

**Slay the Dragon:**  
**Trash Talk from an Evolutionary Perspective**

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## **Introduction:**

Trash talk is a common occurrence in athletics. It can occur in any sport at any level. Thus, it is important to question why trash talk is so frequent. Some athletes think of trash talk as a distraction, while others view it as a motivating force and tool. Tyson Gay once said, “I do a lot of trash talking to keep me motivated, to keep me to not want to lose”. For him, trash talk was a source of motivation. Michael Jordan once said, “When you talk trash, that's a game. It's a game of psyching out”. For him, it was a tool to throw off his opponents. Furthermore, Trae Young said, “I think that it's a sign of competitiveness and just having fun with the game”. In other words, he thinks that it's a natural side effect of fun competition. Interestingly enough, research supports these claims. A study performed by Gershon Tenenbaum found that players who use trash talk are more assured in their actions, which may help them perform better. Other research has found that this benefit may extend beyond the individual. Using trash talk can boost the self-confidence of the individual and their teammates (Milord, 2015). Additionally, players who use trash talk tend to have high standards and can use a wider range of experiences as motivation (Milord, 2015). Lastly, but perhaps most obviously, research indicates that trash talk can hinder your opponent's performance (Renner, 2019). These benefits can partially explain why players continue to rely on trash talk despite its negative conception.

Trash talk has been analyzed by many different perspectives. However, evolutionary psychology is uniquely situated to dissect the phenomenon from a new perspective. Although, there is no current research that analyzes trash talk from this perspective. Related research can provide some insight. Specifically, David Livingstone Smith's (2008) research on the process of dehumanization during war can be applied to the world of sports as well.

Smith concluded that extreme violence goes against human nature and that killing another human being can be psychologically damaging. Human beings evolved to be social creatures. Consequently, they also evolved strong inhibitions against violence. This was evolutionarily adaptive because it promoted social cohesion. Therefore, when an individual must engage in serious violence, there are harmful consequences. This is why soldiers often have adverse reactions to killing for the first time. Smith explains that they often vomit, weep, tremble, become incontinent, etc. This is also why veterans suffer from such high rates of PTSD and face high rates of suicide. Smith summed this up very well when he said, “...it’s very difficult, psychologically, to kill another human being up close and in cold blood, or to inflict atrocities on them’. So, when it does happen, it can be helpful to understand what it is that allows human beings ‘to overcome the very deep and natural inhibitions they have against treating other people like game animals or vermin or dangerous predators’” (Smith, 2011, para 2). Essentially, he wanted to understand how humans were able to harm and kill each other, when they have evolved not to. Smith argues that dehumanization helps individuals overcome these inhibitions against violence. He defines dehumanization as, “‘thinking of others as less than human creatures’, while also recognizing that they are, in fact, still human” (Combs, 2021, para 5). Essentially, individuals recognize that their enemy is human at the surface, but not on a deeper level. By portraying their enemies as less than human, it becomes easier to commit atrocities against them. However, doing so can have devastating outcomes. There are several examples of this throughout history. For example, Nazis referred to Jews as rats during the Holocaust, Hutus called Tutsis cockroaches during the Rwandan genocide, and slave owners have referred to their slaves as animals throughout history (Combs, 2021). More specifically, Smith identified three types of dehumanization that take place, all of which are evolutionarily based. Smith claims that

during times of war individuals portray their enemies as a predator, prey, or as a vector of disease. Portraying one's enemy as a predator makes it heroic to harm or kill them. Depicting one's enemy as prey makes it natural to hunt them. Lastly, portraying one's enemy as a vector of disease makes it essential that they are exterminated. Smith found that this last type of dehumanization (vector of disease) is commonly associated with genocide.

While the intensity and purpose of trash talk varies, it is essentially a form of dehumanization. This idea begs the question, which types of dehumanization are most common in sports? Do men and women rely on the same types of dehumanization? How does the level of competition affect this? What about how violent the sport is? How do one's perceived odds of winning impact this? Lastly, does the social nature of a sport alter this relationship? This study aims to answer these questions.

I predict that portraying one's opponent as prey will be the most common type of dehumanization found in sports, closely followed by portraying them as a predator. I do not expect to find many examples of enemies being portrayed as a vector of disease. I also think that men will be more likely to portray their opponents as prey due to their evolutionary background as hunters and warriors. Conversely, I think that women will be more likely to portray their opponents as a predator due to their evolutionary history as mothers and caregivers. I also predict that as the level of competition or violence within a sport increases, so will the prevalence of dehumanization. In addition, I think that teams/athletes who are favored to win will be more likely to portray their enemies as prey and underdogs will be more likely to portray their enemies as a predator. Lastly, I think that athletes on team sports will engage in more dehumanization than athletes who engage in individual sports.

## **Methods:**

### Participants:

This study is available to student athletes within the Northeast region of the United States. In order to be eligible participants must engage in a NCAA sport at the D1 or D3 level. In addition, they must have a minimum of one year of experience on said athletic team. Thus, participants must be sophomores or older. The hope is to recruit student athletes who play a variety of different sports at a variety of different schools. It is also important to recruit student athletes from multiple competition levels (D1 vs D3) and of both sexes (male and female). The accuracy and generalizability of the results will be dependent on the number of participants recruited to participate in the study.

### Materials:

Participants are provided with a Qualtrics survey that is designed to measure the frequency that they have witnessed each form of dehumanization: “predator”, “prey”, and “vector of disease”. Likert scales (ranging from 1-10; 1 being not frequent and 10 being very frequent) are used to measure the frequency of these descriptions. This survey also asks for qualitative examples of these portrayals. In addition, the survey will collect relevant background information. For example, information about the sex, gender, sport, level of competition, social nature of the sport, level of violence within the sport, and perceived success of the participants and their teams will be recorded. These variables are evaluated by the following measures:

| <b>Variable</b> | <b>Measure</b>             |
|-----------------|----------------------------|
| Sex             | Sex assigned at birth      |
| Gender          | Male vs Female Sports Team |

|                           |                                  |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Competition Level         | D1 vs D3 Sports Team             |
| Level of Violence         | “Contact” vs “Non contact” Sport |
| Perceived Odds of Success | Rated by Individual (Scale 1-10) |
| Social Nature             | Team vs Individual Sports        |

All in all, the survey consists of 4 short answer questions, 5 multiple choice questions, and 4 likert scale questions.

Procedures:

This survey was approved by the Institutional Review Board of SUNY New Paltz. Participants will be recruited for the survey via their school’s athletic and/or psychology departments. Snowball sampling will be used as well. There will be no cash or gift incentives provided to participants. Participants will be provided with a brief description of the survey. If they wish to participate, they will be sent a direct link to the survey and a secure link to take the survey through the SONA system. If participants want to receive SONA credits for their participation, they must use the secure SONA link.

The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. The identity of participants will not be tied to their survey responses in any way. Due to the low risk associated with study participation, there will be no debriefing session following the survey. That said, participants will be thanked for their participation and will be provided with avenues to seek out support if necessary.

Once data is collected, it will be coded. The coded data will be analyzed and statistically significant trends between the variables will be identified.

**Results:**

Since the study is still in progress, there are no definitive results at this time. Final results will be collected and analyzed in about 2 weeks' time.

**Discussion:**

Since there are not yet definitive results, no conclusions can be drawn about the proposed hypotheses. However, one can anticipate how the results could impact the world of athletics. The findings of this study may have implications for the ways in which social dynamics are managed in sports. Athletes, coaches, refs, and athletic departments can use the information found in this study to better navigate player dynamics, motivate players, and enforce sportsmanship.

**Sources:**

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