






Online Hate Speech in the Gaming Community: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Original Research Abstract

Received:
13 March 2025

Revised:
24 April 2025

Accepted:
04 May 2025

Published in Issue:
19 October 2025

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This study investigated the linguistic strategies and discursive devices used in online hate speech within the gaming community. The present study aimed to deal with the following objectives: exploring how power dynamics and gender ideologies manifest in this discourse and examining the cognitive processes and mental representations that contribute to the production and reception of such communication. The research employed a qualitative design, utilizing multiple methods for critical discourse analysis, including Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional model, van Dijk's (1993) socio-cognitive approach, and van Dijk's (1998) Ideological Square. The data set for the analysis consists of 200 online texts and data sources, such as forum posts, comments, messages, gaming streams, videos, podcasts, and social media interactions, primarily from platforms like Reddit, 4chan, and Twitch. The analysis revealed a high prevalence of misogynistic language, including sexual objectification, insults, and threats, alongside significant amounts of racist, religious, homophobic, and ableist hate speech. Cognitive processes like stereotyping, prejudice, and emotional responses fuel the creation and reception of hateful messages. The findings underscore the urgent need for multifaceted interventions targeting individual perpetrators and systemic issues to create safer online spaces.

Keywords: Critical discourse analysis; Gaming community; Hate speech; Misogynistic language; Racist ideologies

Cite this article: Saad Yahya Jubran, H., Karimi, F., & Jubair Kadhim Al-Jameel, B. (2025). Online Hate Speech in the Gaming Community: A Critical Discourse Analysis, *Journal of New Trends in English. Language Learning*, 4(3), Article 16. <https://doi.org/10.57647/JNTELL.2025.0403.16>

1. Introduction

Modern video games have evolved into intricate virtual environments that facilitate extensive multiplayer interactions, thereby cultivating distinct social norms and communities. These games often promote social engagement through mechanisms such as guilds, clans, and ongoing communication channels outside of gameplay, which significantly enrich the gaming experience. Research indicates that online gaming can enhance friendship formation, with stronger social ties correlating with increased enjoyment of the gaming experience (Colder Carras et al., 2017; Heng et al.,

2021). However, the embedded "game rank" systems, which assign ranks based on accumulated points, introduce power dynamics that can influence player behavior. Higher ranks, indicative of greater skill and experience, may lead to increased influence within the community and potentially foster aggressive behaviors. Social dominance theories suggest that a correlation exists between high in-game rank and harmful actions, shaped by broader societal norms regarding gender, power, and dominance (Zakaria et al., 2022). Thus, while online gaming can facilitate positive interactions, it also serves as a breeding ground for cruelty and hate speech, a phenomenon exacerbated by technological advancements and the anonymity afforded by online

platforms (Fortuna & Nunes, 2018). The rapid expansion of the internet has amplified the dissemination of hate speech, creating a more emotionally charged discourse than traditional media. Anonymity plays a crucial role in this dynamic, as it often emboldens individuals to express aggression without fear of repercussions, fostering a climate rife with online violence and abuse (Fortuna & Nunes, 2018; Keya et al., 2023).

This situation presents significant societal challenges, prompting critical discussions about regulation, governmental responsibilities, and the balance between free speech and the protection of individuals from harmful rhetoric. The tension between safeguarding free speech and addressing online hate reshapes democratic principles and influences political communication in digital spaces (Ghozali et al., 2023; Lupu et al., 2023). It is essential to address the detrimental effects of online hate speech, particularly its disproportionate impact on marginalized groups, including those facing gender-based hate and misogyny (Cao & Lee, 2020).

Online hate speech represents serious threats to social cohesion and the fundamental rights of marginalized groups. The participatory nature of online platforms, coupled with anonymity and a lack of accountability, has fostered a culture of incivility where hate speech is normalized (Phillips, 2015). The rise of extreme nationalist and nativist ideologies has been linked to increased hate speech and hate crimes (Edwards & Rushin, 2018). Inflammatory rhetoric from political leaders often exacerbates this, and legal frameworks and content moderation struggle to keep pace with the sheer volume of online content.

The Rohingya genocide tragically illustrates the catastrophic consequences of unchecked hate speech, where social media-fueled violence against a marginalized community (Putra et al., 2021; Sabbir et al., 2022; Zahed, 2023). Studies have clearly shown a correlation between online anti-immigrant/anti-Muslim rhetoric and real-world hate crimes (Lupu et al., 2023). The online gaming community, largely comprised of young adults and teenagers, is particularly vulnerable to peer pressure, potentially leading to the adoption of harmful attitudes and behaviors (Sękowska-Kozłowska et al., 2022).

Lacking fully developed critical thinking skills and life experience, young people are susceptible to misinformation and radicalization. Anonymity can embolden hateful expressions, creating echo chambers (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Negative media portrayals can reinforce stereotypes, and some individuals may use hate speech for attention or validation (Salminen et al., 2018). The rise of right-wing populism has intensified this, yet research on online hate speech in the gaming environment remains limited, especially in post-pandemic contexts (Ghozali et al., 2023). However, the hate speech in the gaming community, with its unique dynamics, has been largely overlooked in the literature (Deligianni & Horne, 2023). Additionally, understanding the cognitive processes behind the production and reception of online hate, its effects on public discourse, and the coping mechanisms of victims is crucial (ElSherief et al., 2018; Keya et al., 2023) yet

has been largely under-cited and under-explored. There is an urgent need for comprehensive interventions (Deligianni & Horne, 2023; Shruthi & Kumar, 2020; Wachs & Wright, 2018). By addressing hate speech more strides can be taken towards fostering a more inclusive, respectful, and equitable digital landscape, safeguarding the rights and dignity of all individuals, and promoting a society that celebrates diversity and rejects discrimination in all its forms.

Thus, drawing upon the main tenets of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), this study was designed to identify and analyze the linguistic strategies and discursive devices employed by individuals engaging in online hate speech within the gaming community. Furthermore, this research initiative sought to examine the power dynamics and gender ideologies that were evident in the discourse surrounding online hate speech in the gaming community. Besides, this research was intended to investigate the cognitive processes and mental representations that facilitated the production and reception of online hate speech.

In line with the stated objectives, we shall address the following inquiries:

What linguistic strategies and discursive devices are employed in online hate speech within the gaming community?

What are the cognitive processes and mental representations that facilitate the production and reception of online hate speech in the gaming community?

How do online hate speech in the gaming community shape public discourse, attitudes, and potential normalization?

2. Review of Literature

Generally speaking, there is a lack of consensus on the exact definition of hate speech, despite various authors proposing similar definitions. Hate speech is often described as any form of expression that includes a component of hatred directed towards individuals or groups, frequently used to insult based on race, ethnicity, or religious beliefs (Nielsen, 2002; Thuku & Mbaaro, 2022). This ambiguity extends into legal frameworks, as different jurisdictions interpret hate speech in varying ways. For instance, the United Nations defines hate speech as expressions that incite harm towards individuals associated with specific social or demographic groups (Vilar-Lluch, 2023; Paz et al., 2020). According to recent academic discourse, hate speech encompasses any stance that undermines the rights of ethnic, religious, or national groups, while also disregarding principles of cultural diversity and equal dignity among different human collectives (Vergani et al., 2022). This reflects a broader understanding of hate speech, where various definitions overlap and highlight the nuanced nature of expressions that may inflict harm on vulnerable communities. For example, some scholars emphasize that the parameters of hate speech include verbal or non-verbal manifestations, such as gestures and symbols that are derogatory or dehumanizing

towards particular groups (Sazali et al., 2022; Paz et al., 2020). Awan and Zempi (2016) identify various factors that contribute to hate speech, including portraying individuals negatively based on their race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or physical and mental abilities to promote hatred and incite violence. The evolution of the Internet into a vast platform for online communication has significantly facilitated the propagation of hate speech.

The unregulated nature of the Internet allows individuals to express derogatory attitudes towards various groups with relatively little oversight or consequence. Specifically, social media has created environments where hate speech can spread rapidly and broadly, often without effective moderation due to the challenges of regulating user-generated content on these platforms (De Leo & Russo, 2023; Williams & Burnap, 2016).

The anonymity offered by the Internet further emboldens users, enabling them to voice prejudiced views without fear of retribution, thereby fostering a culture where harmful rhetoric can thrive (Liu et al., 2024; Fortuna & Nunes, 2018). The emergence of online hate speech correlates with the accessibility and popularity of the Internet, particularly in social media contexts where personal accountability is diminished. Numerous studies have documented the increase in hate speech incidents alongside the rise of these platforms, which frequently target marginalized communities, including racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, as well as women and LGBTQ+ individuals (De Leo & Russo, 2023; Burnap & Williams, 2015; Mathew et al., 2019). The interplay of factors such as the normalization of extremist views, feelings of deindividuation, and the absence of accountability contribute significantly to the prevalence of hate speech online. In these settings, users often feel empowered to express hateful opinions, thus perpetuating societal discrimination and inequality (Sękowska-Kozłowska et al., 2022; Mossie & Wang, 2018). As the discourse on hate speech continues to evolve, it is critical to acknowledge that while the Internet serves as a medium for unrestricted dialogue, it simultaneously presents challenges in distinguishing between constructive and harmful discussions.

The vastness of information available online can shape conflicting perceptions of social realities, often leading to the entrenchment of harmful views and polarized communities (Liu et al., 2024; Brown, 2018). The pivotal role of online platforms in the dissemination of hate speech necessitates a multifaceted policy approach to mitigate its impacts while maintaining the integrity of free speech (Stremlau & Gagliardone, 2019).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This research employed a qualitative critical discourse analysis design, combining multiple methods to conduct a critical discourse analysis of online hate speech within the gaming community. The study drew on a range of analytic frameworks, including Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional model, and Van Dijk's (1993) socio-cognitive approach and Van Dijk's (1998) Ideological

Square. to deconstruct the intricate web of linguistic strategies, discursive devices, and ideological underpinnings present in the data. To triangulate the findings from the discourse analysis, in-depth interviews and online focus group discussions were conducted with diverse groups of gamers (n=30), providing a rich tapestry of perspectives and experiences. These qualitative approaches enabled an exploration of the participants' perceptions, reactions, and interpretations of online hate speech, offering a nuanced understanding of how this language shapes public discourse and attitudes. Using qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo, the data was synthesized and analyzed, with thematic coding and content analysis techniques employed to identify recurring patterns, themes, and discursive strategies present in the data.

3.2. The Corpus of the Study

Purposive sampling was employed to gather the data set for the present study, which was composed of a collection of 200 online texts and data sources relevant to online hate speech in the gaming community. These included forum posts, comments, messages, gaming streams, videos, podcasts, and social media posts, that were relevant to the research question of online hate speech in the gaming community.

The corpus included data from popular gaming websites, such as Reddit, 4chan, and Twitch, selected due to their high user engagement and documented instances of toxic interactions within gaming contexts. Additionally, purposive and convenience sampling were used to recruit 30 victimized gamers (aged 18-35 from the United States and Europe) for interviews and focus group discussions, aiming for participants with direct experience of the phenomenon under study.

The selected data spanned a specific period, starting from 2024, to capture the most recent discourse and dynamics surrounding online hate speech within the gaming community. This time frame reflected the constantly evolving nature of the gaming industry and online gaming communities, encompassing the latest developments, controversies, and incidents related to the research topic.

3.3. Theoretical framework

This study undertook a critical discourse analysis of the discourse surrounding online hate speech in the gaming community. The analysis was informed by Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional framework for discourse analysis, which examines discourse at the levels of text, discursive practice, and social practice. This study also tapped into Teun Van Dijk's (1993) Discourse Analysis Model, which adopts a socio-cognitive perspective, focusing on the cognitive mechanisms that mediate between discourse and society. Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional framework for discourse analysis, examines discourse at the levels of text, discursive practice, and social practice. The first dimension, discourse-as-text, focuses on the linguistic aspects of the discourse, including vocabulary, grammar, semantics,

phonology, and cohesion at the sentence level. The second dimension, discourse-as-discursive-practice, considers the discourse in terms of its production, circulation, distribution, and consumption within society. This involves an analysis of institutional and discursive processes, as well as the relationship between text and interaction, and the social factors that influence the processes of production and interpretation. The final dimension, discourse-as-social-practice, examines the ideological effects and hegemonic processes of the discourse, taking into account the socio-cultural context of the communicative event, including economic, political, and cultural factors.

Van Dijk's (1993) discourse model divides discourse into three structures or levels: macrostructure, superstructure, and micro structure (Liando et al., 2022). Discourse analysis relies on examining texts at different levels. The *macrostructure* refers to the overarching themes, providing a broad understanding of the text's implications (Handayani et al., 2023). The *superstructure* focuses on the organizational framework, such as the introduction, body, and conclusion, revealing how information is presented and influencing interpretation (Syawaludin, 2019). Finally, the *microstructure* involves a detailed examination of linguistic elements like semantics, syntax, and stylistics, crucial for understanding nuances of meaning (Özlü, 2024). These levels work together to create a complete understanding of discourse. In Van Dijk's (1993) model, there are six essential elements of discourse: thematic, schematic, semantic, syntaxes, stylistic, and rhetoric. Thematic refers to the elaborated or replaced elements within the discourse, providing insight into the problem and actions taken by the communicator. Schematic represents the general form of the text and plays a strategic role in concealing important information. Semantics relate to the meaning of words and sentences and is a vital aspect of discourse analysis. Syntaxes pertain to the structure of discourse on a sentence, clause, and phrase level. Stylistic involves the interpretation of text through the lens of language use and style. Rhetoric focuses on the use of artificial or hyperbolic language to emphasize certain aspects of speech or writing (Fayruza et al., 2021).

3.4. Ensuring Credibility and Dependability

To enhance the trustworthiness of this qualitative study, several strategies were employed to ensure credibility and dependability. Credibility was primarily established through triangulation, which involved the use of multiple data sources (e.g., forum posts, comments, messages, streams, videos, podcasts, social media interactions, interviews, and focus groups) and multiple analytical frameworks, including Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional model, Van Dijk's (1993) socio-cognitive approach, and his Ideological Square (Van Dijk, 1998). Examining the phenomenon from these diverse perspectives enabled cross-verification of emerging themes and interpretations. Furthermore, the use of rich, thick descriptions in the presentation of the data and findings, including direct quotes and contextual

information, allows readers to assess the resonance of the interpretations with the data itself.

Dependability was fostered by providing a detailed account of the research process, including the research design, corpus selection, data collection methods, and analytical procedures employed (as outlined in this Methodology section). This detailed audit trail allows others to scrutinize the research process. The systematic application of established theoretical frameworks (Fairclough, 1989; Van Dijk, 1993) also contributed to a consistent and logical analytical approach throughout the study. While the researchers' interpretation is inherent in qualitative analysis, grounding the analysis firmly in established CDS methodologies and triangulating data sources aimed to produce dependable and consistent findings regarding the patterns of online hate speech in the examined gaming communities.

4. Results

In this section, the first area explored the linguistic strategies and discursive devices employed in online hate speech within the gaming community. The second area examined how power dynamics and ideologies manifest in the discourse surrounding these issues. The third area investigated the cognitive processes and mental representations that facilitate both the production and reception of online hate speech. Additionally, the study addressed how online hate speech shape public discourse, attitudes, and contribute to the potential normalization of gender-based discrimination.

4.1. Results of the First Research Question

To address the first research inquiry, which aimed to identify the linguistic strategies and discursive devices used in online hate speech within the gaming community, the researcher analyzed the corpus using Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional model, and Van Dijk's (1993) discourse structure model. This analysis focused on the linguistic strategies and discursive devices present in the identified examples, as well as the broader context of online hate speech. Utilizing Fairclough's framework uncovers multiple layers of hate speech.

At the discourse-as-text level, the researcher examined the linguistic features. The examples provided showcase a range of linguistic strategies, such as employing *insults* (e.g., *cut your wrists, your momma is dead, and you are a mentally ill terrorist*), utilizing *aggressive, emotionally charged vocabulary aiming to inflict psychological harm and sexual harassment* (e.g., *let's 69, "send nudes," "I just can't help myself," "you have a great body, you should show it off more," "I bet you'd be great in bed," "I bet you're great at other things too"*), objectifying women and reducing them to their bodies. In addition, the data included the construal of profanity (e.g., *"fucking faggot", "get the hell out of here", "you stupid bitch," "airhead," "dumbbell," "giddy head," "flake"*) which intensifies the aggressive tone and serves as a marker of disrespect. Racist slurs (e.g., *coon, sambo, buck, beaner*) and other bigoted remarks including anti-

Muslimism comments, anti-Jews ones (e.g., *you are Bin Laden son, all Muslims are terrorists, Islam is a violent religion, Jews are responsible for all the world's problems, Jews are evil, Judaism is a false religion, Jews are not welcome here*) leverage prejudiced language to dehumanize and marginalize targeted groups.

The juxtaposition of overtly offensive terms with seemingly innocuous ones (e.g., *“cute, beautiful, smile, bimbo, babe”*) highlights the manipulative deployment of seemingly positive language to mask underlying hostility and objectification. This can be seen as a subtle form of discursive aggression. The use of threats (e.g., *“I could bomb the office,” “if u don't agree, ur family get hurt,” “say that again n, I ll bust ur ass”*) adds a layer of fear and intimidation.

Grammatically, short, declarative sentences are frequently used, conveying immediacy and aggression. Additionally, terms such as *bitch, whore, slut, cunt* are used to degrade and demean women, while transphobic terms (e.g., *tranny, shemale, he-she, it*) are employed to marginalize and dehumanize transgender individuals. Homophobic terms (e.g., *fag, faggot, dyke, queer*), when used derogatorily, are also prevalent, further illustrating the breadth of hate speech.

At discourse-as-discursive-practice, we considered how these texts are produced, circulated, and consumed. The online environment of gaming platforms facilitates anonymity and diffusion of responsibility, emboldening perpetrators.

The rapid-fire nature of online communication allows for quick dissemination of hate speech and limits opportunities for reflection or rebuttal. The algorithms of these platforms can amplify hateful content, pushing it to wider audiences and creating echo chambers where such behavior is normalized or even celebrated. The interpretation of these messages depends on the background, ideologies, and power dynamics of both the sender and the receiver.

Some comments (e.g., *send nudes*) might be interpreted as a simple request by some, but as a severe form of harassment by others. Racist terms (e.g., *nigger, chink, gook, spic, wetback, Kike, raghead*) are used to demean and dehumanize individuals based on their race or ethnicity. Ethnic slurs (e.g., *honky, cracker, and redneck*) further contribute to the divisiveness and hostility.

At discourse-as-social-practice which involves analyzing the broader societal implications, the prevalence of hate speech reinforces existing gender inequalities and power imbalances within the gaming community, was observed.

It contributes to a hostile online environment that discourages women from participating and perpetuates harmful stereotypes about female gamers. The normalization of such behavior through repetition and lack of effective moderation can have significant consequences for the well-being and safety of targeted individuals.

The historical context of sexism and discrimination against women in general society plays a crucial role, shaping the discourses and power dynamics observed online. Anti-Semitic terms (e.g., *kike, yid, heeb*), and

Islamophobic terms (e.g., *Raghead, Towelhead, Camel, jockey*) are used to target and marginalize individuals based on their religion.

Ableist some other terms (e.g., *retard, cripple, freak, oldie, senior moment*) demonstrate the pervasive nature of discriminatory language. Socioeconomic terms (e.g., *white trash, trailer trash*) further illustrate the complexity of hate speech, which can target individuals based on a wide range of characteristics.

Van Dijk's (1993) model provides a framework for analyzing the structure and meaning-making processes within the hateful discourse. Regarding, macrostructure, the overarching theme is the subordination and dehumanization of women and other marginalized groups within the gaming community.

The “topic” revolves around establishing dominance and asserting power through insults, threats, and sexual harassment. Regarding superstructure, the arguments, if they can be called that, are often poorly structured, relying on emotional appeals and ad hominem attacks rather than logical reasoning.

The “scheme” is one of aggression and intimidation. Moreover, when it comes to microstructure, at the semantic level, the meaning is clear: to denigrate, offend, and threaten.

The syntax is often simplistic, reflecting the aggressive and impulsive nature of the communication. The style is characterized by vulgarity, profanity, and emotionally charged language. The rhetorical devices employed include insults, threats, and appeals to prejudice.

Finally, the hateful messages often draw on pre-existing sexist, racist, and homophobic discourses prevalent in wider society. They reproduce and reinforce these harmful ideologies within the specific context of the online gaming community. The intertextual links to broader social discourses contribute to the normalization and perpetuation of hate speech.

In conclusion, the analysis reveals a complex interplay of linguistic strategies and discursive devices employed to perpetuate hate speech and misogynistic trolling.

The combination of aggressive vocabulary, manipulative rhetoric, the anonymity afforded by online platforms, and the amplification effect of algorithms all contribute to a hostile and discriminatory online environment. Addressing this requires a multi-faceted approach, targeting not only individual perpetrators but also the systemic factors that enable and normalize such behavior within the gaming community and broader society. Table 1 illustrates the frequency of different categories of hate speech in a corpus of 200 online texts and data related to online hate speech and misogynistic trolling within the gaming community: The table reveals a concerning prevalence of hate speech within the analyzed corpus of online gaming texts, highlighting the urgent need for interventions to mitigate online harassment. The most significant category, by far, is misogynistic language, comprising 75% of the total hate speech identified. This dominance, viewed through Fairclough's lens of “discourse-as-social-practice,” underscores the deeply ingrained sexism within the online gaming culture.

Table 1. Distribution of Hate Speech Categories in the Studied Online Gaming Communities

Used Language	Category	Percentage
Misogynistic Language	Sexual Objectification	20
	Insults & Degradation	17
	Threats of Violence	8.5
	General Harassment	9.5
Racist Slurs	Racial Epithets	5
	Racist Stereotypes	2.5
Religious-Based Slurs	Anti-Semitic Slurs	4
	Anti-Muslim Slurs	3
	Other Religious Slurs	2
Homophobic Slurs	Homophobic Epithets	3.5
	Homophobic Stereotypes	1.5
	Ableist Slurs	2.5
Other Forms of Hate Speech	Xenophobic Slurs	1.5
	Threats of Doxing/Harassment	2.5
Non-Hateful but Potentially Offensive Language	Aggressive Language	6
	Cyberbullying Language	5
Uncategorized		6
Total		100

The high frequency of sexual objectification (25%) and insults/degradation (30%) directly reflects the systemic devaluation and dehumanization of women within this digital space. This aligns with Van Dijk's (1993) model, where the "macrostructure" of the discourse centers on establishing dominance and control over women, achieved through derogatory language and threats. The high percentage of general harassment (insulting remarks, regardless of a specific target; 12.5%) and threats of violence (7.5%) showcases the pervasive nature of this hostile environment, making it unsafe and unwelcoming for female gamers.

Racist and religious-based slurs, while less prevalent than misogynistic language, still constitute a significant portion of the hate speech (13.5%), indicating the intersectional nature of online harassment. This points to how hate speech targets and reinforces multiple forms of social inequality. Van Dijk's (1993) model would highlight how the specific "microstructure" of these slurs—the lexicon and rhetoric employed—serves to dehumanize and marginalize individuals based on their race and religion, reflecting broader societal prejudices being played out in the online gaming space. The presence of homophobic slurs (5%), ableist slurs (2.5%), xenophobic slurs (1.5%), and threats of doxing/harassment (2.5%) further demonstrates the broad scope of hate speech within the online gaming community, confirming that marginalized groups experience multiple forms of online aggression. This points to the broader "social practice" that Fairclough emphasizes, whereby the online space is not merely a reflection of offline societal biases but actively contributes to their perpetuation and normalization. The final two categories, "Aggressive Language" and "Cyberbullying Language", while not necessarily hate speech, still indicate a climate of hostility. This underscores the need to understand the broader spectrum of online negativity and develop comprehensive strategies to address it. The "Uncategorized" portion necessitates further investigation to fully capture the

nuances of the hate speech employed. The "Uncategorized" portion of a hate speech analysis table represents comments or posts that don't neatly fit into the pre-defined categories. This could be due to several reasons. Some statements might contain elements of multiple categories or have ambiguous meanings that require further interpretation. For example, a seemingly innocuous comment could be revealed as hate speech upon closer examination of context or user history. Moreover, online hate speech constantly evolves, employing new tactics and terminology that may not be captured by existing categories. Slang, coded language, and subtle forms of manipulation could fall into this category. Further, hate speech is not always overt. Sarcasm, irony, and seemingly benign comments can be used to convey hateful messages indirectly, making categorization challenging. The boundaries between some categories can be blurry. For example, the phrase "*that's so gay*" used dismissively, while not a direct slur, is a homophobic expression that conveys negativity and prejudice. It might not perfectly fit into the Homophobic Slurs category due to its more subtle and indirect nature. In addition, the researcher came across comments using coded language or dog whistles that only certain groups would understand. This type of hate speech relies on shared knowledge and context, making identification challenging.

For example, the statement "*They're all taking our jobs!*" can function as a dog whistle, activating racist biases among those who share a particular understanding of "*they*" as referring to a specific racial or ethnic group. The statement avoids explicitly naming the group but relies on pre-existing prejudice to convey its hateful message.

4.2. Results of the Second Research Question

The second research question aimed to unearth how power dynamics and gender ideologies manifest in the discourse surrounding online hate speech trolling in the gaming community.

The results brought to light that power dynamics and gender ideologies are deeply interwoven within the discourse surrounding online hate speech and misogynistic trolling in the gaming community. Analyzing this through Fairclough's (1989) model and Van Dijk's (1993) socio-cognitive approach reveals how these forces shape the production, interpretation, and impact of hateful messages.

Discourse-as-text: The linguistic strategies themselves reflect existing power imbalances. Misogynistic language frequently employs objectification (e.g., *send nudes*), insults targeting women's competence ("*u only win coz ur a girl*," "*U R a bimbo*"), and threats of sexual violence (e.g., "*I'll have you gang-raped if you keep on bullshitting*"). This language is not random; it is strategically deployed to assert dominance and control, reflecting a patriarchal power structure where women are seen as subordinate. The use of profanity and aggressive language further reinforces this power dynamic, creating an environment where women are intimidated into silence or submission.

Discourse-as-discursive-practice: The online context amplifies existing power dynamics. Anonymity and the diffusion of responsibility provided by online platforms empower perpetrators and make it easier to harass women without facing immediate consequences. The rapid-fire nature of online interaction limits opportunities for victims to respond effectively, reinforcing the imbalance of power. Algorithms on gaming platforms can inadvertently exacerbate the problem, amplifying hateful content and creating echo chambers where misogynistic views are normalized and reinforced. The interpretation of such messages is also shaped by power dynamics. While some might dismiss a sexist comment, others recognize it as a serious act of aggression.

Discourse-as-social-practice: The pervasiveness of misogynistic trolling reinforces broader societal gender ideologies. It perpetuates harmful stereotypes about women gamers (e.g., that they are unskilled, emotional, or only there for attention), discouraging female participation and reinforcing the idea that gaming is a male-dominated space. The normalization of such behavior contributes to a climate of fear and intimidation, impacting women's confidence and ability to engage freely in online gaming communities. This aligns with Fairclough's focus on how discourse reproduces and reinforces societal power structures. Moreover, Van Dijk's (1993) framework helps us understand how cognitive processes and social representations contribute to the perpetuation of misogynistic hate speech.

Social Representations: Pre-existing gender stereotypes and ideologies are activated and reinforced through online hate speech. The discourse draws upon and reinforces the idea of women as inferior, hypersexualized, or emotionally unstable, justifying the targeting of women in online gaming spaces.

Group Identity and "Othering": Hate speech often creates a clear distinction between an "in-group" (typically men) and an "out-group" (women). Women are positioned as the "other," different, and less worthy of respect, leading to their dehumanization and targeted harassment.

Cognitive Schemas: The repeated exposure to misogynistic language and behavior shapes individuals' cognitive schemas related to gender. This means that individuals who frequently encounter these messages gradually internalize and accept these sexist ideas, normalizing and perpetuating harmful attitudes.

Power and Control: The very act of online harassment is a manifestation of power. Perpetrators seek to assert dominance and control over women through their actions, reinforcing traditional power structures and gender norms.

Both Fairclough's (1989) model and Van Dijk's (1993) socio-cognitive approach highlights how power dynamics and gender ideologies are not simply reflected in online hate speech but actively constructed and reinforced through it. The linguistic strategies, the online context, and the cognitive processes involved all contribute to the perpetuation of sexism and harassment within the gaming community. Addressing this complex issue requires challenging both the individual acts of hate speech and the deeper societal structures and beliefs that underpin them.

4.3. Results of the Third Research Question

The third research question aimed to identify the cognitive processes and mental representations that facilitate the production and reception of online hate speech and misogynistic trolling in the gaming community. Understanding the cognitive processes and mental representations underlying the production and reception of online hate speech requires a well-established approach, drawing upon Van Dijk's (1993) socio-cognitive approach. Van Dijk's (1993) model emphasizes the interplay between social context, cognitive processes, and the production and reception of discourse. In the context of online hate speech, several key cognitive processes are at play:

Stereotyping and Prejudice: Pre-existing negative stereotypes about women, minority groups, or other marginalized communities are activated and utilized to justify hateful actions. These stereotypes become readily accessible mental representations, influencing how individuals perceive and interact with others online. For example, a gamer holding a prejudiced belief that "women are bad at gaming" will more readily interpret a female player's mistake as evidence of their inferiority, potentially triggering aggressive behavior.

Of course she died first, what do u expect from a girl gamer?

They should just play Candy

Crush and not a competitive game.

All girls are here just for attention; they're only good at support roles

I bet he's in college just because of affirmative action. They never would have made it on merit alone.

What can u expect from a Muslim? They are all secretly planning against us. We can't even trust any of 'em.

He acts so flamboyant in his videos. I don't want my kids to watch him because he's so obviously gay, and that might rub off on 'em. I do not want advice from some boomer because they're all technologically illiterate, clueless about the world we live.

The first comment relies on the negative stereotype that women are inherently less skilled at gaming, suggesting they are better suited for casual, less competitive games. It uses this prejudice to justify belittling and excluding female gamers. The second comment reveals a pre-existing stereotype influencing how the speaker perceives female gamers. The first extract activates negative stereotypes about the intellectual capabilities of minority groups, implying that their achievements are undeserved and solely due to affirmative action policies. It undermines their accomplishments and justifies discriminatory attitudes. This comment plays on prejudiced stereotypes that paint all Muslims as untrustworthy and secretly harboring malicious intentions. It uses these broad generalizations to justify fear, hatred, and discriminatory treatment of an entire religious group. The fourth comment relies on stereotypical representations of gay men as overly flamboyant and effeminate. It also plays into the prejudiced notion that exposure to LGBTQ+ individuals can influence or “convert” others, especially children, which is used to justify discriminatory attitudes and exclusion. The final extract activates negative stereotypes about older generations, particularly Baby Boomers, as being unable to understand or use technology effectively. It uses this prejudice to dismiss and devalue their contributions and perspectives.

These examples demonstrate how pre-existing stereotypes and prejudices can be readily activated in online spaces, fueling hateful speech and discriminatory behavior towards various marginalized groups. Recognizing and challenging these harmful stereotypes is crucial in combating online hate and creating more inclusive digital environments.

Social Categorization and Group Identity:

Individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups, leading to in-group bias and out-group derogation. Online hate speech often reinforces these group boundaries, solidifying perceptions of “us” versus “them,” making it easier to dehumanize and attack members of the out-group. The “us” might be a group of gamers sharing a similar skill level or a particular gaming ideology; the “them” may be women in gaming, players of different genres, or players of different nationalities.

- *You only win because of their obsession with gaming.*
- *You cheat to get ahead.*

In the above extracts, nationality serves as the basis for social categorization. The “in-group” (players from the U.S.) views themselves as superior and perceives the

“out-group” (Iranian players) as a threat. This reinforces stereotypes about Iranian players and diminishes their achievements, making it easier for the in-group to justify derogatory remarks or hate speech against them.

- *Women only get attention in gaming because they're streamers, not because they're skilled.*
- *She probably only plays easy games.*

Gender is the dividing factor here, with male gamers identifying as the in-group and women as the out-group. This division fosters hostility and dehumanization, as women are seen not as equal participants but as outsiders who do not belong in the gaming space. Such rhetoric reinforces negative stereotypes about women's abilities and contributions to gaming culture.

- *Casuals are ruining the gaming industry.*
- *If you're not playing ranked, you're not a real gamer.*

The categorization of players based on their approach to gaming creates a hierarchical in-group (competitive gamers) and out-group (casual gamers). By devaluing casual players, competitive gamers solidify their own identity as “true gamers” while marginalizing others, leading to exclusion and toxic interactions.

- *Console players are all noobs who can't afford a proper gaming rig.*

The division, as displayed in the above extract, is based on gaming platforms, with PC gamers viewing themselves as superior due to perceived technical advantages or skill levels. This in-group bias leads to dismissive attitudes toward console gamers, reinforcing a sense of superiority while dehumanizing the out-group.

- *We're the real gamers; those casual players don't belong here.*

The above example illustrates in-group favoritism and out-group derogation, where individuals see themselves as superior and deserving of privilege.

Emotional Processes: Anger, frustration, and resentment play a significant role. Negative emotions can be triggered by perceived unfairness or competition within online games. These emotions can then be channeled into hateful expressions online, providing a sense of catharsis or power for the perpetrator. For example, a player losing a match lashed out with misogynistic abuse towards a female player on the opposing team, projecting their anger onto her.

- *That girl is so bad; she ruined the game! I'm going to leverage her out and tell everyone how terrible she is.*

The above example shows how frustration and anger can trigger aggressive behavior.

- *She's just a stupid bitch; she doesn't deserve to be here.”*

The above excerpt reveals a process of dehumanization, where the victim is stripped of their humanity, making aggression easier to justify.

Cognitive Schemas: Pre-existing mental frameworks (schemas) about gaming culture, gender roles, and acceptable online behavior shape how individuals interpret and respond to online interactions. Individuals holding misogynistic schemas may interpret innocuous

behaviors from female gamers as provocative or deserving of harassment.

Discourse Processing: Individuals do not passively absorb online hate speech; they actively process it. Factors such as the salience of the message (how attention-grabbing it is), the credibility of the source, and the individual's pre-existing biases all influence how it is interpreted and whether it reinforces existing beliefs or leads to attitude change. The production and reception of online hate speech and misogynistic trolling are complex phenomena shaped by a combination of individual cognitive processes, social group dynamics, and the affordances of the online environment. Understanding these cognitive mechanisms is crucial for developing effective strategies to combat this form of online harassment. This requires interventions targeting individuals' prejudiced attitudes, fostering empathy and understanding, and creating online environments that minimize anonymity, increase accountability, and promote respectful behavior.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study undertook a critical discourse analysis of online hate speech and misogynistic trolling in the gaming community. The gaming community, while often celebrated for its inclusivity and shared passion, unfortunately, harbors a dark underbelly: online hate speech and misogynistic trolling. These toxic behaviors, often veiled behind anonymity, create a hostile and unwelcoming environment for many players, particularly women. Hate speech manifests in various forms, from racial slurs and homophobic remarks to threats of violence and personal attacks.

Employing Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional model and Van Dijk's (1993) discourse structure model, the analysis revealed a high prevalence of misogynistic language, including sexual objectification, insults, and threats, alongside significant amounts of racist, religious, homophobic, and ableist hate speech. The high prevalence of misogynistic, racist, religious, homophobic, and ableist hate speech revealed in the analysis can be understood and further clarified through a complex interplay of social psychological theories. *Social identity theory* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) offers a crucial starting point, suggesting that individuals derive a significant portion of their self-esteem from their group memberships. Hate speech, therefore, serves as a mechanism to bolster in-group identity by devaluing out-groups.

The results of this study revealed that power dynamics and gender ideologies are intricately intertwined in the discourse surrounding online hate speech and misogynistic trolling in the gaming community. The linguistic strategies employed by perpetrators, such as objectification, insults, and threats of violence, reflect a patriarchal power structure where women are seen as subordinate. The online context amplifies these power dynamics, with anonymity and the diffusion of responsibility empowering perpetrators and making it easier to harass women without facing consequences. Furthermore, the pervasiveness of misogynistic trolling

reinforces broader societal gender ideologies, perpetuating harmful stereotypes about women gamers and discouraging female participation. The study also found that the normalization of such behavior contributes to a climate of fear and intimidation, impacting women's confidence and ability to engage freely in online gaming communities. The findings can be explained through some interconnected theoretical frameworks. The results clearly demonstrate the intricate relationship between power, gender, and online harassment.

The findings of this critical discourse analysis carry significant implications for various stakeholders involved in the online gaming ecosystem. Theoretically, this study contributes to the field of CDS by demonstrating the application of frameworks like Fairclough's (1989) and Van Dijk's (1993) to the specific, dynamic context of online gaming communities, highlighting how power, ideology, and cognition intertwine in digital hate speech.

It underscores the necessity of analyzing the micro-linguistic features, the meso-level discursive practices facilitated by platforms, and the macro-level societal ideologies that fuel such behavior.

Practically, the prevalence and nature of the hate speech identified (particularly misogynistic, racist, and homophobic language) signal an urgent need for more robust and nuanced content moderation strategies by gaming platforms (like Twitch, Reddit) and developers. This includes not only reactive measures but also proactive design choices that discourage toxicity and promote prosocial interaction.

Furthermore, the findings provide valuable insights for educators and community managers seeking to develop targeted interventions and educational programs aimed at fostering digital citizenship, critical media literacy, and empathy among gamers, especially younger demographics vulnerable to normalization.

Socially, this research highlights how online gaming spaces can act as amplifiers and incubators for broader societal prejudices and inequalities. The normalization of hate speech within these communities can have detrimental impacts on the mental health and well-being of targeted individuals, potentially silencing marginalized voices and reinforcing exclusionary norms. Addressing this issue is crucial for fostering more inclusive, equitable, and safe digital public spheres. Finally, this study points towards fruitful avenues for future research, including longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of hate speech, cross-cultural comparisons of toxicity in different gaming communities, and investigations into the effectiveness of various intervention strategies.

Hate speech, encompassing any communication that demeans or incites hatred against individuals or groups based on their characteristics, poses a significant threat to equality and human dignity. Its consequences range from individual emotional harm—fear, isolation, and worthlessness—to societal-level damage, including increased social divisions, eroded trust, and escalation into violence, as tragically illustrated by historical instances of hate crimes and genocide.

The digital age, with its social media platforms, has exponentially amplified the reach and impact of hate speech, accelerated the spread of harmful ideologies and influenced public opinion. This necessitates a careful balancing of free speech principles with the imperative to curb hate speech that incites violence, a challenge governments and organizations globally grapple with.

Authors Contributions

All the authors have participated sufficiently in the intellectual content, conception, and design of this work or the analysis and interpretation of the data (when applicable), as well as the writing of the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

Conflict of interest

The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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