

## Legitimacy and Use of Verbal Aggression Among Youth Basketball Players

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### Abstract

This study used a mixed methodology design to examine verbal aggression as an underground or backstage behavior. Male and female basketball players, aged 10 – 19 ( $N=178$ ), completed both open-ended questions and a modified version of the Sport Behavior Inventory. Younger players found verbal aggression (i.e., trash talking) to be less legitimate for use in sport than high school players ( $F^{(2, 175)} = 3.54, p < .05$ ). High school players perceived trash talking to be used more often to bully opponents than used as a joke. Results are discussed in the context of a Goffmanian theoretical framework. Implications for coaches, officials, and coaching educators are considered.

### Introduction

Participation in sport is clearly not the only way for children to be physically active. Such participation, however, is the most common formal introduction to physical activity for children in the United States. Because an estimated 30-45 million children participate each year, youth sports are certainly a rich field of study (National Council of Youth Sports, 2001). Participation in sport can make for wonderful experiences in which children find joy and lifelong pleasure in physical activity; however such participation can also have the opposite result. Parental pressure, injuries, overtraining, and violence all contribute to the “dark side of youth sport” (Murphy, 1999).

Many researchers have addressed the problem of violence and physical aggression in sport (Bushman & Wells, 1998; Gee & Sullivan, 2006; Kirker, Tennenbaum, & Mattson 2000; Loughead & Leith, 2001; Sheldon & Aimer, 2001). However, few researchers have considered verbally aggressive behavior. It is important to study verbally aggressive behavior because: (a) If young athletes perceive verbal aggression to be a legitimate behavior, and/or they use it as a tactic, what does this say about a youth sport culture that promotes beating opponents through intimidation?; and (b) If there is a connection between verbal aggression, trash talking, and bullying, coaches should be aware of it. Scholars estimated bullying and victimization affect 10-25 % of middle and high school students in Australia, Austria, Germany, Finland, and the U.S. (Veenstra, Lindenberg, Oldehinkel, De Winter, Verhulst & Ormel, 2005; Wessler & De Andrade, 2006). Coaches need to work with players, teachers, and community members to minimize such harassment since it may turn children away from sport and physical activity and result in long-term emotional damage.



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Sport psychologists Weinberg and Gould (1995) define aggression as a physical or verbal behavior involving harm directed with intent against another human being. Although verbal aggression is also part of Coakley's (2001) definition of aggression and intimidation, it has not commonly been part of studies of behavior in sport. Verbal attacks relating to the self-concept of another person are verbally aggressive behaviors. Insults about appearance or character, name-calling, and threats are common types of verbal aggression (Infante & Wigley, 1986). Bullying, defined by most scholars as a word, action, or behavior that happens over time, is related to a power imbalance, and is a particular type of physical and verbal aggression (Englander, 2007).

Sometimes, however, bullying does not meet all of the components of this definition. This study asks how and where does trash talking in sport fit into the frequently researched topics of verbal aggression and bullying? In this study trash talking was defined as words, typically exchanged among opponents, used to intimidate, distract, or tease. Some trash talking falls into the category of bullying and verbal aggression; other trash talking is classified as in jest. It is important to recognize that while this study did not consider the trash talking that occurs among adult professional basketball players, it did explore how young basketball players (aged 10 – 19) experienced trash talking. The researcher considered trash talking and its possible connection to bullying (a type of verbally aggressive behavior).

## *Theoretical Framework*

Goffman's (1959) theoretical framework of backstage and frontstage behavior is instructive for understanding trash talking. Coaches prepare their players for games (i.e., sport performances) that occur in what Goffman called the front region or frontstage. Coaches are concerned with frontstage behaviors such as wins and losses, adherence to team rules, performance, and statistics. Frontstage behavior is done in public, under the purview of others, and influences much of what we do in social life. Conversely, Goffman asserted that the locker room was a private space or a "back region" where players relaxed and escaped the spotlight of the front region (Goffman, 1959, p. 125). Sport behaviors such as pinching or striking opponents in a huddle, trash talking, and holding opponents' shorts or shirts are also backstage behaviors done in the players' realm and out of the sight of officials, coaches, and spectators. Although these behaviors are done in public, they are typically hidden from the spectators. Behaviors that occur after a tackle in football, while waiting for a corner kick in soccer, or while boxing out in basketball are, for example, parts of the game that belong to the players. Although Goffman discussed physical spaces that were literally behind the scenes of a performance, sport performance is a unique case. Verbal aggression, much like other forms of bullying, is a backstage behavior difficult to observe and identify because it may be done anonymously and cannot be heard clearly off the court.



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Goffman discussed a variety of types of talk that occur in ritualized communication when individuals come together “as ratified participants in a consciously shared, clearly independent undertaking” (1982, p. 111). A sport contest, itself a ritualized event, does not require talk among opponents, but participants may choose to communicate in a variety of ways. *Self-talk* is spontaneous and often does not warrant a response (e.g., “How did I miss that?”). *Muttering* is under one’s breath and is directed at a person as they walk away (e.g., “Get off me”). *Response cries* are exclamations resulting from an overflowing of emotion (e.g., “Ooops!”). Goffman (1981) argued that in ritualized communication forums, like sport competitions, taboo words and gestures are used that may not be acceptable in open or public communication forums. All of these types of talk are uttered as part of a performance of self. They are meant to be heard even if a response is not expected. In sport, as in other parts of social life, individuals present a version of themselves they want others to see and understand (Goffman, 1959).

Trash talking has long had a place in basketball. Often discussed in the media, physical aggression recently resulted from trash talk between fans and players (see Peters & Robbins, 2004 for a discussion of the fight between the Indiana Pacers’ players and the Detroit Pistons’ fans). While not all talk among opponents is negative or leads to physical aggression, children often do not realize the impact of their words on others (Wessler & De Andrade, 2006). The Columbine shootings in 1999, the Virginia Tech shootings in 2007 and other such violent acts in schools reinforce the dangers of bullying and teasing. As many as 24% of youth between the ages of 12 and 17 report being victims of violent behavior (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2000; Resnick & Bearman, 1997). Using a Goffmanian theoretical framework to focus on the behind-the-scenes world of youth sports has the potential to provide coaches, parents, and administrators with a better understanding of verbally aggressive behavior. Additionally, bullies and victims are both harmed by bullying behaviors; bullies may be more likely to turn to crime, alcohol abuse, and delinquency, while victims may be more depressed and less self confident in adulthood (Veenstra et al. 2005).

## *Related Literature*

Scholars typically utilized paper and pencil measures to predict the likelihood to aggress in sport, identify perceived legitimacy of aggression in sport, or identify bullying and victimization behaviors and participants (Conroy, Silva, Newcomer, Walker, & Johnson, 2001; Stephens, 2001; Veenstra et al. 2005; Wessler & De Andrade, 2006; Visek & Watson, 2005). Self-report measures were preferred in light of the inherent difficulty in observing and quantifying physical aggression or bullying behaviors.

## *Perceived legitimacy of aggression*

Researchers using pencil and paper measures of perceived legitimacy of physically aggressive behavior in sport found a statistically significant difference between both



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youth and professional players and between high school and professional players (Visek & Watson, 2005). In both cases, younger athletes found physical aggression less legitimate. In Conroy et al. (2001) young athletes perceived physically aggressive behavior to be more legitimate if: 1) they participated in contact and collision sports (e.g., football, basketball, and soccer); and 2) if they were male. As the competition level increased from elementary school to professional in Conroy et al.'s (2001) study, both girls and boys perceived aggression to be more legitimate at higher levels of sport.

Tucker and Parks (2001) identified differences of opinion of physical aggression between male and female athletes in sports including women's rugby, men's ice hockey, men's and women's basketball, and golf at an NCAA Division I-A institution. Females were less accepting of aggressive behavior than males, and neither group of athletes perceived aggressive behavior to be legitimate. However, Tucker and Parks (2001) also found a significant sport-type by gender interaction indicating gender differences in non-contact sports such as swimming were greater than the gender differences in contact or collision sports such as basketball. For example, there was a larger difference in perceived legitimacy of physical aggression between male and female swimmers than there was between male and female basketball players. In a 2005 study of verbal aggression among NCAA Division III ice hockey players, Rosenthal found both male and female ice hockey players to perceive the use of trash talking in ice hockey to be a legitimate behavior. However, female ice hockey players still perceived trash talking to be less legitimate than did male ice hockey players. Studies in the perceived legitimacy literature focused on physically injurious behaviors using pencil and paper measures; few considered verbal aggression or used a mixed methodology design.

## *Bullying literature*

Scholars in Europe and the U.S. found a general culture of verbal aggression and name-calling prevalent at the middle and high school levels; boys used sexual insults against girls, girls used gendered and sexual terms against each other, and social class and race-based bullying were common (Coyne, Archer & Eslea, 2006; Salmivalli & Kaukiainen, 2004; Stein, 1999; Veenstra et al. 2005; Wessler & De Andrade, 2006). Coyne et al. (2006) determined that name-calling was the most frequent type of verbal aggression, while physical bullying was the least common type of aggression among middle and high school students in the United Kingdom. In Wessler and De Andrade's (2006) study, high school students in the U.S. reported hearing jokes and slurs about topics ranging from body parts and athletic ability to religion and sexual orientation multiple times each day.

Significant gender differences in patterns of bullying were reported in Crick and Grotpeter's (1995) work (i.e., girls used more indirect and covert types of bullying – gossip, while boys used more direct forms of bullying – physical aggression). Recently, work by Coyne et al. (2006) measured the aggression that girls and boys reported



experiencing at home and compared it with a content analysis of popular television shows. Overall, girls and boys in sixth through eighth grade experienced similar levels of aggression. Salmivalli and Kaukiainen (2004) asserted that boys indeed use physical and verbal aggression more than girls do, but there was a smaller difference in verbal aggression between the genders. Between boys and girls aged 10 to 14, there were no significant gender differences in indirect forms of aggression (e.g., social exclusion). Recent work addressed cyber or online bullying (Li, 2007; Stover, 2006). Significant findings showed the dangers of this type of harassment and the widespread nature and forums for teasing and bullying. It is clear from the bullying literature that girls and boys experience many different forms of aggression each day at school, online, and on television. However, few studies have isolated sport as a potential site of bullying behavior.

### *Purpose Statement*

In the perceived legitimacy and bullying literatures, scholars have not closely considered the use of verbal aggression in sport as part of their aggression analyses. This study addressed these gaps in the scholarly literature with these three goals: (a) to describe the types of trash talking used in youth basketball culture and identify how players varied in their perceptions of it; (b) to measure differences in perceived legitimacy of using verbal aggression between older and younger players; and (c) to measure differences in perceived legitimacy and use of verbal aggression between high school boys and girls.

### *Hypotheses*

Three hypotheses based on previous research were tested in this mixed methodology study. The first two-part hypothesis was investigated through open-ended qualitative questions and the modified Sport Behavior Inventory (SBI). Part one of the first hypothesis posited that young players, even those as young as 10 years old, would be familiar with trash talking. The second part of the first hypothesis asserted that older players perceived the purpose of trash talking to be tactical in nature. Answers to the open-ended questions provided a snapshot of a piece of basketball culture, and helped determine if a connection exists between trash talking and bullying behaviors by using the words and ideas of the athletes themselves. The second hypothesis tested Conroy et al. (2001) and Visek and Watson's (2005) findings about physical aggression using verbally aggressive behaviors in sport. Athletes read verbally aggressive scenarios and indicated when or if their use was acceptable in sport. Younger athletes, those with fewer years of experience in sport, were expected to be less tolerant of trash talking behavior similar to Conroy et al.'s (2001) findings about physical aggression. Varsity basketball players play at a highly competitive level, one that very few youth actually reach. Players in this age group were expected to accept trash talking behavior in basketball. Gender differences, in hypothesis three, were expected to be insignificant based on Salmivalli



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and Kaukiainen's (2004) work showing only a slight gender difference in use of verbal aggression.

## Method

The purpose of a mixed methodology design was to have the qualitative data inform and enrich the quantitative data. The SBI asked about the legitimacy (i.e., when it would be okay) to do a particular behavior. It was not intended to be a measure of actual behavior. The SBI was criticized for representing a disconnect between actual behavior and likelihood to aggress (Gee & Sullivan, 2006; Stephens, 2001). The mixed methodology design was intended to address this critique by investigating the perceived legitimacy of trash talking, using anonymous, open-ended questions, and find out how trash talking is actually used in youth basketball. This allowed the researcher to address some of the methodological difficulties of studying a backstage and potentially taboo behavior.

In Phase 1 of the study, the Institutional Review Board and the basketball camp director permitted the participants who provided consent/assent to anonymously complete two qualitative open-ended questions and three modified SBI scenarios. A group of 100 girls from upstate New York and Vermont attending a basketball camp in the summer of 2005 participated in Phase 1 of the study. The researcher and one graduate student instructed the girls about the voluntary and anonymous nature of the study, encouraged them to be honest in their answers, and administered the questionnaires. The girls remained in their previously assigned age-determined groups and completed the instruments in a classroom adjacent to the gymnasium.

After receiving permission from the Institutional Review Board and the athletic director, the researcher sent a letter to the coaches and parents regarding Phase 2. The participants included 35 male and 43 female high school varsity basketball players from Eastern Massachusetts and Rhode Island. In between games at a basketball tournament in February 2007, the researcher instructed the players who provided consent/assent about the voluntary and anonymous nature of the study, encouraged them to be honest in their answers, and administered the questionnaires in the tournament hospitality room (the cafeteria).

## Participants

The girls in Phase 1 ranged in age from 10 to 14, with a mean age of  $11.97 \pm SD 1.24$ . These fourth through eighth graders had from one to nine years of sport participation including basketball, dance, ice hockey, skiing, softball, soccer, swimming, horseback riding, golf, lacrosse, tennis, volleyball, snowboarding, track, cross country, field hockey, and ping pong. Seven of the girls reported that they were only involved in basketball. The participants were overwhelmingly Caucasian with one Asian or Pacific Islander and two African-Americans in the group.



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The goal of Phase 2 was to gather a larger and more diverse sample of basketball players and to address reasons for the use of taunting and trash talking. The girls in Phase 2 ranged in age from 14 to 18 ( $M = 16.28$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ), had experience playing a large variety of sports, and had participated in an average of eight seasons of basketball. The girls were 2.33% Asian American or Pacific Islander, 20.93% African-American, Haitian, Jamaican, or multiracial, and 76.74% White. The boys in Phase 2 ranged in age from 15 to 19 ( $M = 16.8$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ), and had experience playing a large number of sports. They participated in an average of 10 seasons of basketball. Fourteen percent of the boys were either African-American or multiracial, and 86% were White.

## *Instruments*

The first purpose of the study was to describe the types of trash talking used in youth basketball and to determine varied perceptions of why and how players used it. Participants, in both phases of the study, answered qualitative, open-ended questions about common types of trash talking phrases and the reasons players used it. The open-ended questions were:

- (a) Do you use trash talking as a strategy in basketball? If so, discuss the effects you think it has. (Phase 1 only)
- (b) List some of the trash talking phrases you've either used or heard used in your basketball experience. (Phases 1 and 2)
- (c) When are players most likely to use trash talking? (Phase 2 only)
- (d) Why do you think trash talking is used? (Phase 2 only)

The written and verbal instructions preceding the open-ended questions encouraged the participants to be honest in their responses and reinforced the anonymous nature of the study. The researcher assumed players would be shy about their responses, even though they were completely anonymous, thus illustrating the difficulty in researching a taboo behavior.

The modified SBI used scenarios that were age-appropriate, realistic, and verbally aggressive. These scenarios were used to measure differences in perceived legitimacy between older and younger players and between boys and girls, thus addressing the second and third main purposes of the study. Players responded to the following scenarios, indicating when it was acceptable to use these phrases in basketball:

- (a) You get hit by an elbow thrown by an opponent under the hoop. You turn to your opponent and say "Hey, watch it – you're playing dirty." (Phases 1 and 2)



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- (b) You get knocked over when an opponent roughly boxes you out. You are angry and say to the referee, “And *that* wasn’t a foul.” (Phase 1 only)
- (c) You are trying to get open for an in-bounds pass. A player on the other team is all over you and will not let you get open. You say to him/her under your breath, “Get your fat butt out of my way!” (Phases 1 and 2)
- (d) You are upset after losing a close game. A player on your team walks by, you say, “You suck at playing basketball. You’re the worst player on our team. It’s your fault we lost!” (Phase 2 only)

Following each scenario, the participants indicated whether it was “Never OK,” “Seldom OK,” “Often OK,” or “Always OK” for them to say these phrases at their current level or at a sequentially higher level. The questions started with “Is it OK for you to say this if you were a youth sport participant (aged 11 and under),” and spanned to “Is it OK for you to say this if you were a professional player?” The original SBI used scenarios that were physically injurious; the modified SBI used age-appropriate scenarios that were verbally aggressive. The face validity of the three scenario questions used in Phase 1 was determined through consultations with four graduate students, all of whom had extensive experience in teaching and coaching at the elementary and secondary levels. For Phase 2, student-athletes from the collegiate level piloted the scenarios. The researcher wrote the additional scenario (scenario d) using a direct quote from the results of Phase 1 of the study.

The high school players also completed additional questions using a Likert-type scale. Reasons, intent, and the prevalence of trash talking were among the topics of these additional ten questions. The participants responded “Never,” “Seldom,” “Often,” or “Always” to statements including: (a) trash talking is used by less skilled players; (b) trash talking leads to fights on the court; and (c) trash talking is used as a way to bully opponents.

## *Data Analysis*

As the researcher transcribed verbatim the answers to the open-ended questions, themes emerged. The qualitative analysis followed Bernard’s (2000) suggestions of developing codes from these themes and placing phrases in the codes for analysis. The researcher noted frequencies of phrases in each code. Additionally, comparing the girls and boys’ answers to the open-ended qualitative questions increased the reliability of the results and discussion.

The modified SBI scores were transformed following Conroy et al.’s (2001) suggestions in order that the data is used for parametric statistics. In the spreadsheet, the sum function added the scores across the three scenarios and the reciprocal of this sum was recorded. The transformed score was the sum of the reciprocal scores. For example, a participant





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circled that the verbally aggressive scenarios were “Never OK” across all competitive levels. “Never OK” corresponded to 1.5 on the scale, adding the scores across the three scenarios summed to 4.5, the reciprocal score is .22 and the sum of all the reciprocals is the transformed score of 1.56. This transformed score is higher than the transformed score of .67 belonging to a participant who chose “Seldom OK” across all competitive levels. Low scores represented perceptions that aggressive behavior was more legitimate and higher scores represented perceptions that aggressive behavior was less legitimate. These transformed scores accounted for the variety of responses and were used in the MANOVA analysis.

One-way multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) were done to determine how players varied in why and how they think trash talking is used and to measure age and gender differences in perceived legitimacy of verbal aggression. To test hypothesis one, seasons in sport were the independent variables and reasons for using trash talking were the dependant variables. To test hypothesis two, age groups were the independent variables and perceived legitimacies by competitive level were the dependant variables. To test hypothesis three, gender was the independent variable and perceived legitimacies by competitive level were the dependant variables.

## Results

### *Types of Trash Talk*

Three themes emerged from responses to open-ended questions: name-calling, intimidation, and joking (see Table 1 for sample phrases and frequency of use). Name-calling was common in all age groups and among both the boys and the girls. Name-calling phrases ranged from the more benign “show off” and “jerk,” to more severe phrases that included racist and homophobic speech, “F\*\*\* you pussy!”, “What are you queer?” and “walk your black ass off the court.” Insults about body size and sexual performance were also part of the results. The phrase “you suck,” in 30 different iterations, was noted most prevalently among players in all age groups. There were explicit examples of this phrase being leveled against teammates, “you suck at playing basketball. You’re the worst player on our team. It’s your fault we lost,” “we suck,” or “you suck, you shouldn’t play;” and against opponents, “you suck!” or “sucker” or “your [sic] stupid, this team sucks.” Phrases in the intimidation theme included those related to action in the game, “you pinch me again I’ll blast ya one good [sic]” and to basketball skill and sexual dominance over opponents. Phrases included those implying players had performed sexual acts on an opponent’s girlfriend and those imploring opponents to “go suck it.” Joking phrases like “warm up the bus” and “whose [sic] your barber” seemed tinged with humor. Both intimidating and joking phrases were more common among players in the older age groups.



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## *Reasons for Trash Talk Use*

The high school players provided many in-game instances when trash talking occurred. Their answers to the open-end questions covered such a broad range that no thematic categories emerged. There were multiple examples of “when players are losing” and “when you’re winning.” Also included were “when angry,” “in tight games,” “in rivalry games,” and “if someone is disrupting the way you play.” However, the researcher grouped the answers to how and why players used trash talk into *trash talk as bullying behavior* and *trash talk as behavior used to frustrate opponents* (see Table 1). Fifty-seven percent of all the responses were in the frustration category, many more than the 13% in the bullying category.

A one-way MANOVA was done to see if high school players with more experience (more than seven seasons) perceived the reasons for trash talking differently than those with less experience (fewer than seven seasons). No significant effect was found in the *trash talking leads to gaining an advantage*, *trash talking is used to get in the opponent’s head*, *trash talking leads to fights* or *trash talking is used to bully opponents* ( $\Lambda(2, 75) = 1.99, p < .14$ ). However, an interesting trend in the data showed 55% of more experienced high school players indicated that trash talking was *often* used to bully opponents while only 27% thought trash talk was *often* used as a joke.

## *Age Group Differences*

A one-way MANOVA compared age groups (elementary players, middle school players, and high school players) and when trash talking was acceptable across the three scenarios and competitive levels (see Instruments section). A significant effect was found ( $\Lambda(14, 338) = 2.39, p < .003$ ) with significant power of .98, but with a small effect size of  $\eta^2 = .09$ . Follow-up univariate ANOVAs indicated that players in different age groups were only significantly different in their perceptions of *OK for you to say this when you play this sport* ( $F(2, 175) = 3.54, p < .031$ ) with only moderate power of .65 and a small effect size  $\eta^2 = .04$ . There were no significant differences in age group perceptions of acceptable at all other competitive levels. Means across all age groups indicated a low perceived legitimacy for verbal aggression, all of the mean scores indicated that players perceived this behavior to be *Never OK* or *Seldom OK* (see Table 2).



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## *Gender Differences*

Gender differences in perceived legitimacy across competitive levels and in reasons for trash talking were explored (see Table 2). A one-way MANOVA indicated significant differences between high school boys and high school girls in perceived legitimacy scores ( $\Lambda(7, 70) = 6.19, p < .000$ ). The effect size for this difference was much larger than in the age group difference results, with  $\eta^2 = .38$  and high power of .99. Follow-up univariate ANOVAs indicated that high school boys found trash talking more legitimate in every competitive level except for *OK in Elementary* (see Table 2).

## **Discussion**

The main purposes of this study were to describe common types of trash talking, identify the reasons players use it, and to measure age and gender differences in perceived legitimacy of verbal aggression. Overall the players, regardless of age, gender, or number of seasons in sport, believed trash talking to be an illegitimate behavior, indicating it was “*Never OK*” or “*Seldom OK*” to use. However, participants also wrote many trash talking phrases they had heard used or had used themselves thus supporting part one of the first hypothesis that young players are familiar with trash talking, and that players in different age groups vary in how they use and perceive trash talking. The second part of the hypothesis, that more experienced players used trash talking more often as a tactic, was not supported by the MANOVA analysis. However, the frequency of responses that trash talking is used to frustrate opponents indicates that players at all experience levels do perceive that trash talking is used as a tactic. In response to the second hypothesis, Conroy et al.’s (2001) and Visek and Watson’s (2006) work was supported (i.e., younger players found verbal aggression to be less legitimate than older players). The third hypothesis, that gender differences were insignificant, was not supported by the MANOVA analysis where gender differences were statistically significant in perceived legitimacy of verbal aggression. The difference in perceived legitimacy scores among high school boys and girls supports Conroy et al.’s (2001) work where males perceived physical aggression to be more legitimate than females. Qualitative data revealed both girls and boys believed that trash talking was used to make opponents angry or to otherwise frustrate opponents, and that both boys and girls were very familiar with verbal aggression. This supports Salmivalli and Kaukiainen’s (2004) conclusion indicating a smaller gender difference in verbal aggression than in physical aggression.

## *Sport as a Potential Site of Bullying*

The name-calling and intimidation themes of the trash talking phrases clearly show that players use trash talking in youth sports and that sport, therefore, is a potential site of bullying behaviors. Trash talking may in fact meet all the criteria of the definition of bullying (i.e., it may be cruel, indicate a power imbalance, and since players use it in “rivalry” games, it may be used over time). Insults over looks, body size, race, and sexual performance were all part of the name-calling theme. The more experienced high school



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players thought their peers often used trash talking to bully opponents. The qualitative and quantitative results together yield the conclusion that players believe trash talking is used to bully opponents by using name-calling and intimidation to frustrate them. This belief could be explained by high school students' general familiarity with the term bullying and their assumption that teasing in all forms is bullying. However, this trend more strongly indicates that players have contradictory feelings about trash talking, because although they believe it is *not* okay to use it, they *do* use it in basketball against opponents. Contradictory feelings about a taboo behavior are not surprising. Young people are in the process of negotiating what their parents, coaches, and teachers have told them, and which behaviors they themselves believe to be appropriate.

## *Implications for Coaches*

How should coaches and coaching educators read these results? Coaches should first acknowledge that poor sport behaviors, like trash talking, occur even on the well-coached teams. Coaches should also make themselves aware of the developmental stages of early (ages 10 – 14) and mid-adolescence (ages 15 -18). Peer relationships and independence from parents and authority figures begin to gain importance in early adolescence (Vernon, 2005). Adolescents often value their friends more highly than anything else in their lives. Basketball players treat teammates and opponents in the ways that they think are appropriate. However, thinking and reasoning are not fully stable during adolescence. Coaches who recognize that adolescents need both guidance *and* autonomy are the best advocates for their players. Modeling respect for opponents, teammates, officials, and parents is one way coaches can react to these results. Taking a strong stand when opponents, parents, or others demonstrate name-calling or verbal abuse is another way coaches may be proactive in this area.

Additionally, the data reveal that players resort to verbal taunts of opponents when they are frustrated, winning, losing, or angry. Coaching techniques aimed at managing the arousal of players, coupled with encouragement toward a mastery focus could combine to help players focus more on improving their own skills, and less on what their opponents are doing. For example, during a time out in a close game when athletes seem frustrated by perceived “cheap shots,” the coach might remind players of their progress toward specific individual and team goals. By bringing the arousal level down and reminding players to focus their energy on their own goals, the coach may disrupt the pattern of reacting to pressure from opponents. This may be a more effective coaching practice than simply telling athletes to ignore the antics of the opposing team. These techniques may also help prevent verbal aggression from escalating to physical aggression.

Other specific implications for coaches and administrators at the youth, high school, and collegiate levels include the need to prepare athletes to manage verbal aggression, and to teach character development. Similarly, as coaches might teach players to avoid fouls and



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retaliatory physical behaviors, coaches might consider presenting athletes with situations allowing them to practice moral decision-making skills about verbal aggression. Coaches should engage athletes in discussion on big questions such as “How should a basketball player behave?” and “What is expected of a basketball player on this team?” Solomon (1997) suggested that character development does not automatically happen through physical education and sport participation; character development happens only when coaches and teachers design learning activities around decision-making. Another area of research might be how players and fans interact in virtual spaces. Is trash talking occurring on *myspace.com* between rival teams and fans? The backstage nature of trash talking behavior and the link between trash talking and bullying suggest backstage behavior of athletes should be of concern to coaches and athletic administrators around the U.S.

## *Gender Differences*

Results indicate a strong difference between how boys and girls answered the modified SBI questions. However, the qualitative results indicate that girls have as much experience with verbal aggression in basketball as do boys. One possible explanation for these results is that these girls have been socialized to believe that trash talking or foul language is not gender appropriate. As a result, on the modified SBI, girls are more likely to indicate they find this behavior inappropriate. Because the open-ended questions were aimed at behaviors they have heard *others* use, girls were more likely to write the phrases they have heard in games.

The significant gender difference that is OK at professional level is worthy of a brief discussion because it mimics a trend throughout the data. Players believe it is more acceptable for professional athletes to use trash talk than it is for players at lower levels. While this is not an unusual result, it does open a wider discussion about influence of professional athletes on young sport participants. Young players, like other adolescents in U.S. culture, deify some professional athletes and view their behavior, even when it is brutal or criminal, as acceptable. In some cases hazing of rookies, trash talking opponents, and violent fouls are lead stories. One explanation for young players’ acceptance of trash talk among professional athletes is that they see these athletes are adults and professionals. Another possible reason is the respect afforded to professional athletes who most embody extreme competitiveness and “win at all costs” attitude.

## *Theoretical Significance*

Goffman’s (1981) term *muttering* is a good descriptor for the trash talk phrases in this study. Goffman (1971) argued that muttering phrases are used when the actor wants to express displeasure at the conduct of another, but wants to do so with careful timing so that the target has difficulty responding and the target may choose to ignore the utterance. Examples of muttering include “move!”, “get the f\*\*k off me bitch!”, and “don’t grab



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my...” It is likely that players say these phrases under their breath and in the heat of the game. Goffman’s work helps explain how these utterances are meant to be heard only by opponents and teammates on the court and not by parents, coaches, or officials further demonstrating the acceptance of trash talk behavior on the backstage and its rejection on the frontstage.

## *Limitations and Future Directions*

The significant gender differences among the high school girls and boys may negate the finding that younger players find trash talk less legitimate than older players. If the boys were not in the sample, it seems there would be no significant difference among players in different age groups. Other limitations of the current study include a small number of male participants, a small number of non-White participants, an overlap in experience among the girls in the study, and the inherent difficulty in studying a taboo behavior.

This study is important in that it formally explores what has been and continues to be an underground part of sport culture. Future studies might consider whether athletes are hoping coaches will try to stop this kind of behavior more often, whether a connection between trash talking and dropout of sport exists, and how trash talk is used in different sports. While the tradition of trash talking may, in some locales, be humorous, it is important in the current climate to consider ways the environment of youth sport could be improved. More sport studies research is needed to respond to and supplement movements, like the anti-bullying movement, in the broader field of education. Good coaches, like all good educators, must keep abreast of current trends and use research-focused teaching practices with their players.

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Table 1: *Themes from Open-ended Questions*

Question 1: List some trash talk phrases you have heard used in your basketball experiences.

Name-calling <sup>a</sup>	Intimidation <sup>b</sup>	Joking <sup>b</sup>
“Fatty”	“Ain’t got nothin’!”	“Airball”
“Ugly bitch!”	“Hit me again, I’ll	“Get out my house.”
“You’re a vigina” [ <i>sic</i> ]	knock you out.”	
“Hey kid-You suck!”	“Do it again bitch.”	“Ugly sweater!”

Question 2: Why do you think taunting or trash talking is used?

As bullying behavior	To frustrate opponents
“To feel better about yourself.”	“To get someone else angry.”
“When bullying.”	“To get into someone’s head.”
“Because they are mean.”	“To frustrate the other player.”
“To make fun of and degrade the other team.”	“To make others mad.”
“To feel more superior.”	“To get an advantage.”

*Note.* Name-calling<sup>a</sup> was most prevalent among players in all age groups. Intimidation<sup>b</sup> and Joking<sup>b</sup> were rare among the elementary and middle school aged girls. There were 21 examples of intimidation phrases and 14 examples of joking phrases among the high school players compared to two examples of each among elementary and middle school girls.



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Table 2: *Perceived Legitimacy of Verbal Aggression*

	Girls (elem)		Girls (ms)		Girls (hs)		Boys (hs)		$\eta^2$
	(n = 36)		(n = 64)		(n = 43)		(n = 35)		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
OK in Sport	.17 <sup>a</sup>	.06	.16 <sup>a</sup>	.05	.17 <sup>a</sup>	.07	.11 <sup>a</sup>	.05	.04
OK Elementary	.18	.05	.18	.05	.19	.06	.17	.05	--
OK High school	.16	.06	.16	.05	.16 <sup>b</sup>	.07	.12 <sup>b</sup>	.08	.07
OK Professional	.16	.06	.16	.06	.16 <sup>c</sup>	.07	.11 <sup>c</sup>	.07	.09

*Note.* Elem = elementary school, ms = middle school, and hs = high school.

Means that share superscript (a) in the OK rows are significantly different at  $p < .031$ .

Means that share superscripts (b and c) in the OK rows are significantly different at  $p <$

.023 and  $p < .009$  respectively. Lower scores represent higher perceived legitimacy of

verbal aggression. Dashes mean effect size was not determined because the results of the

ANOVA were not significant.

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