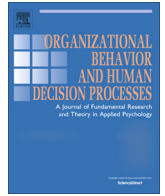




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Trash-talking: Competitive incivility motivates rivalry, performance, and unethical behavior

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ABSTRACT

Trash-talking increases the psychological stakes of competition and motivates targets to outperform their opponents. In Studies 1 and 2, participants in a competition who were targets of trash-talking outperformed participants who faced the same economic incentives, but were not targets of trash-talking. Perceptions of rivalry mediate the relationship between trash-talking and effort-based performance. In Study 3, we find that targets of trash-talking were particularly motivated to punish their opponents and see them lose. In Study 4, we identify a boundary condition, and show that trash-talking increases effort in competitive interactions, but incivility decreases effort in cooperative interactions. In Study 5, we find that targets of trash-talking were more likely to cheat in a competition than were participants who received neutral messages. In Study 6, we demonstrate that trash-talking harms performance when the performance task involves creativity. Taken together, our findings reveal that trash-talking is a common workplace behavior that can foster rivalry and motivate both constructive and destructive behavior.

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[The ATS is] a rear-wheel drive performance car [that] will compete against the C-Class Mercedes. They call it C-Class because it is very average.

[General Motors CEO Dan Akerson].

I saw more honesty on a Match.com ad than AT&T's coverage maps.

[T-Mobile CEO John Legere].

1. Introduction

To celebrate the new millennium, the city of London constructed the London Eye, a giant Ferris wheel on the River Thames. British Airways sponsored the construction of the London Eye. In the final stage of construction, as workers attempted to erect the London Eye, they experienced technical difficulties. Richard Branson, the founder of Virgin Atlantic, decided to capitalize on the

misfortune of its competitor and broadcasted a message intended to humiliate British Airways. He arranged for a blimp to fly over the London Eye with a giant banner that read, "BA can't get it up!" This public insult intensified the longstanding competition between British Airways and Virgin Atlantic.

Competition pervades organizational life (Deutsch, 1949; Kilduff, Elfenbein, & Staw, 2010). In organizations, employees routinely compete for scarce resources, such as promotions, bonuses, coveted project assignments, and praise. We define competition as a context in which the objective outcome for one competitor is negatively correlated with the outcome for another competitor (Beersma et al., 2003; Deutsch, 1949; Garcia & Tor, 2009). Competition has been linked with the pursuit of power and status (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006; Pettit, Yong, & Spataro, 2010), performance (Halevy, Chou, Galinsky, & Murnighan, 2012; Murayama & Elliot, 2012), motivation (Garcia & Tor, 2009), conflict (Halevy, Weisel, & Bornstein, 2012), risk-taking (Jordan, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2011; Ku, Malhotra, & Murnighan, 2005), creativity (Baer, Leenders, Oldham, & Vadera, 2010), and unethical behavior (Kilduff, Galinsky, Gallo, & Reade, 2016; Pierce, Kilduff, Galinsky, & Sivanathan, 2013).

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Though most of the existing competition literature has concentrated on the structural characteristics of competition (Garcia & Tor, 2009), a few studies have examined the traits of the competitors (Brown, Cron, & Slocum, 1998; Fletcher, Major, & Davis, 2008). In addition, an emerging literature has begun to highlight the importance of the relationships between competitors (Chan, Li, & Pierce, 2014; Galinsky & Schweitzer, 2015; Kilduff et al., 2010; Larkin, Pierce, & Gino, 2012; Malhotra, 2010). One aspect of competitors' relationships that has received limited attention is how aggressively competitors relate to each other before and during competition.

This omission is striking, because aggressive behavior is both common in competitive situations and consequential. For example, in studies outside the domain of competition, scholars have found that aggressive and uncivil behavior can have negative consequences for the performance of individuals and organizations (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Melwani & Barsade, 2011; Pearson & Porath, 2005; Porath & Erez, 2007; Tepper, 2000). However, we know surprisingly little about how aggressive communication styles influence competitive behavior.

We also build on the existing research that has examined the influence of communication on negotiation outcomes. This work has found that banal, non-task communication prior to mixed-motive interactions can promote cooperation (Balliet, 2009; Brett, Shapiro, & Lytle, 1998; Morris, Nadler, Kurtzberg, & Thompson, 2002). Conversely, expressions of anger during a negotiation harm cooperative behavior (Allred, Mallozzi, Matsui, & Raia, 1997; Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2004; Yip & Schweinsberg, 2017). Taken together, prior work suggests that communication between competitors is important, but our understanding of how communication among competitors influences behavior is surprisingly limited.

In this paper, we explore the interplay between competition and communication. Specifically, we explore how trash-talking in competition influences perceptions, performance, and unethical behavior. We introduce and investigate a particularly important type of competitive communication: *trash-talking*. We define trash-talking as *boastful comments about the self or insulting comments about an opponent that are delivered by a competitor typically before or during a competition*.

We characterize trash-talking as an uncivil behavior, and we challenge the prevailing assumption that uncivil remarks harm motivation. Instead, we show that trash-talking can substantially enhance motivation through feelings of rivalry. In addition to motivating constructive effort, however, trash-talking can motivate competitors to engage in unethical behavior.

Our research makes several contributions to advance theory and existing research. First, we provide an initial conceptualization and empirical test of the effects of trash-talking. This extends existing research on competition by considering a neglected, yet important feature of competition that is common in organizations. Second, we demonstrate that trash-talking serves as an antecedent of rivalry. Prior rivalry research has focused on rivalry triggered by historical competition. Our research advances our understanding of rivalry by showing that trash-talking can ignite a rivalry quickly, even in the absence of a long-standing relationship. Third, by conceptualizing trash-talking as a form of incivility, we demonstrate how a specific type of incivility can boost motivation. This advances our understanding of incivility, as much of the existing incivility research has presumed that uncivil remarks have negative ramifications for individuals in organizations. We also identify potential hazards of engaging in this form of incivility by demonstrating that trash-talking can promote unethical behavior.

1.1. Trash-talking

We provide the first conceptual definition of trash-talking. Our definition of trash-talking highlights the content of the aggressive

communication (“boastful remarks about the self or insulting remarks about an opponent”) and the competitive context of the communication (“delivered by a competitor typically before or during a competition”). To provide a richer understanding, we identify four characteristics that are unique to trash-talking.

First, trash-talking is incivility expressed in a competitive context in which two or more parties are vying for resources, recognition, or status. Unlike other forms of aggressive communication such as gossip (Wert & Salovey, 2004), bullying (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996), or abusive supervision (Tepper, 2000), trash-talking occurs in interactions defined by strong competitive norms that lack opportunities to collaborate.

Second, trash-talking is aggressive communication that involves ridicule or self-aggrandizement. Importantly, ridicule can be malicious or playful. In competitive interactions with rivals, trash-talking is often characterized by the intent to harm an opponent and involves taunts that criticize an opponent's identity, group membership, competence or performance. In competitive interactions with friends, trash-talking often has a benign intention characterized by teasing that combines ridicule or self-aggrandizement with humor.

Third, trash-talking can occur with or without the opponent present. In dyadic interactions when the target is present, trash-talking is broadcasted directly to the target to boost the self and/or diminish the target. Trash-talking, however, can also occur when the target is absent. Even when the target is absent, a trash-talker can make boastful comments about the self or derogatory remarks about the opponent. These comments may elevate the trash-talker's confidence, alter status perceptions of an audience, or influence the target's behavior when the message ultimately reaches the target.

Fourth, trash-talking varies in quality from crude insults to witty observations. Crude or blunt forms of trash-talking often rely on direct insults and overt aggression. For example, trash-talking may include racist or sexist comments about an opponent. More sophisticated forms of trash-talking exhibit inventiveness and may include sarcasm, hyperbole, and metaphors.

Taken together, trash-talking is likely to influence cognition and behavior in both the trash-talker and the target. That is, competitors use trash-talking to intimidate, distract, or humiliate a target, and boost morale of the trash-talker. Similarly, within groups, a leader who engages in trash-talking may motivate team members. In this paper, we identify trash-talking as a familiar organizational behavior, and we explore the relationship between trash-talking and the target's motivation. Though we expect trash-talking to influence both the trash-talker and the target of trash-talking, we begin our investigation of trash-talking by focusing on targets of trash-talking.

Trash-talking can include boastful comments, insulting comments, or both. For example, in the 1996 NHL conference semifinals, Patrick Roy, a goalie for the Colorado Avalanche, boasted, “I can't really hear what Jeremy [Roenick] says because I've got my two Stanley Cup rings plugging my ears.” In a very different context, Donald Trump insulted his competitor for the 2016 Republican nomination, Carly Fiorina, by exclaiming, “Look at that face! Would anyone vote for that? Can you imagine that, the face of our next president?”

While familiar in sports and politics, trash-talking features prominently in organizational life. Not only is competition a central feature of organizational life (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Galinsky & Schweitzer, 2015; Kilduff et al., 2010), but so too is trash-talking. In an account of financial traders, Lewis (1989) recorded the routine use of demeaning comments directed at competing managers. For example, one manager referred to another manager with whom he was competing as “a boob, all artifice. The man never had an original thought in his life” (Lewis, 1989, p.176).

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