

Paradoxical Value Co-Creation Through Destructive Behaviors: Trash Talking in Dota 2

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A Thesis in The Department of
Marketing in John Molson School of Business

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Science in Marketing at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

March 2025

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

School of Graduate Studies

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Entitled: Paradoxical Value Co-Creation Through Destructive Behaviors: Trash
Talking in Dota 2

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Master of Science in Marketing

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Abstract:**Paradoxical Value Co-Creation Through Destructive Behaviors: Trash Talking in Dota 2**

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Co-creation is always considered an outcome of positive behaviors. Conversely, co-destruction is mostly treated as a negative outcome of negative or destructive behaviors. However, there are instances that negative or destructive behaviors paradoxically create value. Conducting nine interviews and analysing ten extensive threads, my findings suggest that under circumstances, there are more angles to destructive behaviors rather than being merely destructive! Exploring Dota 2 players' motifs for trash talking that is a negative behavior, I identified four types of value in trash talking. First trash talking for the pleasure of winning, second trash talking for entertainment and fun, third trash talking for gameplay self-perception enhancement and feeling better about oneself and fourth trash talking for social bonding and friendship ties. These findings contribute to the co-creation and trash talking literatures challenging the predominant ideologies that co-creation is always stemmed in positive behaviors and that trash talking is always a negative behavior.

Keywords: Co-Creation, Co-Destruction, Value Creation, Destructive Behaviors, Trash Talking, Dota 2

Acknowledgement:

I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor, Pierre-Yan, who supported me throughout this journey. His helps were unconditional and continuous. My especial thanks to my lovely wife, Mehnoosh, who has been sacrificing a lot so I can finish my studies. Her presence is a light and a warmth in my life. Finally, thanks to everyone contributing to the program and helping students like me to get a higher education. I hope I can make the world a slightly better place.

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2. Introduction

Value co-creation is a central topic in marketing. Research on value creation has largely treated co-creation and co-destruction as distinct and opposing mechanisms, each following a linear cause-and-effect structure. The dominant co-creation literature has focused on positive behaviors—such as customer engagement, participation, and collaboration—resulting in positive outcomes, such as innovation, enhanced service experiences, and increased customer satisfaction (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). In this view, value co-creation has been framed as a mutually beneficial process in which customers and firms integrate resources to improve service offerings or in another word positive outcomes (Payne et al., 2008). Conversely, sometimes the interaction between provider and consumer will lead to a negative value creation for at least one of them which is called co-destruction (Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010). The co-destruction literature has focused on negative behaviors, treating them as mechanisms that solely lead to negative outcomes. Studies in this area highlight how customer misuse, conflicts, or service failures disrupt service processes, leading to dissatisfaction, brand damage, or loss of economic value (Echeverri & Skålén, 2011). Negative customer behaviors—such as complaints, defection, or even aggressive interactions—have been framed as obstacles that firms must mitigate or prevent to avoid value loss or value destruction (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). Both co-creation and co-destruction are well studied in marketing but, they are stemmed from perceived positive or negative practices (behaviors) respectively. I define positive and negative behaviors based on societal perceptions. Positive behaviors refer to actions that are generally deemed constructive, ethical, or beneficial within a given social or cultural context. Conversely, negative behaviors are those perceived as disruptive, unethical, or detrimental. However, sometimes co-creation and co-destruction do not follow a linear positive to positive and negative to negative norm. An alleged negative behavior paradoxically can lead to value co-creation therefore the engagement initially seen as co-destruction is in fact a co-creation. For instance, hecklers in stand-up comedies try to unsettle the comedian by shouting mean comments which is at first glance value destructive, but paradoxically provides an entry point for comedians to comeback with funny responses, enhancing the crowd experience¹. In fact, some comedians are famous mainly for the way they handle hecklers (Canonne, 2021). In the music industry, particularly in genres like rap and hip-hop, artist feuds and beefs can create a buzz and attract interests in the artists' work even though the conflict itself is a negative behavior. For instance, the Drake Vs. Lamar feud which resulted in many news agencies creating a history and timeline of their beef (Murray & Roeloffs, 2024). In culinary arts competitions, critical reviews even if harsh, can enhance a chef's reputation and skill. For instance, Christine Ha, the blind chef who won MasterChef Season 3 acknowledged that the Gordon Ramsay's critiques despite being harsh sometimes, pushed her for sharpening her culinary techniques and helping her gain international recognition. Or in sports, an intense fan protests to clubs' poor performance resulting in new expending and player and coach acquisition is another example. Arsenal FC in 2018 went through this where fans were organizing protests, damaging seats, displaying banners, and in some cases boycotting matches. This pressure contributed to the club's decision to part ways with Wenger in 2018 after 22 years in charge.

All in all, we know little about the circumstances and destructive behaviors that consumers engage in that yield value co-creation. To address this gap, I ask: How do actions seemingly destructive can co-create value, and under which circumstances? To answer these research questions, I examine trash talking—aggressive communications insulting both teammate and

¹ (Carr, 2020)

opponent or boastful remarks about self (Yip et al. 2018)—in Dota 2— a multiplayer online video game. Trash talking has been heavily studied, and studies have framed it as a negative behavior that leads to value destruction. For instance, they show how men trash talk and cyberbully more than women (Kaye et al.,2022), and that trash talking is a means through which men keep their dominance in video gaming (Drenten et al., 2022). In the development of a scale for pro and antisocial behaviors, verbal insult towards both teammates and opponents are considered antisocial (Kavussanu and Boardley, 2009). In short, there is clear evidence that trash talking in video games is a behavior that seemingly destroy value for a variety of video gamers.

Still, hostile behavior and in particular trash talking are permanent and rampant features of online video gaming. It is also a distinctive feature of some specific video games, such as Dota 2 which is widely considered as one of the most toxic games in the world where behaviors like trash talk, racial slurs, homophobia, and sexism make up a significant portion of communication (Brinks, M. (n.d.). Given that prior work would conceptualize trash talking as value destroying, we might expect that the prevalence of this behavior would negatively affect the game popularity. For instance, trash talking is framed as morally indefensible as it treats opponents merely as objects to be overcome and such behavior is extraneous to athletic excellence and can be detrimental to the integrity of sports (Dixon, 2007). Players subject to trash talk experience cognitive distractions, leading to feelings of shame and anger, which negatively affect their performance, suggesting that trash talking can undermine an athlete's focus and motivation (McDermott, 2019). While trash talking is supposedly creating a negative experience for players and is a widespread phenomenon in Dota 2, no significant decline in a number of players has been seen during the past few years, with about a million daily players actively engaging in the game (Steam Charts, n.d.).

My findings emerge from the analysis of 9 interviews with consumers as well as of nentnography of more than 10 threads on a popular online web forum. I find that trash talking in Dota 2 conveys different meaning in different settings and encounters. In certain situations, trash talking creates four types of value: First, Competition- taking advantage of trash talking for the pleasure of winning; Second, Fun- trash talking as a means for entertainment; Third, Gameplay Self-perception Enhancement- boosting the feeling a gamer attributes to their own control skills so they can feel better about themselves; And fourth Social Bonding-strengthening the tie between the players. Thus, behaviors previously characterized as value co-destructive resulted in value co-creation.

My findings contribute to existing work is twofold. First it opens up a new stream in value co-creation by finding value in an alleged destructive behavior, urging scholars to expand their view on types of interactions in value co-creation and create a more inclusive framework. Second, I add to trash talking literature showing that it can be value-creative rather than being framed as a destructive behavior. However, there are certain boundaries for these two to be true, for example, bigotry, sexism, racism and personal attacks are not value creative trash talking. Complex interactions in the game results in series of events that makes trash talking value creative in four aforementioned forms. Next, I discuss how co-creation and co-destruction literature fail to provide an inclusive framework that captures all sort of behaviors. Then I elaborate on my research methods and findings in complex trash talking interactions and finally in the discussion section I enumerate contributions and implications of this study.

3. Literature Review

In this section I review co-creation and co-destruction literature and pointing at their shortcomings in addressing contradictory outcomes, such as destructive behaviors that create value. Historically, value creation has been conceptualized as residing solely in the firm. Rooted in the goods-dominant (G-D) logic, this perspective saw value as embedded in products and services, which firms produced, priced, and distributed to maximize efficiency and profitability (Kotler, 1972). As soon as one customer pays for a product or service the company could monetize the embedded value. From this perspective, the role of consumers is largely limited to purchasing and consuming offerings, with little influence on how value was defined or shaped (Levitt, 1960).

This traditional view aligned with the concept of value-in-exchange, where value was determined by the market and measured by the price a customer was willing to pay (Porter, 1985). Firms focused on optimizing internal processes, controlling distribution channels, and differentiating products to gain competitive advantages. Marketing strategies focused on persuasion and segmentation, aiming to position products effectively rather than engaging consumers in value creation (Bagozzi, 1975). I conclude that in this view the destruction of value could mean company's failure in one of the main operations such as not differentiating enough, not creating convincing marketing materials, not targeting the audience properly etc. In other words, their failure to sell their product to customers so the value is not monetized thus destroyed.

3.1 Co-Creation

Co-creation is a concept introduced by Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) which proposed a new lens for value creation between customer and companies. The non interactive view of value creation, that isolated firms and consumers from each other was questioned by this new perspective. It posits that rather than companies solely producing goods and services with an inherited value for passive consumers, co-creation involves consumers' active participation in the value creation by integration of products, services, and experiences (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). From this perspective, companies co-create value with their customers, and therefore need to align strategies to increase customers' integration (or purchase) of companies' offering through involving customers in creating their offerings.

Two characteristics, positive behaviors and as a result positive outcome are recurrent and central to how we understand co-creation. Jaakkola and Alexander (2014) describe co-creation as a process in which customers actively contribute to value creation through positive, constructive engagement. Their framework highlights how customer participation leads to enhanced service experiences and improved outcomes for both customers and firms. Their study underscores that co-creation is fundamentally rooted in positive customer behaviors, such as knowledge sharing, problem-solving, and collaboration. Much of the existing research on co-creation focuses on positive or constructive behaviors. For instance, the customer's engagement with a brand or service is typically framed as a mutually beneficial interaction where both parties benefit from the exchange (Grönroos, 2011). For instance, a positive behavior he discusses is when customers proactively participate in service interactions by asking questions and offering suggestions. While these interactions are certainly important, they leave little room for the consideration of negative behaviors, such as complaints, dissatisfaction, or conflicts, in the co-creation process. Most of the literature assumes that such behaviors are detrimental to value creation and must be avoided (Cova & Dallı, 2009).

Co-creation was replicated cross sectors to redefine value creation highlighting the role of customers and distancing from the traditional non interactive view. For example, in the context of online communities and digital platforms, co-creation occurs when users generate content, share experiences, and provide feedback, which firms can then use to improve products or services (Ramaswamy & Gouillart, 2010). In Virtual Customer Environments (VCEs), co-creation occurs when customers voluntarily participate and contribute, driven by the benefits they expect to gain rather than purely altruistic reasons. These benefits include enhanced product knowledge, social interaction, reputation, and cognitive enjoyment, which ultimately shape their engagement (Nambisan & Baron, 2009). Ind et al. (2019) explored the motifs derives customers to co-create in 3 different online communities; private health, diabetes care and consumer brands. Their idea of consumers co-creation in the communities is that people participate in sharing knowledge and creativity in order to contribute because of their sense of belonging to the group. In another study they find that co-creation activities, such as online communities, allow organizations to engage with consumers in a way that uncovers their emotions, feelings, and memories, ultimately leading to valuable insights. These activities provide fulfillment, opportunities for creative expression, and socialization, which drive individuals to participate in communities (Ind et al., 2013). Zhang et al. (2023) discuss how social commerce features—such as user-generated content, peer recommendations, and online discussions—foster co-creation by allowing customers to help each other make informed purchasing decisions. Chen et al. (2024) further expand on this by emphasizing that customers collaboratively enhance service quality by providing feedback, offering peer support, and even engaging in product co-development. These studies confirm that positive customer interactions—such as knowledge sharing, emotional encouragement, and shared participation—can significantly enhance co-creation outcomes.

Several studies illustrate positive customer to customer co-creation behaviors across different service settings. For example, Rihova et al. (2018) explore customer communities in festivals and tourism and find that shared enthusiasm, social bonding, and mutual assistance between attendees enhance the overall experience. In another study Kumar et al. (2020) empirical findings indicate that customer co-creation has a favorable effect on product and service innovation. Yet again their studies primarily focus on positive and constructive aspects of co-creation, such as collaboration, learning, and dialogue between firms and customers.

Co-creation also happens in my research context: gaming. For example, Acharya and Wardrip-Fruin (2019) identifies games where players actively participate in designing the game world, emphasizing commonalities across these games and proposing ways to enhance collaborative processes in future game development. This is essential in order to increase gamers interaction and integration of games. They found that expandable and adaptable game worlds, informing others by making decisions, and a moderation system which filters incoming content are the common practices that facilitate co-creation in games. Besides the interaction among gamers themselves will contribute to the experience of playing the game hence value co-creation. Similarly, in sporting events, Kim et al. (2019) show that customer passion and positive interactions create a more immersive and enjoyable atmosphere, improving perceived value for all participants. In these studies, customers positive forms of engagements like designing and passion result in positive outcomes like increase gamers interaction and enjoyable atmosphere. Therefore, the shortcoming is overlooking the potential in negative behaviors that result in value co-creation.

3.2 Co-Destruction

Although co-creation aimed to enhance value creation by strengthening engagements between customers and firms, not all engagements will create value. Sometimes the interaction between provider and consumer will lead to a negative value creation for at least one of them which is referred to as co-destruction (Plé and Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010). Value co-destruction, as a counterpart to co-creation, describes the process through which value is diminished or destroyed through interactions among stakeholders, typically involving service failures, misunderstandings, or poorly executed processes (Echeverri & Skålén, 2011). While co-creation involves the integration of resources to generate value, co-destruction occurs when resources are misaligned or poorly managed, leading to negative outcomes for parties involved. Co-destruction is most commonly discussed in the context of service failure, where customer expectations are not met, and value is lost as a result (Järvi et al., 2018).

Most studies regard destructive behaviors as inherently negative and resulting in a loss of value. For example, a customer who receives poor service or encounters a product malfunction may feel dissatisfied, leading to negative emotions and a decreased perception of the value they have received (Plé & Chumpitaz Cáceres, 2010). Recently, the literature has broadened the study of co-destruction to encompass not only service failures but also the actions of both customers and firms that impede value creation (Järvi et al., 2018). For instance, when customers fail to engage properly in the service process or make unrealistic demands, they can contribute to value loss, as firms may struggle to meet those expectations (Echeverri & Skålén, 2011). In another example, in customers-employees confrontation, customers negative feeling of retaliation on the company resulted from a negative behavior like frontline employee's rudeness or lack of understanding, or company lying to customer (Zhang et al, 2018). Moreover, customer-to-customer interactions are not always completely positive. Just as constructive interactions can lead to shared value, dysfunctional or disruptive behaviors among customers can result in the co-destruction of value (Echeverri & Skålén, 2011). Negative experiences, such as conflicts between customers, aggressive competition in online communities, or exclusionary behaviors during service encounters, can diminish perceived value and erode engagement (Camilleri & Neuhofer, 2017; Kashif and Zarkada, 2015).

However, some studies implicitly imply that negative behaviors can lead to value creation. For example, critical feedback from customers can act as a catalyst for change, prompting firms to reassess and enhance their offerings (Holbrook, 2006). De Vries and Van de Velde (2016) propose that negative feedback and dissatisfaction may offer opportunities for firms to innovate, develop new solutions, and better address customer needs. Research on innovation suggests that conflict and disagreement, often perceived negatively in co-creation or destruction contexts, can result in creative solutions and innovative outcomes (Jehn, 1995). Although disruptive in the short term, conflict among team members can stimulate new ideas and ultimately lead to improved solutions (Amabile, 1996). Therefore, negative behaviors such as disagreement or criticism can contribute to value creation by encouraging firms to reconsider their products or services.

However, a crucial gap remains: current research overwhelmingly focuses on constructive behaviors and does not sufficiently explore cases where negative interactions paradoxically lead to value co-creation. In other words, the predominant norm in co-creation literature is that positive or constructive behaviors result in positive outcomes or value co-creation. Conversely, in co-destruction literature, researchers attribute negative or destructive behaviors to merely negative outcomes or value co-destruction. Although there are a few studies in the innovation

literature that identify occasions where the cause of value co-destruction was actually a positive behavior, this has yet to be the focal analytical point in theory development.

In the following, I expand on how I am addressing the research question: How can seemingly destructive actions co-create value, and under which circumstances?

4. Methods

4.1 Context

Dota 2 is a 5-versus-5 online game where each player controls a hero with unique skills. The objective is to destroy the opposing team's main building, known as the 'throne.' Success in the game depends on effective team communication, individual skills, and hero combinations, allowing players to outsmart their opponents by destroying their throne. While Dota 2 is often regarded as one of the most toxic games in the world², there has not been a significant decline in the number of players over the past few years. According to a chart released by the game's host platform, Steam, the peak number of daily active players in Dota 2 was approximately 1.2 million, and in the last 30 days, this number has averaged around 0.8 million. Furthermore, the all-time average of daily active players stands at about 0.45 million. Some may argue that the toxicity has hindered the game's growth, but similar trends can be observed in CS:GO, which has comparable toxicity levels (Brinks, M. (n.d.)). Thus, despite being labeled as one of the most toxic games, it continues to maintain a significant number of active players. I chose this game as a context for exploring how co-destructive behaviors can generate value.

4.2 Research Design

To investigate how paradoxical value creation occurs through destructive behavior in the context of trash talking in Dota 2, I conducted a qualitative study. My research focuses on how Dota 2 gamers create value by engaging in behavior that is typically seen as destructive. The study aims to explore the nuanced ways in which such interactions contribute to value creation within the Dota 2 game.

4.3 Data Collection

My data collection involved two primary sources: interviews and threads from one of the biggest web forums for Dota 2. The combination of these sources allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon from multiple perspectives.

I collected data from the web forum related to Dota 2 using a Python archiver. In the Dota 2 section of this forum, gamers discuss various aspects of the game, including strategies, experiences, and social interactions. I searched for threads using keywords such as "Dota 2 trash talk," "Trash Talking in Dota 2" and "Acceptable Trash Talking in Dota 2" to identify relevant discussions. I ensured that the selected threads contain at least 20 comments and ended up collecting 10 threads. The selected threads were archived, ensuring that I captured a wide range of perspectives and interactions. The comments with rich content were picked and included in the analysis. This data provided a broader context for understanding how trash talking is perceived by a larger community.

² (Anderson, 2023)

In addition to threads, I conducted in-depth interviews with 9 participants who are active Dota 2 players. Participants were all male. They were recruited through in-game chat invitation, and posting on the recruiting message on the main web forum for the game. The interviews lasted between 30 to 60 minutes and were semi-structured to allow for flexibility and depth. The questions focused on participants' experiences with trash talking, their perceptions of its impact on the gaming experience, and examples of how such interactions have led to value creation. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis (table 1 and table 2). Each interviewee received a \$15 Amazon gift card. During the interview process, I realized different players engage in game for different purposes (for example winning or having fun) and also in different engagement setting (for example playing only with friends). Therefore, the direction of interviews varies based on interviewees engagement such as purpose and setting. Hence, throughout the interviews, some questions evolved a special topic like trash talking with and among friends, or competitiveness in order to grasp a deep understanding of underlying reasons. You could find the interview guide on the appendix section.

4.4 Data Analysis

The analysis evolved alongside data collection and was conducted in two phases. After the first five interviews, themes began to emerge, and in the second phase, I developed the questions to deepen the themes that illustrate how trash talking creates value. Our data analysis followed an inductive approach, involving multiple levels of coding to identify themes and patterns. Below, I elaborate on the step-by-step coding process, adhering to best practices from Gioia (2012): first-order, second-order, and aggregated themes. **First order:** This part is similar to the axial analysis of Strauss and Corbin's (1998). I began with open coding, examining the data line by line to identify significant statements and actions related to trash talking and value creation. This initial coding was descriptive, capturing the essence of each segment of data. For instance, 'Teammate' and 'Winning' were common keywords for collecting quotes. **Second order:** In the next phase, I grouped these descriptive quotes into higher-level categories. This process involved identifying relationships between quotes and understanding how they interact to contribute to the overarching theme of paradoxical value creation. Following the 'Teammate' example, I realized that the trash talking among teammates serves two purposes: first, as constructive criticism, and second, as a self-perception buffer when losing. **Aggregated theme:** Finally, I engaged in selective coding to refine and integrate the categories into central themes. This stage aimed to develop a cohesive narrative explaining how trash talking, typically viewed as destructive, can lead to positive outcomes and value creation within the Dota 2 community. For example, constructive criticism is a subtheme of competition due to its functionality aimed at winning the game. Another instance is trash talking as a psychological warfare that serves a winning purpose. Thus, both categories fall under the competition theme.

4.5 Tables

Table 1: Summary of Data Sources

Data Source	Description	Quantity	Usage
Interviews	In-depth interviews with active Dota 2 players	9	Underlying reasons of trash talking engagement
Threads	Discussions related to trash talking in Dota 2	10	Collect data from broader community of players

Table 2: Summary of Interview Details

Alias	Gender	Length of Interview (Excluding Initial Explanation)
Smith	Male	39:16
John	Male	34:09
Jack	Male	34:37
Peter	Male	38:32
Brad	Male	35:37
Liam	Male	36:21
Ryan	Male	26:26
Nick	Male	42:29
Evan	Male	31:33

5. Findings

As we expected that there should have been other angles to the rampant trash talking in Dota 2, I found in some situations trash talking conveys different meanings and is value creative in contrast to what people may expect owing to the fact that trash talking bears a strong negative nature and portrayed negative by literature. My analysis result suggests that in there is value in trash talking in four forms. First to win in the competition, it helps players to criticize teammates or adjust their own gameplay; it can be also used as a warfare when utilized in a proper moment. Second, it is part of the fun and is seen as a funny remark on mistakes; an integral part of the competitive game as a norm breaker; and an outcome enhancer that results in a more joyful winning. Third, trash talking improves or protects gamers' self perception about their skills through showing dominance, provoking more focus and buffering lose responsibility. And finally, it strengthens the tie among teammates or group of friends. In the following I will elaborate on each of these findings. Moreover, there is an overarching boundary over all these forms of trash talking.

5.1 Competition

DOTA 2 is a highly competitive game, and winning the game is a central goal for many players. My analysis finds that seemingly value-destructing actions can create value for players by helping them achieve this central goal. I exemplify this theoretical insight by showing how trash talking can help players win the game by helping them adjust their strategy, improving their teammates' play, and demoralizing the enemy. I open the section by showing how participants generally agree that trash talking is indeed supportive of winning strategies.

Take for example how ABC discusses this idea:

It is just winning, there's really there's no ulterior motive there I'm not trying to like make myself feel better or anything like that. I was just looking for basically a way, an extra way to win.

One may jump to conclusion that trash talking is a negative behavior hence value destructive. However, ABC suggests that trash talking will help him in winning which in a sharp contrast to the literature is value creative. He illustrates that there is no personal attack involved in his motifs to trash talk. Rather, trash talking is used as a strategic tool for winning. In the following, I discuss more in details how trash talking creates value by helping a player win.

5.1.1 Adjusting Strategy (Constructive Criticism)

Although trash talking is seen as a toxic behavior in prior work, my participants relate trash talking as a form of constructive criticism even though directing at them, which prompts revisions in their strategy. When engaging in ‘constructive criticism’ trash talking, players aim at improving gameplay. Unlike what one may initially think regarding how trash talking should have a negative impact on gameplay and winning, I find that provocation may create heightened focus, seemingly helping players win. ABC explains:

trash talking from a teammate a lot of time, is because they believe that you are doing something wrong, right? Or the other thing that, you know, you're not helping them win the game. So in that sense, then, like, whenever I receive trash [talk] from my teammates, I will try to think of all this stuff, because ultimately, me and my teammates have the same goal, right, which is to win. So, if they feel like I'm not doing something correctly, then which is why they're angry at me, then I'll think about it. And then, like, if I think that you have a point, then you know, I'll try to adjust my gameplay so that we can fix a problem together. the problem teammates are pointing out to me.

ABC describes a situation when the trash talking from his teammates helped him realize that he was not playing like as he could. The key point here is the common understating between players, where trash talking like any other mode of communication, conveys meaning. It is not merely insults or derogatory comments; Rather, it is a way to communicate with your teammates about what they should or should not be doing. ABC points to a central aspect of value co-creating trash talking: The pursuit of a common goal. In this case, ABC explains how trash talking helps him adjust his gameplay because he wants to increase the chances of his winning. So, trash talking here acts as a provocation to get him back into the zone and how a player of his rank should perform. Trash talking serves as a wake up call to foster greater engagement with the game, rather than being a value destructive behavior (e.g. disrupting his gameplay). Based on McClelland's (2015) Achievement Motivation Theory, in competitive situations, achievement is the north star of motivating everyone to pursue success. ABC's focus on winning and excel, reinforces this theory.

5.1.2 Psychological Warfare

While trash talking teammates is a form of constructive criticism that can help win the game, trash talking opponents is a tool that is used as psychological warfare and is seen by participants as one of the skill sets serving winning the game purpose. Studies suggest that competition in complicated games is intense, games where players compete by showcasing both their quick reflexes and deep understanding of the game (Sherry et al., 2012). Psychological warfare refers to efforts to destabilize the opponent state of thinking to induce wrong decisions, increasing a player's chances of winning. It thus creates value for the player who trash talks. ABC and DEF offer two examples of trash talking in form of psychological warfare:

I think question marks are great or I think two things great voice lines anything that just throw off your enemy mental game I think is appropriate as long as this doesn't go into like or you're being like I said racist or something along that lines.

Immersion in game have been studied extensively showing its importance. For instance, Cheng and Cairns (2005) realized players were so immersed in a simple game that they didn't notice the change in the jumping ability of their character. When competing against others, trash talking can help a player win by undermining immersion and concentration of an opponent. More importantly, as seen, there is no other purpose in this trash talking other than weakening opponents' decision making, and players see clear boundaries as to what kind of trash talk is

inappropriate. Racists or personal attacks are not considered as proper ways to wage this mental war. Therefore, this boundary highlights the underlying reason of trash talking which is merely winning the game and not putting down someone.

DEC reinforces the idea that trash talking is all about playing the game:

[Is trash talking] Valuable? Yeah, definitely. I definitely think there are. I think for example, if you crush the laning phase [the first 10 minutes of the game], and you kill their carry Back to back and they die again, use voice lines [voice line refers to a short, spoken trash talk voiced by a hero] I think that this could heighten the advantage that you already have, just by making them feel more defeated. If they're unstable, if they're, you know, open to being influenced that way, the way that you can flex your voice lines or tips to affect the emotional stability of the enemy. Yeah, I would say that's like very valuable and can be strong and it works.

DEC adds on to the role of trash talking in undermining an opponent concentration by explaining how it can also affect their emotional stability. He explains how trash talking can give him an edge when he is already in a winning position, and how making his opponent feel more defeated so he can win easier. Puppetry in gaming highlights that players control their player character and enjoy that performance through screen gaze (Westcott, 2009). Therefore, trash talking the character in game is merely to impact negatively on the players control ability not putting an individual down. It is a tool, bounded within the confines of the game, that helps players win.

5.2 Fun

Even though at first sight trash talking may be seen as quite distant from fun, my analysis finds that this is, at least for my participants, far from the truth. In reality, the gamers I interviewed provided ample examples where trash talking positively enhanced their in-game experiences. In the following I elaborate on how trash talk is often an integral part of the game, but that its entertainment value at other times comes from the norms it breaks. I conclude this section by discussing how it also enhances certain game outcomes.

5.2.1 For Just Trash Talking Sake Nothing More Nothing Less

Trash talking in games can serve as a playful interaction among players. Participants describe it as a way to acknowledge mistakes and share laughs over unusual plays. There is a shared understanding that when someone makes a mistake, both the individual responsible and everyone else recognize it as an error and respond accordingly. In such cases, trash talking is a form of friendly banter to just joke around without any specific direct or hidden intentions. ABC discusses:

*There is some shit talking that is good fun. I've had fun games where both my opponents and I were casually shit talking weird plays. People f**k up sometimes and it is funny. Maybe they were actually raging on the other side, but I assume they are normal people like me that can laugh at their mistakes. I think it makes the game more fun to actually be social when you are playing it. Some people are just ragers who are spamming flames though. That is not really shit talking. Shit talking is fun, just straight flaming is pointless.*

ABC explains when someone is executing quite out of the common sense of the game, he would make fun of them and not only it will not negatively affect them but also, they will enjoy it due to the absurd moves they had. He assumes any average player is tolerant towards trash

talking for a terrible play and they know that the trash talking is only a banter. In this case, trash talking is providing gamers what they consider as a fun environment. Studies have shown that interacting with other players to overcome obstacles are joyful and fun (Dholakia et al., 2004), therefore trash talking among teammates here is just a form of interaction prompting fun.

5.2.2 Integral Entertainment through Norm Breaking

While my participants consider some forms of trash talking as fun banter between friends, at other times, trash talking provides entertainment value because it breaks expected normative gaming behaviors. It is quite prevalent that whenever trash talking happens in a pro scene, YouTube channels that create highlight of matches, put the image of their all chatting (trash talking) in the preview of the video to attract people who wants to know more about the context and the moment of trash talking. The unexpected event adds to engagement and buzz around the match.

.... I think that this kind of this this side of competition is just present in so many different sports I think you're removing something that is like integral to competition if you are removing the ability to All Chat easy or the ability to tip or the ability to use voice lines or you know I feel like there is something missing there. if you're playing a competitive game and you're not able to break the code of sportsmanship like it would feel maybe lifeless. It maybe it will be a little boring. I don't know. I'm not a fan of using both sides of like both dire and radiant when I'm playing a game because it is so lonely experience. I do not know. I am not training to play in any kind of tournament or anything right so Do I still want to enjoy myself? And I think that [by] removing that, yes, you are removing an interesting part of the experience

Echoing what I discussed earlier regarding the use of trash talking as a competitive tool, ABC discusses the nuanced interplay between competition, culture, and the performative aspects of gaming. For him, trash talking is part of the cultural fabric of competitive gaming, and serves as a form of psychological strategy, which enriches the competitive experience by introducing a layer of social interaction and mental gamesmanship. The reason is going out of bound of some written or unwritten codes of conduct is entertaining as it breaks the lifelessness of the game. Removing trash talking would strip the game of a significant cultural dimension, leading to a more sterile and less engaging experience.

5.2.3 Outcome Enhancer

Last but not the least, trash talking is also seen as enhancing certain outcomes of gameplay, such as winning. Main purpose of many players playing game is to have fun and when trash talking enhances that fun experience it certainly improves the gaming experience therefore value creative. ABC explains:

Oh, 100% like 100% If the enemy is trash talking and you're behind, and you make a comeback and you win, that is a much more satisfying feeling. Because you feel like you put down a bully. Right? They are ahead and they are bullying you and they are trash talking you so you feel really bad. But then for whatever reason you come back and then you win the game. And then you feel like a superhero. Right, because you overcome an obstacle that with all odds and likelihoods you were going to lose so yeah, I would say that is a much more satisfying feeling if you're getting trashed talked and you come back and win.

ABC explains how trash talking plays a critical role in enriching the gaming experience. By enhancing the emotional experience, trash talking supports shifts between feeling oppressed and achieving a victorious comeback. While, when loosing, trash talking exacerbates negative

emotions, under the circumstances that ABC discusses, when winning, it enhances positives ones, making him feel like a superhero. It transforms routine gameplay into a dramatic narrative filled with emotional highs and lows. Importantly, ABC highlights how the outcomes he perceives is greatly accentuated by trash talking; his satisfaction is increased because he was originally the subject of trash talk.

5.3 Gameplay Self-perception Enhancement

Self-perception of gameplay refers to a feeling a gamer attributes to their own control skills. I identify three ways through which trash talking affect self-perception. First, when *showing dominance*, players use trash talking after demonstrating superior skill through exceptional gameplay. When players assert their dominance, they reinforce their own belief in their abilities and establish their status within the competitive hierarchy. This boosts their confidence and drives them to continue excelling. Second, trash talking can also serve to motivate both the player and their opponents, fostering a more intense and competitive environment. When *enhancing gameplay potential*, trash talking motivates improved gameplay performance by increasing focus, determination, and efforts. Last, when *buffering self-perception*, players protect their self-esteem and maintain a positive self-image in the face of failure that is highlighted by the trash talking of opponents and teammates. This can be seen as a form of motivational defense mechanism preserving their self-perception gameplay. By maintaining this, they are motivated to continue playing and striving for success, rather than being demoralized by perceived failures. I now expand on each in turn and show how trash talking leads to add or preserve value.

5.3.1 Showing Dominance

The first way trash talking can enhance self-perception is when used to *show dominance*. Certain moments during a game are remarkable in almost everyone's perspective. At an extreme, a CounterStrike player remarkable killed all five of his opponents with a single bullet, "a one-in-a-million shot [as] every single enemy player on the opposing team ... had all lined up in just the right way"³. A one-in-hole in golf exemplifies this as well. In Dota2, Roshan [a powerful neutral boss], when killed, offers unique game items. At times, players are able to steal such items from their opponent who killed Roshan. Players understand that, in such remarkable moments, they are granted the permission to emphasize their dominance and remark on outplayed enemy's skills by trash talking them, especially when previously trash talked by them. ABC explains:

I think personally, I find it appropriate for me, when I make a great play. I think that I've earned the right to trash talk the enemy team a little bit. I if I make a rampage, if you're part of me, you just outplayed them? Yeah, if I outplay them, if I'm feeling good, if I'm doing well, if my team is doing well, if they have previously trash talked, you know, whether it be tipping [an act of giving some of your own points to another player⁴] me, or chatting or any of that. if they've previously done it, I think, I try and [re]cover from them in any kind of way, I think that I've earned the right to retort, I think that's appropriate.

For ABC, demonstrating his skills through an exceptional play gives him the right to trash talk his opponents. This is because he is asserting his dominance in a confrontation of skillsets, proving himself to be the stronger or better player. Trash talking in this context can be seen as a form of expression, similar to a victory horn or a lion's roar or namely an extra joy like a

³ (Livingston, 2023).

cherry on top of the cake. Additionally, when a gamer is targeted over a minute mistake, they may feel compelled to not only show his superior skill but also to prove his opponent wrong. For example, “tipping” is a common tactic to get into an opponent’s head after even a minor mistake. When the gamer proves himself otherwise, he is entitled to trash talk his opponent to remind them that he is not only better but that their previous mistake was insignificant. This is aligned with White (1959) portraying people’s motivational system as being energized by an urge toward competence, that is, making progress in the knowledge and abilities that support the individual’s struggle for survival. Therefore, as ABC explains asserting on demonstration of skillful encounter is an extension to that good feeling he had earned or in other words is an extra value created through trash talking.

5.3.2 Enhancing gameplay potential

A second way trash talking creates self-perception value is by *enhancing gameplay potential*. When trash talked, some players become more determined to respond by winning. They invest more mental effort into the game, arguably enhancing their gameplay and improving their self-perception as players. It is important to note that, unlike the previous scenario where the player doing the trash talking seeks to assert dominance, this scenario is value-creating for the player who is the target of the trash talk. For example, ABC says:

Like there are instances where the opponents are trash talking, and that really invigorated me and I ended up winning the game after that. So that put me into total focus. Like I can like zone into the game and then I may learn from that.

Studies have shown that a player subject of trash talking outperform a player who is not target of trash talking. Those targets of trash talking are revitalized in order to punish the opponent by winning (Jeremy et al., 2018). In this case, trash talking acts as mental stimulation, pushing him to play better to win. Trash talking acts as a catalyst for ABC to enter a state of flow, where they become fully immersed in the gameplay and able to perform at their best. Individual characteristics may moderate how likely it is for trash talking to enhance gameplay potential. In this case, ABC reacted to trash talking through increased motivation. Still, it may be that other players become demoralized. Finally entering into this state of focus will help him to learn more from the game that he previously in normal situation hasn’t, for example a new strategy. He also mentions that there are instances this happens which means it is not an always occurrence. According to Bandura (1977) the more one believes they are able to overcome given situations successfully, the more motivation they have to engage in it and they will invest more effort. So it can be inferred that ABC is aware that game situation and winning condition should be at some certain point.

5.3.3 Buffering negative self-perception

The third mechanism my analysis uncovers that may be necessary for maintaining value, is buffering negative self-perceptions resulted from losing. In contrast to prior mechanisms, where trash talking directly creates value, in this third mechanism, players prevent value destruction through trash talking teammates and sometimes opponents. It happens when player thinks they did excellent but ended up losing because low skilled teammates.

games like Dota 2 and League of Legends and the setting they are designed, it is really difficult to do that by yourself. So, you rely heavily on your teammates to be relatively okay or no at least know what they’re doing. Right. So, it becomes frustrating for a player to get stuck in a rank or get stuck in a spot where he is much better than the average player in his rank, but constantly losing games because of bad teammates or people who are not paying attention who just do not know the game. In gaming terms,

we call them noobs, or boosted or someone that does not belong there. And that frustration, in turn, sometimes turns into trash talking.

ABC explains when an individual is performing good (according to their individual kill/death/assist ratio) yet they are not winning the games, they channel that frustration to trash talk their underperforming teammates. The reason is they don't believe the loss was their fault so they try to divert the responsibility to the teammates. This will alleviate the loss experience because at that point they believe they are being held back or unfairly disadvantaged due to factors beyond his control. So, relieving that frustration through trash talking bolsters his self-perception. As Catharsis Theory⁵ explains, expressing emotions, particularly negative ones, can provide a release or purification of those emotions. In the context of trash talking, individuals may use verbal jabs as a way to express and alleviate emotional tension or frustration.

5.4 Social Bonding

Social bonding refers to different connections between players stemmed in gaming together. It goes beyond the technical aspects of gameplay, fostering deep connections through shared experiences, supportive interactions. Sometimes trash talking strengthens their ties and enhances the enjoyment of the game making the gaming experience more meaningful and enriching.

5.4.1 Showing Support

Trash talk from opponents can be a catalyst for strengthening team solidarity and improving interpersonal relationships among teammates. This phenomenon occurs when an opponent's taunt or derogatory remark targets a specific player who may be struggling or making mistakes. Instead of allowing the negative comments to demoralize their teammate, the trash talk provokes team to rally around the targeted player, and trash talk back as a support. ABC discusses such an example:

And then that comes with people who you really engage in something that maybe brings you in together, like for two or four hours in a day? That's someone you have known maybe probably for months. And even if not, maybe personally, I would say it's quite like a community of people who have known each other and want to support each other. So when one of us is getting trash talked, everyone will support that person either by trash talking back, or giving them tips on how to clip it. And we probably win the game.

ABC explains a situation where teammates have a prior connection. He describes themselves as a group of people connected together, either online or in person, in order to play Dota. When one of the teammates get trash talked, it can be inferred that as his fellow community member he should react to the trash talking to maintain community bond. Here, trash talk acts as an indirect supportive behavior as a result of their prior relationship. There are plenty of examples where teammates in both sports and esports show support against an adversary. This is consistent with prior studies that found social support functions as a buffer against stress (Cohen and Wills, 1985). Besides, he adds that, when trash talked, they will probably win, hinting that trash talking should improve gameplay.

5.4.2 Friendship Tie

Trash talking among friends is characterized by a mutual understanding and shared sense of humor. It is rooted in the trust that each member has good intentions and that the primary goal is to enjoy the game and each other's company. This trash talking within groups of close friends,

⁵ This theory, originally proposed by Aristotle and later revisited by Sigmund Freud

serves as a unique social mechanism that reinforces bonds and fosters a sense of camaraderie. In the following interview excerpt, ABC talks about their chemistry and highlight how trash talking, when practiced among friends, transcends its superficial appearance of mockery or derision to become a deeper form of relational engagement.

All me and all my gamer friends, we all have good intentions. I trust everyone. They all trust me. So when we are doing trash talking, we have two goals. One to win the game to be entertained. So any trash talk that we do will be humorous. So if you mark the other person, in fact, that person themselves will laugh. Everyone is allowed to pause [In Dota, pausing the game because of a miss gameplay is one form of remarking that mistake] the game and we laugh. We'll all laugh at that person. Everyone has to have the ability to laugh at themselves. Okay, if that ability is not there, then that person is I would call something's wrong with that. And all of us gamers we all have the ability to laugh with our shits. We all have this, this is all good. So yeah, those are the two intentions one during the game to be entertainment when I met someone else, if it is not humorous, and if it is just hurtful. It's not just him, everyone will be like, do whatever you're doing. This is sad, cold. Nobody will like that. And if it's not entertaining, you are losing your capital, right? You are losing your brand, if it is not entertaining, so if we want to entertain other people those are the variables that you know, move you forward, right? That's putting down another person for no reason and when it's not entertaining doesn't get you anywhere. So I was fortunate enough to have this really good set. Bizarre, we all had thick skin that we can trust to do whatever you want. it was all to win the game or to be entertained. And everything was honest. It was all rooted in truth. When something went wrong, that's three, nine people are laughing at you, right with ten people sitting in behind, people are laughing at you. Yeah, you too have to laugh at yourself.

ABC elaborates on the chemistry among their group of friends, highlighting how trash talking is an integral part of their relationship in the game. This group dynamic is built on a foundation of mutual trust and understanding, where everyone engages in trash talk in a lighthearted and playful manner. They are acutely aware of the dynamics of their relationships, ensuring that no one is genuinely trying to put someone down, and everyone is resilient to the banter. Within this close-knit group, trash talking serves as a unique form of communication, strengthening their camaraderie and enhancing their overall gaming experience. One's ability to laugh at own self is a critical aspect, indicating that the objective is to have fun and enjoy each other's companionship. ABC emphasizes that their goals are twofold: to win and to have fun. As mentioned in previous sections, this dual objective underscores the multifaceted nature of trash talking as both a means of entertainment and a strategic tool for winning, which reinforces other ways through which trash talking creates value. However, ABC makes it clear that trash talking is only considered acceptable within certain boundaries on which we elaborate thoroughly in the following section to conclude the findings. This is in agreement with studies on virtual communities that reveal consumers put significant value on social ties (Claffey & Brady, 2017; Nambisan & Baron, 2009).

5.5 Bounding Out Value Destruction

In this section I expand on how players bound out trash talking behaviors that may destroy value. No value creation is provided here but certain unwritten rules under which trash talking is value creative is further discussed. These sets of boundaries, if crossed, will dampen the positive aspects of some or all of the value created, perhaps even turning into value destruction. These boundaries are built upon two main facets: winning and morale.

5.5.1 Winning (Objective Oriented)

The drive to win often dictates the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Players are more likely to engage in trash talking that energizes and unifies the team, fostering a competitive edge that enhances their chances of victory. So, this type of boundary is all shaped around one main objective, winning. ABC states:

But then again, there has to be a limit. So after a certain point in time, let's say you're just trying to bully the other person or make the other person feel bad. That is a bad strategy. Because now you're negatively affecting the chances of winning, correct? If you're going to make someone mentally doubt themselves, or, you know, take them off their game, or make them feel bad, you're going to put them into that mainframe. That's bad for your team. So you should not do that. So you should know what's the right amount of that trash talking. So you effectively have to optimize how to get the point across in the minimal amount of things without causing damage, so that you can even begin again, the objective is always to win the game

ABC mentions that the main objective is to win the game. There's a fine line between constructive and destructive trash talk. When trash talk is used excessively or in a way that targets a teammate's weaknesses, it can backfire by damaging their confidence and focus. Therefore, one should know the perfect amount of trash talking without damaging the teammate to avoid undermining the team's overall performance. Stressing a teammate to the point where they doubt their capability puts the team at a disadvantage and diminishes winning probability. This boundary is set for teammates considering that winning is the main goal of the team. So, if trash talking becomes anything more than teasing or urging the teammate in order to adjust strategy or have fun, that trash talking is not a value creative one anymore.

5.5.2 Morale (Strict Social Norms)

Socially constructed or whatever else reservations frame some trash talking as destructive and unnecessary. Certain forms of trash talking are inherently wrong, not because they violate game rules, but because they breach the unwritten social contracts that underlies respectful interaction. This section explores how these socially framed reservations define what is considered destructive or unnecessary, ensuring that trash talk remains a positive force rather than a source of value destruction.

*..... So yeah, those are the two intentions one during the game to be entertainment when I met someone else, if it is not humorous, and if it is just hurtful. It's not just him, everyone will be like, do whatever you're doing. This is sad, cold. Nobody will like that. And if it's not entertaining, you are losing your capital, right? You are losing your brand, if it is not entertaining, so if we want to entertain other people those are the variables that you know, move you forward, right? Putting down another person for no reason and when it's not entertaining doesn't get you anywhere..... If someone f**ks up it's totally fine to goof on them for it. well played! [as a sarcasm] Or nice hook [one of the famous hero's abilities] whatever. As long as it isn't the only thing you say all game Don't be the asshole who makes fun of everyone all game. Telling people they're doing something bad is fine, it doesn't have to be a malicious gesture. It can be funny or helpful. But as soon as you make it personal, like telling the player themselves that they are a bad person etc., you're going too far.*

ABC explains that trash talking should display several characteristics to be deemed value creating: It should be based on something worthy of mention and honest. It should remain

humorous and entertaining, and it should not cross into being hurtful or overly aggressive. This emphasis on humor contributes to creating a positive and enjoyable gaming experience for everyone involved. DEF acknowledges that playful banter directed at a player's mistakes, such as sarcastically complimenting a failed move is generally acceptable. However, he warns against repetitive mockery of one mistake to the point it becomes a malicious gesture. If the frequency or severity of trash talking begins to shift from playful interaction to persistent negativity, it risks undermining morale and creating a toxic atmosphere. He highlights the delicate balance required in trash talking: it can enhance the gaming experience by adding humor and light-hearted competition, but it must be kept within respectful and non-personal limits which can be both Fun and Constructive trash talking which are two other types of aforementioned value. Players should be mindful of avoid dominating conversations with repetitive negative comments, and ensure that their remarks remain within the realm of playful banter rather than crossing into personal attacks. The web forum community and other participants also expressed their aversion towards personal attacks like racism, homophobia, sexism, and bigotry. Trash talking, although negative as it is an impulsive yelling and insulting someone, should remain in the game. Insulting one's gameplay or skill can result in co-creation. Personal harassment, although it may have some value creation for the trash talker from time to time, cannot be value co-creative for the other side.

6. Discussion

In this research, I examined how seemingly destructive behaviors can create value for consumers. My findings show that in certain situations, negative (destructive) behaviors lead to value co-creation. The context was trash talking in Dota 2 where we found instances that trash talking, despite being a negative behavior, within certain boundaries, results in four types of value co-creation. First, for competition, trash talking contributes to gameplay by serving as constructive criticism and psychological warfare. Some players use it to highlight teammates mistakes, intimating adjustments in strategy. Others employ it as a competitive tool to disrupt opponents' concentration and emotional stability, increasing their own chances of winning. Second, for fun, trash talking contributes to fun by creating playful banter, breaking norms for entertainment, and heightening emotional rewards. Some players enjoy lighthearted teasing over mistakes as a playful interaction. Others find entertainment in trash talking because it disrupts expected norms and behaviors. Lastly, trash talking intensifies the emotional highs of competition, making victories more satisfying, especially when overcoming an opponent who had previously engaged in trash talk. Third, for gameplay self-perception enhancement, asserting superiority through trash talking allows players to establish dominance and reinforce their self-perception as skilled competitors. Moreover, for some players, being trash talked serves as a catalyst for entering a state of flow, where they become fully immersed in the game and improve their strategic thinking. This suggests that, rather than being purely detrimental, trash talking can function as a psychological stimulus; Also buffering negative self-perception is a coping mechanism for players who experience frustration from losing. Players who believe they performed well but still lost due to external factors, such as underperforming teammates, use trash talking to shift blame to preserve their gameplay self-perception. Last, social bonding emerges as a significant value-creating aspect of trash talking. Within gaming communities and friend groups, trash talking fosters camaraderie, reinforcing trust and mutual understanding among players. When practiced within established relationships, trash talk is often humorous and contributes to a sense of belonging. Teammates rallying around a trash-talked player or engaging in playful banter with friends demonstrates how trash talking can function as a social glue, strengthening interpersonal connections.

The kind of behaviors I examine are unlikely to create value in all situations. Therefore, it is important to identify the boundary conditions that determine whether the trash talking can be value creative or not. First, behaviors such as bigotry, sexism, racism, and personal attacks are unequivocally not value-creative (Fox & Tang, 2017; Nakamura, 2012; Consalvo, 2012). Secondly, when directed at teammates, trash talking should aim to motivate collective success rather than demoralize or harm their confidence. Finally, although not explicitly mentioned in the findings, it can be inferred that trash talking requires perfect moment, arising from specific triggers such as a player's mistake, a remarkable play, or the evolving dynamics between players during the game.

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

My work contributes to extant theory in two ways: First I introduce a new stream to co-creation challenging the conservative approach where only positive behaviors result in positive outcomes or value co-creation, and second, I posit that trash talking in games should not be only condemned and there are more angles to displaying this behavior. I discuss each in turn.

First, prior work dichotomizes value co-creation and co-destruction. Value co-creation is typically attributed to allegedly positive behaviors. For instance, Ind et al. (2013) found that participants in online communities co-create value through emotional fulfillment, creativity, and socialization. Similarly, Gentile et al. (2007) outlined components of customer experience, such as sensorial, emotional, and relational values, all stemming from positive interactions. In virtual customer environments, Nambisan and Baron (2009) argued that customers voluntarily contribute to forums due to perceived benefits like cognitive enjoyment and reputation enhancement.

Plé & Cáceres, (2010) argued that value co-creation proposed by Vargo and Lusch (2008) is in a positive way and optimistic therefore a potential negative outcome is overlooked. From their perspective co-destruction also is typically associated with negative behaviors. Studies, such as Kashif and Zarkada (2015) and Kim et al. (2019), associated customer misbehavior, such as verbal abuse and dysfunctionality, with emotional distress and diminished value. Similarly, Duant and Harris (2013) explored showrooming as a value-destructive practice, while Leo and Zainuddin (2017) highlighted misaligned resource application as a cause of co-destruction. These studies consistently framed negative behaviors as inherently destructive. Despite being broader by adding value co-destruction, they fail to see examples where both sides benefit from a negative behavior.

In contrast to prior work, I demonstrate that co-creation does not exclusively arise from positive behaviors, and conversely, not all negative behaviors necessarily lead to co-destruction. I do not reject the idea that there might be a value co-destruction for one side in trash talking engagements, however, I propose that the so-called negative nature of one behavior is not necessarily fully destructive but also under some circumstances benefits one or both sides. For example, trash talking teammate can be a form of constructive criticism therefore value creative for the teammates on the receiving end, and at the same time a self-perception buffer for the trash talker. Or friendship tie is another instance that value is created for both of the friends through a negative behavior. My findings suggest that the prevalent positive behavior attribution to value co-creation and negative behavior attribution to value co-destruction are not always true and even a negative behavior can create value for both sides involved. Therefore, it opens up new stream to drive a fresh look at some phenomena like trash talking in games and the experience of women in gaming environment (Drenten et al., 2023).

Secondly, several studies identify trash-talking as a negative behavior due to its association with hostility, aggression, and diminished social cohesion. For instance, Kou and Nardi (2013)

explore communication patterns in multiplayer online games and argue that trash-talking can create a hostile environment, discouraging teamwork and negatively impacting player experiences. Similarly, Yoo et al. (2014) investigate toxic communication in online gaming environments, showing that trash-talking contributes to a hostile atmosphere, reducing enjoyment and increasing player disengagement. Therefore, Gaming literature largely condemns trash-talking. My contribution is identifying situations where trash talking can enhance the overall gaming experience rather than being merely value destructive. I would like to illustrate Johnson and Woodcock's (2017) view on this and give it a fresh perspective. They argue that modern professional players incorporate re-aestheticization as opposed to games like Go (a Japanese board game) an example of de-aestheticization in which winning had become the sole purpose of playing the game. The reason of de-aestheticization was that after newspapers started reporting the results of matches, Go players focused more on winning than incorporating perfect moves. This winning at any cost paradigm diminished displaying skilful moves. However due to online broadcasting, today's game players are trying to bolster aesthetic through showing ability and skills which is re-aestheticization. They argue that presence of audience even if they are only the players themselves will impact the actions and consequently the aesthetic. Therefore, trash talking opponents delicately in a high-stake match can be part of re-aestheticization as it surprises the audience because of the norm breaking and is entertaining to the spectators just like a skilful display if not more. Having said this, there is a famous streamer named BlitzSparks who uses trash talking and swearing a lot while streaming. One may immediately think, he is de-aestheticizing streaming. But maybe aesthetic has found some other forms. As shown trash talking and so-called bad language is not always negative, or at least in online competitive game like Dota where it can be a form of norm breaking and an integral part of the entertainment. Even Johnson and Woodcock (2017) said "fan affectation and interest can change and shift depending on context, not technical performance, alongside the reception of the players different attitudes to the game and each other". Thus, this prevalent trash talking among some streamers can be an evidence of altered aestheticization.

My findings also contrast with those of Eastin's (2007). First, this study indicates that the larger the group, the more likely verbal aggression will happen. However, my participants mostly play in small groups with their friends and display excessive trash talking among themselves. Additionally, while Eastin (2007) shows that verbal aggression results in a negative outcome, I show how trash talking is a form of friendship communication rather than a negative behavior. Furthermore, the outcome can strengthen friendship ties rather than foster hostility. Therefore, not all verbal aggression or trash talking results in negative outcomes.

Additionally, following Addis and Holbrook (2001), I distinguish between two kinds of consumer value: utilitarian value and hedonic value. These authors realized that the most important motifs for customers to engage in co-creation are knowledge acquisition and intrinsic motivations which refers to the motivation to engage in an activity primarily for its own sake, without obvious external incentives. Thus, I can argue that the reason that the Dota 2 developer, Valve, has established some form of trash takings as heroes (game characters) voice line, is that they realized this is part of the game experience. This is aligned with for just trash talking sake nothing more nothing less value co-creation where players engage in trash-talking just for fun, without any additional incentives. This suggests that the predominant negative outcomes associated with trash-talking are, at best, not insightful enough.

Disclaimer: My position is not that destructive behaviors always result in value creation, nor that such behaviors should be encouraged. Rather, I argue that we must view these events from

this new perspective to better understand the underlying causes leading to such behaviors. For example, when fans become so frustrated with their team that they damage stadium seats, it may seem contradictory since it is their beloved team. However, this can be seen as a manifestation of frustration stemming from feelings of being unheard. Such behaviors often prompt management to address the issue, leading to fan satisfaction, which can, in turn, boost ticket and jersey sales. While this behavior is not justifiable, condemning and stigmatizing the outcome without considering the context may not be the best approach. Two hundred years ago a slave fleeing was deemed criminal under the law and therefore a negative behavior, but this act could also be viewed as a form of resistance against institutionalized injustice. Negative behaviors, such as trash-talking, cannot be isolated, suppressed and dismissed solely based on perceived detrimental outcomes without acknowledging their potential for co-creation

6.2 Managerial implication:

Trash talking in Dota 2 is a crucial part of competition, often used to destabilize opponents or reinforce dominance. However, competition-driven trash talk is rarely personal—its purpose is to affect the opponent's mental state and influence the competitive dynamics of the game. Players recognize the fine line between strategic psychological warfare and outright toxicity, creating an implicit boundary around acceptable behavior. Thus, for game developers, structured forms of negative engagement, such as controlled trash talking, can enhance user immersion and drive deeper engagement. Game developers and esports organizers can integrate in-game communication tools—such as customizable emotes or controlled recorded voice lines—to channel competitive banter in a positive, engaging manner without escalating into harmful toxicity.

Trash talking in Dota 2 is not only a competitive tool but also a source of fun, especially when it breaks norms and enhances the entertainment value of the game. Players enjoy the unpredictability and humor of banter, which makes the competitive experience more engaging. Marketers can apply this insight by embracing controlled and unexpected brand rivalries that create engaging, norm-breaking, and humorous interactions. Brand feuds, like Nike vs. Adidas or Coke vs. Pepsi, have long leveraged playful competition to generate excitement and community engagement.

In gaming, calling out teammates for mistakes (sometimes aggressively) forces them to improve. While aggressive in tone, this behavior is often rooted in a shared goal—winning the game—and can lead to improved team performance when done within acceptable boundaries. Businesses can reframe harsh and insulting customer and employee feedback as constructive criticism, treating it as an opportunity for co-creation of their shared goal, a better offering, rather than a threat. For instance, Amazon can implement an anonymous review section visible to only Amazon and let verified buyer say whatever they want without any restriction. Companies can leverage the same idea in order to address untold problems and improve work place environment. Also in brainstorming sessions encouraging respectful disagreements, such as using a devil's advocate approach where someone roast any slight problem by all means necessary, can lead to enhanced solutions and innovations.

In Dota 2, trash talking strengthens social bonds—players enjoy insulting their friends in a way that paradoxically reinforces their relationships. Some restaurants (e.g., Dick's Last Resort) are famous for deliberately insulting customers. Staff members act rudely on purpose, creating a uniquely entertaining experience. So, it could be a lucrative idea to develop a fitness app that

have a “bully trainer” mode, where users opt-in for a rude, aggressive AI trainer that mockingly pushes them harder—similar to how military drill sergeants yell at recruits.

6.3 Limitations

While this study provides insights into the paradoxical role of trash talking in co-creation, it is not without limitations. First, although the findings suggest that toxic interactions did not damage the popularity of Dota 2, this relationship cannot be ascertained. Further research employing quantitative methods, such as surveys or behavioral data analysis, could help determine whether toxicity directly influences player attraction and retention.

Second, the study's sample is limited in terms of gender, as all interviewed participants were men. Given that different genders may have different gaming experience in gaming communities, future research should include a more diverse sample to explore genders gaming experience especially trash talking.

Third, the sample size could be larger in order to strengthen the generalizability of the findings. A larger and more participant pool could help validate the observed patterns and provide a broader understanding of the phenomenon.

Finally, this study does not systematically examine the interactions between the trash talker and the recipient as a dyad. Since value co-creation and co-destruction are inherently relational processes, future research could investigate this trash talker/recipient duo to better understand how toxicity affects both parties.

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8. Appendix

8.1 Interview Guide

Most of the questions are about trash talking since we are investigating the trash talking as our context. The rest of the themes are more of a background info so I structured the interview as follows:

Theme one: Themselves:

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself?

How old are you?

Where do you live?

Theme two: Game experience in General:

1. Can you introduce yourself in terms of your gaming background, like what kind of a gamer do you think you are? Can you share a bit about yourself and how you got into gaming?
- 2.

Theme three: Dota 2 experience:

1. Can you briefly describe your experience with playing Dota 2? how long you've been playing? what initially attracted you to the game?
 - a. Do you play solo or with friends mostly?

2. In your opinion, what sets Dota 2 apart from other games?

Theme four: Trash talking in Dota 2

- a. So, when we talk about trash talking in Dota 2, what does that mean to you?
How would you define it?
- b. Can you describe circumstances under which you find trash talking valuable
 - i. How this appropriate trash talking contributes to your experience of the game?
 - ii. Can you share one of your most memorable trashes talking moments?
- c. How about the opposite? Give me your thoughts on useless trash talking.
What is it?
 - i. How do you balance this type of trash talking and staying and enjoying the game?
 - ii. Looking back at your gaming experiences, have there been instances where you regretted engaging in trash talk or felt it negatively impacted the overall atmosphere of the game??
- d. Can you describe circumstances under which you find trash talking appropriate
- e. Give me your thoughts on unacceptable trash talking, like all at all time no matter what
- f. If you could change anything in the game chat setting or chat wheel, what would that be? Do you think can Valve make the game more fun by incorporating trash talking?
 - Will it be more acceptable if those very unacceptable trash talking were in chat wheel?

Extras in case time or the direction of interview allows.

1. In your opinion, how does trash talking add an element of excitement and intensity to competitive games like Dota 2, or does it create unnecessary toxicity?
2. How does it different when you do it vs when you are a subject of it?
3. How do you think the dynamic of trash talking changes when playing with friends versus when playing with strangers?
4. How does your opinion of trash talking changes as a viewer or as a player.

PS: Not necessarily all questions were asked. Given the time and depth of one theme some questions may have been excluded for 2 or 3 interviewees.