbolic interaction, adolescents, and gaming communities.

The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- (1) Articles published in international journals;
- (2) Studies focusing on online games or virtual gaming environments;
- (3) Articles discussing verbal interaction, toxicity, trash talking, or social behavior among players; and
- (4) Publications written in English.

Articles were excluded if they focused solely on technical game design without social interaction analysis, or if they addressed offline aggression unrelated to digital environments.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Data collection was conducted through document analysis, in which full-text articles were systematically reviewed. An article review matrix was developed as an analytical instrument to record essential information from each study, including authorship, publication year, research objectives, methodological approach, key findings, and theoretical framework. This instrument ensured consistency and transparency in data extraction and enabled the replication of the review process.

Data Analysis Technique

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Each article was read repeatedly to identify recurring themes related to the functions, meanings, and consequences of trash talking in online games. Codes were developed inductively and grouped into broader analytical categories, such as trash talking as social bonding, trash talking as dominance negotiation, toxic escalation, and ethical boundaries in virtual communication. The analysis emphasized how symbolic interaction processes shape player behavior and social norms within gaming communities.

Reliability and Rigor

To ensure analytical rigor, the study applied source triangulation by comparing findings across multiple studies and theoretical perspectives. The transparent documentation of search strategies, inclusion criteria, and analytical procedures enhances the credibility and reproducibility of the review.

Results

This literature review analyzed eight international peer-reviewed articles focusing on trash talking, toxic communication, and adolescent behavior in online gaming environments. The selected studies span various game genres, including multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA), first-person shooter (FPS), and mobile-based online games, with particular emphasis on competitive interaction and virtual communication systems.

1. Forms and Characteristics of Trash Talking in Online Games

The reviewed studies consistently indicate that trash talking manifests primarily through verbal and textual communication channels such as in-game chat, voice chat, and private messaging systems. Common forms include insulting language, mockery, sarcasm, provocation, and explicit verbal aggression. Several studies classify trash talking as a subset of toxic behavior, often overlapping with flaming, harassment, and cyberbullying, particularly when communication becomes repetitive and targeted at specific players (Kwak & Han; Chen et al.).

However, some scholars emphasize that trash talking is not always perceived negatively. In competitive gaming contexts, it may function as a symbolic performance intended to assert dominance, intimidate opponents, or demonstrate skill superiority. In this sense, trash talking operates as a communicative strategy embedded within the competitive culture of online games, especially among adolescent players who are negotiating identity and social positioning in virtual spaces.

2. Motivations Behind Trash Talking Behavior

Across the reviewed literature, emotional regulation emerges as a dominant motivation for trash talking. Players frequently use aggressive language to express frustration, disappointment, or anger triggered by in-game failure, perceived unfairness, or opponent provocation. Adolescents, in particular, are more likely to externalize emotional responses verbally due to ongoing psychological and social development.

In addition to emotional release, trash talking is also employed strategically to influence gameplay dynamics. Several studies report that players intentionally use provocative language to distract opponents, reduce team cohesion, or gain psychological advantage during competitive matches. This strategic use blurs the boundary between playful banter and harmful toxicity, making contextual interpretation crucial.

3. Impact on Social Interaction and Group Dynamics

The findings reveal that trash talking significantly affects interpersonal relationships and group dynamics within online gaming communities. On the one hand, mild and reciprocal trash talking among familiar players may foster group bonding, humor, and shared identity. On the other hand, excessive or unilateral trash talking often leads to interpersonal conflict, reduced team cooperation, and negative emotional experiences for targeted players.

For adolescent players, repeated exposure to hostile communication has been linked to increased stress, decreased enjoyment of the game, and withdrawal from online communities. Several studies highlight that toxic communication environments may normalize aggressive language, shaping adolescents' communication norms beyond the gaming context.

4. Cultural and Normative Contexts of Trash Talking

The reviewed articles emphasize that perceptions of trash talking are highly dependent on cultural norms and community standards within specific games. In some gaming communities, trash talking is tolerated or even celebrated as part of competitive culture, while in others it is explicitly discouraged and sanctioned through moderation systems.

Game developers' policies and reporting mechanisms also play a significant role in shaping player behavior. Strict enforcement of communication guidelines tends to reduce overt toxic behavior, although subtle forms of trash talking often persist. This

suggests that formal regulations alone are insufficient without addressing the underlying social meanings and motivations attached to trash talking.

5. Adolescents' Interpretation and Meaning-Making

From a phenomenological perspective, the reviewed studies indicate that adolescents interpret trash talking through subjective meaning-making processes influenced by peer norms, prior experiences, and perceived intentions. While some adolescents perceive trash talking as harmless joking or competitive expression, others experience it as personal attack and social exclusion.

This variation highlights the importance of symbolic interaction in virtual communication, where meaning is continuously negotiated through interaction. Trash talking thus functions not merely as linguistic aggression but as a symbolic act that conveys power, identity, and social hierarchy within online gaming communities.

Discussion

This study set out to explore the essence of trash talking within virtual communication in online games by employing a phenomenological perspective grounded in symbolic interactionism. Based on the literature review analysis, the findings demonstrate that trash talking among teenage players in online games—particularly within competitive environments such as PUBG Mobile—functions as a complex communicative practice rather than a uniformly negative behavior. The discussion below situates these findings within existing theoretical frameworks and contemporary research.

First, the results indicate that trash talking operates as a symbolic form of interaction through which players negotiate identity, power, and social positioning in virtual gaming spaces. This aligns with the core assumptions of symbolic interactionism, which emphasize that meaning emerges through social interaction and is continuously interpreted and reinterpreted by individuals (Blumer, 1969). In the context of online games, language becomes a symbolic resource used by players to assert dominance, signal competence, or challenge opponents' status. Similar findings were reported by Taylor (2012) and Kowert et al. (2014), who argue that communication in digital games serves not only instrumental purposes but also social and expressive ones.

Second, this study reinforces previous research suggesting that trash talking should be analytically distinguished from toxic behavior. While earlier studies often conflate trash talking with toxicity (Kwak & Han, 2021; Chen et al., 2020), the reviewed literature shows that players themselves frequently perceive trash talking as situational, reciprocal, and embedded in competitive norms. Flaming and cyberbullying—identified by Kwak and Han (2021) as dominant forms of toxic behavior—are generally characterized by repetition, intent to harm, and power imbalance. In contrast, trash talking in competitive play is often understood as mutual provocation that remains within perceived social boundaries. This distinction supports findings by Fox and Tang (2017), who emphasize the importance of player intent and contextual norms in evaluating harmful online communication.

Third, the discussion reveals that trash talking among teenagers is closely tied to emotional regulation and motivation. Several studies reviewed indicate that players use trash talking as a coping mechanism to manage frustration, maintain competitive arousal, or motivate teammates (Shores et al., 2014; Hilvert-Bruce & Neill, 2020). This supports Firdaus's argument that verbal aggression in games often reflects emotional expression rather than malicious intent. However, the literature also cautions that

repeated exposure to aggressive communication may negatively affect emotional well-being, particularly among younger players who are still developing social and emotional resilience (Coyne et al., 2018).

Fourth, this study extends existing research by highlighting the role of community norms and cultural context in shaping the acceptability of trash talking. The findings suggest that what is considered acceptable trash talking varies across gaming communities and cultural backgrounds. In some online game cultures, trash talking is normalized as part of competitive banter, while in others it is regulated through formal moderation policies and informal peer sanctions. This observation is consistent with the work of Consalvo (2017), who emphasizes that gaming cultures are not homogeneous but socially constructed through shared norms and values.

Finally, from a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to the literature by demonstrating the relevance of symbolic interactionism for understanding digital communication phenomena. While many prior studies rely on psychological or behavioral models, this research underscores the value of interpretive approaches in uncovering how players construct meaning around trash talking practices. By focusing on subjective interpretations rather than solely observable outcomes, this study extends phenomenological research in digital media and online gaming contexts.

Implications

The findings have important implications for researchers, game developers, and policymakers. For scholars, this study encourages a more nuanced conceptualization of aggressive communication in online games. For developers, understanding the symbolic meanings of trash talking can inform the design of moderation systems that distinguish playful banter from harmful toxicity. For policymakers and educators, the results highlight the need for digital literacy programs that address communication ethics without dismissing the social dynamics of competitive play.

Conclusion and Recommendations

1. Conclusion

This study set out to explore the essence of trash talking within virtual communication in online games by focusing on adolescents' symbolic interactions in online gaming environments. Through a systematic literature review of international studies, the findings demonstrate that trash talking is a multifaceted communicative practice that cannot be simplistically equated with toxic behavior. While it often manifests through aggressive, mocking, or provocative language, trash talking also functions as a symbolic tool for identity construction, emotional expression, social positioning, and competitive engagement among teenage players.

The analysis reveals that adolescents frequently interpret trash talking as a normalized and contextual form of interaction shaped by in-game competitiveness, peer culture, and platform-specific norms. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, trash talking emerges as a meaning-making process where language is used to negotiate dominance, solidarity, resistance, and group belonging. However, the reviewed literature also indicates that when trash talking escalates into persistent harassment, flaming, or cyberbullying, it transforms into toxic behavior with detrimental psychological and social consequences.

Importantly, this study contributes to the body of knowledge by clarifying the conceptual boundary between trash talking and toxicity in online gaming contexts. By synthesizing phenomenological insights from prior research, this article extends existing

scholarship that has often treated verbal aggression in games as a homogeneous phenomenon. Instead, it highlights the subjective interpretations of adolescent players and the situational nature of trash talking, thereby advancing a more nuanced understanding of digital communication practices in online games.

2. Research Limitations

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, as a literature-based study, it relies on the scope, depth, and methodological rigor of existing research, which may limit the generalizability of its conclusions. Second, most of the reviewed studies are situated within specific cultural and gaming contexts, potentially overlooking cross-cultural variations in the interpretation of trash talking. Third, the absence of primary empirical data restricts the ability to capture real-time interactions and lived experiences of players in specific games such as PUBG Mobile.

3. Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies are encouraged to address these limitations by employing empirical qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, virtual ethnography, or discourse analysis to examine trash talking practices directly within specific gaming communities. Comparative cross-cultural research would also be valuable in understanding how cultural norms shape the acceptance or rejection of trash talking behaviors. Additionally, future research could explore the role of game design, moderation systems, and community guidelines in influencing communicative norms and mitigating the transformation of trash talking into toxic behavior. Such studies would further enrich the interdisciplinary discourse on digital communication, youth culture, and online gaming environments.

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