

Estudo do Discurso de Ódio *Online* em Comunidades de Jogos: Perspetivas de Grupos de Foco com Jogadores Jovens

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Resumo

Este artigo faz parte de uma investigação sobre discurso de ódio nas comunidades de videojogos *online*. Recorrendo a grupos de foco como metodologia qualitativa, foi possível conhecer as experiências de 19 estudantes com idades compreendidas entre os 12 e os 18 anos. A análise dos dados revelou de que formas os participantes foram afetados por discurso de ódio *online*, bem como as suas perceções sobre as motivações e quais as possíveis respostas para este fenómeno. Os resultados demonstram que todos os participantes experienciaram instâncias de discurso de ódio *online*, bem como um certo grau de aceitação de ambientes de videojogos tóxicos. Os testemunhos apontaram para o poder, a busca de diversão e o anonimato como gatilhos e motivações para comportamentos disruptivos. Este estudo serve de base para a produção de múltiplas contra-narrativas que serão implementadas em contexto escolar, com o objetivo de envolver e motivar professores, educadores e jovens alunos a refletir e discutir sobre a problemática do discurso de ódio *online*. Além disso, visa contribuir para uma compreensão mais ampla das perceções, comportamentos e motivações nas comunidades de jogos *online*, enfatizando a necessidade de uma abordagem colaborativa envolvendo jogadores, criadores de jogos e educadores para promover um ambiente mais respeitoso e inclusivo.

Palavras-Chave: Discurso de ódio, Jogos *online*, Comunidades de jogos, Grupo de foco

Exploring Online Hate Speech in Gaming Communities: Insights from Focus Groups with Young Players

Abstract

This paper is part of an ongoing research on hate speech in online video game communities. Through the perspective of younger gamers, and using focus groups as a qualitative methodology, it was possible to gain insight into their experiences with offensive messages and toxic online environments. The analysis of the testimonies of 19 students aged 12 to 18 regarding online hate speech disclosed how they have been affected by it, their perceptions surrounding what motivates it and what possible responses they imagine to this phenomenon. The findings revealed that the participants unanimously experienced online hate speech as well as a degree of acceptance of toxic gaming environments. Young players' narratives pointed to power, seeking joy and anonymity as triggers and motivations for disruptive online behavior. This study serves as the basis for the production of multiple counter-narratives which will be implemented in an educational context in order to engage and motivate teachers, educators and young students to reflect and discuss online hate speech. Furthermore, it aims to contribute to a broader understanding of perceptions, behaviors and motivations in online gaming communities, emphasizing the need for a collaborative approach involving players, game developers and educators to promote a more respectful and inclusive environment.

Keywords: Hate speech, Online gaming, Gaming communities, Focus group

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1. Introduction

The scientific corpus about Online Hate Speech (OHS) in video games has been steadily increasing, dealing with topics that range from the acceptance and normalization of toxicity as an inseparable feature of competitive gaming (Beres et al., 2021) to concerns that video games and video gaming platforms might be a vehicle for digital propaganda to recruit or radicalize individuals (Lakhani, 2021).

Studying online communities and experiences may lead to understanding the digital divide, as well as the link between online communication and offline behavior (Kilvington, 2020). This is specially relevant given the rising levels of online abuse, hatred, and discrimination, which can now spread rapidly and across borders.

The purpose of this paper is to develop further research about this growing phenomenon, specifically surrounding younger age groups, by employing focus groups as a method for data collection and analysis. These discussion groups were structured to identify three key aspects: i) young gamers' experiences with OHS, as well as its prevalence and consequences; ii) perceived motivations behind OHS; iii) opinions on how to counteract OHS.

This study was developed as part of the project "PROPS: Interactive Narratives Propose Pluralistic Speech". PROPS is an initiative which aims to counter OHS by creating interactive digital narratives (video games and interactive films) to be used in an educational context in order to engage and motivate teachers, educators and young students to reflect and discuss OHS. The main goal of these focus groups was to gather and add new insights about the students' experience with OHS, laying the groundwork to develop interactive narratives directly addressing this issue in a way that reflects the student's personal experiences with online gaming.

2. Video Games and Gaming Communities

In recent years, the world of video games has evolved into a dynamic ecosystem that fosters diverse communities, through online interaction, playing an increasingly significant role in contemporary life. With the development of technology and widespread internet access, video games have turned into spaces where virtual communities flourish, becoming one of the most popular forms of entertainment and social interaction.

With the advent of online video games, gaming communities began to naturally gather around shared interests. Video games, once seen as solitary experiences, now serve as platforms for communal engagement. Online multiplayer mode allows gamers from diverse backgrounds to connect, collaborate, compete, and form communities in virtual worlds, transcending geographical boundaries. These virtual communities, also referred to as "guilds," "clans," or "teams," often provide a sense of belonging and social connection, encouraging cooperation and teamwork to achieve common objectives, fostering communication, strategy, and leadership skills.

As for gaming streaming platforms and discussion forums, websites such as Twitch, Steam, Dlive, Odysee, Trovo, Tamtam, among many others, have become popular places for gamers to share their experiences, strategies, and tips (Taylor, 2018). Players can also gather at events and conventions dedicated to video games, where they meet other community members with similar interests. Furthermore, the concept of community within video games extends beyond players to include game developers, streamers, content creators, and modders. Studies by Kowert and Oldmeadow (2013) and Kaye et al. (2017) have demonstrated the significant role gaming communities play in addressing feelings of loneliness and insecurity. These virtual spaces foster connections among like-minded individuals, allowing them to form bonds and find support within a shared interest. For many gamers, the community becomes a lifeline, offering an escape from the challenges of the physical world.

While video game communities offer numerous benefits, they also face diverse challenges. Toxicity and OHS can arise within these communities, negatively affecting the players' experience. Game de-

velopers and community moderators face the challenge of maintaining a healthy and safe environment, leading them to implement measures to control harmful behaviors. The exposure to this negativity may have detrimental effects on vulnerable individuals. As Braddock et al. (2022) highlights, gaming communities have an alarming potential to facilitate the spread of extremist ideologies. Gamers immersed in toxic environments may become more receptive to extremist propaganda, seeking validation and a sense of purpose in extremist beliefs. Therefore, the risk of radicalization within these circles poses significant challenges.

Gaming communities can be seen as having both positive and negative effects on users, reflecting the complex interplay of human interaction, technology, and the multiple challenges that arise from these shared experiences within virtual spaces. In this study, we aim to approach the issue of OHS in gaming and gaming communities through focus groups targeted at young players. We seek to understand their experiences by addressing their exposure to hate speech, how they react to it, the impact it has on them, and the potential solutions they envision to tackle this problem.

3. Understanding the Characteristics and Motivations of Online Hate Speech

The definition of hate speech remains a subject of ongoing debate and lacks universal consensus (MacAvaney et al, 2019; Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2021). The different interpretations are influenced by cultural, linguistic, social, and political factors. Sellars (2016), conducted a survey that outlined several key characteristics useful for identifying hate speech, which include: (i) targeted nature, as hate speech often targets individuals that belong to a specific group; (ii) intent to harm, as there is an intention to cause harm or injury through the use of offensive language and personal attacks; (iii) public discourse, as it frequently occurs in a public setting, such as online gaming platforms; (iv) contextual significance, as the context can potentially incite a violent response, creating a harmful environment for those involved.

Building upon these common traits, various types of hate speech can be identified, often motivated by factors such as gender, sexual identity, nationality, historical events, or religious beliefs.

Soral et al. (2017) underscore the fundamental role of the environment in shaping intergroup aggression and prejudice. Chronic exposure to violence is recognized as a key environmental antecedent of aggression, impacting both cognitive processes and behavioral outcomes. Online communication oftentimes creates an environment where verbal aggression becomes increasingly normalized and accepted: as individuals are consistently exposed to hateful online comments, they progressively become desensitized to them, ultimately leading the contents of these comments to shape their perception of outgroup members, such as minorities, immigrant groups, or political adversaries. This desensitization is not attributed to changes in social norms but rather to a reduction in emotional reactions, even at a basic physiological level. When individuals lack negative emotional reactions to offensive language, they become more susceptible to believing and adopting this type of content as guiding principles. Therefore, when individuals become less sensitive to hate speech, they are more likely to tolerate it or even incorporate it into their own language and behavior. This can create a cycle in which hate speech becomes more prevalent and socially acceptable, making it even more harmful and detrimental to individuals or groups targeted by such speech.

According to Wachs et al. (2022), the motivations underlying hate speech encompass six distinct factors: revenge, power, joy, ideology, group conformity, and the enhancement of morality and status. The most frequently cited motivation for hate speech was the desire for revenge, followed by ideology, adherence to group norms, moral and status elevation, and, lastly, the pursuit of power. The study's findings lead to the conclusion that hate speech serves various purposes, functioning as a defense mechanism or as a response to perceived threats, conveying a sense of authority and approval from peers. These conclusions also enable the identification of shared motivations between engaging in hate speech and engaging in bullying behaviors.

Taking into consideration its inherent attributes, Kilvington (2020) highlighted four significant characteristics of the digital landscape: (i) anonymity, in the online world, individuals often have the option to remain anonymous or use pseudonyms or avatars; (ii) invisibility, unlike offline interactions, where individuals can see each other's facial expressions, body language and reactions, online communication lacks these cues, and as a result, individuals may be less sensitive to the potential harm they cause; (iii) dissociative imagination, online spaces can create a sense of detachment or disassociation between one's online persona and their offline self, blurring the lines between fiction and reality and causing individuals to act or speak in ways that they might consider unacceptable in their offline lives; and (iv) rapid response, online communication platforms often encourage quick responses, sometimes without taking the time to reflect or consider the consequences. These factors, believed to be facilitated by online communication, are thought to foster disinhibition (Suler, 2004), thereby intensifying the issues of hateful behavior and OHS.

A significant relationship has been found between the spread of OHS and the pursuit of social approval (Walther, 2022), suggesting that individuals produce hateful messages to obtain rewards and validation for directing their hostility toward shared targets, simultaneously deepening their existing prejudices. Recent research supports this perspective, including concepts such as moral grandstanding, deriving amusement from political derision, and witnessing peer support for interpersonal violence (Walther, 2022). This understanding sheds light on the underlying motivations behind OHS and underscores the role of social dynamics in its perpetuation.

4. Sample and Methodology

Three focus groups were conducted in two public secondary schools and one public middle school in the municipalities of Olhão and Loulé, in South Portugal. Nineteen students who volunteered for the study were selected. Given the nature of the study, socio-economic aspects were not taken into account. During the session the following data was collected from participants: age, nationality, gender, education level, and time of Internet use for gaming and gaming platforms. All participants were amateur gamers.

This methodology was chosen due to its qualitative nature, as the focus group is an interpretive data collection technique, suitable for handling discourse that can sometimes be subjective, providing researchers with direct access to the language and concepts participants use to structure their experiences and to think and talk about a designated topic (Smithson, 2007). During a focus group, the gap between researchers and participants diminishes, which allows for a broader mutual understanding of a certain topic. This data collection method also benefits from participant interaction, since the opinions can be complemented or challenged by different group members, resulting in either collective consensus or diverse perspectives (Sá et al. 2021; Smithson, 2007; Morgan & Spanish, 1984).

The focus group methodology was divided into four distinct stages: (i) planning, (ii) preparation, (iii) moderation, and (iv) data processing. During the planning phase (i), the research objectives were defined, and a script (Table 1) was developed. Additionally, the location, time, and duration of the focus groups were established. According to studies on this methodology, the choice of location is crucial as it should ensure the comfort of the participants (Morgan & Spanish, 1984; Sá et al. 2021). Taking these aspects, as well as the participants' availability, into consideration, the selected location was the participant's school. Aspects such as privacy, proximity between participants, temperature, and lighting were also taken into consideration to promote a comfortable atmosphere. The duration of the sessions ranged from 50 to 70 minutes, depending on how many individuals were in each group.

The group preparation phase (ii) considered the participants' sociodemographic profile (e.g. similar ages) to facilitate the sharing of opinions and experiences. Participants were informed about the research objectives, the voluntary nature of their participation, and the operational process of the study. Additionally, rules were set to ensure a safe environment during the focus group, such as mutual respect,

confidentiality, equitable speaking, active listening, respect for diversity and non-judgmental attitudes. Participants' doubts were clarified, and informed consent was obtained for their participation in the study. The roles of the moderator and participants were also defined to promote dynamic and equitable interaction during the focus groups.

During the moderation stage (iii), the moderator was assisted by an observer. Both collected verbal and non-verbal information from the participants, paying close attention to verbal responses, facial expressions, and body language, aiming to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perspectives. The moderator provided space for all to express themselves freely, encouraging discussion and debate among the group members. Furthermore, the moderator remained as impartial as possible, adopting a calm and relaxed demeanor, avoiding influencing the participants' responses, and allowing them to feel comfortable in sharing their opinions and experiences openly, with the aim of promoting reflexivity and critical awareness (Smithson, 2007). The observer's fundamental role was to collect notes during the session, which provided valuable non-verbal information concerning postures, facial expressions, and gestures that were not captured in audio recordings.

The script (Table 1) used during the interviews included specific questions for each theme, ensuring that participants shared their experiences and perspectives on OHS in video games and gaming platforms. The topics included experiences with OHS, perceived motivations behind OHS, specific episodes experienced by participants, their reactions to OHS, their perspectives on "haters," and the consequences of OHS in daily life. Additionally, solutions to prevent or combat OHS in these online environments were discussed.

Table 1: Focus group Script

1 Experience with OHS in games and gaming platforms
1.1 In which games/platforms do you experience OHS more frequently?
1.2 In your opinion, what motivates OHS?
1.3 Can you share a specific episode that you have experienced with OHS (as the perpetrator, victim, or bystander)?
1.4 How do you usually react when you see or hear incidents of OHS?
2 Perspective on OHS
2.1 How do you see "haters"?
2.2 When and where is OHS most likely to occur?
2.3 In your perspective, what are the consequences of OHS in everyday life?
3 Solutions to tackle OHS
3.1 How do you think OHS can be prevented or tackled?"

The data collected from the focus groups underwent a process of analysis and data processing (iv). The recorded audio and observer notes were transcribed *verbatim*, using the *Descript* tool, ensuring the accuracy of participants' responses and non-verbal cues. The transcripts were then imported into the

qualitative data analysis software *Atlas.ti* for systematic coding and thematic analysis. Through iterative readings, the data was open coded to identify topics and subtopics related to participants' experiences, perspectives, and reactions regarding OHS in gaming environments.

5. Results and discussion

Nineteen individuals participated in the focus groups, of which eleven were female and eight were male. The age distribution of the participants spanned from 12 to 18 years old. Regarding nationality, most participants were Portuguese. However, our study also included three other nationalities: Brazilian, Indian, and Ukrainian. In terms of educational level, the sample was primarily students attending either middle school or high school - all public schools.

When it comes to internet use in gaming and gaming platforms, some participants reported using the internet less than one hour for gaming purposes, while a substantial segment engaged in online gaming activities for 1-2 hours daily. Additionally, another group spent 2-3 hours of their day on online gaming experiences, while another dedicated more than three hours a day to these activities. The characteristics of the participants are provided in Table 2.

Table 2: characteristics of the participants.

Age range	12-18 years old	
Nationalities	Portuguese Brazilian Indian Ukrainian	
Gender	female	11
	male	8
Education level	Middle school High school	
Internet use for gaming and game platforms	<1h	2
	1-2h	7
	2-3h	6
	>3h	4

The results from the focus groups are presented in three sections which correspond to the three main themes of the script. An illustrative quotation for each topic is presented in Tables 3, 4 and 5.

Table 3: Illustrative quotations on experiences with OHS in video games and gaming platforms.

1 EXPERIENCE
1.1 Negative experience
“I started playing with my microphone turned off, I felt offended. I didn't report or respond to the insults. I didn't want to fuel the discussion or create an uncomfortable atmosphere, nor did I want to draw attention to myself. When the environment becomes like this, whether it's directed at me or another player, I switch off. I don't believe it has anything to do with me personally, as that person doesn't know me, but these unnecessary prejudices persist in games and reflect what happens in real life.”
1.2 Perceived prejudice
“Recently, I had an unpleasant experience where I became a victim of OHS in Free Fire. Another player started insulting me.”
1.3 Online harassment
“Sometimes, they even threaten to find out where I live. It makes me think about it for a moment, but I consider it unlikely. I have witnessed a player making serious threats to another player, saying they would meet in real life to harm them.”
1.4 Cyberbullying
“The insults were related to my voice and sexuality - they mentioned that I had a girlish voice and therefore I must be gay.”
2 MOTIVES
2.1 Anonymity
“People feel protected by the screen, which encourages them to express aggressive and intolerant behaviors.”
2.2 Gender inequality
“I'm often discriminated against in more violent games because I'm a woman. I don't believe I play worse than guys, but they make me believe so. There is still a lot of inequality in games. One time, in a game, I started arguing back after being insulted, and they told me that if I didn't feel comfortable being insulted, then I should stop playing or switch to another type of game. This happened in LoL (League of Legends). This only occurs when I play with strangers because it's different when I play with friends. The insults are more typical and not related to being a woman.”
2.3 Racism
“Unfortunately, I have witnessed cases of racism in game chats, with players making discriminatory comments based on skin color, even towards avatars.”
2.4 Nationality
“I have been insulted based on my nationality.”
2.5 Power
“Sometimes, people want to feel powerful, and they think that insulting others makes them appear strong. It's a matter of dominance in the game.”

2.6 Sexuality

“The insults usually revolve around issues of sexuality and gender.”

2.7 Game skills

“I have been insulted many times for my performance in the game.”

2.8 Frustration

“I also use offensive language when I get hit or when my strategy fails. Swearing is not always meant to offend. Sometimes it's just a way to vent frustration when things don't go as planned.”

2.9 Fun

“Some players may be trying to provoke reactions or simply having fun. There are groups that engage in this behavior for amusement.”

3 REACTION

3.1 Normalization

“During a match, a player started uttering racist insults against another. This happens quite often. The comments often revolve around players' avatars. Even among friends, racist insults are common. Sometimes they seem to have no impact and are treated as something ordinary and normal. I know people who say, 'he/she doesn't mind if I treat them that way.’”

3.2 Insecurity/Fear

“We should report, but sometimes people are afraid that it might spill over into real life. My friend quit playing because the threats became too much, and they mentioned they would find him outside of the game. I don't know where these things come from, but they had an issue with him because he killed one of them in a match and ruined their game.”

3.3 Passive behavior

“Ignoring is the best approach. But there should be ways to control and prevent such incidents, for example, using filters that automatically remove players who say certain things.”

3.4 Responsive behavior

“I react in the same manner. I also use offensive language on days when the game isn't going well or when I'm stressed about something.”

Participants in the study shared their experiences with OHS regarding video games and gaming platforms. Their experiences addressed the motives and reactions to OHS. The participants unanimously confirmed encountering or witnessing OHS during their gaming sessions, often in popular video games, such as Grand Theft Auto (GTA), Free Fire, Roblox, Fortnite, and League of Legends (LoL), as well as on the gaming social platform Discord.

In the participants' experience, OHS encompasses a wide spectrum of motives. Anonymity emerged as a prominent factor, referring to the screen as a protective shield, enabling individuals to express aggressive and intolerant behaviors that they might not exhibit in face-to-face interactions. Discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, race and nationality, also fueled OHS. Participants recounted instances of hateful comments targeting individuals' based on their gaming skills, sometimes originating from frustrations stemming from in-game defeats or failed strategies. Some participants noted that OHS could also be motivated by individuals attempting to provoke reactions, wanting to feel a sense of power or seeking fun.

Participants' experiences with OHS varied widely, with some portraying dual roles as both victims and aggressors. When faced with OHS, many adopted the strategy of ignoring or muting aggressors,

while others responded in kind with aggression or insults. The insults were often related to players' avatars, from which individuals infer their race, gender or nationality. Gender-based insults were particularly prominent, especially when playing with strangers. However, it is important to note that at this stage, none of the participants associated pleasure or enjoyment with OHS situations. On the contrary, even those who occasionally engaged in aggressive responses perceived OHS as a negative aspect of the gaming experience.

Participants' reactions to OHS broadly fell into four categories: normalization, insecurity/fear, passive behavior, or responsive behavior. Some participants reported that they normalized OHS, considering it an ordinary occurrence in gaming. Others expressed insecurity, fearing that the aggression might spill over into their physical life. A particularly concerning testimony focused on a friend who quit gaming due to threats extending beyond the game's confines, illustrating the physical-world impact of OHS. Passive behavior, such as ignoring or muting, was a common strategy for dealing with OHS. Meanwhile, some participants adopted a responsive behavior, reciprocating with offensive language, particularly when faced with frustration or stress.

The toxic atmosphere prevalent within the gaming community played a pivotal role in perpetuating OHS. The hostile environment contributed to an escalation in the frequency and intensity of offensive verbal interactions among its members. Importantly, participants recognized that the broader gaming community might not be actively engaged in addressing these issues, leaving individual players to grapple with these challenges independently.

Furthermore, some participants talked about instances of gaming environments being infiltrated by hate groups that coordinated attacks against specific individuals. These organized efforts amplified the harm caused by OHS and personal attacks.

Participants' testimonials mirror Sellars' (2016) criteria for identifying hate speech, underscoring the pervasiveness of OHS in various games and platforms.

Table 4: Illustrative quotations on perspectives about OHS in games and gaming platforms.

1 PERSPECTIVES
1.1 Collective action
“They only bring bad things to the communities and games, they should all be banned once and for all, we all should contribute to that.”
1.2 Minimizing concerns
“We are just in a game, and the words shouldn't be taken so seriously.”
1.3 Dislike
“[Toxic gaming environments] create a bad gaming experience.”
2 OCCURRENCES
2.1 In competitive games
“It happens more in competitive games.”
2.2 In popular game/Larger communities
“It occurs more frequently in popular games where there are many players gathered in large communities.”
2.3 Everywhere
“I think it's present all over the internet.”

2.4 Due to unclear rules/lack of moderation

“OHS can occur in game forums, voice chats, and even on social media related to games. When there is a lack of proper moderation and clear rules in games, OHS is more likely to happen.”

2.5 Due to gaming skills

“(…) but it's common to offend new players who are not familiar with the game and judge them for having a low level.”

3 CONSEQUENCES

3.1 Social exclusion

“It can have offline effects to those who are offended. They may feel upset, vulnerable, and without friends.”

3.2 Lack of self-esteem

“It has consequences on people's self-esteem, in people's lives that may not know how to deal with it and they even stop playing a game because of this problem. It can also create insecurities about appearance or insert ideas in other people's minds.”

3.3 Group polarization

“It can have consequences if people don't have a good support network of friends to talk about these things. It's essential not to bring these issues into real life. But it also seems inevitable. It's a way to spread ideas, like anti-Ukrainian sentiments, there are anti-Ukrainian communities.”

3.4 Extremism

“It can also be gangs trying to push a certain idea and targeting specific groups. Often, this hatred is related to nationalities, for example, with the ongoing war in Ukraine. There are also groups that constantly talk about Hitler and spread it as some kind of joke in games.”

3.5 Community Toxicity

“People might avoid playing a certain game because they already know it has aggressive communities.”

3.6 Player's skill improvement

“It may even help improve a player's skills.”

When exploring the perspectives of participants regarding OHS within the gaming context, it becomes evident that its impact extends beyond the virtual world, affecting both online and offline aspects of gamers' lives. Participants shared their insights on various dimensions of OHS, including its origins, manifestations, and consequences.

Collective action against OHS emerged as a prevalent perspective, with some gamers advocating for the outright banning of offenders from gaming communities and platforms. They expressed a collective responsibility to eliminate the negative influences brought by hate speech, emphasizing the need for a united cooperation.

Conversely, there were voices that downplayed concerns associated with OHS, arguing that online interactions should not be taken too seriously, as it all unfolds within the context of a game. These individuals adopted a minimization approach, attempting to mitigate the impact of OHS on the gaming experience.

The dislike for OHS was a common sentiment among participants, as they recognized its capacity to create a hostile gaming environment. OHS was particularly associated with competitive gaming

environments, where heightened tensions often provided fertile ground for hate speech to flourish. Participants also noted its prevalence across the broader internet landscape, signifying that OHS is not confined to gaming platforms alone.

The occurrence of OHS was linked to factors such as unclear rules and a lack of effective moderation within gaming communities. It thrived in spaces where there was an absence of proper regulation, allowing offenders to act with impunity. Social interactions in popular games, characterized by large player communities, were identified as hotspots for OHS. Gamers with advanced skills sometimes resorted to offensive behavior towards newcomers, further exacerbating the issue.

Participants emphasized that the consequences of OHS extended beyond the virtual world. Social exclusion and damage to self-esteem were identified as outcomes that impacted individuals in their offline lives. Some individuals chose to disengage from gaming altogether due to the emotional toll inflicted by OHS. Others reported developing insecurities or harboring negative ideas as a result of hate speech.

Group polarization emerged as a concern, as OHS could lead to the radicalization of individuals when they lacked a supportive network of friends to counteract its influence. Participants stressed the importance of not allowing these issues to spill into daily life, yet acknowledged that it often proved challenging to prevent. Hate speech sometimes served as a vehicle for propagating extremist ideologies, with specific reference to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and instances where hate groups targeted individuals based on their nationality.

Moreover, OHS contributed to the toxicity of gaming communities, deterring players from certain games known for harboring aggressive communities. On a somewhat surprising note, some participants suggested that exposure to OHS might inadvertently lead to player’s skill improvement, potentially as a coping mechanism.

Table 5: Illustrative quotations on solutions for OHS in games and gaming platforms.

1 SOLUTIONS	
1.1 Reporting	
<p>“It’s necessary to encourage players to report such incidents, that’s why games have that option, and then there must be serious consequences for the haters, and those who report should feel protected. Some say it’s possible to trace the IP of those who report. Everything should be made clear so that there is no fear of reporting. If good people leave the gaming communities because of OHS, only the bad ones will remain, and the community will become terrible. That’s what already happens in many games like LoL, CS (Counter Strike).”</p>	
1.2 Banning	
<p>“More control, banning those who offend,”</p>	
1.3 Moderation	
<p>“ Investing in community moderators who know how to handle OHS.”</p>	
1.4 Positive role models	
<p>“(…) prevention through education, campaigns, and positive role models, like showing that being a troll is not cool.”</p>	
1.5 Inclusivity	
<p>Creating more inclusive games with characters that everyone can identify with.</p>	

1.6 Education

“I believe education is crucial in combating hate speech. There should be initiatives in schools and communities that talk about respect.”

1.7 Stricter policies

“Gaming companies should invest in serious and strict policies against hate speech. Aggressive players should be permanently banned, not just temporarily.”

Participants in the study were proactive in suggesting solutions to combat the pervasive issue of OHS within gaming communities. Their recommendations centered around seven key approaches: reporting, banning, moderation, positive role models, inclusivity, education, and stricter policies.

Reporting emerged as a fundamental step in tackling OHS. Participants stressed the need to encourage players to promptly report incidents of hate speech. To ensure the effectiveness of reporting mechanisms, participants advocated for implementing serious measures for offenders. Additionally, there was a call for protective rules to be extended to those who report incidents, diminishing concerns about retaliation or harassment. Clear transparency in the reporting process was deemed crucial to eliminate any fear associated with reporting. Participants recognized that the departure of well-intentioned gamers due to OHS could lead to a deterioration of gaming communities, leaving only disruptive individuals behind, a situation lamentably observed in several gaming communities.

The importance of positive role models and prevention through education was emphasized. Participants suggested campaigns and initiatives aimed at discouraging trolling and promoting respectful behavior in gaming. These campaigns could involve influential figures, such as YouTubers and gamers, to convey the message that engaging in hate speech is not acceptable or ‘cool.’ Such role models could play a pivotal role in shaping the attitudes and behaviors within the gaming community, particularly among younger players.

Banning was viewed as an effective measure to counter OHS. Participants advocated for stricter control and more frequent banning of individuals who engage in offensive behavior. The implementation of stringent consequences, including permanent bans, was proposed as a deterrent against hate speech.

The role of moderation was recognized as essential in creating more inclusive gaming environments. Participants recommended investing in community moderators who possess the skills to effectively address OHS. Additionally, there was a suggestion to create games with characters that resonate with a diverse player base, fostering a sense of inclusivity and reducing potential triggers for hate speech.

Education emerged as a crucial tool in combating hate speech. Participants proposed the introduction of initiatives in schools and communities that emphasize respect and positive online behavior. These programs could empower individuals to recognize and address hate speech, thereby contributing to a more harmonious gaming environment.

Lastly, participants called for gaming companies to take a proactive stance against OHS by implementing stricter policies. They emphasized the importance of gaming companies investing in robust measures to combat hate speech, including the permanent banning of aggressive players. Participants acknowledged that completely eradicating OHS might be challenging, but they believed that a concerted effort to reduce it and impose stricter consequences on offenders would significantly improve the gaming experience for all.

6. Final considerations

As it was previously outlined, the student’s perspectives and the insights gathered from this study aimed to set the structure for the production of multiple interactive narratives. These narratives are to be

used in the classroom to foster debates around the issue of OHS. The focus groups aimed at identifying three main aspects: i) young gamers' experiences with OHS, as well as its prevalence and consequences; ii) perceived motivations behind OHS; iii) opinions on how to counteract OHS.

Firstly, it was possible to conclude that the participants unanimously experienced instances of OHS. Moreover, the data collected from the focus groups allowed us to find a paradoxical acceptance of toxic gaming environments, even among those who claim to dislike such interactions. This acceptance of OHS is in agreement with previous studies that highlight players' desensitization to toxic behavior, potentially due to its pervasive nature.

The online gaming landscape is shaped by various complex dynamics. While the acceptance of toxic behavior raises concerns, in order to develop effective strategies to mitigate OHS it is essential to understand its underlying motivations. Some of the findings regarding motives for OHS are in alignment with previous research, namely the identification of the feeling of power or seeking joy as possible triggers, and also the identification of anonymity as a key component for the expression of OHS.

In this study it was also possible to observe connections between online communication and offline behaviors. Participants pointed to reactions to the toxic gaming environment as additional influences, recognizing that OHS extends beyond gaming, impacting individuals in their everyday lives and sometimes revealing underlying biases during moments of tension or frustration. However, it's worth noting that toxic comments typically don't escalate into physical aggression. Despite this, recognizing that OHS can permeate physical-life interactions underscores the importance of addressing it not only within gaming communities but also in a broader social context. Ultimately, achieving a more respectful and inclusive online gaming environment needs a multifaceted approach involving players, game developers, and educators alike.

Finally, the majority of participants expressed a belief that completely eradicating OHS may be an unattainable goal, suggesting a degree of conformity regarding its persistence. However, they were also proactive in proposing solutions to address this issue. One of the strategies suggested by the participants concerns education as a key approach to address hate speech effectively. School programs that promote respect and encourage positive online conducts were referred to as initiatives that could help individuals become more aware of hate speech, ultimately fostering healthier gaming environments. This notion validates this studies' aforementioned goal of using the collected data as a basis for creating interactive narratives that directly tackle OHS, drawing from students' real-life experiences in online gaming.

Regarding the study's limitations, given the target audience of our current study and research project, it is important to acknowledge the limited generalizability of our results to other online groups and contexts. Our study provides insights into the experiences of a specific social group. Continuous and extensive research is essential to identify the most effective strategies of addressing hate speech and to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of OHS in various online communities.

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