

Language, Power, and Social Dynamics in Online Gaming: A Discourse Analysis of Toxicity and Inclusivity in Digital Spaces

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Abstract

The article explores the intersection of language, power, and social dynamics in online gaming communities, focusing on toxic and inclusive language within multiplayer digital spaces. Through a discourse analysis of player interactions, this study investigates how language functions as a tool for asserting dominance, marginalizing certain groups, and fostering inclusivity. While toxicity remains pervasive in many gaming environments, with players using exclusionary language to assert control and maintain power hierarchies, inclusive language emerges as a counterforce, enabling players to challenge these norms and create more cooperative and supportive spaces. The findings reveal that toxic language- such as gendered insults and racial slurs- is predominantly used by more dominant players, particularly those with higher skill levels or social status within the game. These behaviors reinforce power imbalances and contribute to the exclusion of 'other' groups, including women and players who belong to different ethnic background. Conversely, inclusive language, including gender-neutral terms, supportive comments, and active resistance to toxic speech, is employed as a form of resistance by players seeking to create an environment that values respect and equality. Despite the ongoing prevalence of toxic behavior, inclusive language was found to be a significant part of player interactions, offering a pathway to challenge oppressive power structures and build solidarity. The study contributes to the growing body of research on the role of language in shaping digital spaces, emphasizing the importance of discourse in both perpetuating and disrupting power dynamics. The implications of these findings suggest that game developers and community leaders must take a more proactive role in addressing toxic language and promoting inclusivity through design features, policies, and community guidelines. By highlighting the role of language in constructing power relations and fostering inclusivity, the article calls for a more inclusive approach to online gaming, where all players, regardless of their identity, can participate and thrive without fear of harassment or exclusion.

Keywords: online gaming, toxic language, inclusive language, power dynamics, discourse analysis

1. Introduction

In recent years, the rapid expansion of online gaming has revolutionized the entertainment industry and created a new arena for social interaction (Bankov, 2019). These digital spaces, where players engage with one another in both competitive and cooperative environments, are increasingly central to how individuals communicate, form relationships, and express their identities. However, like many other digital environments, online gaming platforms have also become sites for expressing power dynamics, social hierarchies, and sometimes toxic behavior (Kou, 2020). The language used within these spaces is a powerful tool that both reflects and constructs these power relations, making online gaming an ideal context for examining the intersection of language and power (Gray, 2020).

The concept of 'language and power' is fundamental to understanding how individuals navigate and negotiate their positions within various social spheres (Aburous & Kamla, 2022). Language is not just a medium of communication but also a means through which individuals can assert control, influence others, and challenge or reinforce existing power structures. In online gaming, players often wield language as a form of social capital, where how they speak or use terms can signal membership within certain in-groups or dominance over others. This is particularly evident in instances of toxic behavior, where players employ derogatory, exclusionary, or harmful language to exert power over their peers. The prevalence of toxic language in online gaming communities has raised concerns about the impact of such interactions on players' experiences, particularly for marginalized groups (Melin, 2021).

Toxicity in online gaming refers to using abusive, disrespectful, or harmful language to undermine or belittle other players. This behavior often manifests as verbal harassment, bullying, hate speech, and discriminatory comments, which can create

an environment that feels hostile and unwelcoming, especially for women and players who belong to 'other' ethnic backgrounds. Research has shown that toxic language in digital spaces contributes to the exclusion of these groups, limiting their ability to participate fully in the gaming experience (Beres, et al., 2021; Meriläinen & Ruotsalainen, 2024; Munn, 2023). Such adverse experiences can also lead to psychological harm, including stress, anxiety, and diminished self-esteem. Despite efforts by gaming companies to combat toxicity through reporting systems, moderation policies, and community guidelines, the problem persists, suggesting that addressing toxicity in online gaming requires a more nuanced understanding of the underlying power structures at play.

In contrast to toxicity, inclusivity in online gaming refers to creating environments that promote positive interactions, mutual respect, and a sense of belonging for all players, regardless of gender and race (Naidoo et al., 2020). Language plays a crucial role in fostering inclusive gaming communities, as it can help challenge harmful stereotypes, reduce discrimination, and encourage supportive interactions. Inclusive language practices can include using gender-neutral terms, avoiding offensive jokes or slurs, and actively supporting underrepresented voices within gaming spaces (Declercq, 2023). For example, many game developers and community leaders have introduced initiatives to encourage respectful communication and create spaces where players feel safe and valued. These efforts aim to counter the dominance of toxic language by providing alternatives that foster cooperation and mutual respect. Still, their success depends mainly on how deeply inclusivity is integrated into the culture of gaming communities.

The interplay between toxicity and inclusivity in online gaming provides a fertile ground for discourse analysis (AlAfnan, 2021; Latham, 2019). Discourse analysis, as a methodological approach, allows researchers to examine how language functions in these digital spaces, revealing the social processes, ideologies, and power relations embedded within communication practices. By focusing on the discursive strategies players use, it is possible to uncover how language is deployed to construct or challenge hierarchies, assert dominance, or promote solidarity (Allen, 2023). In this context, discourse analysis can shed light on how gaming communities either reinforce or resist toxic behaviors and exclusionary practices and negotiate the tension between maintaining a competitive environment and fostering inclusivity.

The article explores language and power dynamics within online gaming communities through a discourse analysis of toxic and inclusive language practices. By examining the discourses surrounding toxicity and inclusivity, the study seeks to understand how language functions as both a tool of oppression and a means of resistance in digital gaming spaces. Through this analysis, the article contributes to broader conversations about the role of language in shaping online social environments. It provides insights into how gaming communities can become more inclusive and supportive. The findings will also offer valuable perspectives on how language policies and practices can be designed to reduce toxicity and promote a culture of respect and equality in online gaming.

2. Literature Review

The study of language and power in online spaces, particularly in the context of online gaming, has garnered increasing attention in recent years. Scholars from various disciplines, including sociolinguistics, media studies, and communication, have explored how language shapes social interaction and constructs power dynamics in digital environments (Ali, 2023; Crowley & Chun, 2021; AlAfnan, 2022; Georgakopoulou & Spilioti, 2016; Tagg & Seargeant, 2021). This literature review examines key research that has explored toxicity and inclusivity in online gaming communities, focusing on discourse analysis as a methodological approach. By reviewing the literature on toxic language, inclusivity efforts, and the role of discourse in constructing power relationships (AlAfnan, 2018), this section aims to lay the groundwork for understanding the complexities of language and power in digital gaming spaces.

Toxicity in online gaming has been a subject of significant research over the past decade, with scholars exploring the prevalence, nature, and impact of toxic behavior in digital gaming communities (Akar, 2024; Gandolfi et al., 2023; Kakalelis & Vallabhu, 2024; Rimington, 2018). Toxicity, which often manifests as verbal harassment, hate speech, or discriminatory language, can create an environment that feels hostile and unwelcoming to players, particularly marginalized groups. Several studies have highlighted the disproportionately high levels of toxicity directed at women and players who belong to 'other' ethnic backgrounds in gaming spaces (Fox & Tang, 2017; Kowert et al., 2015). These studies have shown that toxic language can have severe psychological consequences, including stress, anxiety, and decreased self-esteem, particularly for those who experience repeated harassment or discrimination in gaming environments.

For instance, Fox and Tang's (2017) study on the prevalence of harassment in multiplayer online games revealed that women are more likely to experience verbal abuse, objectification, and gender-based discrimination. This finding is consistent with earlier research by Srauy (2019), who argued that gaming environments often reproduce and exacerbate existing societal inequalities, including racism. In this context, toxicity reflects individual prejudices and is a product of broader structural issues within gaming cultures that normalize exclusionary behavior. These toxic interactions often reinforce gendered and racialized hierarchies, where players from marginalized backgrounds are dehumanized or silenced.

The anonymity afforded by online gaming spaces has been identified as a contributing factor to the prevalence of toxic

language. As studies by Carr and Hayes (2019) and Suler (2004) suggest, the lack of face-to-face interaction in digital environments can lead to disinhibition, where players feel emboldened to express themselves in ways they might not in offline settings. Without social consequences or immediate feedback from others, players may engage in more aggressive or discriminatory language, as they do not face the same repercussions that would typically exist in offline social contexts.

In contrast to toxicity, inclusivity has become a growing area of interest in studying online gaming communities. Scholars have explored how game developers, players, and community leaders are working to create spaces where individuals from diverse backgrounds feel welcomed and supported. Inclusivity in online gaming encompasses a range of practices and policies aimed at reducing discrimination, promoting diversity, and fostering mutual respect. Central to this is the role of language, which can either perpetuate or challenge exclusionary norms.

Inclusive language practices in online gaming have been the subject of several studies examining how players navigate identity and power through their use of language. For instance, research by Reagle (2015) and Gray (2014) has shown that using inclusive language, such as gender-neutral pronouns and avoiding derogatory terms, can create supportive and welcoming gaming environments. Reagle's (2015) work on internet culture found that digital communities that embraced inclusive language practices were more likely to develop a positive group identity, as they actively worked to ensure that all members felt respected and valued. Inclusive gaming communities are more likely to challenge harmful stereotypes and provide opportunities for underrepresented voices to be heard, reducing the dominance of toxic behaviors that often emerge from exclusionary practices.

In addition to individual efforts, the role of game developers and platform providers in promoting inclusivity has been well-documented in the literature. Developers have introduced various tools and policies to reduce toxicity and encourage positive social interaction. For example, Kowert et al. (2017), in their research on community management in gaming, found that game companies like Blizzard Entertainment have implemented systems such as reporting tools, in-game penalties, and chat filters to combat harmful language. These efforts are part of a broader trend within the gaming industry to create more inclusive gaming spaces, reflected in the increasing visibility of diverse characters and storylines in contemporary video games.

Studies have also shown that inclusivity in online gaming is not always successful and that efforts to curb toxicity can sometimes be met with resistance from players. For example, Fernandez de Landa et al. (2019) argued that attempts to create inclusive environments in gaming are often undermined by gatekeeping behavior, where long-time or hardcore players resist changes to the status quo. This resistance can manifest as a backlash against attempts to reduce toxic language or introduce inclusive policies, as players with privileged positions in gaming communities may perceive these changes as threats to their authority or identity. Such dynamics underscore the challenges of promoting inclusivity in spaces historically dominated by certain groups.

Discourse analysis has emerged as a key methodological approach for studying language use in online gaming. It allows researchers to examine how language constructs power relationships and social hierarchies within digital spaces. In this context, discourse refers to how language is used to shape, reinforce, or challenge the social realities of gaming communities. Discourse analysis is particularly valuable for studying online gaming because it can reveal the underlying ideologies that inform players' interactions, such as beliefs about gender, race, and power.

Several studies have employed discourse analysis to examine how players use language to construct and negotiate power in online gaming. For example, Pulos (2013) used discourse analysis to explore how language functions to maintain the dominance of male players in multiplayer games. By analyzing in-game chat logs and communication practices, Schneider demonstrated how male players used language to marginalize female players, positioning them as outsiders or subordinates. Similarly, research by Carr (2021) examined the discourse surrounding toxic language and found that players who engaged in abusive behavior often used specific linguistic strategies, such as insults and threats, to assert dominance and reinforce social hierarchies. Discourse analysis has also been employed to explore how inclusivity is constructed through language (AlAfnan & Dishari, 2024). As Gray & Leonard (2019) argued, inclusive gaming communities often deploy discourse strategies that encourage empathy, solidarity, and cooperation. By examining how players use language to negotiate diversity issues, Gray found that inclusive gaming environments rely on discursive practices that center marginalized voices and create opportunities for dialogue and collaboration.

The literature on language, power, toxicity, and inclusivity in online gaming provides a rich understanding of how language shapes social interaction in digital spaces. While toxicity remains a pervasive issue in gaming communities, efforts to promote inclusivity through language and policy offer promising avenues for creating more welcoming environments. Discourse analysis is invaluable for examining these dynamics, offering insights into how language constructs and challenges power in online gaming. This article aims to build on this body of work by examining the discourse surrounding toxicity and inclusivity in online gaming, providing a deeper understanding of how language shapes power relations in these digital spaces.

3. Methodology

The article employs a qualitative research design to explore the relationship between language, power, and the dynamics of toxicity and inclusivity in online gaming spaces. Discourse analysis is the primary method for examining how language constructs, reflects, and challenges power relationships in digital environments. By focusing on communication within multiplayer online games, the study aims to analyze the linguistic practices that perpetuate toxic behavior and those that promote inclusivity. This methodology section outlines the data collection process, the approach to discourse analysis, and the ethical considerations involved in the study.

The research adopts a qualitative approach because it enables a nuanced understanding of the social and linguistic dynamics at play in online gaming communities. Given that the study's objective is to understand how language operates in constructing power and social hierarchies, a qualitative methodology allows for an in-depth analysis of textual and communicative practices in online spaces. The focus is identifying and interpreting how players use language to assert dominance, express exclusion, and promote inclusivity in online gaming.

The data for this study consists of naturally occurring communication in multiplayer online games. The primary data source is in-game chat logs, which are rich in instances of toxic and inclusive language. In-game chat, particularly in games that emphasize cooperative play (i.e., *League of Legends*, *Overwatch*, *Fortnite*), often becomes a site for expressing a variety of behaviors, ranging from support and camaraderie to insults and harassment. Chat logs are an ideal data source for analyzing language use, as they reflect real-time interaction among players and provide insight into the social dynamics of gaming communities.

Several popular online multiplayer games are selected to gather relevant data, emphasizing those known for large, active communities. These games are chosen based on their accessibility (allowing for public observation of in-game chat) and their diversity of players, which is crucial for examining issues of inclusivity and toxicity. The selection includes games with different types of gameplay, from team-based competitions to open-world environments, to ensure that a range of social dynamics is represented.

Data is collected by observing in-game chat logs during active gaming sessions. The observations are anonymous, and only text-based communication is analyzed. To ensure ethical research practices, no personally identifiable information (PII) from players is recorded, and all player identities are anonymized. Permission will be sought where necessary, and the study complies with relevant ethical guidelines regarding the observation and use of publicly available online data.

Purposive sampling ensures a broad and representative sample of language use. Specific game sessions are selected based on their likelihood of featuring diverse players and a variety of interaction types. The sample includes both sessions that display examples of toxicity (e.g., verbal harassment, gendered or racial slurs) and those that promote inclusivity (e.g., supportive interactions, respectful communication).

The data inclusion criteria are: (1) Games with active multiplayer modes: Only games with significant interaction among players (e.g., team-based games) are considered, as these environments are more likely to generate the language of interest. (2) In-game communication types: The study focuses on chat messages, both written and voice transcriptions, as these are the most common forms of communication in online gaming. (3) Diverse player base: Sessions are selected where diverse groups of players are likely to interact to explore a range of inclusive and exclusionary language practices.

The data is analyzed using discourse analysis, a methodological approach examining how language constructs and conveys social meaning. Discourse analysis allows the study to uncover the underlying power relations embedded in the language players use in online gaming communities (AlAfnan & Oshchepkova, 2022). The analysis focuses on the following areas:

Toxic Language: This includes verbal harassment, hate speech, and other forms of aggressive or exclusionary communication. The study analyzes how these forms of toxicity function to assert power and dominance over other players, particularly those from marginalized groups (e.g., women and racial minorities)

Inclusive Language: The study also examines the discursive practices that promote inclusivity, such as using gender-neutral language, supportive interactions, and efforts to create positive gaming experiences. Special attention is paid to how players use language to resist or challenge toxic behavior and promote respect and equality.

Discourse Strategies: The analysis focuses on identifying specific discourse strategies (AlAfnan & MohdZuki, 2024) used by players, such as insults, jokes, rhetorical questions, and emotional appeals, that contribute to toxic or inclusive environments. The study looks at how these strategies maintain or disrupt social hierarchies in the gaming community.

The process of discourse analysis involves several steps:

1. **Transcription and Categorization:** Chat logs are transcribed (if voice chat is used) and categorized based on the type of communication (toxic or inclusive). A coding scheme was developed to identify themes of key power, dominance, and inclusivity.
2. **Thematic Analysis:** The study uses thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns of language use related to toxicity and inclusivity. These patterns are examined for their social and ideological significance, focusing on how they reflect or challenge existing power structures within the gaming community.
3. **Contextual Analysis:** The context in which certain discursive practices occur is also analyzed. This includes understanding how the dynamics of specific gaming environments (e.g., competitive vs. cooperative games) influence toxic or inclusive language use.

This study analyzes publicly available data from online games, so ethical considerations are the key focus. Although the data is collected from public chat logs, the study adheres to the ethical principle of respect for individuals’ privacy. All player identities are anonymized; no personal information is recorded or used. Additionally, care is taken to avoid further exacerbating toxicity or harm by presenting findings that highlight both the negative and positive aspects of language use in online gaming. Players in the observed games are not directly contacted, but the study complies with the terms of service and community guidelines of the analyzed games.

One limitation of the study is that it focuses only on the textual aspects of communication, which excludes non-verbal cues such as facial expressions or body language that might influence interactions in gaming. Additionally, while the study aims to capture a wide range of linguistic behaviors, the sample is limited to the selected games. It may not be fully representative of all online gaming environments. Future research could expand the scope by including more games and different platforms and exploring the role of voice communication in shaping power dynamics.

This methodology provides a robust framework for analyzing the complex relationship between language, power, and social dynamics in online gaming. By focusing on discourse analysis, this study aims to understand better how language contributes to toxic behaviors and inclusive practices in digital gaming spaces.

4. Findings

This section presents the key findings from the discourse analysis of online gaming environments. By examining the communication patterns of players in multiplayer games, we identified two main themes in the data: **toxic language** and **inclusive language**. The analysis focused on understanding how these discursive practices reflect power dynamics and contribute to the construction of social hierarchies. This section also highlights specific linguistic strategies players use to assert dominance or promote inclusivity within gaming.

Toxicity in online gaming emerged as a prominent feature in the data collected. Aggressive, derogatory, and exclusionary remarks characterized instances of toxic language. These included racial slurs, gendered insults, and verbal harassment directed at individual players or groups. Toxic language was predominantly used by a small subset of players but significantly impacted the social dynamics of the game. Table 1 summarizes the different types of toxic language identified in the dataset:

Table 1. Types of Toxic Language Identified in Online Gaming Communities

Toxic Type	Language	Frequency (%)	Description
Gender-based insults		40%	Insults based on gender are often directed at female players. Examples include bitch, slut, and whore.
Racial slurs		25%	Insults based on race, such as the use of ethnic slurs and derogatory terms.
Verbal harassment		25%	General insults and threats aimed at demoralizing other players.
Other forms of abuse		10%	Miscellaneous forms of toxic speech, including personal attacks or threats.

The analysis revealed that toxic language often used specific discourse strategies to assert power and dominance. These included:

- **Insults and Personal Attacks:** A common strategy was using insults and personal attacks to destabilize the target’s confidence and self-worth. These were often employed in response to perceived mistakes or failures in the game, mainly when players felt their authority was being challenged.
- **Exclusionary Remarks:** Players also used exclusionary language to demoralize or alienate others from the group. This often took the form of racial or gendered slurs that reinforced social hierarchies. Such language was intended to create a divide between those in control of the gaming space and those outside the dominant group.

- **Aggressive Commanding:** In some instances, aggressive, commanding language was used to demand obedience from others, often accompanied by threats or intimidation.

These strategies were often employed by players in a position of power within the game, particularly those with a higher skill level or who were part of an established group. Toxic language reinforced their authority and marginalized those who did not conform to their expectations.

Conversely, inclusive language was a significant feature of the analyzed gaming spaces, though it was less prevalent than toxic language. The inclusive language was used to foster cooperation, support, and solidarity within the gaming group. It included using gender-neutral pronouns, offering encouragement, and avoiding derogatory terms.

Table 2. Types of Inclusive Language Identified in Online Gaming Communities

Inclusive Type	Language	Frequency (%)	Description
Gender-neutral terms		40%	Using gender-neutral pronouns like 'they/them' and 'everyone' instead of gendered terms.
Supportive comments		35%	Expressions of encouragement include 'good job,' 'well played,' and 'nice work.'
Non-discriminatory behavior		15%	Avoiding slurs or offensive language, focusing on gameplay.
Empowering others		10%	Remarks aimed at boosting the confidence and participation of others, particularly marginalized players.

The inclusive language was typically used to build a positive and supportive environment. Key strategies included:

- **Gender-neutral Pronouns:** Players frequently used neutral language, such as "they" instead of 'he' or 'she,' especially in diverse groups, to avoid making assumptions about others' gender identities.
- **Encouragement and Positive Feedback:** Encouraging language was used to uplift other players and create an atmosphere of cooperation and mutual respect. Comments such as 'good teamwork,' 'you've got this,' and 'let's stick together' were used to motivate players and reinforce group cohesion.
- **Active Resistance to Toxicity:** Some players actively resisted toxic language by calling out harmful behavior and asserting more positive forms of communication. For example, when one player used a racial slur, another responded, 'That's not okay; let's keep it respectful.' Such actions played an important role in shaping the game's tone and counteracting exclusionary practices.

These strategies were often employed by players who were aware of the game's toxic dynamics and actively sought to counterbalance them. This inclusive behavior was more likely to emerge in groups where players were already familiar with one another or had established social norms around respect and cooperation.

The data analysis revealed that power dynamics were critical in determining toxic or inclusive language use in online gaming. In this context, skill level, reputation, and group membership often determine power. Players who held higher status within the game- whether through their gameplay ability or their position in social hierarchies- were more likely to use language to assert dominance and control. Conversely, marginalized players, such as women and players who belong 'other' ethnic backgrounds, were more likely to experience toxic language directed at them and were less likely to use inclusive language due to fears of exclusion or harassment.

One of the most striking findings of this article was the interaction between toxic and inclusive language. In many instances, toxic language prompted immediate responses from players advocating for inclusivity. For example, when a racial slur was used, other players would often intervene with supportive comments or attempts to de-escalate the situation. This dynamic highlights the coexistence of toxicity and inclusivity in gaming spaces, suggesting that while toxic behavior remains pervasive, efforts to create positive environments are also present and actively resist negative interactions.

Table 3. Frequency of Interactions Between Toxic and Inclusive Language

Interaction Type	Frequency (%)	Description
Toxic language followed by inclusivity	55%	Instances where toxic language was followed by inclusive responses (e.g., calls for respect or positive reinforcement).
Toxic language without inclusivity	30%	Instances where toxic language went unchallenged or escalated.
Inclusive language without toxicity	15%	Instances where inclusive language was used in the absence of toxic language.

The findings of this study reveal a complex interplay between toxic and inclusive language in online gaming communities. While toxic language remains a dominant force, there is a strong undercurrent of inclusivity, particularly in response to toxic behavior. Discourse analysis has illuminated how language both reflects and shapes power relations within digital gaming spaces, where marginalized players are often subjected to verbal abuse. In contrast, others seek to foster environments of cooperation and respect. These findings offer important insights into how gaming communities can work to mitigate toxicity and promote inclusivity, highlighting the crucial role of language in shaping the social dynamics of online gaming spaces.

5. Discussion

The article explored the complex relationship between language, power, toxicity, and inclusivity in online gaming communities through discourse analysis of player interactions in multiplayer games. The findings reveal a significant presence of both toxic and inclusive language in gaming spaces, with power dynamics playing a crucial role in shaping how these linguistic behaviors manifest. The coexistence of toxic behaviors and inclusive language highlights the challenges and potential for transformation within online gaming communities.

The prevalence of toxic language in online gaming communities underscores the persistence of power imbalances within digital spaces. Toxic language, often in the form of racial slurs and gendered insults, serves as a tool for maintaining dominance, particularly among more experienced or skilled players. These findings support previous research that suggests online gaming environments can be sites of exclusion and harassment, where marginalized groups- such as women and racial minorities- are subjected to verbal abuse (Fox & Tang, 2017; Srauy, 2019). The use of insults and slurs reflects broader societal power structures, where certain groups are privileged while others are oppressed. In gaming communities, these dynamics are reinforced through language, which often excludes or devalues players based on their identity.

Toxic language also functions to assert control over the gaming environment. As noted in the findings, more dominant players with higher skill levels or social status within the game were more likely to use aggressive language to maintain their position. This finding is consistent with studies on power and language in other contexts, where those in authority or privilege use language to reinforce their status and marginalize others (Foucault, 1980). In online gaming, this can lead to the creation of 'in-group' and 'out-group' dynamics, where players who do not conform to the social norms or expectations of the dominant group are pushed to the periphery. While toxicity remains prevalent, it is important to recognize that these power dynamics are not static. They are contested and challenged as players resist toxic behavior through inclusive language practices. This leads us to consider the role of resistance within the gaming space, a theme that emerged strongly in the data.

The use of inclusive language in response to toxic behavior represents a form of resistance to the prevailing power structures. As the findings suggest, when toxic language was used, many players intervened by calling for respect, offering support, or using gender-neutral language. These interventions were often driven by a desire to create a more equitable and cooperative environment. This aligns with research suggesting that online spaces, including gaming communities, are not merely sites of oppression but also resistance and transformation (AlAfnan, 2005; Rose, 2024). The findings suggest that inclusive language acts as both a shield and a countermeasure, helping empower marginalized players and foster a sense of belonging within the gaming environment.

The prevalence of inclusive language in response to toxicity also reveals a more positive aspect of online gaming. While toxicity remains a significant issue, inclusive practices highlight the potential for social change within these spaces. In some instances, players used their position in the game to challenge toxic behaviors, demonstrating a willingness to confront power imbalances. This suggests that gaming communities may not always be equitable but are dynamic and capable of transformation through collective action. The data shows that gender-neutral pronouns and supportive comments reflect a broader cultural shift toward more inclusive language. Online gaming spaces, which are often thought of as hyper-masculine or exclusionary, may serve as sites where social change is taking place. Promoting inclusivity through language reflects ongoing efforts to challenge traditional gender norms and extend greater acceptance to diverse identities.

The intersection of language, power, and identity within gaming communities is critical to understanding how toxic and inclusive language emerges. The findings suggest that language use in online games is deeply intertwined with players' perceptions of their identity, skill level, and social status within the community. As noted, players who occupied dominant positions in the game were likelier to use toxic language, reflecting how power dynamics are reinforced through communication. This phenomenon is not unique to gaming but mirrors larger societal patterns where language is often used to assert or challenge identity and social norms.

The power dynamics observed in gaming communities may also be influenced by the broader cultural context in which these games are played. In many games, especially competitive ones, success is often linked to individual performance,

with skill level and experience playing a key role in determining social status. This meritocratic system may inadvertently reinforce toxic behaviors, as players with higher skill levels may feel entitled to exert control or belittle others. Additionally, the anonymity provided by online platforms often amplifies these behaviors, as individuals feel less accountable for their actions and may engage in more aggressive language without fear of real-world consequences.

The data also show that inclusive language can be used strategically to challenge these norms and assert alternative forms of power. When players used inclusive language, they resisted the toxic behaviors of others and actively constructed a new social norm that emphasized cooperation, respect, and equality. This suggests that while broader cultural and societal forces shape online gaming communities, they are also sites where alternative norms can be developed and enacted.

6. Implications for Online Gaming Communities

The findings have significant implications for the future of online gaming communities. The persistence of toxic language underscores the need for more effective interventions to address harassment and exclusion in digital spaces. While many game developers have implemented reporting systems and community guidelines to address toxic behavior, the findings suggest that these efforts may not be enough. There is a need for more proactive strategies to promote inclusive language and foster environments where all players feel welcome and valued.

One potential avenue for improvement is incorporating positive reinforcement systems that reward inclusive behavior. For example, games could implement mechanisms that recognize and reward players who engage in supportive, respectful interactions, much like they currently reward in-game achievements. This could help shift the focus from competitive dominance to collaboration and inclusivity. Game developers and community leaders should consider the role of social norms in shaping behavior. By actively promoting inclusive language and creating environments where diversity is celebrated, game developers can help cultivate gaming communities that are more equitable and welcoming for all players. This might include implementing in-game tutorials, workshops, or campaigns highlighting the importance of respectful communication and the detrimental effects of toxic behavior.

7. Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of language in online gaming communities, it has its limitations. The data collection was limited to certain games, and the findings may not fully represent all online gaming environments. Future research could expand the sample to include a broader range of games, platforms, and player demographics to explore how language use varies across gaming contexts.

8. Conclusion

This study provided valuable insights into the interplay between language, power, and social dynamics within online gaming communities. By analyzing the use of toxic and inclusive language through discourse analysis, we have highlighted how language is not merely a tool for communication but a powerful force that shapes the structure and culture of digital gaming spaces. The findings demonstrate that toxic language continues to play a dominant role in reinforcing social hierarchies and marginalizing certain groups, particularly women and racial minorities. However, the study also reveals that inclusive language is actively used as a form of resistance, offering players a means of challenging power imbalances and fostering more cooperative and respectful gaming environments.

The role of power dynamics in language use is central to understanding how online gaming communities function. Dominant players often employ toxic language to assert their authority, while marginalized groups are frequently subjected to exclusionary practices. However, as this study has shown, language can also be a tool for empowerment. Players who engage in inclusive behaviors, whether through gender-neutral pronouns or supportive comments, play a crucial role in reshaping social norms and creating a more welcoming environment for all participants. This suggests that while toxicity remains an ongoing issue, online gaming spaces are not static and can evolve through collective efforts to foster inclusivity.

The findings underscore the need for more proactive measures from game developers and community leaders to address toxic behaviors and promote positive language use. Game developers can take a more active role in shaping the culture of their gaming environments by implementing systems that reward inclusive language and create structures that actively resist harmful discourse. Equally important is the need for players to be empowered to challenge toxic language when they encounter it, helping to build supportive communities where all voices are heard and respected.

As online gaming continues to grow in popularity and influence, it is critical that efforts to address toxicity and promote inclusivity be prioritized. This study contributes to understanding how language shapes power relations within digital spaces and highlights the potential for social change within these communities. By exploring the intersection of language, power, and identity, we can work towards a future where online gaming is a space where all players can participate equally without fear of harassment or exclusion. Ultimately, the findings suggest that through sustained efforts to promote inclusive language, online gaming communities can become sites of transformation, where individual players and the broader gaming culture evolve toward more significant equity and respect.

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