

Understanding Toxicity in Online Gaming: A Focus on Communication-Based Behaviours towards Female Players in Valorant

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Abstract

Online multiplayer video games have emerged as a significant social platform, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, offering solace and community for many individuals, particularly young people. However, alongside the benefits, online gaming environments have also become breeding grounds for toxic behaviours, disproportionately affecting minority groups within the gaming community, such as women. This study explores toxic behaviours within the competitive gaming environment of Valorant, focusing on communication-based toxicity experienced by female players. Through participative observation and analysis of game recordings, the study identifies various forms of toxicity, including verbal abuse, gender-based harassment, and sexual innuendos. Findings reveal a reluctance among female players to use voice communication due to fear of harassment, perpetuating gender stereotypes and marginalising women within the gaming community. Moreover, the phenomenon of smurfing exacerbates issues within the community, contributing to heightened frustration and hostility, particularly towards minority players. Addressing toxic behaviours in online gaming requires a comprehensive approach involving game developers, community initiatives, and education efforts to promote inclusivity and respect. By fostering a culture of mutual respect, the gaming community can create a safer and more welcoming environment for all players.

Keywords: Competitive Gaming, Female Gamers, Gaming Communication, Gender Bias, Harassment.

Introduction

Online multiplayer video games were a solution to player's social support and a sense of community for those who have interest in gaming. This became a one stop solution when Covid-19 hits and numerous young people have no channel of communication with their peers (Ridho, 2019);(Elvionita, 2022);(Pratama, 2021). This, to combat loneliness and their mental wellbeing, they have turned towards video games to provide them support (Ondang, Moku, & Goni, 2020);(Abbasi, Rehman, Hussain, Ting, & Islam, 2021). However, despite all the good things online video games have on paper, in reality, it can also become harmful for the players, especially minorities in the community. Hiding behind a screen and a username where no one knows who they

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are, this enables players to show hostility towards other players in what the community has known as toxic behaviours (Masya & Candra, 2016).

Toxic behaviour has become a widely used umbrella term for any negative behaviour in the gaming community. While some of those behaviours may fit better under deviant behaviour, anti-social behaviour, disruptive behaviour, cyberbullying, trolling, mischief, and many others (Lutfiwati, 2018). Thus, toxic behaviour is seen as any behaviour that is hurtful towards other players. The definition of toxic behaviour may be important for game companies and the community to be able to take action. As this behaviour is a contribution to how a game gains revenue. New players who experience toxic behaviours from the start may be discouraged from continuing to play the game.

To combat this behaviour, not only game studios, but companies who are involved firsthand in the community such as Twitch and Youtube have formed the Fair Play Alliance coalition to encourage healthy player interaction in online gaming and build a community that is safe for everyone. Free of any cyberbullying, harassment, discrimination, and abuse. In addition, being perceived as a male space, video games was an activity built by men for men, making women being poorly represented in video games content (Yudianto, 2017). This creates a rather hostile environment to the female players as they are perceived as 'outsiders' of the community. Repeated exposure in the hostile environment will impact the perception and attitudes of the player (Breuer, Kowert, Festl, & Quandt, 2015). Thus, it is not a surprise to see gender-based harassment such as sexism, impropriety, gender discrimination, and offensive sexual advances are common in the general game environment.

This study concentrates on team-based competitive gaming in the realm of e-sports, specifically within the FPS (First-Person Shooter) genre. This genre involves the formation of teams comprising strangers who compete against other teams. The amalgamation of competitiveness, cooperation, and social dynamics creates a unique experiential pattern characterised by heightened frustration and challenge (Kou, 2020). Furthermore, the need for mood management within the game increases the likelihood of harassment and abuse. This study narrows its focus to the FPS game Valorant, which is currently gaining popularity.

The research aims to delve into the toxic behaviour the Indonesian female players received, analysing the types of toxic behaviours in the competitive gaming environment of Valorant. Data collection involves participative observation, with female participants engaging in competitive Valorant matches. Valorant, an online first-person shooter (FPS) game created by Riot Games and launched in October 2019, is currently recognized as one of the most popular PC games globally (Valorant, n.d.). In just three years since its release, the game boasts an estimated player base of around 20 million worldwide. The Valorant esports scene received accolades as the best Esports of the Year in 2022 from The Game Awards, drawing an average viewership of 1.5 million during esports events.

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The game's objective is for a team to reach a score of 13 first, and in the event of a 12-12 tie, the winning team must secure a two-point advantage, akin to the rules of a volleyball match. Each team comprises five players randomly assigned to a map and a role, either attacker or defender. Attackers aim to plant the bomb, referred to as the "spike," at a designated site, earning a point upon successful detonation or elimination of the opposing team. Defenders seek to prevent the spike from being planted and defuse it if necessary, earning a point in the process. Role swap occurs at the 12th round, with attackers becoming defenders and vice versa.



Figure 1 Capture of Valorant's gameplay Source: Youtube mcdawgzy, 2023

To ensure fair matches, Riot Games implemented a ranking system that evaluates players' skills, assigning ranks such as Iron, Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum, Diamond, Ascendant, Immortal, and Radiant. Professional players typically operate at Ascendant rank and above. The matchmaking system arranges teammates and opponents within a close range of their rank. To maintain its community, Riot Games has developed a moderation system similar to their MOBA game, League of Legends. Where a player can send a report regarding other player(s) and the developers will adjudicate and issue punishment towards convicted players as they see fit. The report function can be submitted in the middle of the match or after.

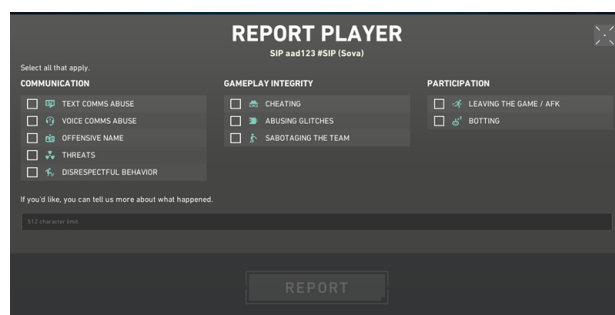


Figure 2. Player Report System in Valorant

The report system asks the player to choose what type of toxic behaviour he will be reporting. The behaviour has been divided into three types which is communication, gameplay integrity, and participation. Players can choose one or all if it applies to the

toxicity they just experienced. The report system has recently gotten an upgrade from what is seen from Figure 2. While none of the categories has been changed, the interface has been changed for easier navigation. However, Riot Games has decided to remove the classification of each type which may cause some confusion for players if they wanted to report.

Due to the competitive nature of online games, there are possibilities of online-based violence (Kwak, Blackburn, & Han, 2015). It would be easier for players to take part in the violence due to the anonymity they exhibit in the online gaming space, there are no immediate consequences they may experience. Some commonly found violence are cheating and cyberbullying, whether verbally or not (Kou, 2020). Cheating generally refers to how an individual uses an external software to give them an unfair advantage in the game.

An example would be in an FPS game, a player's performance heavily relies on their aim and awareness on where the enemy would be located. Numerous cheating software will give a player automatic aim and even reveal the exact location of the enemy team. This causes an unfair playing field. In terms of cyberbullying, it is more than common for a player to use swear words to degrade another player in the game. In a competition, verbal barbs directed towards opponents are quite common in order to gain a competitive edge (Dixon, 2007). This is widely accepted by athletes and the community as part of their sports, not just in the online gaming community (Conmy, 2008).

However, in a normal competitive online game, there are minimal consequences for a player's action. As the toxicity in the game is happening unsupervised, a direct action cannot be taken. The biggest measure the game developers can do is accept reports from other players and take further action by suspending or deleting the accounts of the perpetrator. However, these perpetrators can easily create new accounts and re-enter the community without any consequences. Another measure a victim or a player can do when they experience or witness toxicity is by taking it to social media. This will result in criticism from the community.

Method Research

Collected data is gathered through means of recording the games participants are playing. These recordings are more commonly known as video on demand or VOD. Every participant is requested to meet the same requirements, play a few Valorant Competitive matches in the span of June to August 2023 with their preferred account and/or rank of choice. These games range between three to five games in total and do not necessarily need to be consecutive. Participants are required to be actively communicating through Valorant's communication feature in all of their games, this aims to trigger responses from their unknown teammates.

Responses from their teammates were analysed to see the toxic behaviour happening in real time. Responses from teammates outside of the participant's party are the only one taken into consideration to ensure data validity. The average duration of the game usually ranges between 30 to 50 minutes, and although participants were asked to

submit one video, some of them submitted more than one. Concluding to a total of 25 videos from 13 total participants ranging from Iron rank all the way to Radiant rank.

Result and Discussion

Results

Based on Valorant's player reporting system, there are five types of communication toxicity that can be reported, including communication abuse, offensive name, threats, and disrespectful behaviour. Toxicity towards another player given through communication is more than common to be experienced through Valorant's communication feature. The content of the abuse or aggression are offensive to players on the receiving end. Based on Valorant's player report category, there are four types of toxic behaviour that may be done through communication. One of them being disrespectful behaviour which may be an umbrella term for other aggression such as verbal abuse and hate speech. The term itself may be confusing if an individual isn't familiar with the gaming terms on disrespectful behaviour.

Communication abuse generally focuses more on an individual abusing the feature. Instead of using it to give important information regarding the game, they will use it to be hostile or even disturb other players. An example of disturbing may be spamming in text chat or constantly talking or screaming into the microphone for all of the team to hear. Generally, communication abuse and disrespectful behaviour goes hand in hand in a report. As abusive and discriminatory behaviour may fall under both categories. This includes harassing, using offensive language, discrimination and all kinds of hate speech.

Harassment in the form of flirting was experienced by one of our participants PW001. As she continuously uses her voice communication to give out information, one of her teammates kept responding with flirtatious remarks. "If you watch over flank. How about I watch over you, instead?". The interaction went on for almost the whole game, around the last 5 rounds he stopped talking altogether due to the lack of response from PW001. Not once he provided any useful information for the team to win the game and still opted for flirting instead. Through her interaction with her party teammates, PW001 has expressed her disinterest and discomfort with the teammate's behaviour.

Similar flirtatious remarks are experienced by another participant PW004. While playing alone and actively communicating through voice communication, her teammates realised her gender. With a leading score of 12 – 2, her team only needs one more round to win the game. However, PW004 was left alone to clutch the game against 3 enemies. Her enemies showed support, just not in a way she appreciates. They were constantly using the words 'I love you', 'baby', and 'babygirl'. Even with the game being against her odds, PW004 still won the round. Her teammates were ecstatic but chose to spew some sexual remarks "Oh my god, I love you! Smooch, smooch! I wanna fuck you so bad!" and another player chimed in "Threesome, threesome, let's go!". PW004 did not respond as she does not want to elongate the conversation.

While numerous participants express the common act of getting flirtatious remarks, sexual harassment is surprisingly also commonly experienced by female players. As one of our participants PW002 has experienced harassment in the form of sexual innuendos as one of her teammates said “Aye boleh lah kau cuci my fucking dingdong lah! (Hey, clean my fucking dick!)”. This statement was a follow-up to a previous question which was “Are you Chinese or Malay, ah?”. PW002’s teammate was acting flirty beforehand, throwing sentences such as “Will you be my valentine’s?” but then, after finding out the race of PW002, his attitude changed.

One of our female participants, PW003, has experienced a gender-based hate speech by one of the players in her team. PW003 has simply spoken up regarding her thoughts on how the team should play or just try to take the lead in general. However, her teammate did not take the suggestion and went out of their way to do the exact opposite of what is suggested (Duggan, 2015). “Yeah that’s how you do it! We need to show her (PW003) or else she will become a know-it-all. Girls just stay put and be quiet. Just spread your legs.”

Participant PW003, in one of her games where she plays with 4 other friends, has received harassment by the enemy team. During the first round of the game, her team won easily because one of her friends had easily gotten 4 kills. However, for the next 6 rounds, her teams continuously suffered defeat. Nor PW003 or her friends were bothered by this as they were having fun with the game. Through the chat feature, the opposing team starts taunting by sending question marks (?) followed by a statement “Just play barbie, bro. You consider this serious?”. The statement was followed-up with derogatory words such as ‘retardddd’ and ‘idiot’. One of the opposing players even started mocking PW003’s family such as ‘Fatherless’. At first, the mockery was trivial but as it happens every round, PW003 and her team started feeling fed up.

The taunts and disrespectful behaviour such as shooting dead bodies and teabagging continued as the mockery escalated even more vulgarly. One of the enemy players, after finding out PW003 is a woman, stated “Hey PW003, open a bookout, what’s your rate? <3”. Threats however, fall into its own separate category. The most common threatening behaviour in game is doxing another player’s identity. If combined with hate speech, information regarding a player (or the receiver in this case) may disrupt the safety of said player.

While a player can be on their best behaviour yet be reported for the reason being the offence in their name. Riot Games has made a rough list on what is considered inappropriate for a name. Those being names included hate speech, slurs, profanity, have any reference to any historical, ethical, or political context, and names containing insults, grotesque imagery, and strong vulgarity.

Discussion

The communication-based toxicity shown by players in Valorant shows similar traits but not completely the same. There are some variations in the interaction paths taken, some showing explicit aggression by using vulgar and profane language while some doesn’t even intend to harass but still engage in the act. In low elo lobbies, players

communicate less with their stranger teammates and their games feel more like solo games. They tend to not use the voice communication feature but still often say words of support such as “nice try” or “good game”.

The reason behind this phenomenon may be because new players are not yet familiar with the Valorant game and do not understand the communication feature provided by Riot Games (Voice and Chat Restrictions, 2022). For ordinary people, especially those who are not used to playing games, competitive games like Valorant will seem very confusing and difficult to understand how the game works (Bihari & Pattanaik, 2023). As a result of this, new players can be placed at a lower rank to give them the opportunity to better understand the game first. Other players who are still in the same rank but are more familiar will understand the situation of these new players better.

It should be noted that not all players at low rank do not use voice communication. Some players may choose to use other methods of communication, such as character actions (ping, wheel command, etc.) and communication via text. They avoid using sound, and this may not necessarily be due to their ignorance of in-game features. The use of voice communication is more common in Silver rank lobbies. However, there are also players who already understand the features in the Valorant game but still avoid using voice communication.

They prefer other methods of communicating. This selection could be due to various reasons, including fear of harassment or intimidation, especially for female players. When talking to one of the Bronze rank participants, she said that in her experience playing in the Iron and Bronze rank lobbies, she was often the target of harassment or intimidation. It doesn't matter what impact she has on the team in that game. “I don't like using my microphone because I'm scared of getting yelled at when I play bad, especially as a girl. So, I'd rather just not use my microphone at all.”

It is common for casual players to experience inconsistency in their games, one day they may be playing very well but almost getting no kills on another day (Matthews, Koleva, & Basnet, 2022). Even professional players experience inconsistency albeit not as much. However, knowing the truth to the statement, numerous women still refuse to use their voice communication. Their reasoning behind it connects to the gender stereotyping regarding online gaming skills (Madden et al., 2021).

One of the most common stereotypes is that female players cannot play as well regardless of their actual skills. Thus, women in this lobby who are not as skilled in Valorant do not want to feed more into the stereotype by giving out the fact that they are women and are bad at video games (O'Halloran, 2017). The act of smurfing, where a player(s) from the higher rank plays on a lower ranking account, created a massive problem and a domino effect in the community. One of them being the average ability of the rank heightens because of smurfs thus players being stuck in the mid ranks.

With those players being stuck, created a large pent-up anger inside of them and with nowhere else to channel it, they channel to other players. The victims are usually the minority of the community, those with lower kills on the scoreboard and people not seen as part of the community such as women. The repeated act of smurfing and hostility

towards the minority in the community will be bound to impact the perception and attitudes of the player. The act will continue to be normalised and it will become difficult to make changes to it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the rise of online multiplayer video games, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, provides entertainment and a sense of community for many individuals, especially young people who lack social interaction. However, the anonymity afforded by online gaming platforms also facilitates toxic behaviour, which disproportionately impacts minority groups within gaming communities, such as women. Toxic behavior includes a wide range of negative actions, from verbal abuse to gender-based harassment and sexual harassment. Female players, in particular, often find themselves subjected to unwelcome treatment and derogatory comments, which not only hinder their gaming experience but also perpetuate negative stereotypes about their gaming abilities.

These findings also highlight the reluctance of some perpetrators, particularly women, to use voice communication for fear of harassment or intimidation. This reluctance perpetuates gender stereotypes and further marginalises female players in the gaming community. Additionally, the smurfing phenomenon exacerbates problems within gaming communities, contributing to increased frustration and hostility, particularly towards minority players. Addressing toxic behaviour in online gaming requires a multifaceted approach, involving not only game developers but also community initiatives and educational efforts to encourage inclusivity and respect. By fostering a culture of mutual respect and understanding, gaming communities can create a safer and more welcoming environment for all players.

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