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**To cite this article:** Stojak, D. (2024). Courtesy Under Fire: A Structural and Contextual Analysis of Toxic Language in Online Gaming. *Social Communication. Online Journal*, 1(25), 112-120.

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.57656/sc-2024-0011>



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Published online: 2 Dec 2024



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# Courtesy Under Fire: A Structural and Contextual Analysis of Toxic Language in Online Gaming

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toxic language, toxicity in online games, gamer behaviour, gaming culture

## ABSTRACT

The paper delves into the phenomenon of toxic language in online gaming, a significant issue that reflects the broader challenges of online interaction between users. Despite online gaming being fairly new, considering other forms of games, its impact and popularity are constantly growing. As such a powerful activity, it naturally bears consequences – one of them being other players. This issue is widespread and does not pertain to a single region. The author establishes that patterns of such toxic language exist, basing the thesis on conducted research, whose main goal was to determine the grammatical structures and context in which toxicity manifests. By analyzing those patterns, the author establishes a foundation for understanding how toxic language manifests, providing a detailed examination of its linguistic structure. The observation also offers insight into the possible causes of increased toxicity.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Historically, games have been one of the most popular forms of leisure activity, with their first known appearance tracking back to approximately the 17th century BCE. (Nogueira et al., 2020) Over time, the definition of activities that could be considered games has significantly expanded, and so has their artistic value. Due to the evolution of technology, one can speak of the division between physical and digital games, with the latter trying to assimilate the former. Seeing the success of video games, studios often decide to transfer their product onto the digital screen, an example of which could be the popular board game called “Monopoly.”

Online games are a solution for those who enjoy gaming and spending time with others. How does that differ from the games that require the physical presence of another participant? The first factor is accessibility – in terms of physical games; a player requires at least one person set on a similar goal or someone with basic knowledge of the planned activity. That does not apply to online gaming, which is only a matter of pressing one button and a few minutes. Considering the game’s technological state, the players’ communication is optimized to support verbal (text chat, voice chat) and nonverbal (e.g., built-in-game pings, graffiti) processes. Differences between the two forms of games can also be observed in the factors affecting potential injuries. Just as in the case of sports games, the player is exposed to some unwanted risks.

In general, the primary and foundational principle of games should be the entertainment of all parties involved. However, it is often defined by the character and emotional responses of the participant. Winning and losing is a matter of individual approach and, as such, is perceived differently. What happens when the “duel” is watched by other people? Historically, humanity has demonstrated a proclivity for engaging with polarizing and controversial spectacles, an example of which could have been seen in Ancient Rome, where sports games were based on brutality. Due to humankind’s evolution, those “games” are seen as highly repulsive, pernicious, and perilous activities. Take a moment to think of any sporting event streamed and happened until November 2024 that would be considered “most-streamed.” According to Netflix, it was their event in which “the Jake Paul vs Mike Tyson fight is the most-streamed sporting event ever, peaking at 65 million concurrent streams, with 38 million concurrent streams in the US” (Netflix, 2024). It is a boxing duel between a retired 58-year-old box star and a 29-year-old influencer. Naturally, the numbers could be even higher due to piracy (restreams). The information about the duel has sparked controversy among the users of a social media platform - X (formerly Twitter). The main arguments were mainly about the age of the former and the nature of the duel. In some comments, tension rose to the point where it would not have in a public debate. Such a phenomenon can also be observed in Poland, where freak show fights have been embedded in the minds of teenagers and

1. The article is based on research conducted as a part of the diploma thesis “My grandfather startles horses with such phrases” Toxic language in online games” completed under the Digital Communication field of study, which was defended on 19.07.2024 at the Faculty of Media and Social Communication of The University of Information Technology and Management in Rzeszow.

young adults in recent years. If information about sport-themed games causes such raw emotions on the internet, how does that correspond to people who participate in online gaming? Are there any parallels that can be drawn to the behaviour of online gamers? After all, both commenters and players use the same platform, which is based on anonymity to communicate. In addition to the privacy of data, online gamers invest a significant amount of their time (as opposed to posting a comment) and allocate their emotions to the current match. Such an issue could be catastrophic if a participant decided to stream their gaming sessions to a wider audience and lacked control of their behaviour, which could lead to establishing bad patterns for the viewers and making them cheer after humiliating another person. This phenomenon could have occurred in Ancient Rome.

The author of the article, having considerable experience in the online gaming environment, had decided to collect material filled with any manifestation of toxic language (excluding phrases that are undeniably linked to the sociolect of the studied group), defined as a form of communication characterized by the use of aggressive and offensive language with racist and vulgar connotations, the inclusion of threats and manipulation, verbal deceit, elements of psychological abuse, and hate speech (Mohan et al., 2017). It is used most often to displace the sender's negative emotions onto another participant in communication. Hence, the study's primary objective was to analyze communication among online gamers of selected games in the context of toxic language, including examination of used language, internal variation, level of linguistic accuracy, and identification of topics addressed by the senders. The author has also managed to categorize the content based on its level of toxicity.

## Literature review

According to the report published by the Anti-Defamation League in June this year, "an estimated 83 million of the 110 million online multiplayer gamers in the U.S. were exposed to hate and harassment over the last six months. Three out of four young people (ages 10-17) experience harassment when playing video games" (ADL, 2024). Considering the fact that the study was conducted only in the U.S., it is logical to assume that the number of victims of

toxic language is much higher. Research conducted by Zeila et al. (2022) shows that 66% of surveyed Hungarians were exposed to and have encountered toxic behaviour from other players, which shows that the issue is not regional but global.

It is difficult to determine the number of so-called video gamers alone, not to mention the division between those dedicated solely to single-player games. The data differs in most studies; however, according to the article published by New Zoo (2023), "global player numbers will reach 3.38 billion, with emerging regions driving player growth", most of whom (1.79 billion) reside in Asia-Pacific, and are followed by Middle East & Africa (574 million), and Europe (335 million) (Statista, 2023). The data seems to differ from the report published by the European Commission from the same year, which states that "half of the European population (237 million users aged between 6-64 years) regularly play video games" (European Commission, 2023).

Naturally, with the growth of the player base, sales also pique. In 2024, the amount of income is estimated to reach 71.1 billion dollars. In regards to such a high flow of currency, it is fair to do anything possible to maintain the level. Keeping a player is one of the desirable things. In order to ensure that the player does not quit the game due to another player, the developers try to take action against toxicity. According to Dijkstra et al. (2024), there are five different approaches that were designed to deal with toxic behaviour – empowering, supporting, priming, sanctioning and detecting. Each system is based on a different strategy, but most focus only on reacting, while prevention should be equally desired.

In the case of the Polish language, according to sociolinguistic descriptions, the online branch of the language has numerous distinctive features, such as: "withdrawing from linearity and the casual nexus; lack of established authorial message; ellipticity and abbreviation of a statement; fusion of verbal and iconic codes; eclecticism of written and oral form; colloquialization and vulgarization of expressions; numerous neologisms and English borrowings; deviation from standards of correctness, especially distinguishable in cases of [...] orthography and punctuation" 2 (Smoleń-Wawrzusiszyn, 2016).

When it comes to the English language, linguistic analysis of toxic behaviour has shown that

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2. Originally in Polish: „odejście od linearności i uporządkowania przyczynowo-skutkowego; brak założonego przesłania odautorskiego; eliptyczność i skrótowość komunikatu; łączenie kodów werbalnych z ikonicznymi; elektyzm pisemności i oralności; kolokwializacja i wulgaryzacja wypowiedzi; liczne neologizmy i zapożyczenia anglojęzyczne; odejście od norm poprawnościowych, co jest widoczne zwłaszcza na poziomie grafii, ortografii i interpunkcji”

such players frequently employ offensive language, with distinct uni- and bi-grams serving as markers of their verbal aggression. The temporal patterns of these expressions highlight how toxicity escalates, particularly during high-stakes moments in a match. In consequence, this disrupts the dynamic between players, as it affects their emotional well-being (Kwak & Blackburn, 2014)

One of the conclusions from the study by Beres et al. (2021) was that online disinhibition is a significant contributor to toxicity. It is stated that players feel emboldened to use hostile language due to the anonymity provided by the internet. Over time, the normalization of toxic behaviour turns into a cycle from which the abused is more likely to replicate the abusers' actions. Many players rationalize abusive language as an intrinsic part of competitive gaming, describing it as "banter" to avoid the feeling of guilt

### Characteristics of the gaming community

The gaming community is highly diversified, a trait which is owned by the wide range of thematic categories and types of video games available. Gamers do not fit into the traditional age brackets; the existence of educational games means that even the youngest can be included in this category. While the gaming community was initially heavily dominated by men, an increasing number of women are joining the ranks of gamers, and the difference in the preferred genre has already become a stereotype. Gamers come from diverse cultures, which are often mixed during matches. That can also lead to certain stereotypes, such as the perception of Russians as uncouth.

Gamers are not an affiliated community, but they often communicate between their subgroups with a third-party communicator, providing them with a server platform. Nevertheless, special events bring players together, such as esports tournaments, technology fairs, game awards, and cosplay gatherings. A frequent place visited on the internet by gamers are websites, which function as a streaming platform for content creators known as streamers. When it comes to game development, studios often create a forum dedicated to the game, where a person of interest can discuss the state of the game with the developers.

One of the most notable characteristics of the online gaming community is the tendency to "meme" about most of the things. It is worth noting that each of the subgroups has its own sociolect that is not a part of the general group, and as such, it can be at least controversial when compared. As an example

of such mummification comes an acronym that was developed in Poland – "JD" (Eng. Fuck Dis) spread by one streamer towards another, which was later massively popularized among the younger viewership. Rapidness is the trait directly linked with this community. A group of gamers is capable of both creating new trends as well as adapting to others.

### Methods

The study was carried out through participant observation, which involved examining the gaming environment from within without disclosing the information about data collection. This approach was designed to minimize potential effects on the frequency or content of communication. The research aimed to address the following questions: What does the communication among players of selected online games look like in the context of toxic language?

The observation was carried out between 2017 and 2024, and as such, the study does not have ethical committee approval, as it was initiated by the author long before consideration of publication. The research was conducted with minimal communicative interaction by the researcher with other users, relying instead on the use of in-game communication tools (e.g., pings and voice commands) to preserve the authenticity of gameplay and information exchange. The hours of observation were not rigidly defined to identify patterns – or the lack thereof – in the frequency of toxic language depending on the time of the day.

The games included in the study were as follows: "Valorant", "League of Legends" and "Minecraft". The selection of these games was guided by the diversity of genres (Hero shooter, MOBA, Sandbox), age rating (PEGI 16, PEGI 12, PEGI 7), their cooperative and competitive potential, as well as popularity. The choice of matchmaking server was influenced by optimal ping, as this could also affect gameplay (Warsaw, EUNE, no official data but Polish-based).

The collected materials included screenshots, chat logs, and transcriptions of voice chat recordings. The transcriptions were written manually due to overlapping voices and accompanying in-game sounds, rendering the automated process ineffective. All collected materials were anonymized to protect participants' identities, ensuring compliance with ethical standards and the protection of personal data.

### Findings

The author has collected over 300 cases of toxic language usage. The analysis of the material has led

to some general information about the toxic language.

Regarding gender, the vast majority of primary users (original initiators) of toxic language are men, accounting for 77% of all analyzed material (excluding cases where gender could not be determined through the player's nickname, voice, or use of personal forms). Among female users, the highest concentration of toxic language was observed in "Minecraft". However, the frequency of initiation of toxic language among women remains significantly lower compared to men.

The recipient of toxic language in the collected materials typically chooses one of four responses, with one option being exclusive to "Minecraft". The most common strategy is to respond by mirroring the toxic language (44%). The following approach is to completely ignore the communication (31%), while the least popular response involves replying politely (6%). The fourth strategy is to abstain from reacting, relying on the presence of moderation to handle the issue on behalf of the player (19%). However, none of the first three strategies effectively deter the sender from continuing to use toxic language.

The conducted study revealed an intriguing difference between the usage of toxic language in voice chat (20% of the research material) and text chat (80% of the research material). In the former, interventions by other players were marginal across the entire dataset (35%) and were only made by players who had previously communicated in a calm and non-confrontational tone. Non-engaged participants completely disconnected from team communication, likely out of fear of provoking the toxic individual, who could vocalize their opinions in an aggressive manner, which also extended to refraining from using in-game strategy notification systems. However, in "League of Legends," some non-active players engaged in communication (44%) and often responded humorously to such provocations. In all these games, the individuals targeted by toxic communication displayed a regression in their gameplay, sometimes intentionally making mistakes (while notifying others of this intention) in order to sabotage the match. On the other hand, the collected material from "Minecraft" exhibited a notable indifference to toxic language, as the game lacks a formal team structure, allowing players to maintain contact only with individuals they choose to interact with.

Based on the material obtained from "Valorant",

it can be concluded that users are discouraged from intervening in voice chat, as such actions often lead to the target shifting to the individual who steps in to defend the victim (86% of cases). In instances where intervention against the sender occurred, it was always undertaken by a single player rather than a group. These individuals were either placed at the top of the match's scoreboard or, if ranked lower, demonstrated a higher skill in operating toxic language.

Age also appears to influence the frequency of toxic language. Based on the analyzed material, which included messages indicating the user's age, manner of speaking, and voice characteristics, it can be inferred that the largest group employing this form of communication is adolescents. However, a comprehensive identification of this factor is impossible due to the differences in time spent when it comes to being in front of a computer between adolescents and adults.

The study did not reveal significant differences in the structural form of toxic language between voice chat and text chat. The only notable distinction is the limited variety of words used to describe an individual, potentially due to a lack of broader knowledge of the language employed by the user. This limitation often results in frequent repetition of the same words. Additionally, these interactions have a higher prevalence of negative references to skin color.

### Structural Overview

In most research material, there is a complete lack of adherence to punctuation rules. In text-based chats, the lack of commas or even periods makes sentences take the form of dense streams of thoughts that may be incomprehensible for some (particularly for inexperienced users).

[...] you fucking dick go fuck \*nickname\* instead of sitting before computer you fat swine fuck until she hadn't left (spelling error) such fatty with dick of 1 mm<sup>3</sup>

This phenomenon also extends to voice chats, where the sender, attempting to convey their message, often fails to pause for breath and instead produces communicative noise. This behaviour may be connected to a desire to establish dominance by overwhelming the other user with a barrage of

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3. Originally in Polish: „nie chuju jebany idz ruchac \*nick\* a nie przed kompem siedzisz gruba swinio ruchaj póki nie ruciła takiego gruba z kutasem 1 mm”

information. Communicative noise most commonly manifests as stuttering or filled pauses, characterized by prolonged repetition of a single sound (“uhhh/emmm”). Another frequent strategy in speech formation involves the heavy use of vulgarisms, which either allows the speaker to construct their next thought or acts as a substitute for a lack of vocabulary.

Yo mamma ciamkała (alludes to sexual activity but also sound you make while eating, no direct translation) fuck yo daddy or yo daddy ciamkał \*uhhh\* the cunt of yo mamma when they made you while their condom fuck \*uhhh\* broke<sup>4</sup>

In the first example, the sender of the message made a few spelling errors in simple construction words. Those errors could not be even justified by their phonetic resemblance. Such mistakes may indicate fundamental educational deficiencies, which either correlate with the user’s age, or is a simple result of carelessness due to the rapid pace of gameplay. An intriguing perspective on this issue was detected in two other research materials from “Valorant” in which the users combined both text and voice chat. The absence of physiological voice mutation in the player’s speech, alongside their use of personal pronouns and a username partially containing a male name, allowed for inferences about their age and gender. The user showed no concern for the time spent composing his text messages, completely pausing his participation in gameplay yet still making basic mistakes. During oral communication, he also made phonetic errors. Most common issues with orthography in the gaming community include beginning sentences with lowercase letters, writing entire sentences in uppercase letters, and omitting Polish diacritical marks (e.g., “ą”, “ę”). There are errors that are widespread and not limited to toxic language.

Sometimes, players choose to replace Polish words with their English equivalents. This phenomenon is most commonly observed when users resort to insults related to genitalia. However, only in two out of twenty instances was a verb substituted in the imperative form. Interestingly, in such cases, based on the analyzed material, no spelling errors occur. One instance, however, stands out significantly. During

voice communication, the user opted to replace a Polish vulgar word filled with toxic connotations (“cwel”, which could be translated. as faggot) with an English word that sounds phonetically similar but lacks the negative aspect (“spell”).

Another case of an activity limited to voice chat is mimicking an accent to ridicule an individual after obtaining a sample of their voice. This was only directed at individuals whose accents could have been perceived as Middle Eastern. During the conversation, the sender constantly mocked the cultural elements of the receiver.

## The categorization of toxicity

Three levels of toxic language can be established based on the variety of examples, their rhetoric, and potential harm. The first level involves the denigration of another user, the second pertains to discriminatory and racist elements. At the same time, the third consists of deliberate provocation aimed at emotional destabilization while also employing highly toxic expressions targeting values closest to the individual, such as family.

A linguistic unit present in all the materials is a vulgarism. Its intensity, frequency, and variety of epithets used as an addition are the defining characteristics of toxic language. Given their overwhelming presence, it can be argued that they serve as a foundation for insults and threats. Those insults can be categorized into six distinct groups. However, it is important to note that individual statements often combine elements from multiple categories.

Demeaning insults represent the mildest forms of verbal abuse in terms of content. Their usage is typically limited to disparaging player’s skill, intelligence or voice. The most common phrases in this category include: “twit” (pl. “pajac”), “dishwasher” (pl. “zmywara”), “pipe” (pl. “rura”) and “clown” (pl. “klaun”).

Offensive insults - one of the most common forms of toxic language primarily utilizes terms such as: “idiot” (pl. “idiota”), “moron” (pl. “debil”), “rag” (pl. “szmata”), “weak person” (also slur for homosexual male, pl. “ciota”) and “trash” (pl. “śmieć”). This category also includes verbs used in the imperative form such as “fuck off” (pl. “spierdalaj”) or “leave

4. Originally in Polish: „odejście od linearności i uporządkowania przyczynowo-skutkowego; brak założonego przesłania odautorskiego; eliptyczność i skrótowość komunikatu; łączenie kodów werbalnych z ikonocznymi; elektyzm pisemności i oralności; kolokwializacja i wulgaryzacja wypowiedzi; liczne neologizmy i zapożyczenia anglojęzyczne; odejście od norm poprawnościowych, co jest widoczne zwłaszcza na poziomie grafii, ortografii i interpunkcji”.

me the fuck alone” (pl. “odpierdol się”). A defining feature of this group is the brevity of the sentences, which lack additional descriptive elements.

Insults based on sexual themes – characterized by vocabulary related to genitalia or activities related to sex e.g. “dick” (pl. “chuj”), “cunt” (pl. “pizda”), “whore” (pl. “kurwa”). The content of such statements varies significantly, often addressing topics related to family or sexual orientation. This form of communication is also the most likely to include threats or harassment. Interestingly, when it comes solely to insults, no gender-specific differences can be observed—terms with either masculine or feminine connotations (which are common in the Polish language) are used regardless of the biological sex of the recipient. In a marginal number of cases within this specific category, intentional misgendering through the use of incorrect pronouns occurs, particularly in voice chat interactions.

Insults related to sexual orientation - in all but one of the analyzed materials, are directed at men by individuals presumed to be of the same gender. This category, aside from its discriminatory element, is characterized by a significant number of threats and imperative statements, over half of which resemble fantasy-like manner - excessively describing sexual acts. One possible factor influencing this trend could be the correlation between the dominance-inducing aspects of the game and the personality traits of the sender. In this way, the sender may seek to elevate their perceived value as an “alpha male” (a term often used by teenagers). Examples of demeaning insults in this category include terms such as “faggot” (pl. “cwel” or “pedał”), or “dyke” (pl. “lezba”).

Insults based on physiology, animals, diseases, and age - the most frequently used terms in the first subcategory are synonyms for excrement, expressed in various parts of speech, such as “crap-pants” (pl. “obsraniec”), “shit” (pl. “gówno”) or “pissed-on” (pl. “obszczany”). This category also includes animal-based comparisons, where species names are sometimes employed as insults to demean the recipient. The most common term in the Polish gaming community is “pies”, while in English, the equivalent “dog” is also popular, occasionally replaced by “rat”. This category also encompasses age-related insults, as they often overlap with physiological references. Examples include terms such as “brat” (pl. “gówniarz”) or “bed-wetter” (pl. “moczydupa”). Notably, references highlighting

old age are minimal, with such insults typically focusing instead on diseases, the most prevalent being “cancer” (pl. “rak”). Interestingly, the use of disease-related terms as insults also extends to younger individuals, especially when they struggle with conventional language norms. For instance, if a user attributes their mistakes to dysorthography, the most common retort from the original sender is the term “dysmózgia” (pseudo-diagnosis implying brain dysfunction). This category is marked by the highest degree of discriminatory content, targeting a broad range of social groups.

Insults directed at ethnicity and nationality - the most targeted ethnic group in this context are Jews. To a lesser extent, Russians and Ukrainians are also mentioned, with the latter group being explicitly targeted within the Polish gaming community, as indicated by the research material. Regardless of the region, individuals with darker skin tones are the most discriminated against in the context of racial slurs. This pattern of ethnic and racial insults highlights deeply rooted biases that manifest within gaming communities.

### Context of toxic language

Conflicts between players, even when initially focused on criticizing skills, tend to escalate if not quickly resolved, ultimately converging on four thematic areas. The most prevalent theme is violence, which involves the verbalization of acts which the sender expresses a desire to commit. The contextual range of these threats includes assault, rape, or even the intent to commit murder. In every instance, interventions by other players, regardless of whether they use toxic language, only exacerbate the sender’s anger, provoking further hostile statements. The research material included one extreme case in which the sender, openly expressing their rage, issued threats without any moral restraint, even targeting children who might not have even been present in the game.

I promise that when something will break in me, I fucking go out, and I don’t give a fucking shit, whether someone has a family or some fucking life. I’ll eliminate everyone in order, no fucking exceptions, and with utmost importance, children fuck... Fucking...5

Another prominent theme involves family, which in the vast majority of cases is closely tied to sexual

5. Originally in Polish: „Obiecuję, że jak we mnie coś pęknie, kurwa wychodzę i w piździe mam jebanej, czy ktoś będzie miał rodzinę, czy kurwa życie jakieś. Niweluje każdego po kolei, bez kurwa wyjątków, a w szczególności najlepiej dzieci kurwa... jebane”

topics. The sender of toxic language most often references only the recipient's mother. Interestingly, in the analyzed materials, where the sender's gender was identifiable, female senders never mentioned the father. In the rare cases where fathers were referenced, the insults did not involve sexual themes but rather were focused on the father's absence from the recipient's life. This indicates a distinct pattern in how family-related insults are gendered and contextually framed.

The topic of gender arises exclusively when the recipient of the message is a woman who discloses this fact. Gender is not addressed in any way concerning male players. The conversational pattern focuses on degrading the role of women by invoking outdated stereotypes through comments such as "to dishes" (pl. "do garów") or "go take out the trash" (pl. "wynieś śmieci"). This behaviour reflects the belief that women are of lesser value and lack the skills to participate in gaming due to their gender. Furthermore, sexual harassment and persistent provocative remarks are common in such interactions, highlighting the toxic environment often faced by female players.

The least frequently discussed theme revolves around historical and political aspects. Among Polish players, this includes references to political affiliations, accusations of "leftist propaganda," and religious elements, particularly involving the late Polish Pope. On servers outside Poland, topics such as World War II, Nazi concentration camps, and slavery are occasionally brought up. A temporary surge in the popularity of these themes occurred on February 24, 2022, during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In these instances, the intended target of the toxic language was not another player but Vladimir Putin. Other players supported and approved this behaviour, reflecting a collective sentiment rather than individual animosity.

### Triggers of toxic language

The usage of toxic language can be categorized into six common patterns. Understanding these scenarios and their underlying factors is crucial for developing effective strategies to prevent the proliferation of toxic behaviour in gaming environments.

The gameplay failures category includes all situations where gameplay outcomes are unfavourable for the sender, particularly in matches perceived as a lost cause. An unhealthy approach to competition and self-imposed pressure is a significant factor amplifying negative feelings. Players at the top of the leaderboard are likelier to use toxic language than those with poorer performance. Mistakes made

by teammates or perceived incompetence further provoke emotional outbursts from these individuals.

Creating chaos and toxic behaviour in this pattern stems from a desire to create disorder, often out of boredom or for amusement. This type is most prevalent in "Minecraft", where motivations might include the desire to disrupt servers disliked by the player, often tied to competitive dynamics between servers. In these scenarios, moderators are frequently targeted. This behaviour tends to persist until the sender perceives it as pointless. Players displaying such tendencies are commonly referred to as "trolls" within the community.

Sexual harassment is a category that can manifest in three forms: (1) targeted by gender - this typically begins when a player discloses their gender or is deemed attractive based on voice chat interactions. In Minecraft, gender identification may occur through the use of specific grammatical forms. Initially, this involves subtle sexual innuendos that later escalate into explicit toxic comments if met with resistance; (2) perception of weakness - male players perceived as weak, feminine, or exhibiting unusual communication styles are targeted with direct toxic language, bypassing subtle innuendos. This is the most frequently observed form out of three; (3) entertainment-driven harassment - this subtype ties into the chaos-creating pattern, with harassment conducted purely for amusement.

Unfairness caused by game errors or malicious actions by other players is another significant factor contributing to the increased use of toxic language. Frustration intensifies when a player perceives they have performed well, but the system fails to accurately reflect their efforts (e.g., due to server lag). This emotion fosters negative feelings toward the gameplay, leading to irritability in the affected player. A critical trigger in such cases is provocation through comments about the player's skills. The second element—malicious actions by other players—is predominantly observed in "Minecraft", where there is a real risk of such behaviour. Examples of malicious actions include the destruction of player structures, theft of items, and intentional sabotage, such as excluding a player from certain game elements. In both scenarios, the targets of toxic language are those perceived as directly responsible for the deterioration of the victim's gameplay experience.

Toxic language also manifests in ideological discussions. In most cases, it is not directed at other users but instead used to express opinions that discriminate against specific social groups, political parties, or politicians affiliated with those groups. In



rare cases, when discussions involve extremist views, the target of toxic language may include individuals participating in the conversation. This suggests that toxic behaviour in such contexts is often a by-product of expressing deeply entrenched biases or hostility toward opposing viewpoints.

An interesting situation involves players who openly declare being under the influence of alcohol. Based on the research material, these individuals do not exhibit tendencies to use toxic language unless encouraged by other players. This dynamic often includes an element of playfulness, as recipients appear to consent to consciously and even encourage further exchanges in a similar tone. Participants deliberately accept communication in such a style within this type of interaction. Paradoxically, once the game concludes, the same players who engaged in the exchange often display friendliness and exchange pleasantries, showing goodwill toward one another in subsequent games.

It is also worth noting that users of toxic language often share links to their social media profiles (e.g., Twitch, TikTok, or Instagram), where they stream gameplay, post clips from their matches, or share personal photos. This behaviour suggests that one of the potential motivations driving toxicity may be a desire to gain popularity and attract attention.

## Conclusion

Toxic language in online games is widespread and is characterized by offensive comments, vulgarisms, name-calling, mockery, sarcasm, and various forms of humiliation. It often includes elements of harassment, racism, threats of different kinds, and discrimination. In the gaming community, toxic language exhibits significant variation across games. For example, in “Minecraft”, communication tends to stand out for its creativity. “League of Legends” takes the form of a mix of insults, and in “Valorant”, it is the most personal. The linguistic correctness of toxic communication often deviates significantly from standard norms, disregarding established language rules entirely. The communication between players suffers due to a lack of effective measures to combat toxicity. Interventions by other players often expose them to further verbal attacks, providing the aggressor with even more opportunities for manoeuvring. Research has shown that despite security measures developers implement, toxic language remains highly prevalent in gaming communities. Current methods of addressing this issue are poorly adapted to contemporary trends, rendering them ineffective in the prevention of toxic behaviour. Tools and algorithms designed to combat

toxicity often fail to detect, react and adapt to the nuanced ways in which toxicity can manifest. As Akbulut et al. (2023) argued, efforts must be made to combine real-time detection with cultural sensitivity to address the specific contexts in which toxic language occurs, as it only diminishes the community and creates a dangerous precedence.

The thematic breadth of toxic language has the potential to affect even the most resilient individuals emotionally. A game, as a source of entertainment combined with an element of competition, should not decrease self-esteem through humiliation, stress, feelings of shame, the resurfacing of potential traumas due to comments, isolation from the community, or a sense of threat. The prevalence of toxic language yields no positive outcomes, even for the sender, unless their sole intention is provocation. When using toxic language to express criticism it results only in lowered team morale, reduced cooperation among participants, and a lack of willingness to continue participating in the match or game.

Game culture plays a critical role in the gaming community, as it influences the perception of the product itself. Mentions of other gaming communities by players help shape opinions that remain with the recipient until they are personally verified. This demonstrates the far-reaching impact of toxic language and behaviour, not just within a single game but also on the reputation and perception of the gaming ecosystem as a whole, which, in comparison to other forms of games, is fairly new to the market and can be wrongly judged.

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