

Gamers' Strategies to Avoid the Negative Impact of Dota 2's Trash Talking in Madiun City

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Abstract. *Trash talking is a form of aggressive communication that often occurs in competitive games like Dota 2 and has the potential to disrupt players' emotional state and performance. This study aims to explain how Dota 2 players interpret, feel, and respond to trash talking in the context of competitive play. The study used a descriptive qualitative approach with five informants selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed thematically according to the research focus. The results show that players interpret trash talking in various ways, ranging from competitive jokes to demeaning provocations. At the organism stage, players show emotional reactions such as annoyance and frustration, but some feel more motivated. At the response stage, players implement coping strategies such as deactivating communication, ignoring negative comments, responding lightly, or choosing to play with friends to maintain a comfortable playing experience. This study concludes that players' responses to trash talking are influenced by individual interpretations, emotional readiness, and coping abilities. These findings confirm the relevance of the Stimulus–Organism–Response theory in understanding the dynamics of player behavior in competitive games.*

Keywords: *Trash talking; Dota 2; Player Behavior; SOR Theory*

Abstract: *Trash talking is a form of aggressive communication frequently found in competitive games such as Dota 2 and has the potential to disrupt players' emotional states and gameplay performance. This study aims to describe how Dota 2 players perceive, experience, and respond to trash talking within competitive interactions. This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach with five informants selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed thematically based on the research focus. The findings show that players interpret trash talking in various ways, ranging from competitive humor to explicit provocation. At the organism stage, players exhibit emotional reactions such as irritation and frustration, while some become more motivated. At the response stage, players apply coping strategies such as muting communication, ignoring negative comments, responding lightly, or choosing to play with friends to maintain comfort. The study concludes that players' responses to trash talking are influenced by individual interpretation, emotional readiness, and coping ability. These findings reinforce the relevance of the Stimulus–Organism–Response theory in understanding behavioral dynamics in competitive gaming.*

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Introduction

The popularity of *online games* in Indonesia continues to rise as a means of entertainment to reduce daily stress, but the dynamics of competitive gaming often create new pressures through the practice of *trash talking* (Gilbert et al., 2020; Devianti & Nurchayati, 2023). As a deliberate communication strategy to influence the opponent's

mental state or demonstrate dominance, *trash talking* and other aggressive behavior have been shown to have significant emotional impacts, such as anxiety, discomfort, and even loss of motivation to play (Fajar Ramadhan et al., 2023; Putri et al., 2021). This situation creates a paradox where media that should be a stress reliever actually turns into a source of psychological stress for players.

The phenomenon of trash talking has become part of the communication dynamics in competitive gaming. While some players interpret it as a joke or psychological strategy, this behavior can also trigger discomfort, frustration, decreased concentration, and even interpersonal conflict. Gilbert et al. (2020) explain that online games, which initially function as a means of relaxation, can turn into a source of stress when players are exposed to repeated negative interactions. Similarly, Palanichamy et al. (2020) found that the competitive esports environment has the potential to increase psychological stress, while Kaluarachchi et al. (2023) showed that emotions such as frustration and anger can lead to cyberbullying and toxic behavior in online gaming.

Research on trash talking has been conducted from various perspectives. Putri et al. (2021) and Ambarwati et al. (2022) examined forms of trash talking behavior as negative verbal expressions that can disrupt the gameplay atmosphere. Sugiono (2019) showed that some players view trash talking as part of a competitive culture that enhances gameplay. On the other hand, Mattinen and Macey (2018) highlighted that verbal abuse persists despite game developers implementing various punishment systems. These studies provide important insights, but most focus on the general impact or types of toxic behavior without detailing the psychological processes that link negative communication stimuli to player responses.

A number of studies have documented this phenomenon from various perspectives. The first group of studies focuses on the emotional impact of *toxic behavior*, showing that negative interactions can trigger anxiety, stress, and even aggressive behavior and *cyberbullying* (Palanichamy et al., 2020; Kaluarachchi et al., 2023; Ambarwati et al., 2022). The second group examines *trash talking* from a social perspective, where this behavior is sometimes considered "normal" or even a means of self-motivation and increased fun, depending on the cultural context (Sugiono, 2019; Savolainen, 2025; Ravari et al., 2020). The third group of studies highlights technical and moderation aspects, such as *trolling*, *skill abuse*, and the failure of penalty systems to reduce toxicity (Mattinen & Macey, 2018; Santoso et al., 2022). However, a major limitation of these previous studies is the lack of discussion of the internal mechanisms by which players process these negative stimuli into specific behavioral responses.

descriptive types of *toxic behavior*. No researchers have specifically examined the flow of Dota 2 players' perceptions of *trash talking* through specific features (such as *the chat wheel*, *voice chat*, and *tipping*) using a systematic theoretical framework. Therefore, this study intends to use *the Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R) theory approach to examine how trash talking stimuli are interpreted cognitively and affectively by players. The purpose*

of this study is to analyze how Dota 2 players interpret and respond to *trash talking* and how they develop strategies to maintain emotional stability in a competitive gaming environment.

This research offers novelty by integrating SOR theory to deeply analyze how Dota 2 players interpret trash talk, experience emotional reactions, and develop coping strategies in the face of toxic communication. To date, studies specifically examining these processes in Dota 2 players in Indonesia are relatively limited. Therefore, this study aims to analyze how Dota 2 players in Madiun City interpret and respond to trash talk and the strategies they use to maintain emotional stability and comfort while playing.

Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach. Its primary focus was to deeply understand Dota 2 players' experiences with *trash talking*, based on their own perspectives. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the meanings, emotions, and responses that emerge in the context of competitive interactions (Alaslan et al., 2023). Informants in this study were selected using a *purposive sampling technique* with the following inclusion criteria: players with at least 100 hours of Dota 2 play and experience interacting with *trash talking*. The minimum playing time limit was set because at that stage, players are considered to have entered a competitive mode with intense communication dynamics. After the initial informants were obtained, the researchers used *snowball sampling* to reach subsequent informants through recommendations from previous informants (Alaslan et al., 2023). A total of five informants met the criteria and were involved until data sufficiency was achieved.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The research instrument was an interview guide designed to explore informants' experiences and meanings in detail yet remain flexible (Sri Yona, 2006). Interviews were conducted in person or through digital media such as *Discord* or *WhatsApp* and documented after obtaining informants' consent. All recorded data was then converted into text transcripts for analysis. This study prioritized the principle of voluntariness, where informants had the full right to refuse or terminate the interview if they felt disturbed. To maintain confidentiality, the researcher implemented strict anonymity by using only informants' *game account IDs* as identification in the research report. All data obtained was used only for academic purposes after obtaining verbal consent from each informant.

Results and Discussion

In the S-O-R model, a stimulus is understood as the initial stimulus an individual receives before further cognitive and emotional processing. In the context of the game Dota 2, this stimulus arises through trash talk, which is speech that belittles, blames, or provokes other players during a match.

Interview results showed that the form of trash talk received by informants generally took the form of harsh words or insults that emerged when game errors occurred. G2 gave

examples of statements such as "stupid support," "so noob," or "just uninstall." G5 also mentioned that trash talk often appeared as "gasping, rude words, or long typing to get angry," especially when the game atmosphere was heated. This stimulus did not only appear through the chat box, but also through other features such as ping, quick chat, and voice chat.

This finding aligns with research by Santoso et al. (2022), which found that forms of verbal abuse still frequently appear in MOBA games, even though developers have implemented punishment systems such as communication restrictions. Savolainen (2025) also explains that the Dota 2 community has a strong competitive culture, so that negative or provocative comments are often considered "normal" and almost always appear in interactions between players.

However, this stimulus isn't always perceived negatively. Informant G4 explained that in some situations, trash talking is actually seen as part of the competition or a way to stimulate enthusiasm for the game. He said that for some players, provocative remarks can make them "more motivated" to play better. This view aligns with the findings of Linda Apriliya Sugiono (2019), who stated that trash talking for some players serves as a motivator or as part of the excitement of the game.

Overall, the stimulus of trash talk in Dota 2 has a dual nature. It can appear as a negative provocation, but it can also be understood as a competitive element that encourages players to perform better. These differences in how players interpret the stimulus ultimately influence how they process and respond to it.

a. Cognitive: Understanding Trash Talking

At the organism stage of the S-O-R model, players process the stimuli they receive through cognitive appraisal. This appraisal helps them determine whether trash talking is perceived as a joke, a form of provocation, or a threat that could disrupt gameplay.

Interview results showed that informants had varying understandings of trash talk. G1 and G4 viewed trash talk as a "normal" part of competitive dynamics and can sometimes increase gameplay enthusiasm. For them, trash talk isn't always interpreted as a personal attack, but rather as a way for other players to express frustration or increase the intensity of the game. This understanding makes them more tolerant and doesn't always view trash talk as a form of negative behavior.

Meanwhile, G2, G3, and G5 had a different assessment. They viewed trash talking as behavior that tends to be demeaning and trigger conflict. For G2, remarks like "stupid," "idiot," or the command "uninstall" were clearly understood as insults that directly targeted the individual. G3 added that the difference between joking and trash talking lies in intention: if the goal is to demean or distract another player, then it falls into the category of trash talk. This understanding makes them more sensitive to negative comments, especially when delivered during tense gameplay.

These varying assessments align with the literature on competitive interactions in online games. Ambarwati et al. (2022) explain that trash talk can be understood as a form

of negative expression such as anger, disappointment, or frustration, depending on the context. This interpretation determines how players assess the speaker's intentions. Furthermore, Ravari et al. (2020) found that players from different cultural backgrounds tend to play and interact differently, including in how they interpret provocative speech. This is consistent with the findings in this study, which found that some players are more tolerant of trash talk, while others are more sensitive and perceive it as a form of verbal aggression.

Thus, in the cognitive stage, players evaluate trash talk based on the game context, the relationship between players, and their perceived intentions. This difference in understanding influences how they respond in subsequent stages, whether with negative emotions, ignoring, or increased motivation to play.

b. Affective: Emotional Responses to Trash Talking

The affective stage of the S-O-R model describes how stimuli elicit emotional reactions in individuals. In the context of the Dota 2 game, trash talking evoked a variety of emotions in informants, ranging from irritation and emotion to motivation to play better.

G3 and G5 showed a tendency toward negative emotional responses. G3 admitted to feeling "annoyed" when receiving harsh comments, especially when he was focused on the game. G5 also stated that trash talk made him easily provoked, especially if opponents or teammates accused or blamed him for no apparent reason. The emotions that arose weren't just anger, but also frustration when the game was already going badly, and negative comments only worsened the team atmosphere.

These reactions align with research by Palanichamy et al. (2020), which found that pressure in competitive gaming can lead to stress, anxiety, and even aggressive behavior. Kaluarachchi et al. (2023) also explained that emotions such as frustration and anger are key triggers for toxic behavior and cyberbullying in MOBA games. The findings of this study support this literature, as informants who tend to be more emotional are more easily affected by negative comments and experience a decrease in gaming enjoyment.

On the other hand, not all informants responded negatively to trash talk. G1 and G4 showed more stable and even positive emotional responses. G4, for example, said that provocative remarks sometimes made him "more motivated" to prove his abilities. G1 also felt that trash talk didn't significantly affect his mood during play, as long as the context remained "competitive" and didn't cause personal attacks. These responses suggest that some players are able to withstand emotional pressure and use trash talk as a performance booster.

This variation in emotional responses demonstrates that trash talking isn't just about negative words, but is also influenced by mental preparedness, the game atmosphere, and a player's ability to manage pressure. The emotions that arise, whether negative or positive, are crucial determinants of how a player will react in the next stage, whether to respond, ignore, or increase their focus.

c. Conative: Response Tendency

In the conative stage of the S–O–R model, the focus is on the behavioral tendencies that emerge after players receive and experience the stimulus of trash talking. Interviews revealed diverse behavioral patterns, depending on the intensity of the emotions that arise and their goals in the game.

Some informants showed a tendency to respond to trash talk when the comments they received were deemed too offensive. G2, for example, admitted to only responding if the comments were "outrageous," especially when the insults were directed at him. G5 also mentioned that the urge to retaliate often arose when an opponent or teammate made personally offensive remarks. This finding is consistent with the explanation by Kaluarachchi et al. (2023), who argued that negative emotions such as frustration can trigger retaliatory or aggressive behavior in competitive gaming environments.

However, not all players responded aggressively. G3 and G5 explained that although they felt annoyed and wanted to retaliate, they preferred to refrain from escalating the conflict. They believed that responding to trash talk could disrupt the game's focus and worsen teamwork. This attitude suggests that some players tend to control their responses to maintain their game performance.

Meanwhile, G4 tends to be more flexible. He sometimes responds jokingly or sarcastically, not to escalate the situation, but to deflect tension. He considers this strategy more effective in maintaining a positive game dynamic. Meanwhile, G1 tends not to respond at all, preferring to ignore negative comments because, for him, trash talk "doesn't need to be taken personally," especially if it's not personal.

Overall, players' conative tendencies are influenced by a combination of emotional impulses and rational considerations. This aligns with the explanation by Ambarwati et al. (2022), who stated that trash talking often emerges as an expression of annoyance, anger, or disappointment, so it's not surprising that some players are compelled to retaliate. However, interview findings also indicate that players have the ability to restrain themselves or choose alternative responses when they perceive that retaliating will worsen the game atmosphere.

Thus, the conative phase in the context of the Dota 2 game exhibits a variety of actions, ranging from the urge to retaliate, the tendency to avoid open conflict, to humorous strategies for reducing tension. This pattern serves as a link between players' emotional experiences and the coping strategies they employ in subsequent response phases.

d. Response: Impact Prevention Strategy

In the response stage within the S–O–R framework, players begin to take concrete action to manage the impact of trash talk after previously processing it cognitively and affectively. Interview results show that informants (G1–G5) have various strategies for dealing with verbal provocation. The most frequently used strategy is to mute the language through the mute or block feature. G1, G3, G4, and G5 admitted to using mute

when the game situation becomes heated or when comments are perceived as disruptive. This action is taken because it is considered the quickest way to reduce the disturbance without having to directly engage in conflict.

Furthermore, some informants chose to ignore negative comments. G2 and G5 stated that ignoring was the most practical option because they felt the behavior was so commonplace that it no longer triggered a strong emotional reaction. This attitude suggests a form of passive acceptance, where players attempt to maintain a comfortable playing experience by allowing provocations to pass without further response.

Some informants also responded to trash talk by responding in a lighthearted manner, such as through jokes or sarcasm. G4 and G5 revealed that they occasionally responded back to adjust the game atmosphere or maintain their position within the team, although not aggressively. Furthermore, some informants chose to create a more comfortable playing environment by playing with friends or small teams. For G1, G3, and G4, playing with familiar people made the game more manageable and reduced the potential for conflict with other players. This strategy helped them maintain emotional stability and ensured a conducive team dynamic.

These interview findings align with the research of Türkay et al. (2020), which explains that players in competitive environments generally employ several forms of coping mechanisms, such as deactivating communication to avoid exposure to toxic behavior, ignoring comments deemed irrelevant, or adopting mild responses as a form of adjustment. The study also showed that some players normalize toxic behavior as part of the competition, while others attempt to defuse tension by maintaining more positive communication. This similarity in patterns suggests that the informants' coping strategies emerge not only from individual experiences but also from a general trend within the competitive gaming community.

Overall, the research findings confirm that the Stimulus–Organism–Response theory is able to explain the psychological processes players experience when dealing with trash talk. Trash talk functions as a stimulus that is perceived differently by each individual. These interpretations elicit varying emotional reactions, which in turn influence the choice of actions and coping strategies. This research expands the study of digital communication behavior by demonstrating that players are not simply passive victims of toxic communication, but rather active actors developing self-regulation mechanisms. These findings confirm that subjective factors, such as the meaning given to comments and the ability to regulate emotions, play a crucial role in shaping behavioral responses. Practically, the results of this study provide implications for game developers to strengthen communication moderation features, improve education on gaming ethics, and provide support systems to help players manage emotional distress during gameplay.

Conclusion

This study successfully revealed that *trash talking* in the Dota 2 ecosystem is a complex stimulus that is responded to **diversely** through dynamic cognitive and affective mechanisms. These findings advance current knowledge by proving that player responses are not impulsive, but rather the result of internal assessments influenced by the competitive context, relationships between players, and personal emotion regulation in accordance with the *Stimulus–Organism–Response* (S–O–R) theoretical framework. This study's scientific contribution lies in mapping players' *coping strategies* –from technical measures such as the *mute feature* to normalization through ignoring– which indicate a certain level of **mental resilience** in the face of digital toxicity. Implications, these findings can be applied by game developers to strengthen more intuitive communication moderation features to create a healthier gaming environment. Future research is expected to expand the scope of analysis by including *rank level variables* or more diverse cultural backgrounds to dissect the influence of competitive structures on how players manage negative interactions in online games.

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