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ISTANBUL UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS AND PUBLICITY

Ph.D. DISSERTATION

**HATE SPEECH AND DISCRIMINATORY
LANGUAGE IN MULTIPLAYER ONLINE
BATTLE ARENA GAMES: A MIXED METHODS
STUDY ON PLAYER EXPERIENCES**

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ISTANBUL – 2025

ABSTRACT
HATE SPEECH AND DISCRIMINATORY LANGUAGE IN MULTIPLAYER
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This study aims to analyze the sociological structure and dynamics of hate speech and discriminatory language in digital gaming environments. It examines players' experiences of exposure to hate speech, their perceptions, coping strategies, and the emotional and psychological effects across different demographic groups. Due to its large player base and competitive nature, the multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) was selected as the research sample. Using players' gaming experiences as a foundation, the study employs a qualitative mixed-method research design, with data collected through digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Maxqda software. The findings reveal that players targeted based on ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, age, and political or religious identities are subjected to systematic exclusion. Additionally, the study demonstrates that hate speech is intertwined with economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital dynamics and is amplified by the online disinhibition effect. While players adopt coping mechanisms such as limiting communication, remaining silent, using humor, concealing their identity, reporting, retaliation, and engaging in counter-speech, these approaches were found insufficient in preventing hate speech. Furthermore, the findings indicate that players gradually become desensitized to hate speech, leading to its normalization within gaming culture. Ultimately, the study concludes that digital games are not merely entertainment platforms but also interactive spaces where social conflicts are digitally reflected.

Keywords: Digital Game, Hate Speech, Capital, Online Disinhibition, Coping Mechanism, Desensitization, Normalization

ÖZ

ÇOK OYUNCULU ÇEVİRİMİÇİ SAVAŞ ARENASI OYUNLARINDA NEFRET SÖYLEMİ VE AYRIMCI DİL: OYUNCU DENEYİMLERİ ÜZERİNE KARMA YÖNTEM ÇALIŞMASI EMRE MERİÇ

Bu çalışma, dijital oyun ortamlarında ortaya çıkan nefret söylemi ve ayrımcı dilin sosyolojik yapısını ve dinamiklerini analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmada, farklı demografik gruplardan oyuncuların nefret söylemine maruz kalma deneyimleri, algıları, başa çıkma stratejileri ve bu söylemin duygusal ve psikolojik etkileri incelenmiştir. Geniş oyuncu kitlesi ve rekabetçi dinamikleri nedeniyle çok oyunculu çevrimiçi savaş arenası (MOBA) türündeki Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB), araştırma örnekleme olarak seçilmiştir. Oyuncuların oyun oynama deneyimlerinden yola çıkarak dijital oyunlardaki nefret söylemi ve ayrımcı dilin ele alındığı bu çalışmada, nitel karma yöntem araştırma deseni kullanılmıştır. Veriler, dijital etnografi ve yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yoluyla toplanmış ve analiz sürecinde Maxqda programından yararlanılmıştır. Bulgular, etnik köken, toplumsal cinsiyet, cinsel yönelim, engellilik, yaş, siyasi ve dini kimlikler temelinde hedef alınan oyuncuların sistematik bir dışlanmaya maruz kaldığını ortaya koymaktadır. Araştırma, nefret söyleminin ekonomik, kültürel, sosyal ve sembolik sermaye dinamikleriyle iç içe geçtiğini ve çevrimiçi çözülme etkisiyle daha da güçlendiğini göstermektedir. Oyuncuların nefret söylemiyle başa çıkmak için iletişimi kısıtlama, sessizlik, mizah, kimlik gizleme, raporlama, misilleme ve karşı-söylem gibi stratejiler geliştirdiği ancak bunların nefret söylemini önlemede yetersiz kaldığı saptanmıştır. Ayrıca, oyuncuların zamanla nefret söylemine karşı duyarsızlaştığı ve bu söylemin dijital oyun kültürü içinde normalleştiği belirlenmiştir. Dijital oyunların yalnızca bir eğlence aracı olmadığı, aynı zamanda toplumsal çatışmaların dijital yansımalarının görüldüğü etkileşimli alanlar olduğu ortaya konmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dijital Oyun, Nefret Söylemi, Sermaye, Çevrimiçi Çözülme, Baş Etme Mekanizmaları, Duyarsızlaşma, Normalleşme

PREFACE

This dissertation is the product of a demanding and intensive process, reflecting my passion for knowledge and discovery. Throughout this journey, I owe gratitude to many precious individuals who have encouraged, guided and supported me. From the first day of my academic journey at Istanbul University, I have been fortunate to receive the inspiration and guidance of my esteemed advisor, Assoc. Prof. Nilnur Tandaçgüneş Kahraman, whose knowledge and mentorship have significantly contributed to my academic growth. I also extend my sincere gratitude to Prof. Dr. Erkan Saka and Assoc. Prof. Özlem Kalan, who shared their invaluable expertise and experiences, making this process even more meaningful for me. I want to thank Assoc. Prof. Aysun Eyrek Keskin and Prof. Dr. Ayşe Melahat Kalay for being part of my dissertation defense committee and their invaluable insights that contributed to my work. The efforts of all my professors who have contributed to my academic journey are deeply appreciated. I am also grateful to the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Türkiye (TÜBİTAK) for providing financial support, which has significantly facilitated the completion of this study. The support I received under the 2211-E National PhD Scholarship Program was crucial in bringing this research to life. Lastly, I extend my heartfelt thanks to my family, who have always believed in me and supported me with patience and understanding, as well as to Zindan Çakıcı, Rahmi Uysal, and Yüksel Enes Altınok, who have been a source of strength throughout this process.

EMRE MERİÇ
ISTANBUL, 2025

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	ii
ÖZ.....	iii
PREFACE.....	iv
LIST OF TABLES	xi
LIST OF FIGURES	xii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xiii
INTRODUCTION.....	1

CHAPTER I

DIGITAL GAMES UNVEILED: THEORIES, GENRES, INDUSTRY, AND PLAYER DYNAMICS

1.1. Game and Play	5
1.2. Pierre Bourdieu: Capital, Habitus, and Digital Game Spaces.....	9
1.3. Goffman’s “The Presentation of Self” and Digital games	13
1.4. Cultivation Theory In The Age of Digital Games	19
1.5. Silence and Voice: Spiral of Silence in Digital Games.....	20
1.6. The Concept of Digital Game	22
1.6.1. The History of Digital Game	23
1.6.2. Digital Game Genres.....	25
1.6.3. Digital Game Industry.....	30

1.6.3.1 Digital Game Industry in Turkey	33
1.6.4. The Effects of Playing Digital Games	35
1.6.4.1. Positive Effects of Playing Digital Games.....	35
1.6.4.2. Negative Effects of Playing Digital Games	37
1.7. Theoretical Roots of Game Studies: Ludology and Narratology.....	38

CHAPTER II

EXPLORING HATE SPEECH: DEFINITIONS, ONLINE PRESENCE, AND IMPACT ON DIGITAL GAMES

2.1. The Concept of Discourse.....	41
2.2. The Definition of Hate Speech.....	43
2.2.1 Legal Attempts to define hate speech	43
2.2.2. Academic Attempts to Define Hate Speech.....	45
2.2.3. Attempts by Online Platforms to Define Hate Speech	48
2.3. Types of Hate Speech.....	50
2.3.1. Political Hate Speech	52
2.3.2. Racist Hate Speech.....	53
2.3.3. Gendered Hate Speech	57
2.3.4. Religious Hate Speech	59
2.3.5. Anti-LGBTQ+ Hate Speech.....	61
2.3.6. Disability or Severe Disease Hate Speech	63

2.4. Hate Speech Online	64
2.4.1. The Intensity of Online Hate Speech	66
2.4.1.1. Dehumanization and Demonization	67
2.4.1.2. Violence and Incitement	69
2.4.1.3. Early Warning	69
2.5. Freedom of Expression versus Hate Speech: The Ongoing Debate	70
2.5.1. Freedom of Expression	70
2.5.1.1. Arguments for Hate Speech Protection.....	72
2.5.1.2. Arguments against Hate Speech Protection	74
2.6. Hate Crime	75
2.7. Hate Speech and Discriminatory Language in Digital Games.....	78
2.7.1. Hate Speech in the Production Process.....	79
2.7.2. Hate Speech in Online Gameplay	86
2.7.3. Hate Speech in Online Game Communities	89

CHAPTER III
EXAMINATION OF HATE SPEECH AND DISCRIMINATORY
LANGUAGE IN DIGITAL GAMES

3.1. The Problem of Research	92
3.2. Purpose and Importance of the Research	92
3.3. Research Questions	93
3.4. Research Methodology.....	94
3.4.1. Phase One: Digital Ethnography	95
3.4.1.1. Population and Sample.....	97
3.4.1.2. Data Collection.....	99
3.4.1.3. Data Analysis	101
3.4.1.4. Limitations	105
3.4.2. Phase Two: Semi-structured Interviews	105
3.4.2.1. Participants and Sampling Method	106
3.4.2.2. Procedure.....	109
3.4.2.3. Data Analysis	110
3.4.2.4. Limitations	112
3.5. Findings.....	113
3.5.1. Findings of Digital Ethnography.....	113
3.5.1.1. The Types of Hate Speech in MLBB	113

3.5.1.2. The Relationship Between Hate Speech and Ranks in MLBB...	114
3.5.1.3. The Targets of Hate Speech in MLBB.....	116
3.5.1.4. Types of Playing and Hate Speech.....	119
3.5.1.5. Forms of Hate Speech in MLBB.....	119
3.5.1.6. The Intensity of Hate Speech in MLBB.....	120
3.5.1.7. The Reactions to Hate Speech in MLBB	122
3.5.1.8. Reactions to Different Identities in MLBB.....	123
3.5.2. Findings of Semi Structured Interviews.....	125
3.5.2.1. MOBA Gaming Habits	125
3.5.2.2. Hate Speech in Daily Life	134
3.5.2.3. Hate Speech in MLBB	138
3.5.2.3.1 Causes of Hate Speech in MLBB.....	148
3.5.2.3.1.1. Economic Capital and Hate Speech	148
3.5.2.3.1.2. Cultural Capital and Hate Speech	153
3.5.2.3.1.3. Social Capital and Hate Speech	158
3.5.2.3.1.4. Symbolic Capital and Hate Speech.....	161
3.5.2.3.1.5. Real-World Influences	175
3.5.2.3.1.6. Online Disinhibition Effect.....	178
3.5.2.3.2. The Effects of Hate Speech on Players	186

3.5.2.3.2.1. Emotional Effects.....	186
3.5.2.3.2.2. Psychological Effects.....	189
3.5.2.3.3. Coping Mechanisms for Hate Speech in MLBB.....	192
3.6. Discussion of Findings.....	201
3.6.1. The Digital Divide: Identity, Exclusion, and Hate in MLBB	201
3.6.2. Unveiling the Hidden Structures of Power and Exclusion in MLBB	205
3.6.3. Emotional and Psychological Challenges in MLBB.....	209
3.6.4. Between Silence and Resistance: Coping Strategies in MLBB	211
CONCLUSION.....	213
BIBLIOGRAPHY/REFERENCES	219
APPENDICES	284
CURRICULUM VITAE.....	290

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1. Participant Demographics	109
Table 3.2. The Types Of Hate Speech.....	113
Table 3.3. The Relationship Between Hate Speech And Ranks.....	114
Table 3.4. The Targets Of Hate Speech	116
Table 3.5. The Relationship Between Types Of Playing And Hate Speech	119
Table 3.6. The Forms Of Hate Speech	119
Table 3.7. The Intensity Of Hate Speech	120
Table 3.8. The Reactions To Identities.....	122
Table 3.9. The Reactions To Identities.....	123

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1. Regional Revenues of Global Game Market	31
Figure 1.2. Gaming Revenue by Device	31
Figure 1.3. Rate of Digital Game Players Worldwide	32
Figure 2.1. The Intensity of Online Hate Speech.....	67
Figure 3.1. Interest to MOBA Games	125
Figure 3.2. Motivations for MOBA Games	126
Figure 3.3. Game Playing Times.....	128
Figure 3.4. Daily Gaming Time	129
Figure 3.5. Daily Gaming Locations.....	130
Figure 3.6. Players Favorite Digital Games	131
Figure 3.7. Gaming Devices.....	132
Figure 3.8. Social Platforms.....	133
Figure 3.9. Direct Experience with Hate Speech	135
Figure 3.10. Targets of Hate Speech in Daily Life	136
Figure 3.11. Targets of Hate Speech in MLBB.....	138
Figure 3.12. Causes of Hate Speech.....	147
Figure 3.13. Emotional Effects Of Hate Speech	186
Figure 3.14. Psychological Effects of Hate Speech	189
Figure 3.15. Coping Mechanism for Hate Speech	192

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

MOBA	: Multiplayer Online Battle Arena Games
MLBB	: Mobile Legends: Bang Bang
RPGs	: Role Playing-Games
MMOGs	: Massively Multiplayer Online Games
MMORPGs	: Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games
ESA	: The Entertainment Software Association
CoE	: The Council of Europe
ECRI	: The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance

INTRODUCTION

Digital games have evolved beyond mere entertainment and have transformed into interactive platforms that connect individuals worldwide while shaping cultural and social dynamics. Competing with traditional media such as television and the cinema and even surpassing them in certain aspects, games have become an integral part of modern society. Today, 2.68 billion people actively play games globally, which is projected to reach 3.2 billion by 2029 (Clement, 2025). This remarkable growth continues to expand the gaming industry and accelerates the development of virtual communities and communication platforms that foster new social connections among players. However, this expanding digital universe also brings significant challenges. In particular, the increasing use of discriminatory language and hate speech in online games hinders healthy interactions within gaming communities and negatively impacts the overall gaming experience. Compared to social media platforms, in-game communication mechanisms are subject to less regulation, making it easier for hate speech to spread through anonymous identities. This issue has become a major concern for the sustainability of the gaming industry (Costa et al., 2023).

This dissertation examined the sociological structure and dynamics of hate speech and discriminatory language manifesting in digital gaming environments. The study explores the experiences of players from diverse demographic backgrounds exposed to such discourse, their perceptual processes, the coping strategies they develop, and the emotional and psychological impacts of hate speech on players. By analyzing how in-game interactions are shaped within the context of socio-cultural norms, identity construction, and power relations, this research aims to uncover the mechanisms that sustain discrimination and hate speech in digital gaming ecosystems. In this context, multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) games characterized by high interaction and competition were selected as the research universe to examine online gaming culture and hate speech dynamics in Turkey. The sample consists of the game Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB), which provides a suitable platform for observing hate speech due to its large player base, mobile accessibility, and competitive nature. The study employs a qualitative mixed-methods design based on digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews. The sociological structure and

dynamics of hate speech and discriminatory language are analyzed by observing in-game interactions and evaluating player experiences via personal narratives.

The first chapter presented a multi-layered theoretical framework to gain an in-depth understanding of the complex social structure and dynamics of hate speech and discriminatory language produced in digital gaming environments. The concepts of games and play are examined within historical and socio-cultural contexts, incorporating various scholars' definitions of games. The chapter underscores that games are not merely entertainment tools but are also shaped by social structures and power relations. Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of capital and habitus are employed to explain how players establish status within gaming environments and how this process relates to hate speech. Erving Goffman's theory of self-presentation is used to analyze the relationship between players' in-game and out-of-game identity management and hate speech. From the perspective of George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory, the study evaluates how games shape individuals' social perceptions, while Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence theory is applied to discuss why players develop silence strategies in response to hate speech. The historical development of the digital game industry, global market dynamics, and the transformation of the gaming sector in Turkey are examined to reveal how hate speech becomes legitimized and normalized within the gaming ecosystem. The study's sample is determined based on academic classifications of digital game genres. Discussions on the individual and social impacts of games cover not only their educational and socialization functions but also potential negative consequences such as addiction, aggression, and toxic community dynamics. Thus, the theoretical and industrial analyses presented in this chapter establish a conceptual foundation for studying in-game hate speech, laying the groundwork for the qualitative analyses conducted in the following chapters.

The second chapter demonstrated a multi-layered theoretical and conceptual framework to understand the structural, disseminative, and in-depth dimensions of hate speech manifesting in digital gaming environments. Firstly, the concept of discourse is examined through key approaches such as Michel Foucault's discourse theory and Teun A. van Dijk's critical discourse analysis, analyzing the role of discourse within socio-cultural and political contexts. Following this, the legal, academic, and online platform-based definitions and categorizations of hate speech are

explored. Hate speech is classified into various typologies, including political, racial, gender-based, anti-LGBTQ+, religious, and disability-related hate speech. The fundamental characteristics of online hate speech, such as anonymity, invisibility, community formation, and rapid interaction, are evaluated in the context of its dissemination mechanisms and effects within digital ecosystems. The study investigates three key areas of hate speech in digital games: Discriminatory representations in the game production process, The spread of hate speech during online gameplay, and the proliferation of hate speech within gaming communities. These aspects are thoroughly analyzed based on existing literature, providing a theoretical foundation for the fieldwork of this study. By doing so, this chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of the multi-dimensional dynamics of hate speech in digital gaming environments.

In the third chapter, the research problem, objectives, significance, research questions, and methodology were explained in detail. The sociological structure and dynamics of hate speech and discriminatory language in Mobile Legends: Bang Bang were analyzed concerning players from diverse demographic backgrounds, focusing on their experiences of exposure to hate speech, coping strategies, and the emotional and psychological effects of such discourse. Using a digital ethnography approach, the study examines the types of hate speech occurring in the game, its relationship with different rank levels, its frequency in solo vs. group games, as well as the formal characteristics and depth of hate speech. Additionally, the study explores player responses to hate speech and the discriminatory discourse targeting different identity groups. The findings reveal that racial hate speech was the most frequently observed form, with Kurdish and Arab identities being the primary targets. Hate speech was most prevalent in in-game chat environments and usernames, with a positive correlation between rank progression and its frequency. Furthermore, solo games exhibited higher levels of hate speech, primarily consisting of insulting and degrading negative character expressions. Hate speech targeting avatars representing diverse identities was widespread, with most players exhibiting passivity in response.

Findings from semi-structured interviews further indicated that hate speech in gaming environments is linked to players' economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Additionally, the online disinhibition effect emboldens players to engage in

hate speech, while national and international political agendas influence its spread within games. Moreover, Turkey's societal dynamics play a significant role in the perpetuation and normalization of hate speech in gaming communities. In terms of coping strategies, most players either muted in-game chat or responded with further hate speech, suggesting a growing desensitization among players and the normalization of hate speech within gaming environments.

In the conclusion section, the findings were interpreted with the theoretical framework, analyzing how hate speech is structured, disseminated, and legitimized within digital gaming environments. The operational mechanisms of hate speech in games were evaluated, along with an in-depth examination of the dynamics of discriminatory discourse experienced by different demographic groups. Furthermore, strategies for combating hate speech in the digital gaming ecosystem were discussed at individual, societal, and platform levels. The study also presents policy recommendations and practical solutions for game developers, policymakers, and gaming communities to address and mitigate the impact of hate speech in online gaming spaces.

CHAPTER I

DIGITAL GAMES UNVEILED: THEORIES, GENRES, INDUSTRY, AND PLAYER DYNAMICS

1.1. Game and Play

The concept of game, as an intrinsic part of human nature and culture, has been deeply ingrained in human and animal behavior since the dawn of existence. Play is a fundamental activity through which individuals, both humans and animals, explore their bodies, minds, environment, and social relationships. The game predates the formation of culture and has been a consistent element in the historical progression of life on Earth (Erbay, 2021: 521). Huizinga (1980:1) posits that play precedes human culture and is not limited to humans, as animals also partake in playful behaviors reminiscent of human playfulness. For instance, young dogs engage in playful interactions characterized by playful invitations, adherence to specific rules to prevent harm, and simulated displays of anger, all while deriving enjoyment from the activity. This illustrates that play extends beyond mere physiological or reflexive actions; it possesses significance that surpasses immediate biological necessities. The diverse manifestations of play convey a profound essence that transcends materialistic interpretations, hinting at a deeper, nonmaterial aspect intrinsic to its essence. In this section, we will examine numerous definitions of games proposed by key researchers in this field. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's influential work "Rules of Play - Game Design Fundamentals," proposing a comprehensive model for assessing game theory and description, will guide us throughout our discussion.

The first definition is proposed by David Parlett, a game historian known for his extensive writings on card and board games. According to Parlett (1999), he makes a distinction between informal and formal games in terms of the concept of a "game." Informal games involve spontaneous and unstructured play, such as puppies playing. On the other hand, formal games have a specific structure with two key elements: "ends" and "means." The "end" refers to the game's objectives, while the "means" includes the established rules and equipment to achieve a winning outcome. These components, comprising clear objectives and adherence to regulations, differentiate

formal games from other forms of play. Parlett's distinction emphasizes the structured nature of formal games and the essential elements that define them within the realm of play (Parlett, 1999: 1). In contrast, the “means” includes the established rules and equipment to achieve a winning outcome. These components, comprising clear objectives and adherence to regulations, differentiate formal games from other forms of play. Parlett's distinction underscores the structured nature of formal games and the essential elements that define them within the realm of play (Parlett, 1999: 1).

Clark C. Abt puts forward the second definition. Abt, in his book “Serious Games” (1970), defines a game that involves multiple independent decision-makers striving to achieve objectives within a constrained context. Abt contrasts this with a traditional definition that characterizes a game as a rule-based environment where competitors work towards specific goals. His conceptualization underscores four essential elements: a game as an activity or event necessitating active decision-making by players, with defined objectives determining success, all operating within a framework of rules that set boundaries. This definition highlights games' dynamic and structured nature, emphasizing the interactive and goal-oriented aspects that distinguish them from other forms of activity (Abt, 1970: 6). We find common elements such as objectives and rules when comparing Parlett's and Abt's definitions. However, Abt introduces rules as inherent limiting barriers for players. The most notable aspect of Abt's definition is his recognition that games are centered around contestants who actively make decisions while competing.

Huizinga's analysis of play, as outlined in his influential book “Homo Ludens” (1980), presents a perspective on games as a form of play. While Huizinga does not explicitly define a game, he articulates the essential characteristics of play. Huizinga characterizes play as a voluntary activity that exists separately from everyday life, offering an engaging experience that is not serious. The play lacks material interests or profits and occurs within defined temporal and spatial boundaries governed by established rules. Additionally, play fosters the creation of social groups that set themselves apart from the external world through secrecy or other means. Huizinga posits that play transcends ordinary life, is captivating, rule-bound, free from material pursuits, and encourages forming distinct social groups (Huizinga, 1980: 13).

According to Salen and Zimmerman (2003:5), Huizinga's definition encapsulates the captivating essence of play, acknowledging its immersive and unserious nature, which aptly characterizes the essence of engaging in play. However, these experiential characteristics do not exclusively delineate a game, as a game can still exist without being profoundly absorbing. Huizinga's emphasis on play, which exists apart from everyday life and is bound by specific constraints, underscores the artificial construct of games. While Huizinga's definition provides valuable insights, it exhibits limitations. Certain elements, such as the formation of social groups, pertain more to the outcomes of play rather than the essence of games, and the disavowal of material gain is intertwined with the ideological underpinnings of *Homo Ludens*. The overarching scope of his definition represents its primary drawback, as it struggles to distinctly differentiate between the concepts of “play” and “game.”

Roger Caillois, a French sociologist, defines a play in his book “*Man, Play, and Games*” (2001: 9-10) with key characteristics. He defines play as a voluntary activity, emphasizing its optional nature rather than being obligatory. Games are characterized by temporary and spatial constraints, predefined rules, and inherent unpredictability regarding outcomes, allowing for player agency and creativity. They are nonproductive, as they do not result in tangible goods or wealth creation. They often reset players to the starting point at the end of the play, except in cases involving property exchanges. Governed by specific rules that temporarily suspend everyday norms, games establish a realm of imagination where participants immerse themselves in an alternate reality distinct from ordinary life. Caillois builds upon previous ideas by emphasizing that play is voluntary, uncertain in its outcome, and involves a sense of make-believe. However, his definition, like Huizinga's, is overly broad. In *Man, Play, and Games*, Caillois categorizes activities such as theater and informal roughhousing as forms of play, which, while valid, diverge from our specific focus on defining games (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003: 6).

In his book “*Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*,” Bernard Suits presents a distinctive definition of a game. He characterizes a game as a voluntary endeavor where players choose to surmount unnecessary obstacles by adhering to specific rules that intentionally reduce efficiency, thereby making the endeavor enjoyable. ' definition encompasses familiar elements such as activity, voluntariness, a defined

goal, and rules while introducing the concept of inefficiency, where rules deliberately hinder efficiency to enhance challenge and engagement. Although insightful, ' the definition, akin to those of Huizinga and Caillois, focuses more on the act of playing than on the essence of the game itself (Siuts, 1990: 34).

Chris Crawford, a prominent computer game designer, defines games in his influential book "The Art of Computer Games Design" (1984) by outlining four fundamental qualities: representation, interaction, conflict, and safety. He perceives a game as a closed formal system with subjective rules establishing an alternate reality, emphasizing player interaction to explore mechanics and observe outcomes. Conflict naturally emerges from this interaction as players encounter challenges, including opposition from other players, in pursuit of their objectives. Safety, the final quality, suggests that games offer the psychological experience of conflict and risk without real-world repercussions. Crawford's concept of representation, akin to Caillois' notion of make-believe, connects a game's ability to represent directly to its rules, portraying it as a structured system. This systemic perspective implies that business games can simulate organizations with defined rules. Crawford's digital game viewpoint significantly influences his game model.

Greg Costikyan, a game designer and author, presents a distinctive definition of games in his essay "I Have No Words, and I Must Design" (1994). He characterizes a game as a form of art where players engage in decision-making to manage resources using symbolic tokens to pursue a goal. His definition underscores games as artistic and cultural expressions that necessitate active decision-making, resource management, token usage, and goal orientation (Costikyan, 1994:9-33). Unlike traditional definitions, Costikyan does not emphasize the exceptional quality of rules but introduces tokens as essential components. He also uniquely associates games with art, sparking discussions on games as reflections of mass culture. This perspective, influenced by digital game design, accentuates decision-making, interaction, and the cultural significance of games (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003: 8).

Brian Sutton-Smith and Elliot Avedon present a detailed definition of games in their book "The Study of Games" (1971). They characterize games as voluntary control systems that compete between forces, regulated by rules to generate an outcome of disequilibrium. Their definition highlights essential components such as

mental or physical engagement, voluntary participation, player conflict, the constraining role of rules, and attaining a goal state distinct from the initial state. While their definition does not introduce novel elements, it distinguishes itself by directly focusing on games rather than on play or the act of playing. This distinction renders it the most comprehensive definition thus far, clearly delineating games from less structured play activities. However, the concept of a disequilibrium outcome may face criticism, as many games can lead to similar results (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003: 9).

Salen and Zimmerman, in their book “Rules of Play” (2004:11), define games as systems where players engage in artificial conflict governed by rules, leading to a quantifiable outcome. Their definition underscores key elements such as the systemic nature of games, players’ involvement, the separation from reality, the presence of conflict, the significance of rules, and achieving a measurable result. While these components align with previous definitions, the emphasis on a quantifiable outcome is distinctive. Salen and Zimmerman do not include the concept of voluntariness but maintain the idea of a separation from reality. Despite the comprehensive nature of their definition, it has been critiqued for its uneven scope, ranging from broad concepts like systems and rules to specific elements like quantifiable goals and conflict.

The definitions of game and play have progressed alongside our comprehension of the social dynamics associated with gaming and playing in conjunction with the evolution of games. The diversification of games and technological advancements have substantially altered the characteristics and utilization of games. This transformation has inevitably influenced how games are conceptualized and defined.

1.2. Pierre Bourdieu: Capital, Habitus, and Digital Game Spaces

The French sociologist Bourdieu sees individuals as a player that the one plays in between various fields according to a certain set of rules. Bourdieu exemplifies his concepts by the frequent use of a game metaphor. Like a game, a field has rules for how to play, stakes or forms of value (i.e., capital), and strategies for playing the game (Sallaz and Zavisca, 2007: 24). For him, individuals, just like tennis players, obey game rules within a certain field, and these sets of rules determine individuals’ habitus as a result. In the process of playing, participants become invested in and absorbed by

the game itself (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 98-100). At this point, the term habitus becomes a more exotic and attractive tool when juxtaposed with his whole sociology readings to investigate social analytics. Habitus is a slippery concept; we offer what we think to be its three essential characteristics. First, as a disposition, habitus is less a set of conscious strategies and preferences than an embodied sense of the world and one's place within it, a tacit "feel for the game" (Bourdieu, 1984:114; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:128-35). The habitus has certain characteristics because it is internalized in individuals through early socialization in the family or primary group; habitus is durable (although never immutable). Third, habitus is transposable, in that people carry their dispositions with them as they enter new settings. (Sallaz and Zavisca, 2007:25). Originally, Durkheim (1982) firstly described sociology as one may term an institution all the beliefs and modes of behaviour instituted by the collectivity; sociology can then be defined as the science of institutions, their genesis, and their functioning. Likewise, Bourdieu starts the same root by putting forward the habitus to examine the social structure of individuals.

In a specific field, Bourdieu underlines that "the habitus of a determinate person or of a group of persons occupying a similar or neighbouring position in social space is in a sense very systematic: all the elements of his or her behaviour have something in common, a kind of affinity of style" (Hillier, 2005:44). In this sense, "habitus characterises individuals' human behaviours". In addition, Bourdieu specifically emphasises that habitus is reproduced and perpetuated by dispositions. Nevertheless, the dispositions do not tend to be eternal, "they may be changed by historical action oriented by intention and consciousness and using pedagogic devices" (Hillier, 2005). For instance, a linguistic habitus may be changed when an individual correct his/her accent as well as pronunciation, or one may move between different fields and play its habitus when s/he graduates from top-level educational institutions. However, to clearly comprehend the notion of habitus, Bourdieu's other terms, field, doxa, and the theory of practice, should be clarified before it.

In Bourdieusian sociology, the field is a concept that is completely relational. For Bourdieu, so to speak, "the real is the relational" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 97). This relational sociology mainly is started with field theory for easier comprehension. Essentially, "Field" (champ) is a key spatial metaphor for Bourdieu

that differentiates his work. (Ignatow and Robinson, 2017:952). Field theory represents an “interest in forces, intensities, dynamics and processes, in place of a more static sociology of variables, categories and social groups” (Savage and Silva, 2013: 111). Bourdieu frequently posits a game allegory as the centre of his narrative that, for him, each field has its own logic in terms of the ‘rules of the game’. In this regard, the capital that individuals accumulate within the social field constitutes their habitus.

Bourdieu proposes four different capital that are extremely relational with each other. These are categorised as economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. Each capital strongly and relationally affects each other regarding cause and result. Bourdieu, nevertheless, points out that any form of capital can serve as symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991:118). The individual power within the field relies on the power of these capitals. In this logic, the more individuals invest in their capital, the more they are socially powerful in the social field. In essence, economic capital refers to the income rate of individuals, while cultural one relates to their education and intellectual level. In addition, social capital denotes the social classes of individuals in Marxist terminology. Importantly, symbolic capital is relevant to all of them. It represents the symbolic power of the person or institution that obtains sociologically and politically from these capitals. For Bourdieusian terminology, symbolic capital is the most abusive one that might cause legitimate symbolic violence, among others. In other words, Individuals who have upper-level economic, cultural, and social capital can covertly abuse others for their interests, which is named as symbolic capital. Nevertheless, symbolic capital does not refer to the negative term, but it may be abusive by those who hide their interests in the field.

Bourdieuian sociology briefly asserts that every individual has a habitus that is born and grows in it. Secondly, individuals have a certain amount of four capital which may change from person to person in which they may enter the field. Their behaviour and attitudes are shaped according to values and norms of habitus within the field. The last concept of Bourdieu is doxa. His approach to doxa has similarities with its meaning in Ancient Greek, but mostly and originally, its early usage relates to the Husserlian concept of “doxa”. The first usage of Doxa in Ancient Greek manuscripts denotes a statement that is not scientific and matches common belief or opinion, which its opposition is episteme (epistēmē). The concept broadly defined

refers to the misrecognition of forms of social arbitrariness which creates the unformulated, non-discursive, yet internalized and practical recognition of that same social arbitrariness as such, doxa contributes to its reproduction in social institutions, structures and links as well as in minds and bodies, expectations and behaviour (Deer, 2014: 114-115). In the Bourdieusian framework, doxa is the rules of game playing in the field. Bourdieu defines Doxa as “a set of fundamental beliefs which does not even need to be asserted in the form of an explicit, self-conscious dogma” (Bourdieu, 2000:16). Doxa within the field refers to arbitrary social power relation that individuals need to follow in order to adapt the habitus. In this sense, this conceptualization of doxa as unquestioned “shared beliefs constitutive of a field, underpins the related notion of symbolic power, which is particularly relevant in Bourdieu’s later understanding of social relations in modern societies (Deer, 2014:116)

As mentioned above, Bourdieu exemplifies his sociological terms with a game metaphor to explain the cultural and social production of inequality. He embodies his terminology through the game of tennis analogy. In his framework, the tennis court signifies the field in which players ought to play in it. Doxa, on the other, is the rules of tennis that players should not violate or neglect. For him, every individual is a player on both sides of the net who should obey a certain set of rules in the social field. The capitals are the skills that they obtain by practising for the game. Lastly, the habitus signifies the style of players while playing tennis.

One avenue of exploration could be through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's theories of capital and habitus, which offer a helpful framework for understanding the dynamics at play in many digital gaming spaces. Within digital games, these various forms of capital “economic, social, cultural, and symbolic” play a role in how players interact and experience these virtual environments (Korkeila and Hamari, 2020). Generally referring to the ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions one acquires through one’s life experiences, it is crucial to understand how players can be seen as active rather than passive in their gameplay and how these active engagements can, in turn, reflect the broader structure of society.

1.3. Goffman's "The Presentation of Self" and Digital games

Humankind has made efforts to make sense of the world and the environment surrounding them. The notion of self is widely discussed in sociology, psychology, and communication sciences. Additionally, studies on the relationship between self-presentation digital games and social media have been widely carried out. Köknel defines the self as the sum of society's perception of the individual and the process of self-evaluation and recognition by the individuals themselves (Zengin, 2021). Individuals form their senses of self through achieving meanings and adopting behaviors compatible with the world.

Erving Goffman has been described as a "sociologist of interaction." Interaction relationships are relationships that are shaped by shared resources and communication rules (Serpa and Ferreira, 2018: 74). In order to explain the interactions among the groups, individuals, and interactions themselves, Goffman theorized Self-presentation in his book "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" (1956). Self-presentation, or impression management, is the organization of behaviors to control other people's impressions of one's image conducted consciously or unconsciously. He analyzed society through everyday life and interpersonal relationships. According to Goffman, individuals form their identities and the concept of "self" by determining the impressions of others intentionally or unintentionally. When interacting with society, individuals adopt an image suitable for themselves (Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013: 101).

On the other hand, Goffman uses theatre metaphors to explain face-to-face interactions. He considers this interaction as the reciprocal influence of individuals on each other (Serpa and Ferreira, 2018: 75). Thus, in the material world resembling a theatre stage, people adopt roles. Goffman relies on the dramaturgical theory when explaining the presentation of self in society. Thus, he underlines the importance of performance, to refers to the entire activities of the individuals during a specific period marked by his continuous presence before the society and the performance has influence over them (Goffman, 1956: 13). He names the individuals "actor" akin to the actual theatre stage. Individuals maintain two types of "self". The one on the front stage and the one on the backstage. However, it should be noted that individuals do not pretend to be somebody else; instead, they show some aspects of their identities to

a broader society. In the front stage, the actor/individual is conscious about being observed by the other members of the society and gives his/her performance shaped by specific rules and social conventions in order to receive acceptance in the society (1956: 14). The individual is in the act of performance. Roles are operated within three interconnected elements: the physical environment (setting), the appearance and manner of the performer (personal front), and the collective, situated expectations (front). The personal front includes sex, race, gender, age, speech patterns, and facial expressions assumed in society. There are fixed elements like race, age, and sex that cannot be changed on the front stage. Appearance refers to the stimuli that function, implying the performer's social status. Conversely, Manner refers to the stimuli implying the interaction mode the performer is expected to perform in the ongoing situations (1956: 15).

However, actors can change their appearances according to the environment and the people they interact with. For instance, specific rules exist for performing in parks, hospitals, and media corporations. They adopt specific manners and characteristics while performing, depending on the circumstances. Furthermore, Goffman linked the self-presentation or, in other words, strategic interaction with "face" as a metaphor. Face can be described as a metaphorical concept in which one deploys a positive image of oneself while interacting with others. The face has two meanings: firstly, it is the visual aspect of the subject and maintenance of the desirable self-image (Goffman, 1955: 213).

Conversely, a performance is unnecessary backstage, and actors can act authentically. Backstage is where the actors can interrupt and put aside their roles. This area is closed to the public domain and is a restricted area. Serpa and Ferreira explained the difference between front and back stages with the examples of a football team and a family with parents dealing with alcohol problems. The team members adopt good codes in the first example to impress the audience and society. Backstage, they influence the front stage by strengthening their bonds and managing their problems. Regarding the family example, the parents are expected to portray good examples of a family and being a good mother and father. However, backstage, they are dealing with drinking problems. Backstages serve the purpose of the actors to rehearse their roles and perfect them on stage. (Serpa and Ferreira, 2018: 75-76).

It should also be noted that, as Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013: 102) cite from Goffman, individuals “have both expressions that they give and those that they give off.” The expressions they give mean the impressions the individuals intentionally achieve through communication. The latter implies the impressions created unintentionally during the communication. Goffman argued that the technology of his day, such as telephone conversations, is a departure from conventional communication. He considered it inferior to the conventional conversation due to the lack of visual cues in the face-to-face conversation (Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013: 102). However, his studies on the presentation of self have been adapted to social media studies and game studies. Meyrowitz has adapted Goffman’s self-presentation concept to modern mass communication studies. Meyrowitz states that modern mass communication blurs the differences between the front and back stages (Zengin, 2021).

Social media sites pave the way for the actors to present themselves in alternate ways. Social media reduces the barriers of time and space. Therefore, users can use social media both synchronously and asynchronously. Synchronous self-presentation occurs through live broadcast or real-time communication, which resembles face-to-face communication. Whereas asynchronous communication on social media occurs when a user shares a picture or a status update, and these elements are received by another user hours later in a different location. Uski and Lampinen (2016) argue that self-presentation of Goffman can be applied to social media studies through the concept of “profile work” which is a strategic self-presentation method conceived by both technical aspects and social norms. The aim is to capture users’ experiences and actions on social media as they strive to maintain their self-image and regulate their profiles. Self-regulation on social media occurs in multiple ways. The users can omit, reveal, and underplay elements from their self-image (Uski and Lampinen, 2016).

Serpa and Ferreira put forward that with the lines between front and back stages becoming blurred, the private lives are brought closer to the public eyes through online social interaction (Serpa and Ferreira, 2018: 76). Social media allows users to perform strategic authenticity by displaying personal information with symbolic connotations that respond to the audience (Koidl and Kapanova, 2022: 4). In the social media studies, empirical studies show that adolescent users on social media aim to construct

a role based on desirable image and “positive-biased” behaviors in order to attract the attention of the other users. The users meticulously stage the lighting, the angles, and the costumes they are wearing while taking photos or videos on social media to maintain control over the reactions of the other users (Scheurs and Vanderbosch, 2022: 2). Yenilmez Kaçar (2023:12) conducted a study on the relationship between self-presentation and the use of social media within the context of Instagram. Instagram offers two spheres of self-presentation: the main feed and the story section. Primary feeds are permanent posts resembling photograph albums, which is another way of visual self-presentation and maintaining control over users’ opinions of the feed owner. On the other hand, stories disappear after 24 hours. The first provides a persistent exhibition, but the other offers a temporary one. The audience provides feedback so the user can modify his/her performance on the front stage.

Gilmore (2014) implemented Goffman’s “self-presentation approach” in online education analysis by dividing the front and back stages into several categories.

Front stage online: The stage where the university or institution observes the student while performing. For instance, students upload their homework, participate in classes, and write on online university forums.

Backstage online: The stage where the student prepares a performance without being seen by the university resources. E.g., Facebook, websites, email

Backstage offline: The stage where the student prepares for performance without the aid of the Internet, such as Word documents, books, or face-to-face conversation (Gilmore, 2014: 187).

Digital games have offered more than entertainment and leisure for gamers. They played a key role in forming identities, subjectives, and frames. Goffman’s relation to the game studies is that he used tools to examine communication and social life as a performative, theatrical stage where the roles are performed and linked to the four simultaneous metaphors. The interactions in games can be interpreted as a theatrical space where the individuals perform their roles, manipulate impressions, and the practices engender ritualized normative orders. Goffman’s relation to the game studies is traced back to Huizinga’s game studies that emphasized the habitual comparisons between gaming and theatrical pieces (Bienvenido and Bruna, 2019: 135-138).

From the Goffmanian perspective, daily life practices are created within the game environment. Gamers perform roles oscillating between day-to-day spaces and narratives while their avatars leave a digital imprint. Apart from the dramaturgy, the other three metaphors are explained throughout the article. The ritual metaphor describes the individuals conducting their performances daily, conceiving rituals and ceremonial rules that strengthen their performances and narratives. The frame or cinematographic metaphor means that individuals perceive the social environment through the frames based on their own subjective social experiences. In digital games, gamers experience the gaming environment and learn the game through their past gaming experiences. Additionally, further frames are conceived as the gaming progresses. Game metaphor is used for social interactions that are considered games in which gamers/individuals embrace adjusted strategies to manipulate their audiences.

Bienvenido and Bruna (2019: 139-140) divide the front and back stages of video gaming as the online gaming space and the space occupied by an actual person. However, as in social media, the boundaries of the spaces are blurred. For example, even though the screens can be isolated in networked digital games, the backstage activities are exposed through sound. An inappropriate comment made by a player who forgot to turn the sound off or an intruder, such as family members interacting with the players. Meanwhile, in online games, individuals have to come to terms with being subjects present in the front and backstage simultaneously because they are not separate anymore, as was the case in Goffman's time back in the 1950s. Thus, they put forward a third stage of Goffman's approach that is often forgotten in the studies: the outside region, which is a remaining region that refers to the spaces outside the other regions for instance, individuals who are outside the places where the performances occur.

Furthermore, the interactions are ritualized in games. The players explore the gaming mechanisms through the exploration phase and routines. If these phases do not exist, there is a lack of structure, implying a constant sense of disorientation, discomfort, and confusion. In other words, players do not know how to accomplish game objectives and get lost due to a lack of structured rules and predictable behavior. These will give rise to an anomaly. Hence, the players gradually learn the rules and

rituals, making themselves comfortable with the newly constructed daily life in the game realm from a Goffmanian perspective. The players feel safe when encountering new elements within the game (Bienvenido and Bruna, 2019: 141). They should carefully calculate their interactions and performances because a small part of their backstage is exposed. Otherwise, the performance will suffer from ruptures. For this reason, the gamers follow processes of adjustment and renegotiations to recover their image imposed on their fellow gamers in the shared narrative. The players can appeal to shared complicities to form empathetic bonds with other players to minimize the hazards. For instance, when an outside element causes a disturbance, the player can say, "Sorry, it is my mother's turn to interrupt." Thus, the image is strengthened by the spectators as a result of the empathetic relationship. Additionally, the play ignores the event that compromised the dramatic performance and pretends everything is normal. Besides, the players mute their microphones and turn their webcams off until the interruption ends so that he/she can make excuses. Finally, players can create a second back region within the back region to protect their intimate moments, such as making phone calls guarded from the front stage (Bienvenido and Bruna, 2019: 143).

On the other hand, the change of roles paves the way for creating new performances, such as being transferred from a monster to a magician, creating new ways of interaction within the shared narrative. Finally, one of the ruptures happens when the relationship is renegotiated. For instance, the players introduce other players to their offline lives backstage, leading to the enforcement of new elements in the performance. The players share private aspects of their lives and form face-to-face communications and even romantic relationships (Bienvenido and Bruna, 2019:144-145).

In conclusion, Goffman's dramaturgical approach can be applied to social media and game studies to expose the interaction between the performers and the audience. Though the front and backstage lines are blurred, the performers should carefully balance their stages while communicating with the spectators. If they follow methods of renegotiation and adjustments, they can sustain their performances without compromising their offline backstage.

1.4. Cultivation Theory In The Age Of Digital Games

In the late 1960s, George Gerbner (1969) proposed a new theoretical framework called cultivation theory that offered an insightful analysis of media's impact on societal perceptions and beliefs, particularly television. With this framework, they were attempting to explain the effects of the media on people's perspectives on social reality at a time in the mid-20th century, when television had a more significant role than other mass communication such as radio, newspapers, and film (Morgan et al., 2014: 481).

Gerbner's model involves three main dimensions: (1) the institutional processes involving the production of content, (2) the dominant images that populate this content, (3) the correlations between exposure to media content and audience beliefs or behaviors (Gerbner, 1998: 179). The basic approach of cultivation analysis explores how such viewing habits shape the understanding of social reality. It is concerned with whether heavy viewers have perceptions that are more in line with televised portrayals than lighter viewers with the same demographic characteristics (Till et al., 2016).

Cultivation theory, though initially concerned with the impact of television on perceptions of violence and victimization, has expanded to cover many other subjects, including those related to gender roles, stereotypes, health problems, school policies, and environmental and political issues (Romer et al., 2014; Morgan et al., 2009). From Gerbner's perspective, the primary function of mass media is not necessarily to affect social change but to maintain the existing structures of power. In this sense, Gerbner positions the culture as "a system" of messages and imagery that shape and re-create social relations (Gerbner, 1990: 250). He argues that the mediated narratives help link what people do with what they know about what they do and, at the same time, help reflect and reproduce their understanding of social reality (Stacks, Li, and Spaulding, 2015; Morgan, Shanahan, and Signorelli, 2014; Signorelli and Morgan 2009).

One of the more significant ideas to emerge from this concept was the idea of "mean world syndrome," which claims that heavy television viewers develop inaccurate notions of danger, insecurity, and victimhood. Studies have found that such heavy viewers are more likely to believe they are at greater risk for violence and see others as untrustworthy. Heavy viewers have been more likely to adopt the attitude

that one should “be very careful” what you do and with whom socially, and they have overestimated the percentage of people working in law enforcement versus the real-world percentage. Such encounters underscore the far-reaching psychological and social consequences of continued engagement with dramatized depictions of threat and violence on screen (Sestir, 2020; Shrum, 2017; Gerbner, 1998).

Intended to explore how television affects how audiences view reality, Cultivation theory has recently gained significant traction concerning digital video game media. This theory says continuous exposure to specific media content gradually alters how individuals think and feel. Research concerning digital games has generally focused on the effects of violence in games. The research found no significant relationship between the amount of video game play and perceptions of crime likelihood and feelings of safety after controlling for gender (Anderson and Dill, 2000, pp.781–782). Van Mierlo and Van den Bulck (2004:97) also conducted a cross-sectional investigation. They found some evidence for first-order cultivation effects (i.e., associations with estimates of serious crime and estimates of how many law enforcement officers are in the workforce) but no evidence for second-order effects. The study of Festl et al. (2013: 392) demonstrated no strong relationship between general video game usage, preference for first-person shooter games, and militaristic attitudes. Chong et al. (2012:952) also observed no second-order cultivation effects and only partial evidence for first-order effects in a long-term experimental study. Similarly, Williams (2006:69) reported first-order cultivation effects in a longitudinal field study but only for real-world threats relevant to scenarios depicted in the specific game being studied.

1.5. Silence and Voice: Spiral of Silence in Digital Games

The Spiral of Silence model, introduced by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann in 1984, highlights how public opinion is shaped by fear of social isolation. Observing trends during Germany’s 1965 elections, she noted that individuals often hold unpopular opinions to avoid standing out. Mass media plays a crucial role by amplifying majority views, discouraging dissent, and eventually transforming prevailing opinions into social norms. Minority views, meanwhile, fade as supporters grow silent. This creates

a self-reinforcing cycle where one perspective dominates public discourse (Stacks et al., 2015: 30).

Social feedback includes peer-to-peer opinions and behaviors integrated into complex social dynamics that players are embroiled in during digital gaming environments. Banisch et al. (2022:7) propose that public opinion can be represented as a spiraling process whereby silence breeds silence, given the power of social feedback mechanisms. They report that the principle is obvious in online gaming communities, where players avoid voicing dissenting opinions out of fear of social sanctions or ostracism. It reflects one of the key points in the Spiral of Silence theory (Gencer et al., 2018: 1418). Because of the fear of exclusion, gamers can voluntarily silence themselves (Bowen and Blackmon, 2003: 1394), especially in competitive gaming or cooperative playing contexts where in-group (team) cohesion becomes valuable.

Social capital is key to whether the diversity of opinions in gaming communities makes a difference in this context. Shared gaming experiences can facilitate open discussion through greater cohesiveness and connection between players and stifle dissenting views through greater cohesion. This is often true as studies have shown that online play can enhance social capital and individual ties (Perry et al., 2018: 202). However, this also has the potential for echo chambers and groupthink to form in these online communities, erasing divergent views (Mathews et al., 2022). The unwillingness gamers have when deviating from the socially constructed community narratives they are a part of in fear of potential ostracisation is in direct correlation with the Spiral of Silence theory.

In addition to that, hate speech in online gaming spaces presents another complication because it directly attacks them based on race, gender, or other identities. Such discourse can instill fear and discomfort that lead players to self-censor rather than speak up. Obermaier et al. (2021: 2352) highlight the chilling effects of online hate speech, preventing individuals from intervening or expressing dissenting views and thus creating a cycle of audience silence. This aligns with the Spiral of Silence theory, which posits that the fear of social isolation allows hate speech and hate as acceptable forms of social discourse and discourages those with dissenting views, especially vis-a-vis hate speech, from speaking out against the majority view.

One of the main reasons for this is the segregation of online gaming communities, which often become echo chambers wherein hate speech can take root and spread. Duncan et al. (2020) have noted that such environments often inhibit dissenting views because individuals are deterred from expressing dissenting views that they fear will be unwelcome or generate hostility. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle where the dominant narrative becomes more and more hostile, and opponents stay quiet; thus, the Spiral of Silence widens. As these communities normalize hate speech over time, wider acceptance ensues, and individuals find it increasingly difficult to confront this behavior (Öztekin, 2020:535).

1.6. The Concept of Digital Game

In this study, the term “digital games” encompasses all modern games utilizing computing technologies for their functionality. This encompasses a wide range of gaming forms, including but not limited to digital games played on home consoles, arcade machines, mainframe or personal computers, as well as mobile games for cell phones and other emerging digital devices. While some literature sources may interchangeably use terms such as “computer games” or “digital games” as overarching categories, “digital games” is employed here as the most neutral and inclusive term available.

Digital games, as an innovative medium, represent a reinterpretation of reality by employing a coding system that utilizes a combination of visual and auditory elements. The incorporation of video console systems, merging television with gaming consoles, situates users in a distinct position within the gaming realm. These games afford users an interactive role-playing experience, granting them control and influence over the gameplay. Through the gameplay experience, various messages are communicated to users within the digital game environment. The immersive quality of digital games and the active involvement they provide users emphasize their significance as a means of communication and self-expression in contemporary society (Yengin, 2011: 22).

Digital games are typically identified by the platforms utilized for their execution, such as arcade machines, gaming consoles, and personal computers (Binark, 2005:4; Binark and Sütücü, 2008: 43). Over the past few years, the gaming

sector has expanded its horizons to include mobile gaming on smartphones and tablets, as well as advancements in virtual and augmented reality technologies, and remote cloud gaming services. Furthermore, digital games are categorized into various genres depending on their gameplay mechanics and intended goals. This classification highlights the broad spectrum of platforms, genres, and technologies that characterize today's digital gaming environment.

1.6.1. The History of Digital Game

The origins of digital games can be dated back to ancient civilizations such as Egypt, where games like Senet existed as early as 2686–2613 BC. These ancient games served as precursors to interactive entertainment and gameplay. The first digital games were simple extensions of electronic games that used video-like output from large room-sized computers in the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1960s, groundbreaking games such as Spacewar! at MIT were developed, showcasing the potential of interactive digital entertainment. These pioneering experiments laid the foundation for the rise of digital games as a novel form of entertainment (Egenfeld Nielsen et al., 2024:70).

The 1970s witnessed the inception of the video game industry, characterized by the introduction of gaming consoles and the establishment of gaming companies. Arcades emerged as popular hubs for gamers, fostering the development of a distinct gamer subculture and the integration of digital games into mainstream culture. Computer Space, introduced in 1971, marked the debut of the first coin-operated video game (Egenfeld Nielsen et al., 2024:71). Subsequently, in 1972, the Magnavox Odyssey, the inaugural home gaming console, was launched alongside the game Pong. Merely a year later, in 1973, a plethora of game companies emerged, heralding the inception of a pioneering and swiftly expanding gaming industry. (Ivory, 2015:5).

The 1980s were a pivotal era in the evolution of digital games, characterized by notable technological progress, the ascent of legendary gaming consoles, and the introduction of influential game titles. During the 1980s, the gaming landscape witnessed the emergence of several legendary titles that left an indelible mark on the industry. Games like Pac-Man, Super Mario Bros., The Legend of Zelda, and Sonic the Hedgehog became emblematic of the era, shaping the trajectory of game development for years to come (Wardyga, 2023).

The 1990s marked a significant era in the advancement of digital games, characterized by remarkable technological advancements, the introduction of new gaming platforms, and the evolution of gaming genres. There was a shift towards 16-bit and 32-bit consoles such as the Sega Genesis, Super Nintendo, and Sony PlayStation, resulting in enhanced graphics and gameplay experiences. The introduction of CD-ROM technology facilitated the development of expansive game environments and full-motion video, leading to immersive gaming experiences evident in titles like Final Fantasy VII and Tomb Raider. In addition to this, digital games underwent a genre evolution where the classical adventure game genre began to wane, while action games experienced a surge in popularity with the advent of the first-person shooter template. Hybrid games that amalgamated elements from various genres became increasingly common, blurring the lines of traditional genre distinction (Kirriemuir, 2006; pp. 21-35; Ivory, 2015: 13).

During the 2000s, online gaming soared in popularity with titles like World of Warcraft, while mobile gaming thrived with devices like the Game Boy Advance and smartphones. Consoles such as the PlayStation 2, Xbox 360, and Wii introduced innovative features, broadening the gaming community's reach (Ivory, 2015:13).

The 2010s ushered in significant changes in the video game industry. Virtual reality gaming became mainstream with headsets like Oculus Rift and HTC Vive, while mobile gaming on smartphones gained prominence with titles like Angry Birds and PUBG Mobile catering to diverse gamer preferences (Pallavicini et al., 2019). Independent developers made a mark with critically acclaimed games such as "Minecraft" and "Undertale," and esports exploded in popularity with events like The International and League of Legends World Championship attracting massive audiences (Egenfeld Nielsen et al., 2024:113-118).

Streaming platforms like Twitch and YouTube Gaming became go-to destinations for broadcasting gameplay, while cross-platform play in games like Fortnite enabled players across different systems to join forces (Sjblom and Hamari, 2017). Subscription services like Xbox Game Pass and PlayStation Now transformed game access, offering a vast library of titles for a monthly fee (Newman et al., 2016). Augmented reality games like Pokémon GO merged virtual and real-world elements, promoting outdoor exploration, and cloud gaming services like Google Stadia and

NVIDIA GeForce Now allowed players to stream games without high-end hardware (Spilker and Colbjørnsen, 2020). The integration of AI in games enhanced realism and complexity, pushing the boundaries of technology and creativity in gaming (Westera et al., 2019).

1.6.2. Digital Game Genres

Since ancient times, games have been sorted into categories based on their genre or medium. As game studies advanced in the latter part of the 20th century, scholars introduced different ways to classify games, aiming to deepen our understanding of them. These classifications have expanded over time, refining our grasp of games and their content. Genres like strategy games and mediums like digital games have been key in organizing them. With the growth of game studies, classifications have become more sophisticated, taking into account factors beyond traditional genres and mediums. This evolution has enhanced our understanding of the diverse world of games (Spanos, 2021:10).

There are many digital game classifications put forward by scholars. John Roberts et al. (1959:597) identified three main types of games based on a cross-cultural study: Physical games, games of chance, and games of strategy. They noted that physical games have the broadest ethnographic distribution, followed by games of chance.

Ingolf Ståhl (1983:32) proposed a categorization of five game types: Entertainment games, Educational games, Experimental games, Research games, and Operational games, focusing on the benefits obtained, the time scale of benefits, and the beneficiaries.

Classifying games into specific types poses a challenge due to the multidimensional nature and vast array of characteristics inherent in games. Roger Caillois even suggests that the sheer multitude and infinite diversity of games can be overwhelming for those attempting to establish classification principles. Roger Caillois, in his seminal work “Man, Play and Games,” outlined a game typology consisting of four main categories: games of competition (*agôn*), games of chance (*alea*), games of simulation (*mimicry*), and games of vertigo and disorder (*ilinx*) (Caillois, 2001: 11-12).

In competitive games, termed *agôn*, emphasize equality of chances and rivalry, with players starting on equal footing. The core qualities of these games include speed, endurance, strength, memory, skill, and ingenuity. The primary objective for players is to demonstrate their superiority, requiring sustained attention, training, application, and a strong desire to win, along with discipline and perseverance (Caillois, 2001:15).

In games of chance, termed *alea*, player skills are irrelevant as the outcome is solely determined by luck. Caillois categorized chance games under the term *alea*, contrasting them with competitive games (*agôn*). While *agôn* emphasizes qualities like work, patience, and experience, *alea* eliminates the need for professionalization, training, and application. Despite these differences, both *agôn* and *alea* share a common goal of creating conditions of pure equality for players, which are often absent in real life (Caillois, 2001:19).

In games of simulation, termed *mimicry*, player skills do not impact the outcome; instead, luck dictates the results. Caillois contrasts *mimicry* with competitive games, stating that *mimicry* removes the necessity for work, patience, experience, and qualifications. While competitive games emphasize attributes like training and application, *mimicry* focuses on chance. Despite these distinctions, both game types aim to establish conditions of equality for players, a feature often absent in real-life scenarios (Caillois, 2001: 19-23).

Games of vertigo and disorder, termed *ilinx* involve inducing sensations of dizziness or disorientation that alter perception. In contrast to competitive and chance games, *ilinx* games do not rely on skills or luck but aim to create experiences that disrupt stability and provoke a sense of exhilarating panic or vertigo. These games focus on altering perception and creating temporary states of disorder, providing players with a unique and immersive experience that transcends traditional gameplay elements (Caillois, 2001: 23-26).

Wolf (2001) also introduced a framework for categorizing digital game genres based on the level of interactivity required for player success. This framework encompasses genres such as “sports,” “adventure,” “platform,” “combat,” “racing,” “strategy,” and “shooter,” among others. Similarly, Egenfeldt Nielsen et al. (2008:41) developed a classification system for game genres that hinges on success criteria, resulting in four main categories: Action, Adventure, Strategy, and Process-oriented

games. These genre classifications emphasize the success criteria in game design, moving beyond technological distinctions to focus on purpose (Cășvean, 2015).

While popular industry sources and websites often use subgenres like platformers or racing games, these frameworks delve into the fundamental aspects of gameplay that drive success. They offer a detailed, purpose-oriented approach to game categorization, differing from the more common industry classifications. Such genre frameworks are crucial for grasping the core elements that define various game types and the success criteria for players. By concentrating on the interactive demands and inherent success criteria in game design, these frameworks provide a systematic method for analyzing and categorizing digital games, offering valuable insights for game designers, researchers, and players (Cășvean, 2015).

In academic literature, while there's no universally agreed-upon classification for digital games, we can identify the primary types of games. These are:

Action Games: Action games are typically fast-paced and involve combat or physical challenges. Examples of action games include Pac-Man, the shooter Red Dead Redemption, and the racing game MotorStorm: Apocalypse. What unites these games is that success is primarily determined by motor skills and hand-eye coordination. In traditional arcade action games, players mainly focus on coordinating the movements of their on-screen character without needing to make complex strategic decisions (Egenfeld Nielsen et al., 2024:57-58).

Strategy Games: Strategy games require players to make decisions and develop plans to achieve goals within the game, often involving resource management, tactical thinking, and long-term planning to defeat opponents or solve challenges. In real-time strategy games, players gather resources, control units, and create effective strategies to win. Players may use various tactics, such as autocratic or memory-one strategies, to influence outcomes and manage interactions with opponents. Players experiment with different interactions and cooperation strategies to handle competitive gameplay complexities (Apperley, 2006; Czauderna and Budke, 2020; Baek and Kim, 2022).

Role Playing Games (RPGs): It involve players taking on characters and participating in fantasy scenario. These games include tabletop RPGs, computer RPGs, massively multiplayer online RPGs, and live-action RPGs. In RPGs, players engage

with each other, following game rules and building relationships within the game world. The essence of RPGs is in players' ability to embody characters and experience different lives through these roles (Zagal and Deterding, 2018).

Simulation Games: It merge gaming with simulation to offer immersive experiences where players make decisions in artificial environments to see the outcomes of their actions. These games often mimic real-world scenarios or systems using symbolic models, providing a hands-on learning experience. Covering topics from economics to business management, simulation games aim to deepen players' understanding of complex concepts through interactive play (Dobrescu et al., 2015; Blažič and Novak, 2015; Apperley, 2006).

Adventure Games: Adventure games are a type of video game where players assume the role of a protagonist on a journey through a fictional world, solving puzzles, interacting with characters, and following a narrative-driven storyline (Cavallari et al., 1992). These games focus on storytelling, problem-solving, and exploration, offering immersive experiences that stimulate players' intellect and creativity (Hsu et al., 2020).

Independent Games: Independent digital games, or indie games, are created by individual developers or small studios without major game publishers' financial or logistical backing. These games are known for their creativity, innovation, and distinctive gameplay that often strays from mainstream norms (Martin and Deuze, 2009). Indie games are celebrated for their artistic expression, experimental mechanics, and niche appeal, offering players unique and unconventional experiences (Latorre, 2016). Unlike traditional games from large companies, indie games are typically made with smaller budgets and teams, giving developers more freedom to explore new ideas and take creative risks (Ebbing, 2022).

Massively Multiplayer Online Games: Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) are digital games that allow hundreds or thousands of players to interact and play together in a virtual world over the internet. Examples like Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) let players cooperate, compete, and form virtual teams with others worldwide (Lou et al., 2019). MMOGs offer a continuous and immersive online experience where players create avatars, complete quests, and interact in a shared digital space (Marchetti et al., 2016). These games are

known for their social elements, helping players build social identities both in and out of the game (Martin, 2012). MMOGs are appealing because they create vast, interactive worlds that promote collaboration, competition, and social connections (Lou et al., 2019). They often include rich storytelling, character customization, and regular content updates to keep players engaged and invested in the virtual environment (Marchetti et al., 2016).

Sports Games: Sports games are a type of video game that imitate real-world sports, letting players participate in virtual versions of activities like football, basketball, or racing. These games strive to mirror the rules, strategies, and competitive elements of different sports, giving players a chance to enjoy the thrill and challenges of athletic contests in a digital setting (Crawford and Gosling, 2009).

Racing Games: Racing games are digital games where players drive vehicles at high speeds through different settings, competing in races against other players.. These games focus on speed, precision, and skillful maneuvering to beat competitors and finish first. They can vary from realistic simulations to arcade-style fun, providing an exciting and immersive racing experience in a virtual world (Stollberg and Lange, 2020). The most prominent games in this genre are Gran Turismo and Need For Speed.

Fighting Games: Fighting games are digital games where players engage in battles or duels between characters, fighting against other players. These games require using a mix of attacks, defenses, and strategies to defeat opponents and win. They often emphasize hand-to-hand combat, special moves, and combos, creating intense and competitive gameplay. While some sources classify these games under sports games, they are fundamental to digital gaming and have a large player base. Notable examples include Tekken, Street Fighter, and Mortal Kombat.

Casual Games: A casual game is designed for simple, short-term play rather than deep, immersive gameplay. This broad category, unlike serious games, includes very simple and easy-to-handle games that don't require long-term commitment. Examples include puzzles, classic board games, solitaire, arcade action games, and party games like dancing, music, or singing games. Tetris (1985) is a classic example of a popular casual game (Konzack, 2015).

Battle Royale Games: Battle royale games are a popular video game genre where many players compete until only one player or team is left standing. Players

usually start with minimal gear, search for weapons and resources, and fight within a shrinking play area. The game focuses on survival, strategy, and skill in intense multiplayer combat. Apex Legends is a notable example of a free-to-play battle royale shooter that uses in-game purchases and a battle pass for monetization (Choi and Kim, 2018).

Multiplayer Online Battle Arena Games (MOBAs): A multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) is a video game genre where two teams compete on a set battlefield. It is generally accepted as subgenre of strategy game. Each player controls a unique character whose abilities improve throughout the match, contributing to the team's strategy. The main goal is to destroy the enemy team's central structure, located at the opposite end of the battlefield. Players are supported by computer-controlled units that spawn periodically and advance toward the enemy base. MOBA games focus on teamwork, strategy, and coordination, requiring players to adopt different roles and combine their abilities effectively. Success in this genre demands patience, macro-level decision-making, and well-planned strategies, with matches typically lasting 30-45 minutes (Cantallops and Sicilia, 2018).

1.6.3. Digital Game Industry

The digital game industry, which began its emergence in the mid-20th century, witnessed a significant breakthrough at the beginning of the 21st century. This advancement was primarily driven by the decreased costs of personal computers and the internet, as well as the introduction of portable devices such as tablets and smartphones, which notably enhanced the accessibility of digital games to a wider audience, consequently fostering the industry's expansion and development.

The digital game industry is a rapidly changing and growing part of global entertainment. Digital games are now a major force in leisure activities and entertainment, being one of the world's fastest-growing sectors. In 2022, the industry's revenue reached \$183.9 billion with an increase in sales of video game consoles, mobile games, and PC Games by surpassing some more established industries such as film industry and music recording industry. It is expected to hit \$207 billion in 2026 (Newzoo, 2023; IFPI, 2023).

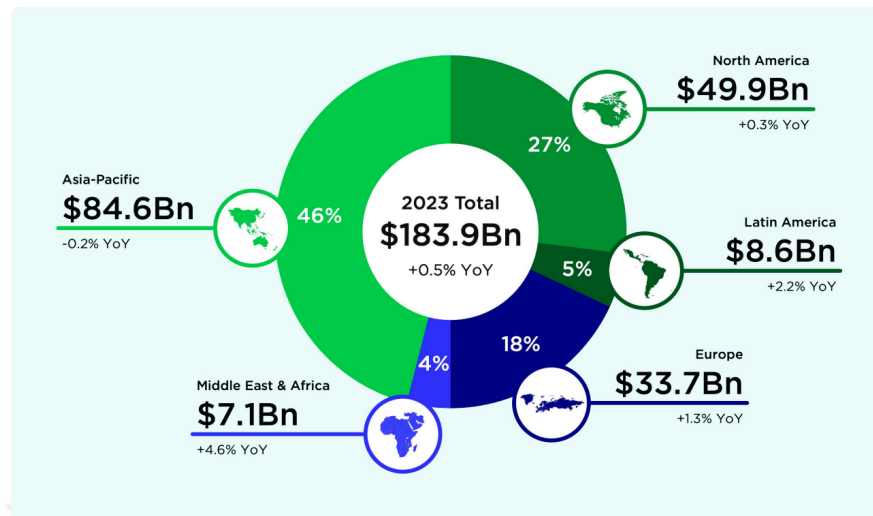


Figure 1.1. Regional Revenues of Global Game Market

When examining regional revenues of global game market, it is evident that the Asia-Pacific region holds a significant share of global revenues, accounting for 46% with a substantial amount of \$84.6 billion. Following closely behind is North America, contributing 27% of global revenues amounting to \$49.9 billion. Europe stands as the third-largest contributor, representing 18% of global revenues with \$33.7 billion. Latin America and the Middle East and Africa regions contribute 5% and 4% of global revenues, amounting to \$8.6 billion and \$7.1 billion, respectively. These figures highlight the varying degrees of revenue generation across different regions, showcasing the economic disparities and strengths present globally (Newzoo, 2023).

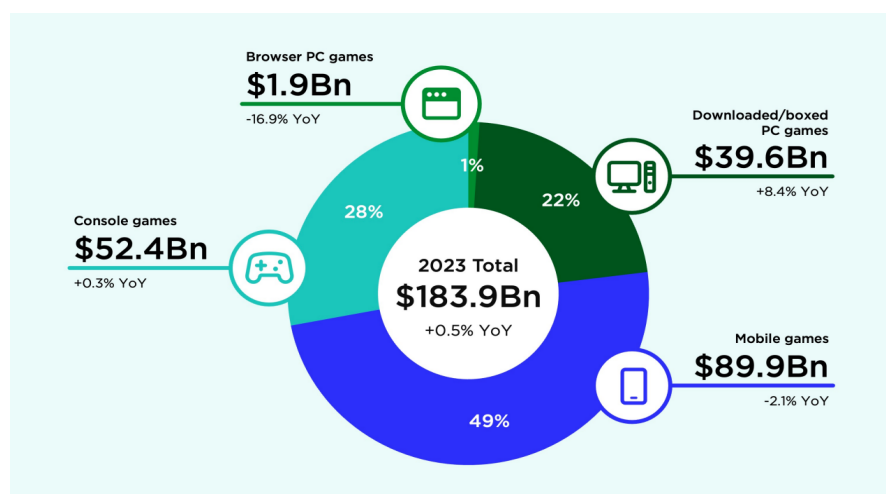


Figure 1.2. Gaming Revenue by Device

Mobile games dominate the global game market, holding 49% of total revenues, which amounts to \$89.9 billion. Console games follow with 28% of global

game revenues, also at \$52.4 billion. Downloaded/boxed PC games account for 22% of the global game revenues, totaling \$39.6 billion, while Browser PC games represent 1% of the revenues, equivalent to \$1.9 billion.

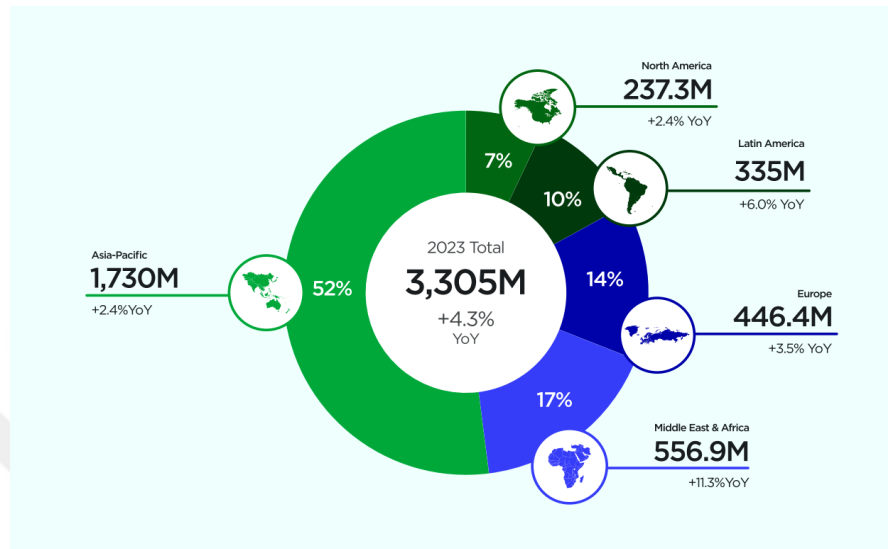


Figure 1.3. Rate of Digital Game Players Worldwide

According to Newzoo report (2023), there are 3.38 billion digital game players around the world and it is expected that global player numbers will reach 3.68 billion players by the end of 2026. The regions with the highest increase in the number of players are the Middle East and Africa, with a total growth of %11.3. Although there is an increase in the number of players in all continents, the region with the highest number of players is the Asia-Pacific region with 1.730 billion people. This region holds 52% of the number of players in the world.

In 2023, the global video gaming industry witnessed strategy and brain games emerge as the highest-grossing genre, generating approximately \$87.57 billion in revenue. This genre's financial success can be attributed to its popularity on mobile devices, which have significantly contributed to its revenue dominance. Following closely behind, action and adventure games secured the second position in revenue generation, amassing \$70.82 billion (Statista, 2023).

1.6.3.1 Digital Game Industry in Turkey

The digital game industry has become a significant economic driver for developed economies, contributing substantially to national economies worldwide. Governments are increasingly acknowledging the economic potential of the gaming sector and have enhanced their support and incentives to promote its growth. In recent years, our country has actively supported the gaming industry, leading to its rapid expansion. These efforts have not only fueled the industry's growth but have also made significant contributions to Turkey's economic progress and employment opportunities (Dijital Dönüşüm Ofisi, 2023).

The inception of the gaming industry in Turkey can be traced back to the early 2000s, with the establishment of Sobee in the year 2000. Sobee emerged as a prominent company specializing in the development of computer-based games, marking a significant milestone in the Turkish gaming landscape. Transitioning to the 2010s, Sanalika emerged as a notable player in the Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) category, rapidly amassing a user base of 1 million individuals and solidifying its position as one of the key entities in the gaming sector during that period. The founder of Sanalika subsequently ventured into founding Gram Games, a move that propelled the company to become one of the major gaming startups in Turkey at the time. This strategic evolution underscored the entrepreneurial spirit and innovative drive prevalent in the Turkish gaming industry during this era. Concurrently, Peak Games experienced substantial growth between 2009 and 2012, leveraging the burgeoning popularity of games on prevalent social media platforms (Dijital Dönüşüm Ofisi, 2023).

As the landscape of gaming evolved and witnessed a shift towards mobile platforms, Peak Games adeptly pivoted its focus towards mobile gaming, laying the groundwork for the development of mobile games that would eventually captivate hundreds of millions of users. This strategic shift exemplified the adaptability and foresight of Peak Games in responding to the dynamic trends within the gaming industry, thereby positioning itself as a key player in the mobile gaming segment. The exodus of 80 former employees from Peak Games, the preeminent gaming entity in Turkey, culminated in the establishment of 65 startups, with a notable 28 of these

ventures concentrating on the gaming sector (Sirt, 2022). This proliferation of startups not only facilitated the dissemination of expertise within the ecosystem but also accelerated the pace of innovation and development within the Turkish gaming industry.

Remarkably, several of these startups ascended to unicorn status which is about reaching within a mere 23-month timeframe, underscoring the rapid growth and success achieved by these emerging enterprises. For example, the mobile game “Royal Match,” developed by Dream Games, a pioneering unicorn technology startup in Turkey, achieved a remarkable milestone in 2023 by emerging as the highest revenue-generating mobile game globally. This accomplishment not only underscores the innovative prowess and entrepreneurial acumen of Dream Games but also highlights the transformative impact of Turkish startups on the international gaming landscape (Hürriyet, 2023). Furthermore, investors who had previously backed Rollic Games, a notable player in the Turkish gaming landscape that was acquired just 21 months after its inception, embarked on establishing a fund aimed at replicating the model of swift exits and sustainable growth across the startups they supported. This strategic initiative not only bolstered the entrepreneurial ecosystem but also catalyzed the adoption of a growth-oriented approach among emerging startups, thereby fostering a culture of rapid expansion and success within the Turkish gaming industry (Dijital Dönüşüm Ofisi, 2023).

Upon thorough examination of the revenue allocation within the Turkish gaming market across distinct segments, a prevailing pattern emerges, revealing that the most substantial revenue share, totaling \$315 million, is derived from mobile games. Subsequently, PC gaming accounts for \$145 million, while console gaming trails with \$120 million in revenue. This delineation underscores the pronounced dominance of mobile gaming in revenue generation within the Turkish gaming industry, followed by PC and console gaming, respectively (Gaming in Turkey, 2023).

Upon scrutinizing the distribution of players across diverse gaming platforms, it becomes apparent that mobile gaming commands the largest player engagement, boasting a user base of 44 million individuals. In comparison, PC gaming attracts 20 million players, while console gaming entices participation from 11 million individuals. When the demographic characteristics of mobile gamers in Turkey are

analyzed, it is seen that gamers in the 18-35 age group play more mobile games. It was found that more than 25 percent of mobile gamers spend at least one to two hours a day on mobile games. The preferred genres among mobile gamers encompass casual games, simulation games, and action games, in that order of popularity. Also, Turkish players play mobile games to enjoy, to relax, to feel free, to progress, to create, to accomplish and to socialize. (Gaming in Turkey, 2023).

1.6.4. The Effects of Playing Digital Games

Digital games have become a widely embraced pastime among various age groups. While younger players often engage in gaming for fun, middle-aged individuals might turn to it for relaxation or to fill their free time. Additionally, elderly people sometimes play digital games to keep their minds sharp and potentially ward off conditions like dementia. The ever-changing virtual worlds in these games offer a wide range of possibilities. Nonetheless, there is an ongoing debate about how these virtual experiences influence players' real lives. This discussion continues to examine the effects of video gaming on players' well-being, weighing both the potential benefits and drawbacks (Bean, 2020: p.81).

1.6.4.1. Positive Effects of Playing Digital Games

Granic et al. (2014: pp.66–73) highlight that digital games offer numerous benefits across cognitive, motivational, emotional, and social dimensions. Cognitively, digital games improve attention, focus, spatial skills, problem-solving abilities, and creativity by involving players in tasks that require strategic thinking and quick information processing. Feng et al. (2007:850) support this by showing that action digital games can reduce gender differences in spatial cognition, which is important for fields like math and engineering. Similarly, Dale et al. (2020: 2) found that regular gamers have superior hand-eye coordination, underscoring the cognitive benefits of gaming.

Motivationally, digital games build resilience, persistence, goal-setting, and a proactive approach to challenges as players overcome obstacles. In a literature review study conducted by Reynaldo et al. (2021: 211), digital games have been proven to improve cognitive skills and decision-making. Cognitive skills such as perception,

attentional control and decision-making were found to improve when subjects were trained with digital games. Depending on the type of digital games, Real-time strategy (RTS) players outperformed first-person shooter (FPS) players in cognitive flexibility, while FPS players tended to have lower switching costs at work. Professionals such as nurses and doctors have been found to show improved decision-making and risk assessment when trained with serious simulation games. High school and undergraduate students who played digital games showed better results when given tasks related to cognitive abilities compared to students who did not play digital games. Dobrowolski et al. (2021: 408) also found that real-time strategy games improve perceptual, attentional, and executive functioning, demonstrating that these games cultivate important motivational traits.

Emotionally, digital games help regulate mood, build emotional resilience, and provide a safe outlet for expression and stress relief. Sarsenbayeva et al. (2020:755) found that people use digital games to manage emotions and socialize with friends, supporting the emotional benefits noted by Granic et al. Socially, multiplayer and online games promote prosocial behavior, improve communication and social skills, and foster a sense of community. Cheryl K. Olson (2015:39-43) found that digital games help children and teens cope with boredom, loneliness, and emotional stress. They also provide a safe space for experimenting with different identities and roles, helping players see things from various perspectives. Olson also notes that playing with people of different ages helps develop leadership and teamwork skills. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA) report (2023) also found that digital games enable diverse social connections, allowing players to interact with people from different backgrounds, enhancing social skills and fostering community. Additionally, Martinez et al. (2023:1) compared digital games and board games, finding that digital games specifically enhance cognitive abilities. Xiang et al. (2023: 2) emphasized that video game training can improve learning abilities beyond the game context, enhancing attention, perception, and cognition, supporting the broader cognitive, motivational, and emotional benefits of gaming.

1.6.4.2. Negative Effects of Playing Digital Games

While digital games can have some benefits, such as improving hand-eye coordination and problem-solving skills, it can also have negative effects such as physical, mental, social, psychological and digital addiction. Gentile (2011) outlines five dimensions through which digital games can affect players: play duration, game content, play context, game structure, and gameplay mechanics. Each of these dimensions contributes to the diverse and complex impacts of gaming on players. In this section, the negative effects of some of these aspects on gamers will be covered.

Numerous studies have shown that the amount of time spent playing digital games is linked to various negative outcomes. For example, Altıntaş et al. (2019: 491) found that extended gaming is associated with poor sleep quality, highlighting the adverse effects of excessive gaming on sleep. Wang et al. (2019:4) demonstrated that heavy gaming is related to mental health issues such as depression, social anxiety, and problematic behavior. Additionally, Turel et al. (2017:1) revealed potential connections between gaming habits, poor sleep, sweet drink consumption, and obesity in children and adolescents. Additionally, Brunborg et al. (2013: 27) emphasized that the excessive amount of time spent on digital games causes depression, more alcohol consumption, and lower academic achievement.

The surge in video game popularity has also seen a rise in gaming addiction, where individuals excessively play games despite negative consequences. This addiction has been linked to various mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts (Wenzel et al., 2009; Rehbein et al., 2010; Van Roji et al., 2010; Choo et al., 2010; Mentzoni et al., 2011). In digital games, the content of play includes the themes, stories, characters, settings, and plotlines players experience. It involves the visual, audio, and written elements that enhance the player's overall experience and immersion. Research on the content of digital games, especially violent ones, has consistently shown negative effects. According to Prot et al. (2012:649-652), digital games can increase aggression, positive attitudes toward violence, anger, and hostility, while decreasing empathy, prosocial behavior, and academic performance. The context in which games are played, including the setting, environment, and circumstances, also significantly impacts players' behaviors, emotions, and

perceptions. Mahood and Hanus (2017:61) found that playing characters who commit immoral actions in games can lead to feelings of guilt and shame, especially when players are deeply engaged in the narrative.

1.7. Theoretical Roots of Game Studies: Ludology and Narratology

In the inaugural issue of *Game Studies*, Espen Aarseth referred to 2001 as “the first year of computer game studies,” marking it as a pivotal moment when academia began recognizing digital games as a legitimate cultural domain. Although early games like *Spacewar!* were created forty years earlier, and commercial games had been around for three decades, the process of establishing digital games as an academic discipline or what Aarseth (2006) called an “academic field” was a protracted endeavor. Central to this effort was the question of which disciplines, methodologies, and theoretical tools were appropriate for studying games. Within this context, the debate between two major schools of thought in game studies, ludology and narratology, became a defining discussion, shaping the field's foundations. The “Ludology-Narratology Debate,” which emerged in the 1990s, examines the ontological assumptions about what games are and considers which theoretical approaches are most suitable for analyzing them (Karadeniz, 2017: 59).

Ludology is a term with varying interpretations within game studies and research. It can denote (1) the general study of games, (2) a specific methodological approach to game research, or (3) a movement active between 1998 and 2001. Gonzalo Frasca (1999) introduced ludology into computer game studies as a methodological proposal to understand the structures and processes that define games. Positioned as a sibling discipline to narratology, which focuses on the structural analysis of narratives, ludology arose during the formative years of game studies prior to the millennium. During this period, researchers from fields such as film, media, and literary studies, driven by the 1990s surge in academic interest in digital media, began forming international networks, often connected to emerging disciplines like hypertext and virtual reality studies (Aarseth, 2023: 255).

Key figures in ludology include Espen Aarseth (1997), Jesper Juul (2001), Markku Eskelinen (2001), and Gonzalo Frasca (2003). Advocates of ludology contend

that games should not be treated as narratives. Instead, they argue that games must be studied on their terms, not as a subset of narrative or digital media. To this end, ludologists have sought to develop a theoretical framework grounded in phenomenology and formalism, aimed at defining the unique structures inherent to games (Karadeniz, 2017: 62).

The study of storytelling in the Western tradition dates back to Aristotle's *Poetics*, but the term "narratology" emerged in the 1960s as a cornerstone of French structuralism. Rather than constituting a singular theory, narratology introduced a paradigm shift by emphasizing that the structural relationships connecting semantic units form a framework of meaning that must be analyzed to understand the events and objects created through that structure. Given that games operate as processes built upon a foundational structure of rules, structuralism has illuminated the connections between games and narrative (Arsenault, 2023:588). Prominent narratologists like Henry Jenkins (2004), Brenda Laurel (1991), and Janet H. Murray (1997) assert that games share a conceptual ecology with narrative-based media, such as novels, films, and drama. This perspective supports the idea that analytical tools designed for traditional narrative media can be adapted, with modifications informed by empirical evidence, to study games (Karadeniz, 2017: 62).

Brenda Laurel's *Computers as Theatre* (1991) exemplifies one of the earliest applications of narratology to game studies. Laurel proposed that computers are particularly suited to represent actions that can be observed, controlled, and played. She argued that the unique potential of computers lies not in their computational capacity but in their ability to depict actions in which users can participate. From this perspective, she likened computers to theater, framing the user as both an actor and an audience member (1-17). Similarly, Murray (1997) noted that narratives began adopting multiform structures, allowing for multiple pathways even before the advent of digital media. She argued that digital narratives emerged as part of a trajectory of narrative technologies, each serving as a precursor to the next (28-29). For Murray, games represent a link in this chain, exemplified by her holodeck concept as a form of multiform narrative technology.

These examples demonstrate that narratology approaches games by situating them within the context of other storytelling media, viewing them as part of a shared

ecological framework. While this approach acknowledges the distinctive qualities of digital media, the portrayal of games as interactive narratives has faced criticism from ludologists, who advocate for a unique theoretical approach to studying games. This ongoing debate underscores the tension between understanding games as extensions of narrative media and recognizing them as distinct entities requiring their frameworks.



CHAPTER II

EXPLORING HATE SPEECH: DEFINITIONS, ONLINE PRESENCE, AND IMPACT ON DIGITAL GAMES

2.1. The Concept of Discourse

The term “discourse” originates from the Latin *discursus*, signifying “running to and fro” or “roaming about,” particularly in the context of communication. While its literal meaning pertains to articulating and exchanging ideas and thoughts through language, the term has been adapted in academic discourse to encompass a broader spectrum of interpretations. Within scholarly contexts, discourse may refer to linguistic units extending beyond individual sentences, sets of utterances within specific contexts, specialized terminological systems, or codified representations of knowledge within a particular domain. Furthermore, it can denote social practices tied to professional activities, such as classroom instruction, journalistic practices, or job interviews. Despite the diversity of interpretations, discourse is generally understood as the interplay between language and social action (Chiang, 2015: 3).

Foucault (1972) conceptualized “discursive formations” as structured patterns characterized by identifiable orders, correlations, roles, and transformations among objects, statements, concepts, and themes. According to Foucault, discourse delineates what can be said or thought, determining who is authorized to speak, under what circumstances, and with what legitimacy. These discourses embody meanings and social relationships, shaping individual subjectivities and power dynamics. Foucault argued that discourse does not merely describe objects but actively constructs them, often obscuring the mechanisms of their creation. Beyond spoken language, discourse also shapes written communication. It influences diverse aspects of life, from visual representations and architectural designs to artistic expressions and the structures of social institutions (Foucault, 1972, 38–51).

Van Dijk’s contributions to critical discourse analysis (CDA) have profoundly influenced the exploration of language, power, and social context. His model integrates three analytical dimensions: macrostructure, microstructure, and mesostructure. Macrostructure examines overarching themes and topics within a discourse,

microstructure focuses on linguistic features such as syntax and semantics, and mesostructure addresses the interconnections within a text that contribute to its overall meaning (Sarány, 2024; Nursanti and Triyono, 2022). Central to Van Dijk's CDA is the role of context, which he defines as encompassing cultural, social, and cognitive dimensions that shape both the production and interpretation of discourse. This framework allows researchers to investigate how societal structures and ideologies are embedded in and perpetuated through language. For instance, studies utilizing CDA have highlighted how political discourse constructs ideologies and manipulates public opinion (Suparto, 2023; Fayruza et al., 2021). Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach underscores the interaction between individual cognition and social structures, framing discourse as a contested space where ideological struggles and power dynamics are negotiated (Sarány, 2024; Zhao, 2016).

This analytical framework has also been applied to contemporary media, including social media and journalism. Van Dijk's approach has been pivotal in examining how media discourse employs rhetorical strategies, such as fear appeals, to influence social behavior during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers have demonstrated the strategic use of language in shaping public responses and instilling fear (Rovino et al., 2021; Mukhlis et al., 2020). Additionally, this approach has proven effective in analyzing the construction and contestation of ideologies in dynamic online spaces, where discourse rapidly evolves and reflects diverse perspectives (Musri, 2023).

In a complementary analysis, Çınar (2013: 138) describes discourse as a fundamental tool through which modern power structures establish, reinforce, and legitimize themselves. Discourse is often used interchangeably with ideology, and Althusser's theoretical framework further elucidates this connection, suggesting that ideology positions individuals as subjects, fostering an illusion of autonomy in decision-making. Power shapes cognitive frameworks through discourse, enabling the reproduction and normalization of ideologies in everyday practices (Zhao, 2016 Abdelwahab, 2023). As a result, discourse plays a crucial role in addressing issues such as ideology, racism, and ethnic prejudice. For example, hate speech is both constructed and disseminated through ideologies rooted in racism and bias, while

discrimination is often articulated in verbal or written forms by dominant groups advocating hegemonic ideologies (Matamoros Fernandez and Farkas, 2021; Munir and Ahmed, 2024)

2.2. The Definition of Hate Speech

The feeling of hate is deep-rooted in human beings. When hatred embraces a part of an ideology, a person or group of people starts to select one side and create “the other” that is imposed by that ideology. In this case, hate becomes a part of identity that defines itself through the hated group (Çayır, 2010: 48). The feeling of hatred created by discrimination based on characteristics such as gender, ethnic identity, skin color, religion, and culture reveals the concept of hate speech (Boyle, 2001: 489). Hate speech is controversial; its definition varies across time and place (Gelber and McNamara, 2016: 324). We decided to focus on this section to show how hate speech has been grasped and defined. We first propose a historical analysis of this phenomenon by laws that shed light on the transition in hate speech definitions across time and institutions. Secondly, we cover academics' popular definitions of hate speech and then focus on online platforms' attempts to define hate speech.

2.2.1 Legal Attempts to define hate speech

There are national and international efforts to adopt standards for hate speech. The first international treaty explicitly dealing with the issue of hate speech was adopted in 1965 by the United Nations General Assembly. The treaty called the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, contains a general obligation about hate speech in Article 4. According to General Assembly resolution 2106 (1965:3), states are required to “*condemn all propaganda and all organizations which accept the superiority of group of persons of one race, one color or ethnic origin, or which pursuit to advocate or encourage racial hatred and discrimination in any form, and take positive precautions to eradicate all incitement or acts of such discrimination.*”

In the following years, The Council of Europe (CoE) Committee of Ministers suggested broad definitions of hate speech. In 1997, recommendation No. R(97) describes hate speech as a term that includes “*all types of expression which spread,*

trigger, support or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, antisemitism or other types of hatred based on intolerance, including prejudice directed by oppressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination, and antagonism against minorities, migrants, and people of migrant origin.” (Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, 1997: 107) In this sense, comments directed against a person or a particular group of people and arousing hatred are considered hate speech.

In 2015, The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) within The Council of Europe (CoE) attempted to recommend a more comprehensive definition of hate speech. According to ECRI General Policy Recommendation No. 15 (2015:3), hate speech is *“the advocacy, promotion or incitement of any type of hatred against a person or group of persons.”* Also, *“any harassment, insult, negative stereotyping, stigmatization or threat directed to a person or group of persons due to their race, color, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, language, religion or belief, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other characteristics”* are evaluated as hate speech. In the beginning, the United Nations General Assembly and Council of Europe evaluated hate speech as a term including *“all forms of expressions that incite, promote, or justify all types of hatred based on race, color, or ethnic origin.”* However, The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) contributes to developing classifications about hate speech, including age, disability, language, religion or belief, sex, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

A growing number of countries also regulate hate speech in their criminal codes. Waldron’s 2012 book, *“The Harm in Hate Speech”*, covered the hate speech regulations in Canada, Denmark, Germany, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. The definitions of hate speech in these regulations reflect how each society embraces various aspects of hate speech. In Canada, public statements that arouse hatred against an identifiable group and hurt a breach of peace in groups are prohibited. Denmark has had a specific prohibition against hate speech. The statements that threaten, deride, or degrade a group of people due to that race, the color of their skin, or national or ethnic background are defined as hate speech in Denmark. In Germany, the attacks on identifiable groups by insulting, calumniating, or defaming parts of the population are considered hate speech and prohibited. New Zealand has provisions that prohibit hate

speech, similar to Denmark's law. Words that are insulting, abusive, or threatening to a group of persons or create hostility against those groups because of their skin color, race, or ethnic or national, or ethnic origins are defined as hate speech and prohibited. The use of threatening, abusive, or insulting words or behavior that incites racial hatred is prohibited by the United Kingdom's laws (Waldron, 2012: 8). In the Turkish legal system, provoking hatred or hostility that creates danger and threatening for a group of people based on social class, race, or religion is prohibited by Article 216 of the Criminal Law (Aydınlı, 2021: 5). As is evident, all of the regulations deal with the use of words that are intentionally abusive, insulting, or threatening directed at the members of vulnerable minorities, trying to incite hatred against them.

2.2.2. Academic Attempts to Define Hate Speech

Academics also define hate speech through different approaches. Their particular motivations generally shape their definition of hate speech. Some academic community members do not openly rely on legal sanctions for such speech. It investigates solely to figure out the phenomenon. In contrast, some other academics try to make the speech illegal and are making efforts to advise legislators and courts to use adequate legal language. Some are undecided (Sellars, 2016: 15).

According to Sellar (2016:16), many evaluations of the academic landscape about hate speech start with Richard Delgado's article "Words that Wound." In this article, Delgado focuses on racist speech and discusses why the law should punish racist speech. Offering suggestions against racist speech, Delgado comes up with a definition that would be necessary for the plaintiff to convince: "*Defendant used language that intended to insult through the race; that the plaintiff perceived as aimed at insulting through reference to race; and that a logical person would identify racial insult.*" (Delgado, 1982: 179) With this definition, Delgado focuses on the speaker's intent, the impact of speech, and the objective perception of the recipient.

Mary J. Matsuda (1989) takes inspiration from Delgado's work and makes further suggestions regarding criminal matters. This suggestion moves between two critical points. The first is focusing on the effects of hate speech on victims. The second is the relationship between law and free speech. Three characteristics of racial hate speech are suggested by Matsuda: (1) the message is "of racial inferiority" in which it

denies the personhood of target group members, and (2) the message is “directed against a historically oppressed group.” This process is a mechanism of subordination. It reinforces a historical vertical relationship. (3) the message is “prosecutorial, hateful, and degrading.” The third element is related to the language intended to direct prosecutorial, hateful, and degrading words against target group members (Matsuda, 1989, pp. 2357–2358). The common point between Matsuda and Delgado is that they both engage in racial hate speech. The intention of the speaker or language is also a common determinant for identifying racial hate speech.

Calvin Massey (1992) and Mayo Moran (1994) also discussed the definition of hate speech. Matsuda’s definition was adequate for determining their hate speech definitions. According to Calvin Massey (1992: 105), hate speech is *“any form of speech that causes harm such as loss of self-esteem, economic and social subordination, physical or mental tension, the spiral of silence, and exclusion from the political arena.”* In this definition, he emphasized the outcomes of hate speech. However, Mayo Moran (1994) deals with the promotion of hate speech in her definition. Hate speech is defined as *“intended to promote hatred against traditionally hatred groups”* by Mayo Moran (1994: 1430).

Kenneth Ward (1997) puts forward a further analysis of hate speech. He defines hate speech as *“any form of expression through which speakers primarily intend to vilify, humiliate, or incite hatred against their targets”* (Ward, 1997: 765). The concept of primary intention in this definition refers to the desire of speakers to communicate ideas with the target audience or the desire of speakers to injure their victims. This is explained as a blend of intents mentioned by Matsuda and Moran. In their definition, the speech is hateful and incites societal hatred (Sellars, 2016: 17).

Pankowski (2007: 1) offered a broad definition of hate speech. He also deals with hate speech in the media. He defines hate speech as a *“discourse aimed at discrediting, threatening, or inciting violence or bias against an individual or group of individuals coming from different races, ages, genders, nationalities, religions, sexual orientations, gender identities, disabilities, languages, moral or political views, socioeconomic class, occupation or appearance, mental capacity, and any other*

similar features.” He states that hate speech is seen in written and oral communication and visual communication, including in the mass media or on the internet

Raphael Cohen-Almagor (2011) engaged directly with Ward’s definition, explicitly focusing on the target audience of hate speech and the intent element in hate speech. He defines hate speech as *“bias-motivated, hostile, malicious speech targeting an individual or a group of individuals due to their actual or perceived innate features.”* He notes that hate speech contains discriminatory, intimidating, or prejudicial attitudes against features such as gender, race, religion, ethnicity, color, national origin, disability, or sexual orientation. The intent of these attitudes in hate speech is actually to injure, dehumanize, harass, intimidate, debase, degrade, and victimize the targeted groups and incite insensitivity and brutality against them. The messages that incite hatred can be in any form of textual, visual, or audio-based rhetoric (Cohen-Almagor, 2011:1-2).

Bhikhu Parekh (2012) addresses the issue of whether a practical definition of hate speech could be sought for the aims of regulation. He proposed a list of eleven instances of speech that may or may not be hate speech, and then he offered a framework for classifying those examples. Then he put forward his hate speech definition. According to Parekh (2012:40), *“expressing, encouraging, stirring up, or inciting hatred against a person or group of persons within a particular set of features such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, nationality, and sexual orientation”* can be assessed as hate speech. He separates the concept of “hatred” from other concepts such as disrespect, dislike, and disapproval. Hatred contains hostility, ill will, severe contempt, rejection, or desire to harm the target group.

Parekh recommends three essential features of hate speech: (1) *“based on an arbitrary and normatively irrelevant trait, it is conducted against a specific or readily identifiable person or a group of persons;”* (2) *“it stigmatizes the target group by indirectly or directly or attributing to it features widely marked as highly undesirable;”* (3) *“target group is recognized as an undesirable presence and legitimate object of hostility due to its negative traits.”* (Parekh, 2012: 41) From these features, he stated that hate speech does not automatically or by definition engender acts of violence or public disorder. Its content and its long-term impact on an

individual or group of individuals are matters rather than its immediate results in terms of public disorder. He also emphasized that hate speech's subtle, moderate, and even blended nature is important because its message is disseminated through ambiguous jokes, innuendoes, and images. The historical and cultural context can effectively determine forms of speech (Parekh, 2012: 41).

Alice Marwick and Ross Miller (2014) focus on extensively scrutinizing existing definitions. They put forward three distinct elements that legislatures and commentators adapt to describe hate speech: a “*content-based element, an intent-based element, and a harm-based element.*” (Marwick and Miller, 2014: 16) The presence of certain symbols and iconography, such as the swastika or burning cross, or words or phrases that are evaluated as abusive by a particular minority, reveal the content based dimension of hate speech. Without communicating legitimate, the subjective intention of the speaker to promote hatred, violence, or resentment against a person associated with a minority, a particular minority, explains the intent-based dimension of hate speech. The third aspect of hate speech, the harm dimension, deals with the victim harm caused by hate speech. As can be seen from hate speech's elements, Marwick and Miller determine these elements by benefitting from previous studies of Calvin Massey and Kenneth Ward. They focus on the symbolic and subjective nature of hate speech. They first emphasized the symbolic feature of content-based hate speech, and then add requirements about the speaker's subjective intent and subjective harm (Marwick and Miller, 2014, 16-17).

2.2.3. Attempts by Online Platforms to Define Hate Speech

Another significant definition of hate speech comes from private online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. They put forward their guidelines to determine hateful content and report it. These attempts also provide insight for scholars. According to Facebook (2022), hate speech includes “*direct assaults against an individual or group of individuals because of their distinctive qualities, such as age, race, national origin, religious affiliation, caste, sexual orientation, sex, gender identity, and serious disabilities or disease.*” Facebook categorizes these attacks as aggressive speech, derogatory words, expressions of scorn, disgust, or dismissal, and calls for segregation or exclusion. In addition to this, attacks

are divided into three levels of severity. The first level of attack encompasses violent speech, dehumanizing speech, and mocking hate crimes. The second attack level includes statements of inferiority, physical, mental, or moral deficiency, expressing contempt or disgust. The third level of attack covers segregation in the form of calls for action and exclusion in the form of calls for action, such as explicit exclusion, which is about dismissing certain groups or expressing they are not permitted; political exclusion, which is about refusing the right to political participation; economic exclusion, which is about refusing access to economic rights and restraining participation in the labor market; and social exclusion, which is about refusing the rights to access physical and online spaces, social services.

Twitter also takes some precautions to combat hate speech. Twitter accepts hate speech as a *“type of attack or violence against people based on their race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, religious affiliation, age, disability, or serious disease.”* The contents include violent threats against targeted groups, wishing or calling for severe damage to targeted groups, references to genocides or violent events against targeted groups, inciting behavior against targeted groups, targeting others with repeated slurs or tropes, and hateful symbols or images are prohibited by Twitter. Instagram put forward a similar perspective about hate speech to Twitter. Hate speech is defined as an *“attack against people based on their protected characteristics such as race and religion”* by Instagram. With this attempt, Instagram started to prohibit more implicit forms of hate speech, like content portraying common antisemitic tropes. The accounts of users who continue to send abusive messages are banned permanently. YouTube and TikTok also created a policy to prevent hate speech. Both of the platforms evaluate hate speech as *“content that attacks, threatens, promotes violence or hatred against an individual or a group based on their protected attributes such as race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, caste, sexual orientation, sex, gender, gender identity, serious disease, disability, immigration status”* and remove hateful content from their platform.

After investigating the attempts to define hate speech by different actors, there are common patterns to define hate speech found among them. Firstly, there is always the target of hate speech. This target can be a group or an individual as a group member

with different characteristics such as race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, or any other similar common factor that is fundamental to the identity. Secondly, to meet the definition of hate speech, the content of the message should contain hatred. Thirdly, there are consequences, such as harm arising from hate speech. Fourthly, scholars have evaluated the intention of the speaker to harm the target audience as one of the key determinants of hate speech. Fifthly, hate speech can be disseminated through expressions and hateful symbols or images. The definition of hate speech adopted as the knowledge base in this study is the following: Hate speech is a form of expression, symbol, or image intended to promote hatred against a group or an individual as a member of a group based on their protected characteristics such as race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, caste, sexual orientation, sex, gender, gender identity, age, severe disease, disability, immigration status.

2.3. Types of Hate Speech

Hate speech is a widespread phenomenon in which it tries to promote hatred against diversified target audiences. As can be seen from hate speech definitions by different actors in the previous section, the target audiences expose hate speech because of their protected characteristics such as race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, caste, sexual orientation, sex, gender, gender identity, age, severe disease, disability, the immigration status. This means that anyone other than “me” or “us” has the potential to be the target of hate speech. However, the emergence of this potential requires the existence of political, economic, social, cultural, or psychological dynamics. Therefore, addressing the target groups in a general framework is difficult since hate speech covers a wide area. In the research of Tuğrul Çomu and Mutlu Binark (2013:209) called *Hate Speech in New Media Environments*, hate speech is classified under six headings that are listed as “political hate speech, hate speech against women, hate speech against foreigners and immigrants, hate speech based on gender identity, hate speech based on belief and sect, and hate speech against people with disabilities and various diseases. Based on Çomu and Binark’s work and previous hate speech definitions put forward by different actors, we created a classification system dealing with hate speech types in this study. The topics of hate speech are classified as follows:

Political hate speech, Racist Speech, Gender-based hate speech, Anti-LGBTQ+ Hate Speech, Religious hate speech, Disability or Severe Disease Hate Speech.

When the topic of hate speech listed above is considered, it can be seen that the common feature is related to the concepts of “identity” and “other.” Identity is a multifaceted and complex field. William E. Connolly (2002) defines identity in his book “Identity-Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox” as a concept that needs difference to exist and transforms difference into otherness to secure its certainty. There are two types of identity: personal and collective. Personal identity refers to the subjective sense of self related to unique personal characteristics. However, collective identity can be defined as how people define themselves about others and the outside world. Collective identity is connected to an individual's self-definition and relationship with specific groups or roles (Franco-Zamudio and Dorton, 2014: 257).

Collective identity is built within sociality and creates the concept of “other” (Karaduman, 2010: 2888). The other refers to “being the one remaining or not included.” (AbdulMagied, 2020: 7). According to Staszak (2008:1), the “Other” is the person “opposing to us, the self, and them,” and it means the continuation of stigmatization and exclusion from society. Faults describe other, devalued, and susceptible to discrimination. The concept of “Other” differs from “otherness and othering.” Othering is a term that is associated with the idea of identity. A person's identity generally impacts a person being othered (Dervin, 2016). Otherness is a consequence of a discursive action by which a dominant in the group (“Us,” the self) creates one or several dominant out-groups (“Them,” Other) by incusing a difference - real or imagined- conferred as a denial of identity and hence an intention for possible discrimination (Staszak, 2008: 2). Identical characteristics such as ethnic identity, sexual orientation, religious belief, politics, having severe disease, and disability can have an impact on the idea of otherness in a group.

2.3.1. Political Hate Speech

One of the essential practices of hate speech is “othering.” In this process, social life, political, economic, and cultural fields can be determinative, as well as the ideological structure and power relations. In other words, one practice of othering can be not only on identities but also on differences. People outside of the dominant thought are also excluded from the social sphere and marginalized (İnceoğlu and Çoban, 2014: 55). A person with a particular ideological orientation that is not included in “me and us” is evaluated as “other” in society. The other is defined not in terms of what it is but in terms of what it is not. The relationship between “me” and “other” that is constructed through political and ideological identities can have the potential to cause hate speech and “othering.”

Political hate speech is a type of hate speech that targets a political thought or its followers and aims to create pressure on the followers with a specific political thought (Çomu and Binark, 2013: 209; İnceoğlu and Çoban, 2014: 55). In this process, the pressure is formed through a language. Words, phrases, speech styles, and expressions are significant tools for forming hate discourse against followers with specific ideological orientations. Negative labeling, stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory practices against followers with a specific political view are major players in the emergence of hate speech (Poshka, 2018: 90)

Various democratic and political structures can strengthen hostility and prejudice against others (Castano-Pulgarin et al., 2021: 3). Several unexpected political results since 2016 around the world, including the UK’s vote to leave the European Union, the electoral triumph of Donald Trump in the US, and the increase in far-right parties in Europe, have partially led to exclusionary sentiments related to immigration and national identity. The circulation of these events worldwide has posed widespread concerns associated with increased polarization and intolerance in public speech (Murphy, 2022: 50). Primarily, the term populism refers to a thin-centered ideology that accounts for society eventually divided into two group homogenous and antagonistic groups: “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite,” and discusses that politics must be the voice of the general will of the people, increased the demonization of minorities such as immigrants, and asylum seekers (Mudde, 2004:543, Akbaba,

2018:210). The presidential campaign of Donald Trump could have created an appeal to individuals drawn to hateful ideologies. In Saunidiin et al. (2019:34) research, a significant number of retweeters of hateful ideologies were presented on Trump's Twitter network, such as anti-immigrant, anti-muslim, anti-government, neo-nazi, alt-right, white-nationalist, and anti-LGBT.

Hateful rhetoric by political figures may have the potential to be key antecedents of racist attitudes, aggression or support for discrimination, and hate crimes. In several pieces of research, it is found that the political violence between aggressive individuals and among strong partisans is increased due to the use of violent metaphors by politicians (Kalmoe, 2014; Kalmoe et al., 2018). In addition to this, multiple studies showed that people who are exposed to racially prejudiced statements by President Trump are more likely to express racist speech against minorities and others (Crandall et al, 2018). Moreover, a relatively large number of studies have investigated whether there is a relationship between President Trump's rhetoric and hate crimes in the United States. In the research of Müller and Schwarz (2018:36), it is seen that Trump's tweets for the period after the start of his presidential campaign are connected with the incidence of anti-Muslim hate crimes. Edwards and Rushin (2018:1) find that President Trump's election is related to the significant increase in reported hate crimes across the United States. In a similar study, Chyzh et al. (2019:263) reported that Trump's political message leads to whites' sense of threat and prejudice against racial, ethnic, and religious minorities.

2.3.2. Racist Hate Speech

Before explaining racist hate speech, one should consider its extent. The scope of racist hate speech consists of race, ethnicity, religion or belief, color, migrant status, and other characteristics (Ghanea, 2012: 6). In our study, the scope of racist hate speech is constrained. The three features of targets, including their race, ethnicity, and migrant status, encompass the scope of racist speech in our study.

We should first try to explain the terms "race" and "ethnicity" because these terms are sometimes misused or used interchangeably. The concept of race is associated with the biological realm and has historically been used to distinguish socially described human categories. Skin color, hair type, face, skull type, and genetic

ancestry are evaluated as the most common differences. Skin color is extensively preferred to be used as one of the features that define race. Skin color is also not accepted as the only determinant of race that defines ancestry among racially mixed people like the Brazilian population. In contrast to race, ethnicity is related to the cultural realm. Linguistic and cultural inclinations and genetic resemblance identify ethnicity. Ethnic communities frequently affirm having different social and political structures and a territory (Santos et al., 2010: 124).

These characteristics of race and ethnicity lead many people to expose racial hate speech by others. Racial hate speech is defined as degrading sentiments about or stances towards people based on their race in order 1) directly to cause psychological damage to them or 2) to provoke in third parties animosity or hatred against them. In other words, hate speech is evaluated as the most explicit statement of the sort of animosity that promotes racial discrimination and violence, short of acts themselves, and it points out its targets the existence of these attitudes and behavioral inclinations in the speaker (West, 2012: 233). In racist hate speech, a person or group of persons with specific innate characteristics are evaluated as “other” and associated with negative behaviors (Oliver, 2003: 3). According to Zerrougui (2005:155), the imprisonment of ethnic and racial minorities is probably more than that of other ethnic groups. For instance, black men are imprisoned eight times more than white men in the United States. Black women are imprisoned eight times more than white women, and Hispanics are four times more than white. Children of minority backgrounds are arrested and held in youth custody centers more.

The media also reinforces the criminalization of racial and ethnic minorities. Media can shape attitudes towards ethnic, national, religious, or social groups with portrayals. In this process, it can be friend or foe to promote racial and social equality. Media can sometimes construct bridges between minorities and the majority by introducing minorities’ understanding of backgrounds, cultures, and religions. In contrast, it sometimes becomes the source of arousing negative views and hostility against minorities. For example, the media is used as an effective tool to disseminate nationalism, anti-Semitism, racism, and xenophobia during the Nazi regime (Sorensen, 2005: 165). In Turkey, it is found that hate speech targeting ethnic, religious, and

gender groups is distributed through media, textbooks, and politicians. It is accepted as “normal” (Arcan, 2013: 44). The research of Gençoğlu (2015:121) shows that the Kurdish community in Turkey is exposed to highly discriminatory, exclusionary, and marginalizing discourse in social media entries by creating dominance of an “us versus them.” In similar research, Kurds, Alevis, Jews, and Armenians are seen as the most common targets of hate speech on Twitter (Karaman and Işıklı, 2016: 141). Deveci and Binboğa (2019:39) also emphasized that the attitude of the Turkish judiciary is biased toward hate speech in some cases due to nationalistic bias. However, Kurds and Gypsies face clear types of hate speech.

As governments struggle with the new facts of their multi-ethnic societies, racism and violence against migrants, refugees, and other non-nationals have also been noticeably increased in many parts of the world by extremist groups (Riaz et al., 2024). The ongoing COVID-19 health and economic crisis also exacerbates the stigmatization of excluded populations in many countries, and the media have become the prominent tool of dissemination of propagation and space for performing racist attitudes (Arcila-Calderon et al., 2022: 22). Media plays a crucial role in emphasizing human rights and managing the rising diversity in society (Wolfermann, 2010). Especially when reporting on refugees and asylum seekers, the media has enormous potential to shape public attitudes. Media contributes to increasing prejudice and discriminatory attitudes against refugees and asylum seekers among the public with different representations (Georgiou and Zaborowski, 2017: 3). Several representations of refugees and asylum seekers in the media were observed in academic literature. Refugees and migrants are portrayed in media with frames of “needing help,” “victim,” “pain, sadness and despair,” “crime,” “threat,” “problem” to society, and “violence” (Klocker et al., 2003; KhosraviNik, 2010; Lueck et al., 2015; Parker, 2015; Ferreira et al, 2017; Vezovnik and Sariç, 2018; Amores et al., 2019).

Turkey is one of the countries that hosts a vast number of refugees. According to the Operational Data Portal (2025), 2,814,402 million Syrian refugees are registered in Turkey. The devastating harm of the COVID-19 pandemic and devaluation fuelling a 20-year inflation rate in Turkey have challenged Turkish citizens. Turkey became politically polarized (Akboğa et al., 2023). Significantly, the statements of various

political leaders, such as Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who is the head of the Republican People's Party, and Ümit Özdağ, who is the head of the Zafer Party, about Syrian refugees made Syrian refugees live in panic and caution. Kılıçdaroğlu said that “return all Syrian brothers to their country in two years in his Presidential election program. Ümit Özdağ mentioned that “all Turkey's problems will be fixed after Syrian refugees return home” in his political program (North Press Agency, 2022). This situation is promoted by Turkish mainstream media coverage of the Syrian population. Many researchers focusing on the coverage of Syrian refugees in media find that Syrians are represented as main victims, the burden on the economy, or a threat to society (Doğanay and Çoban Keneş, 2016; Narlı et al., 2019; Pandır, 2019; Çakıcı, 2020). The discriminative rhetoric of political leaders and manipulative media representation regarding Syrian refugees also exacerbated discriminative language and “xenophobia” on social media. The study of Ozduzen, Korkut, and Ozduzen (2021:3356) shows that the superiority of the Turkish race is favored over Syrians and/or Arabs on Twitter. %85 of tweets contain racist attitudes against the cultural life of Syrians compared to Turks. To raise the tension between refugees and Turkish citizens, there has been much misleading content about refugees on social media platforms. In a recent study, Erbayşal Filibeli and Ertuna (2021:2246) examined comments made under the most viral content related to Syrian refugees on Facebook. They found that users criticize, discriminate, and judge Syrian refugees, state policies, and people who support Syrians with sarcastic rhetoric.

Consequently, ethnic minorities and migrants are the groups that expose highly discriminatory language and hate speech nowadays. The severe pandemic conditions, the ongoing economic crisis around the world, increasing political tension in many countries, and the reflection of these crises have partially accelerated intolerance, racism, or xenophobia against ethnic minorities and migrants. To combat racist speech, states should improve their national strategies and establish long-term actions based on human rights principles. There should be cooperation between states, independent human rights institutions, and civil society to provide effective solutions for overcoming racist hate speech (Marsal et al., 2020:29-31).

2.3.3. Gendered Hate Speech

The phenomenon of gender hate speech is discussed with various names such as “sexist hate speech,” “hate speech based on sex or gender,” “gendered hate speech,” and “hate speech against women” (Sękowska-Kozłowska and Baranowska, 2022: 2328). In this study, we use gendered hate speech due to its comprehensiveness. Gendered hate speech is an expression that is built upon gender or sex. The term “sex” is related to biological components that describe males and females. People are classified into one type or another, such as man or woman, with the term “sex.” However, “gender” is associated more with social and psychological aspects (Howson, 2004: 40). Besides it is related to hierarchies between man and woman and is culturally determined and variable. It is emphasized that femininity and masculinity are related to gender, and they are all learned through our practices rather than inborn. Gender has an impact on how we perceive society, as well as its ideological and cultural background. It affects the division of wealth, decision-making, and political power (Moes, 2019,18-19).

According to The Council of Europe’s Gender Equality Strategy (2016:15), gendered hate speech is a kind of sexist expression, which can be described as any proposition, credence, affirmation, gesture, or act that has a purpose to direct disdain to an individual, grounded on her or his sex or gender, or to account for that individual as lower or necessarily degrade her or his sexual dimension. Chetty and Alathur (2018:113) evaluate gendered hate speech as “sexist hate speech,” which is a sort of social shaming that aims at insulting women and creates fear and insecurity among women in society. The target of this kind of hate speech is generally women and girls. Women and girls are exposed to intentional violence in the world because of their gender identity. The insufficiency of the existing legal structures and various cultural and traditional systems have expedited society's gendered attitudes and behaviors (Venditto et al., 2022:446). In traditional society, there are certain gender stereotypes assigned to women and men about their physical and behavioral features. Women are connected with strict and consistent “feminine roles,” while men are portrayed as having “masculine roles.” These patterns in a patriarchal society have an impact on the limitation of the behavior of women and reinforce stereotypes. The social power

structure in a patriarchal society is sanctioned through principles such as language, clothing, work, and family relationships and reinforces sexism (Llanco et al., 2021).

Gendered hate speech can be seen in many forms online and offline in all sorts of social interaction, such as at school, in public, via e-mails, websites, social media, etc. (Cangemi, 2020: 150). These forms of gendered hate speech are propagated through short messages, song lyrics, gestures, art, and images (Gagliardone et al., 2014:6). The easy availability of the Internet, the rapid evolution of information and communication technologies have provided a new dimension for the expression and transmission of gendered online hate speech to large audiences (Elias and Gurbanova, 2018: 273). Gendered online hate speech consists of two forms of gender bias: "Hostile sexist gender bias" and "Benevolent gender bias." Hostile sexist gender bias comprises negative prejudice against one gender. The statement "women cannot think logically as men" can set an example for hostile sexist gender bias (Glick and Fiske, 1996; Gothreau et al., 2022:3). Benevolent sexist gender bias is associated with positive attitudes that consider one gender stereotypically and limited roles. Reinforcing beliefs like "women are beautiful gender, or men are strong gender" can be an example of benevolent sexist gender bias (Glick and Fiske, 1996; Deak et al., 2021: 1). This lack of gender insensitivity is especially reproduced within social media platforms more than before because of the interactive nature of social media platforms. Wotanis and McMillan's (2014:924) and Döring and Mohseni's (2020:64) research demonstrated that female YouTubers received more negative video comments, including sexist hate speech, than male YouTubers. Besides, their physical appearance was commented on more positively than their personality and video content. A recent study showed that women are three times more likely to be victims of online sexual harassment compared to men. In other words, one in two women is exposed to gender-based online harassment (Vogels, 2021).

When it comes to Turkey, it is possible to say that women are confronted with gendered discourses because of the patriarchal structure of Turkish society. Significantly, the institutions of marriage and family are seen as highly patriarchal structures. It is expected that men are the dominant sex, men have to deal with the control of the home, and men are responsible for the perpetuation of the family

structure and lineage. In contrast, women are expected to care for their family members and obey their husbands to protect the family (Sakallı, 2001:601-602). The research of Esen (2007:466) showed that school textbooks prepared under education reform reproduce gender stereotypes that internalize the patriarchal ideology by depicting men and women within their traditional roles. Women are not only represented with gender stereotypes, but also they can expose violence and sexual harassment in Turkey. Bülay Doğan (2021:1) found that women face violence through the category of gender and the instrument of humor in Sour Dictionary as a pioneer digital platform.

In conclusion, gendered hate speech is a widespread phenomenon that is often seen offline and online. Women are exposed to gendered hate speech more than men. Online platforms have been the major conveyors of gendered hate speech, such as social media and digital games. Gendered hate speech on online platforms leads women to experience emotional, social, financial, professional, and political harm (Jane, 2017: 709). That is why the law should be developed to protect the rights of women, and states should cooperate with civil society to take significant precautions to combat gendered hate speech.

2.3.4. Religious Hate Speech

Religious identities can be both the target and the source of hate speech (Bonotti, 2017: 259). In this section, the instances where religion is responsible for hate speech, spreading motivation for the haters for promoting hatred against people because of various characteristics such as sex and sexual orientation, will not be included. It will cover the instances where religion is seen as the target of hate speech. Religious hate speech can simply be defined as inflammatory and sectarian language that incites hatred and violence on the grounds of the religion or belief of the targets of the hate of the victims (Howard, 2017: 63). Religious hate speech takes place at both national and international levels. Religion consists of a group of people, and hate speech against this becomes more harmful than against someone (Chetty and Alathur, 2018: 113).

According to Moon (2018), there are three common targets of religious hate speech: anti-Semitic speech, anti-Christian speech, and anti-Muslim/Islam speech. Castano-Pulgarin et al. (2021:2) note that Islam is the most attacked religion in the

world, and it is motivated by an Islamophobic sentiment amplified by cultural processes of globalization and cyberspace. The terrorist attack in September 2001 has been a notable source of increasing negative attitudes, stereotypes, discrimination, and physical attacks against Muslims (Howard, 2017). Islam is presented as a regressive and violent belief system that is discordant with Western values. (Moon, 2018:20). The common stereotypes and acts of hate speech against Muslim communities are perpetuated through social media platforms. Imran Awan (2016:10) found that Muslims are demonized and vilified on Facebook walls, such as “Muslims are terrorists, Muslims as rapists, Muslim women are a security threat, A war between Muslims, Muslims should be deported.” Törnberg and Turnberg (2016:132) found that Muslims are portrayed as a homogeneous outgroup associated with conflict, violence, and extremism characteristics arising from Islam in Swedish Internet forums. In a similar study, Rahman et al. (2016:223) examined the connection between Islamic culture and the opinions of online readers with sentiment analysis and content analysis. They found that the majority of online readers in Kanada show their opposition to veiling with their comments (51.75%). Vidgen and Yasseri (2020:69) propose a classification that helps researchers examine the content more systematically about Islamophobic content on Twitter as strong Islamophobic content and weak Islamophobic content. They found that in strong Islamophobic content, Muslims are explicitly exposed to opposing views, such as defining Muslims as barbarians, demanding that Muslims be forcibly forbidden from the UK, and spreading hostile emotions such as rage and insecurity. In weak Islamophobic content, Muslims are confronted with an implicit expression of negativity like “Wearing a Burkha does not feel very #UK.”

In Turkey, the Hrant Dink Foundation Hate Speech and Discriminatory Discourse in Media 2019 Report showed that Jews, Christians, and atheists are the main targets of hate speech related to religious identity in the media. The newspapers “Yeni Akit and Milli Gazete” contain more hate speech against Jews and Christians than other newspapers. In addition to this, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee Hate Crimes Based on Religion, Belief or Unbelief in Turkey 2021 Report identified twenty-nine hate crime cases related to religious identity in Turkey. Alevi (12 times),

Christians (10 times), Jews (5 times), and atheists (2 times) were the main targets of hate crimes.

Consequently, religion has a significant role in hate speech cases in which it is either the source or target of hate speech. The circumstances, such as the 9/11 attacks, diversity in cultures, and the proliferation of digital media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc., help to move religious differences to the forefront of the public consciousness. Jews, Christians, Muslims, and atheists have been the main targets of religious hate speech. The inflammatory and sectarian language used against these groups has the potential to promote hostility against those groups. This hostility also can result in hate crime cases. Therefore, there should be borders between freedom of speech and hate speech, and laws should protect them.

2.3.5. Anti-LGBTQ+ Hate Speech

The increasingly conservative and fundamentalist movements around the world are highly using the topic of LGBTQ+ identity, both for politicizing it to assail the argumentation around gender issues or by assigning them as scapegoats in order to reconstruct social or moral values that put diversity in danger in general, and violates LGBTQ+ people's human rights (Council of Europe, 2021:6). As result of these acts, anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech started to be seen more in offline and online spaces. Anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech refers to any language that promotes or incites hostility, discrimination, and violence against any individual or group of people due to their sexual orientation or gender identity (Galop, the LGBT+ anti-abuse charity, 2022). There are terms "homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia" associated with anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech.

Homophobia is defined as "a hostility of intimate and sexual relationship among a person of the same sex and those who do not accept aspects of gender conformity." (Stevenson, 2022). In other words, it is irrational to fear, intolerance, and hatred against sexually diverse people: "lesbian, gay, and bisexual" (Amigo-Ventureira et al., 2022:277). Transphobia is described as a prejudicial attitude against transgender individuals that encompasses negative feelings such as fear, hatred, and disgust in addition to behaviors of violence and aggression (Uluboy and Husnu, 2022: 101). Biphobia, known as antibisexual discrimination depends on the beliefs that

bisexuality is unsteady sexuality and that those distinguished as bisexual are confused and incapable of monogamy (Smout and Benotsch, 2022: 540). LGBTQ+ people are repeatedly under scrutiny in different places, such as at school or in the neighborhood. They are frequently discriminated against or abused because of whom they love or how they look in these spaces (Thurlow, 2001: 25; Barrientos et al., 2010: 760; Chakravarthi et al., 2022: 369). In a similar study, The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2019:3) survey suggests that 40% of LGBTQ+ people experience discrimination at work, at school, at cafes, restaurants, bars, nightclubs, healthcare, or social services.

However, the discriminatory practices against LGBTQ+ that are observed in offline spaces are also reinforced by the online environment. The growth of social media platforms has helped the circulation of homophobic, transphobic, and biphobic content that intends to harm the LGBTQ+ community (Hanckel and Chandra, 2021: 32; Upadhyay, Srivatsa and Mamidi, 2022:276; Singh and Motlicek, 2022: 270). Characravarthi et al. (2022:3) classified hateful content on social media toward the LGBTQ+ community at three levels: homophobic content, transphobic content, and non-anti-LGBTQ+ content. Homophobic content includes any comment involving pejorative labels such as “fag” and “homo” against people belonging gay, lesbian, and bisexual community. Transphobic content involves derogatory labels such as “cross-dresser” and “not manly enough” against people belonging to the transgender community. Non-anti-LGBTQ+ content contains non-aggressive comments and hopeful speeches that criticize anti- LGBTQ+ speeches. These forms of abuse, homophobic/transphobic/biphobic attacks, sexual assaults, and disrespect have negative impacts on people belonging to the LGBTQ+ community, such as poor mental health (Friedriksen-Goldsen et al., 2013: 1802), emotional distress, depression, panic attacks (Nyman and Provozin, 2019: 37), the he feeling of anger, sadness, anxiety, social isolation (Hubbard, 2020: 20), and desensitization (Soral, Bilewicz, and Winiewski, 2018:145).

In Turkey, hate speech against the LGBTQ+ community is disseminated through traditional and digital media. According to Kaos GL Association (2022), anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech is spread through pro-government newspapers such as Yeni

Akit, Yeni Şafak, and Sabah, establishing a relationship between being a member of the LGBTQ+ community and perversion in their news. The speeches of political figures also have been the distributors of homophobic hate speech in Turkey (Muedini, 2021). Hate speech against LGBTQ+ has proliferated on social media platforms. Dondurucu (2018:1387) found that under the headings of “gay, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender” on İnci Sözlük, 63.8% of all messages containing hate speech based on gender identity contain indirect hate speech, and 36.2% contain direct hate speech.

As a result, homophobia, transphobia, and biophobia build upon themselves not only around public spaces like schools, but they are also on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. This hateful content against the LGBTQ+ community in offline and online spaces causes them to experience some psychological problems and even commit suicide. For that reason, there should be taken some precautions to prohibit hate speech and hate crimes against members of LGBTQ+.

2.3.6. Disability or Severe Disease Hate Speech

In this section, we will be covering two different concepts related to identity: “disability” and “severe disease” in terms of hate speech. First of all, disability hate speech will be covered. Then, severe disease hate speech will be focused on. Disability is not directly associated with biological or social constructs; it is a consequence of interactions among health circumstances and environmental and personal factors (World Health Organization, 2012). People with disabilities are faced with hate speech and hate crimes in offline and online settings (Hall, 2019: 309). Disability hate speech includes the manifestation of many types of hateful, harassing, predatory, and hostile forms of utterances in offline and online settings. Using the terms such as “retard,” “spastic,” “cripple,” “gimp,” and “Mongol” can be evaluated as hate speech, and the purpose of using these words is actually to wound disabled people (Sherry, 2019, pp. 40-429). Disabled people are one of the most marginalized groups in Western society. This marginalization causes them exclusion from social life through various drawbacks in psychosocial, cultural, and economic domains (Agmon, Sa’ar, and Araten-Bergman, 2016:2). In addition to marginalization, disabled people are confronted with hate crimes because of being an easy target and limited response to these crimes (Roulstone, Thomas, and Balderston, 2011:351). According to recent data

published by the Fundamental Rights Agency of the European Union (FRA), %50 of disabled people have expressed being harassed over 5 years (European Disability Forum, 2021:2).

People can also suffer from social exclusion because of their severe disease (Richter and Hoffmann, 2019: 427). From a historical perspective, diseases such as “plague,” “leprosy,” and “AIDS” can be given as examples of areas where the “other” occurs. The quarantine rules quoted by Foucault against the plague and leprosy epidemic in the Middle Ages indicate this. According to Foucault, practices against plague, leprosy patients, and the insane can be seen as one of the control and surveillance methods of the hegemonic power. Foucault believed that hegemonic power not only keeps the records of patients with plague and leprosy but also that the victims of the disease are positioned at the center of an administrative system by stigmatizing them as dangerous and unknowable. (McKinlay, 2009:168). In other words, the medical treatments of victims of severe diseases handled by hegemonic power aim at controlling and stigmatizing them in society instead of curing and liberating them. Today, new types of diseases can be the target of exclusion, marginalization, or hate speech. People having any of these diseases, such as Ebola, Covid-19, HIV, etc., can be significant targets of hate speech.

2.4. Hate Speech Online

Historically, it has been observed that there is a transition from the general definition of hate speech to the one delivered on online platforms such as social media and digital games, which is the topic of this research. The advent of the internet has led to the proliferation of hate speech online. The experiences of bias, inequalities, and oppression in the offline world were moved to online spaces (Nakayama, 2017; Ullman and Tomalin, 2020). Online hate speech can be defined as any expression or behavior that promotes hatred or hostility against a particular person or group in online interactions. In this section, we will try to illustrate the features of online hate speech that take its power from the internet in terms of various traits such as anonymity, invisibility, community, rapid response, and harm (Brown, 2018; Kilvington, 2021).

Anonymity is the first factor that has been identified as one of the perpetrators of hate speech online. Although anonymity offers opportunities for free speech, it also

leads to hate speech spreading rapidly and widely. Online users can create fake accounts and use pseudonyms that reflect their identity (Kilvington, 2021: 261). A study by Santana (2014:27) showed that 65% of online users posted hateful comments against immigrants with anonymous identities, and 35% of them submitted uncivil comments with their real names.

The second factor exacerbating hate speech is invisibility. The physical distance between the speaker and the audience blurred. Speakers can be invisible to the audience and vice versa (Brown, 2018: 300). In addition to this, the speaker's visible cues can be less trustworthy because these digital identities can be fictitious or embellished (Kilvington, 2021: 261).

Another feature of online hate speech is related to the community. Users can reach a mass audience in short periods without physical proximity. The Internet brings every kind of person together. These persons can be like-minded thinkers or not. While the internet provides the formation of hate groups, haters encourage people who do not display their discriminatory thoughts and feelings publicly to reveal their hate with the help of the internet (Brown, 2018:302-303).

Rapid response features of the internet can also be the driving factor of online hate speech. According to Manghani (2009:224), the desire to communicate online makes it possible for an addictive call-and-response feeling. For example, social media highly depends on rapid reactions. Serpa and Ferreira (2018:77) emphasize that people are probably more inclined to post hateful comments when they have less time to think about any subject. Brown (2018:304) states that gut reactions, ad hoc judgments, offhand reflection, not modified commentary, and first opinions are promoted by some parts of the internet or internet services. These reactions also vary in social media platforms. For example, there is spontaneity in Twitter, Snapchat, and WhatsApp, whereas there are more planned, considered, and non-spontaneous forms of speech in LinkedIn, blogs, and online forums (Kilvington, 2021: 263).

The last dimension of online hate speech is its harm to the audience. Research on harm caused by hate speech distinguishes between two main types: consequential and constitutive. Consequential harm refers to direct harm as a result of hate speech, such as emotional distress, anxiety, low self-esteem, and physical symptoms like

higher blood pressure or even hypertension. In contrast, constitutive harm implies the societal impact of hate speech, which strengthens harmful societal norms, attitudes, and beliefs, leading to discrimination and marginalization of targeted groups (Maitra and McGowen, 2012: 6; Wood and Ruscher, 2021: 273). The study of Awan and Zempi (2016:1) indicated that victims experience fear and emotional distress as a result of anti-Muslim hate speech. Victims are worried about the possibility of online threats materializing offline at any time. In a study on anti-LGBT+ hate speech, Nyman and Provozin (2019:37) demonstrate that victims who are exposed to online hate experience a heightened state of fear, emotional distress, depression, sleep disturbances, exhaustion, panic attacks, and social isolation.

2.4.1. The Intensity of Online Hate Speech

Hate speech is frequently regarded as a binary choice. This is partly due to attempts to automate its content's detection or censorship/annulation, requiring clear distinctions to determine whether the communication is hate speech. However, most definitions in the literature indicate several commentaries on hate speech, some potentially more harmful to the target than others. (Bahador, 2020). This section will explain George Washington University's methodology to classify hate speech incidents.

The members of George Washington University, Babak Bahador, Daniel Kerchner, Leah Bacon, and Amanda Menas (2019), introduce a 6-point color-coded hate speech intensity scale in a report called "Monitoring Hate Speech in the US Media." Bahador et al. (2019) offered firstly three significant hate classifications of speech called "Dehumanization and Demonization, Violence and Incitement, and Early Warning" and then presented six categories called "Disagreement, Negative Actions, Negative Character, Dehumanizing or Demonizing, Violence, and Death" fit within them. This classification is based on the "us vs. them" dichotomy. The "Dehumanization and Demonization" typology encompasses category 4; the "Violence and Incitement" typology includes categories 5 and 6; the "Early Warning" typology contains categories 1 to 3. This classification is demonstrated in Figure (1) below:

Color	Title	Description	Examples
	6. Death	Rhetoric implies literal killing by group. Responses include the literal death/elimination of a group.	Kill, annihilate, destroy
	5. Violence	Rhetoric implies infliction of physical harm or metaphoric/aspirational physical harm or death. Responses include literal violence or metaphoric/aspirational physical harm or death.	Hurt, rape, starve, torturing, mugging
	4. Demonizing and Dehumanizing	Rhetoric includes sub-human and superhuman characteristics. There are no responses for #4.	Alien, demon, monkey, Nazi, cancer, monster, germ
	3. Negative character	Rhetoric includes non-violent characterizations and insults. There are no responses for #3.	Stupid, aggressor, fake, crazy
	2. Negative actions	Rhetoric includes negative non-violent actions associated with the group. Responses include non-violent actions including metaphors.	Threaten, stop, outrageous behavior, poor treatment, alienate, hope for their defeat
	1. Disagreement	Rhetoric includes disagreeing at the idea/mental level. Responses include challenging groups claims, ideas, beliefs, or trying to change them.	False, incorrect, wrong; challenge, persuade, change minds

Figure 2.1. The Intensity of Online Hate Speech

2.4.1.1. Dehumanization and Demonization

The phenomenon of “dehumanization” is defined as the denial of part or whole of the humanity of a person or group of persons. In other words, the act of treating someone as less than fully human refers to dehumanization. This process can be expressed as legitimizing dehumanizing rehearsals (Haslam and Stratemeyer, 2016: 25). According to Haslam (2006:256), there are two senses of dehumanization practice: Human Uniqueness and Human Nature. The characteristics of human uniqueness are related to qualities that are unique to the human species, such as culture, refinement, intelligence, and moral responsibility, while human nature characteristics are fundamental, shared, or essential to humans, and they have connections with emotionality, depth, openness, and individuality. The aspect of human nature links humans to the natural world and their inborn biological aspects (Bain et al., 2009: 790).

Examining the absence of two senses of humanity, Haslam put forward a model of dehumanization. According to Haslam (2006), there are two types of dehumanization: Animalistic Dehumanization and Mechanistic Dehumanization. Animalistic dehumanization involves explicit comparisons of the people or groups who do not recognize human unique characteristics, such as kindness and moral sensitivity, to animals, such as pigs, rats, monkeys, or even germs or dirt/filth.

However, mechanistic dehumanization is the denial of attributes of human nature to others. Others are considered objects or automatons and are represented in superficial attributions (Lekka et al., 2021: 2). Portraying an individual or group with superficial attributions such as superhuman, monster, or robot is also known as demonization. When portrayed this way, the foe's demolition is adequate and beneficial for the in-group and its existence (Bahador et al., 2019: 6).

Although dehumanization practices are often seen as a relic of a darker past, there are prominent examples provided in the literature. The study of Bruneau and Kteily (2017:15) demonstrates that Israelis and Palestinians evaluated each other as animals rather than full humans during the 2014 Gaza war. In another study, Hagan and Rymond-Richmond (2008:832) indicate that victims are called “dogs” and “monkeys” by genocidaires in Sudan and Myanmar. In addition to this, Haslam (2006:253) points out that dominant ideologies have dehumanized Jews in the Holocaust, Bosnians in the Balkan wars, and Tutsis in Rwanda both during the violence and beforehand by establishing a connection between victims and vermin. Immigrants are also dehumanized by portraying them as animals, predators, and vermin (Kteily and Landry, 2022: 222).

As can be seen above, the major dehumanization practices have focused on particular ethnic groups. These groups were seen as the primary focus of research in the literature. However, there are also other targets of the phenomenon of dehumanization. Delicate types of dehumanization have been portrayed in the perception of occupational groups, people from lower social class backgrounds, women, medical patients, the mentally ill, sex offenders, violent criminals, and asexuals (Haslam and Loughnan, 2014: 408). Overall, dehumanization and demonization can be expressed as excessive forms of negative characterization. They are effective tools for facilitating violence by removing moral restraints toward harming fellow humans in the early stages (Landry and Mere, 2022: 1). For this reason, dehumanization and demonization have their category on the other side of the standard negative description.

2.4.1.2. Violence and Incitement

Although dehumanization and demonization are seen as harmful phenomena for an individual or group of people, they do not ask for violence to be operated on them. The categories of violence and death can be evaluated as the worst hate speech that is assigned to the group's actions or about how to respond to the group. Category 5 is called "violence" in the hate speech intensity scale, implying the torment of physical harm or literal physical harm. The words such as "hurt, rape, torturing, mugging" that are used in digital platforms against various targets can set an example for this category. Category 6 is called "death" in the hate speech intensity scale, implying that the rhetoric calls for the literal death of the group, and responses such as "kill," "annihilate," and "destroy" encompass the disposal of the group (Bahador et al., 2019: 6). This category encourages people to commit hate crimes against different targets.

2.4.1.3. Early Warning

The third category of speech, often accompanied by what constitutes hate speech, is called "early warning." Dehumanization or incitement is generally not the starting point of hate speech. There are early signs that are usually subtle and measured. However, understanding these early signs can be helpful to take precautions against disseminating more intense language. In this process, the creation of "us" versus "them" is a significant advance in hate speech. Diverse ideas and values in a distinct group are the significant determinants of creating "other" in this process (Bahador, 2020). Early warning typology of hate speech includes three stages: disagreement, negative actions, and negative characters.

Disagreement is the first warning sign of hate speech in the early warning stage. This category is about disagreeing with the ideas and ideologies of certain groups. Groups' claims, ideas, and beliefs are challenged, even trying to persuade and change their position. When the current ideas are not changed, the "us" and "them" paradigms start to demonstrate themselves, and then this can turn into hate speech in the future (Bahador et al., 2019: 6).

The second level of hate speech is called negative actions in the early warning stage. It deals with negative non-violent practices within the group. Negative actions encompass rhetorical words or phrases uncertain of violence, such as defeat, stop, outrageous behavior, and hope for defeat. Negative actions cannot move to violence and death levels as long as their context openly does not direct to violence. There are non-violent responses and metaphors in the group against the out-group (Bahador et al., 2019: 6).

The third early warning typology is associated with negative characterization or insults such as stupid, crazy, and fake. This level of hate speech is more harmful than negative non-violent actions because it means something essential about the entire group instead of just a single incident. Negativity is always seen in part of the group, and it is less likely to change. However, episodic actions can be a problem unsuitable for the group's nature. That's why there are no responses in this category of early warning; it does not depend on actions (Bahador et al., 2019: 6).

2.5. Freedom of Expression versus Hate Speech: The Ongoing Debate

In this part, the recurring dilemma about whether or not hate speech should be protected by law will be examined. Firstly, this part provides various definitions of freedom of expression regarding international standards; then, it focuses on the discussions about whether hate speech should be restricted, banned, and finally, it offers arguments about freedom of expression about modern communication changes.

2.5.1. Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression is the keystone and indispensable condition of any democratic society. It is a fundamental human right in many countries. The definition of freedom of expression and its limits are arranged by international organizations that proclaim and guarantee freedom of expression. The United Nations and the Council of Europe are considered major organizations that define freedom of expression and improve legal tools that punish hate speech. That's why the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights will be revised to determine the association between freedom of expression and hate speech.

United Nations General Assembly, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) describes freedom of expression in article 19, remarking that “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, including freedom of opinion, free of interference, free of seeking, receiving, and transmitting information and ideas through all media, without borders.” Within this definition, it seems that freedom of expression has no borders. This means that freedom of expression has no restriction.

However, some restrictions are displayed in Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). According to ICCPR (1966), some responsibilities are brought about by freedom of expression. It points out that freedom of expression “ Thus, certain restrictions can be imposed, but only the ones provided for by law and necessary for a) the protection of other people's rights or reputations; b) the protection of national security or public order; or public health or morals.” Furthermore, ICCPR (1966) explicitly prohibits “any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence” in article 20. Article 20 actually bolsters the restrictions imposed by Article 19.

In the European context, it is necessary to look at the European Convention on Human Rights. According to the Convention (1953), “ Every person has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include the freedom to have opinions and to receive and distribute information and ideas without interference from the public authority and without restriction, regardless of the borders.” In this definition, it seems that freedom of expression is not restricted. However, the European Convention also mentions duties and responsibilities that can be subject to restrictions or penalties as prescribed by law in the rest of Article 10. Consequently, it is assumed that both the European Convention on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights categorize freedom of expression while at the same time accepting its possible borders and giving adequate legal space for the restriction of hate speech.

2.5.1.1. Arguments for Hate Speech Protection

Elisabeth Ring (2013: 22) presents five primary arguments for hate speech protection, which include the marketplace of ideas, self-governance, personal liberty and self-fulfillment, safety valve, and hate speech as a bellwether.

The first dimension is the marketplace of ideas defenses not to restrict hate speech. According to marketplace theory, ideas should be permitted to contend freely in the marketplace, emancipated by government intervention and missing emergency circumstances. The solution to hate speech in this market is not repression but counter-speech, which processes by allowing those faced with hate speech to confront good speech as a counterweight (Nunziato, 2019: 1526). John Stuart Mill supports this argument, stating that the true limits of arguments can only be explored through complete freedom of expression, not just social acceptance boundaries. However, Mill recognizes the need for limitations on freedom of expression in situations where harm to others can be prevented (cited in Ring, 2013).

The second dimension, asserting not to limit hate speech, is related to self-governance, which is defined as the volume of social structures to govern themselves autonomously (Kooiman and Van Vliet, 2000: 359). Alexander Meiklejohn is an American philosopher who has discussed this in his book titled “Free Speech and Its Relation to Self-Government.” According to Meiklejohn (2000), freedom of speech is not a right that belongs solely to individuals but rather a necessary condition for the proper functioning of democratic self-governance. He claims that freedom of expression is a necessary condition for democracy. This allows individuals to participate in conversations about political matters and gain knowledge to make informed choices that impact their societies. He also asserts that free speech acts as a control over governmental power, allowing citizens to express opposition and criticize those who are in power. The ultimate goal of freedom of expression is not individual autonomy but the preservation and improvement of democratic self-government (Meiklejohn, 2000). Therefore, hate speech should not be limited because it would restrict the ability of individuals to practice open and honest discussions about difficult subjects.

The third dimension of hate speech protection is related to personal liberty and self-fulfillment. This aspect of hate speech protection focuses on an individual's liberty instead of dealing with the absence of government censorship. Law professor C. Edwin Baker is the pioneer of this aspect, developing the liberty model as an alternative to the "marketplace of ideas" model. According to Baker (1989:6-7), the marketplace model, which was primarily influenced by John Stuart Mill's "On Liberty," was not persuasive enough as it was based on the assumption that truth is objective and can be attained, that individuals are inherently rational, and that rationality would enable people to evaluate such truths. He believes that speech or other self-expression acts are protected not as a means of achieving collective good but because of their value to individuals. This conciliatory and noncoercive speech provides two central values, specifically, "self-fulfillment" and "self-realization." Democracies appropriately promote policies that support "impartial respect for individuals as independent agents" (Baker, 1989, pp. 47-49). That's why hate speech should not be cut back; it is an inherent right to express our ideas and feelings about any topic. To violate this right by limiting hate speech means infringing personal liberty.

The fourth dimension of hate speech protection is associated with safety valve theory. According to the safety valve theory, citizens are free to express their opinions or feelings regarding controversial societal issues and make statements about their displeasure against government policies. Allowing citizens to express their frustrations can be effective in preventing them from performing more aggressive actions. It can also help to reduce the possibility of social unrest or violence (Omachonu, 2009). Hate speech delivers a safety valve for potentially violent haters who blow off steam instead of performing violent acts. Eliminating this freedom through the suppression of hate speech could actually increase violence against minorities and women (Weinstein, 2018: 154).

The final aspect of hate speech protection highlights that hate speech acts as an indicator of racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination. This viewpoint implies that if regulations regarding hate speech were implemented and restrictions on hate speech were lessened, society would, unfortunately, be oblivious to whether these detrimental perspectives persisted or not. Furthermore, supporters of

this argument argue that if racists and bigots are averted from publicly airing their opinions, the rest of the public may perceive that racism is no longer present while it is actually hidden. Thus, hate speech is argued to remind us of the fact that racists, bigots, and homophobic are (Ring, 2013: 28).

2.5.1.2. Arguments against Hate Speech Protection

The question of whether hate speech should be restricted is a controversial subject. It should be remarked that laws and regulations on hate speech show differences from country to country and reflect different cultural and legal frameworks. We offered some common arguments favoring hate speech protection in the previous section. However, in this section, we provided counter-arguments for the ban on hate speech cited in academic discussions.

Firstly, the harm to psychological and emotional well-being caused by hate speech towards targeted groups is frequently cited as a key rationale for banning or restricting such speech. The victims of hate speech experience fear, anxiety, humiliation, distress, and depression as a result of continuous exposure to hate speech. (Williams et al., 2003; Sullaway, 2004; Paradies, 2006; Pacheco and Melhuish, 2018; Saha et al., 2019; Williams, 2019). Heavy exposure to hate speech can contribute to harming the physical and mental health of victims (Leets, 2002; Anderson, 2013; Wypych and Bilewics, 2024).

Secondly, the persistent and unregulated presence of hate speech within public debates is likely to exert a silencing effect on women, minorities, and other individuals who are specifically targeted by prejudiced language. Ishani Maitra and Mary Kate McGowan (2012:7-8) have shown how hate speech silences and subordinates women socially in their book *Speech and Harm: Controversies Over Free Speech*. Additionally, Mary Kate McGowan (2019:100-113) demonstrates how hate speech oppresses different targets by treating them as inferior and second-class people in the book *Just Words: On Speech and Hidden Harm*. According to Gelber and McNamara's

(2015) study, it is also evident that hate speech in Australia results in the suppression of voices within various minority communities.

Finally, the extensive dissemination of hate speech toward different identities results in acts of violence, including targeted hate crimes against individuals and even large-scale genocides. Disregarding or dismissing the connection between hate speech and the promotion of violence indicates a lack of historical awareness encompassing recent events. Examining the association between hatred and violence does not require solely examining the era of Nazi Germany during the 1930s and 1940s. Hateful rhetoric played a significant role in the ethnic cleansing during the war in Bosnia (Knechtle, 2006: 546). Recognizing the significance lies in understanding that minority communities often possess a heightened sense of apprehension towards violence, particularly if they have experienced harm inflicted by prevailing racial, religious, or ethnic groups. Consequently, minorities exhibit a strong inclination to combat hate speech that fuels acts of aggression. However, due to their subordinate status and the dynamics of their association with the majority, minorities encounter challenges that are sometimes insurmountable in convincing the majority about the gravity of their concerns (Knechtle, 2006: 550). As a result, to foster well-structured and harmonious communities, it becomes imperative to establish legislation against hate speech, thereby curbing the prevalence of violence.

2.6. Hate Crime

Hate crime is a socially constructed concept without a clear and universally accepted definition (Jacobs and Potter, 1998: 27; Schweppe, 2021: 1). Defining any type of crime with precision is inherently challenging, given the evolving societal norms, continuous legal modifications, and the varying influence of political, cultural, and environmental factors across different societies (Chacrabarti and Garland, 2009: 4). Hate crime is no exception to this complexity. It can be argued that defining this specific crime category presents even more significant difficulties due to the subjective nature of understanding hate and the inherent inconsistencies found in academic and professional definitions (Pezzella and Fetzer, 2021, pp. 16-17). In this section, the various definitions of hate crime, its perpetrators, and its presence around the world, specifically in Turkey, will be covered.

Academic discussions surrounding hate crime have revolved around determining the definition of hate crime, identifying the typical motivations of offenders, and identifying the common characteristics of victim groups targeted by hate crimes (Schweppe and Walters, 2016: 16). Benjamin Bowling (1993), Leslie Wolf and Lois Copeland (1994), Carole Sheffield (1995), Barbara Perry (2001), and Carolyn Petrosino (2004) put forward definitions regarding hate crime. According to Bowling (1993:238), hate crime, both as a category and as a social occurrence, is continuously evolving and subject to constant flux rather than being stationary and unchanging. Wolf and Copeland (1994:201) define hate crime as acts of violence targeting marginalized groups that are often devalued in society, experiencing discrimination in various domains, and lacking adequate resources to address societal, political, and economic injustices. Carol Sheffield (1995:438) asserts that hate crime stems from social and political influences upheld by belief systems that aim to justify such acts. This view emphasizes that personal experiences are intertwined with broader political contexts, highlighting that such violence is not an isolated incident but rather a product of the political culture that determines the distribution of rights, privileges, and social status based on biological or social attributes. Carolyn Petrosine (2004:5) defines hate crime as entailing the targeted victimization of minority individuals based on their racial or ethnic identity, perpetrated by individuals belonging to the dominant or majority group.

Barbara Perry (2001) offers a more comprehensive definition than other scholars. According to Perry (2000:10), "Hate crime encompasses acts of violence and intimidation targeted at marginalized and stigmatized groups. It functions as a power and oppression tool, reinforcing existing social hierarchies within a specific societal framework. Simultaneously, it seeks to preserve the threatened dominance of the perpetrator's group while reinforcing the subordinated identity of the victim's group, whether real or perceived. Hate crime serves as a means to label both oneself and the Other, ultimately reinforcing and perpetuating broader ideologies and patterns of social and political inequality". Like other definitions, Perry's definition highlights the link between power dynamics and hatred. It prioritizes the concept of violent and intimidating conduct, distinguishing it as unique or distinct when driven by intolerance

and expressed as discrimination against marginalized communities (Chakraborti, Garland, 2009: 6).

The examination of academic definitions indicates that hate crime is a challenging concept to grasp. Its inherent ambiguity results in variations in the definitions of hate crime across academics. Remembering this when attempting to establish the criteria for identifying what qualifies as a hate crime is crucial. While scholars specializing in hate crime have made efforts to tackle the complexity associated with the term, official classifications tend to offer less intricate interpretations. While academic definitions, such as the ones mentioned earlier, are pivotal in our conceptual understanding of hate crime, they are less practical for criminal justice practitioners and lawmakers (Chakraborti, Garland, 2009:7). European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2012:7) defines the concept of hate crimes as acts of violence and criminal activities driven by racism, xenophobia, religious intolerance, or directed towards individuals based on their disability, sexual orientation, or gender identity. According to the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) (2013), hate crimes encompass criminal actions that stem from prejudice or bias against specific groups of individuals. ODIHR (2013) points out two aspects of hate crime: criminal offense and biased motivation. As outlined by ODIHR in 2013, hate crime can be delineated by two key dimensions. Firstly, it entails engaging in actions considered criminal offenses, falling within the purview of legal frameworks. Secondly, hate crimes are propelled by a motivation rooted in bias, whereby individuals or groups are targeted based on protected characteristics such as race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, or similar attributes. These dual facets, encompassing the criminal nature and bias motivation, constitute the essential elements of hate crime within scholarly discussions (Mason et al., 2017: 9). Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) also focuses on the bias and identities of its definition of hate crime. According to the FBI (2015), hate crime is characterized as a criminal act that is driven, either wholly or partially, by the offender's biases directed towards a particular race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, or gender identity. Consequently, the approaches taken by practitioners may appear relatively more straightforward compared to their academic counterparts.

Hate crimes in Turkey have increased through the years, and attacks based on ethnicity and sexual orientation have become most violent. These crimes are intended to harm their victims. These crimes have occurred as threats and severe assaults; in some cases, these attacks lead to deaths (ODIHR, 2021). In the Turkish legal system, the concept of “hate crime” is defined as discriminatory acts based on various factors such as language, race, nationality, skin color, gender, disability, political views, philosophical beliefs, or religion. However, it fails to encompass ethnic identity and sexual orientation as protected characteristics (Bezirgan, 2016: 151). Article 122 introduces specific offenses related to discrimination but does not include penalties specifically addressing ethnicity. This legislative gap highlights how ethnic identity is detached from the consequences imposed by the law for these offenses. Similarly, the absence of legal protection for LGBTI individuals, who are frequently targeted in hate crimes in Turkey, reflects the disregard of heteronormative legal structures in safeguarding these communities from acts of hatred committed against them (Human Rights Association, 2020:2-3).

In conclusion, a debate exists surrounding the precise definition of a hate crime, as various scholars and legislative bodies incorporate different groups and actions into their definitions. Nonetheless, these diverse definitions share a close interconnection. The lack of a universally agreed-upon definition hampers efforts to accurately measure the prevalence and consequences of hate crime accurately, impeding the development of specific strategies to address such incidents.

2.7. Hate Speech and Discriminatory Language in Digital Games

In recent times, scholars across various academic disciplines have focused on the study of digital games, leading to a substantial increase in research interest. This scholarly attention has encompassed a wide array of dimensions within the realm of digital games, including investigations into patterns of consumer behavior and depictions within virtual environments (Shaw et al., 2019), analyses of historical perspectives and the narrative structures employed in gaming (Williams, 2006), examinations of character portrayals and the potential effects of digital games on players (McLean and Griffiths, 2013), as well as explorations into the motivations and experiences that drive game playing (Wallenius et al., 2009). Despite the abundance

of scholarly work in this area, there remains a notable gap in the existing literature about the exploration of discriminatory language and hate speech as well as the subsequent analysis of these phenomena from the standpoint of gamer experiences. This section aims to delve into three distinct realms within the domain of hate speech in digital games: hate speech in the production process, hate speech during online gameplay, and hate speech within online game communities. Through an extensive review of current academic literature, this section will present a compilation of scholarly research addressing these specific spaces of hate speech in digital games.

2.7.1. Hate Speech in the Production Process

The initial facet pertains to the game content that game developers craft during production. Within this context, certain digital games may encompass elements associated with hate speech, wherein they either incorporate explicit material featuring extraordinarily violent and cruel language and scenarios or potentially encourage the proliferation of hate speech. This issue is exemplified by the recognition of content descriptors, such as discrimination and hate speech, within the PEGI (Pan European Game Information) rating system, which has been attributed to renowned video game titles such as “Grand Theft Auto.” Developed by Rockstar North and initially published in 1997 by Rockstar Games, this series has encountered censorship or outright bans in multiple countries, including Brazil, China, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, and the United Arab Emirates (Costa et al., 2020). Much research has investigated the frequency and portrayal of hate speech within game content throughout the production phase. Scholars have undertaken comprehensive analyses of prevalent digital games, meticulously scrutinizing the presence of hate speech and organizing their findings into distinct categories based on various manifestations and underlying themes. Researchers have successfully identified instances of hate speech within popular digital games by employing content analysis techniques, providing valuable insights into its prevalence and diverse expressions within game content.

Many studies have been conducted on the portrayal of gender in digital games (Dietz, 1998; Beasley and Standley, 2002; Dill et al., 2005; Burgess et al., 2007; Miller and Summers, 2007; Jansz and Martis, 2007; Martins et al., 2009; Williams et al., 2009; Downs and Smith, 2010; Lynch et al., 2016). These studies reveal that video

game characters often conform to traditional gender stereotypes and present sexualized representations. For example, studies by Dietz (1998:425), Beasley and Standley (2002:289) and Downs and Smith (2010:721) show that female characters are both underrepresented and sexualized more than male characters (Lynch et al., 2016:1). Dill et al. (2005:123) analyzed 20 plays and found that male characters accounted for 70% of the primary roles, while female characters accounted for only 10%. Similarly, 55% of the secondary roles were played by men and 31% by women.

Female characters were observed to have unrealistic body proportions in line with societal expectations and were often portrayed in stereotypical roles (Martins et al., 2009:831). These characters are often placed in stereotypical roles such as seductive villains or helpless individuals waiting to be rescued (Dietz, 1998:435). Furthermore, according to a study by Tompkins et al. (2020:242), female vampire and virgin characters are often depicted in sexually suggestive and revealing clothing. These portrayals appeal to the heterosexual male gaze while at the same time conveying a message of empowerment and invulnerability. On the other hand, male characters are often portrayed in heroic roles; they are physically imposing, possess superior abilities and are equipped with various weapons (Miller & Summers, 2007:733). This situation reveals different dimensions of gender inequality in digital games.

Certain digital games go beyond simply portraying women in degrading ways by incorporating game mechanics that reinforce sexist attitudes. Such games, often characterized by overtly sexist themes, objectify women beyond their physical appearance, effectively dehumanizing them (Tompkins and Lynch, 2018:129). Dill et al. (2008:1402) found that male gamers exposed to stereotypical portrayals of women in video games were more likely to accept scenarios involving sexual harassment. Similarly, Yao et al. (2010:77) demonstrated that playing games centered on the objectification of women could trigger sexualized thoughts, leading men to perceive women as objects and increasing their likelihood of inappropriate social behavior. Stermer and Burkley (2015:47) observed that men who played games featuring sexist characters displayed elevated levels of benevolent sexism. Furthermore, Gabbiadini et al. (2016:1) found that engaging with violent and sexist games reinforced masculine

beliefs, particularly among men strongly identifying with their characters, while decreasing empathetic responses toward female victims of violence.

The underrepresentation of women and the challenges they face in the gaming industry were highlighted by the #1ReasonWhy hashtag, which trended on Twitter on November 26, 2012. Women in the industry shared personal experiences that shed light on issues such as rape and sexual harassment (18% of coded tweets), overt sexualization (21%), harassment (26%), silencing (10%), and gendered assumptions (25%) (Blodgett and Salter, 2014:2). These challenges are even more pronounced for LGBTQ individuals, who face heightened exclusion and rejection within the gaming community. Findings from this Twitter movement and the IGDA survey suggest a homogenous production environment where individuals with diverse identities struggle to gain recognition for their work and ideas. However, it is important to note that these studies do not provide definitive data (Bragança et al., 2016:938).

Another subject under scrutiny is the limited representation of LGBTQ+ characters within digital games. This scarcity can be traced back to the configuration of the video game industry. In the 2021 IGDA (International Game Developers Association) developer satisfaction survey (Kumar et al., 2021:14), that interviewed 803 people, it was shown that, regarding the gender of the professionals involved with the game industry, 62% are male, 30% female, 8% non-binary, genderfluid, genderqueer or two-spirited. It also questioned the sexual orientation of participants, in which 68% identified as heterosexual, 21% as bisexual, pansexual or demisexual, 6% as gay or lesbian, 3% asexual and 2% queer. This data points to a game development community numerically dominated by heterosexual men, with a small presence of LGBTQ+ individuals.

The responsibility for incorporating LGBTQ representation in digital games should not be placed solely on LGBTQ developers. While these developers may have a vested interest in improving such representation, they often face significant challenges. These include pressures to disclose their identities within an industry dominated by heteronormative norms, which can discourage open expression and limit their capacity to advocate for queer narratives (Bragança et al., 2016). Such systemic

barriers contribute to the limited presence and superficial portrayal of queer characters in games.

Matt Conn (2015) emphasizes that mainstream game publishers often view queer representation as taboo. When queer characters or themes are included, they are often trivialized or used in humorous or shocking ways. Even games that are considered successful in addressing queer themes to some degree, such as *Persona 4*, have been criticized for framing queerness as abnormal or maladaptive in their fictional worlds. Such framing inadvertently alienates queer players by sending the message that their identity is strange or unwanted.

The depth and complexity of queer representations also suffers from reductionist approaches. Shaw (2012) notes that discussions of in-game sexuality are often isolated from other intersecting identities such as gender and race, and that bisexuality and broader queer experiences are underrepresented. Such narrow portrayals can reinforce stereotypes and reduce LGBTQ+ characters to oversimplified narratives. For example, while some female protagonists challenge gender norms, they often retain vestiges of hyper-sexualization (Perreault et al., 2016; Chen, 2023).

Stereotypes also persist in representations of gender non-conforming or androgynous characters, who are often portrayed as villains. Birdo from *Super Mario Bros. 2* is a notable example; his identity is framed as confused or deviant, reinforcing harmful stereotypes (Lacey, 2023). Such portrayals further reinforce the idea that queer identities are deviant rather than valid expressions of human diversity.

The acceptance of queer characters by the gaming community is another important factor. Research shows that gamers interact with queer content through performative or stylized games, which can unintentionally reinforce stereotypes (Krobová et al., 2015). This trend reflects a broader male-dominated gaming culture, leading to the marginalization of queer identities and limiting opportunities for authentic representation (Shaw, 2011; Paaßen et al., 2016).

Extensive scholarly research has also been devoted to investigating the prevalence and depiction of race within the context of games (Glaubke et al., 2001; Leonard, 2006; Mou and Peng, 2008; Everett and Watkins, 2008; Williams et al., 2009; Wohn, 2011; Nakamura, 2019). According to a report by Children Now, most human

characters in the analyzed digital games, specifically 56%, were white. African Americans constituted the second largest group, comprising approximately 22% of all characters. The representation of Asian/Pacific Islanders amounted to 9% of the character population, while Latinos constituted only 2% (Glaubke et al., 2001:20). According to Leonard (2006:85), stereotypes are prevalent in numerous digital games featuring portrayals like Cuban drug dealers, violent rappers, and Arab terrorists. Games such as *Ready to Rumble* and *GTA III* incorporate racialized stereotypes about various communities of color. Examples include Afro Thunder, an Afro-wearing boxer who excels in trash-talking rather than fighting, a Hawaiian sumo wrestler depicted with offensive traits, a heavy-accented Croatian immigrant, and a Mexican boxer named Angel Rivera. Additionally, other games perpetuate stereotypes, depicting Asians as martial artists with limited English proficiency, Black athletes as violent and muscular, Arabs as terrorists, and Latinos as criminals. These stereotypes do not solely result from ignorance or simplistic characterizations but rather reflect dominant racial notions, influencing common conceptions about race and influencing interactions both in everyday life and institutional contexts.

The research of Mou and Peng (2008:927) showed that a significant majority (74%) of lead characters analyzed in digital games were identified as white. Notably, there were only four main characters of Black ethnicity, all of whom were featured in a basketball game. No leading characters from other racial backgrounds were identified. Additionally, in the research conducted by Williams and his colleagues (2009:825), the majority of characters in the study were White, accounting for 80.05% of the total. Following this, Black characters constituted 10.74%, Asian characters represented 5.03%, and Hispanic characters comprised 2.71%. In similar research, the analysis revealed that a significant proportion of human characters, precisely 92%, belonged to the White ethnicity (Wohn, 2011: 203). Digital games predominantly serve as artificial representations of racial stereotypes. The majority of prominent Black male characters are often portrayed as athletes or armed gang members, while Black women are typically marginalized and lack visibility in these game narratives (Higgin, 2009: 16).

According to Lisa Nakamura (2019:128), racism can be observed across various game genres, with simulation games like *Civilization* often portraying non-Western cultures as superstitious, cruel, and irrational. The representation of certain characters in *World of Warcraft*, such as Tauren, Troll, Blood, and Night Elf Players, perpetuates racist imagery of Native Americans, Caribbeans, and Orientals from previous media. Moreover, black women are significantly underrepresented in digital games, and when they are included, they are more frequently depicted as victims of violence compared to characters from other backgrounds. Everett and Watkins (2008:150-156) also assert that digital games predominantly depicted black and brown avatars as criminals, gangsters, and athletes. Women and people of color were often portrayed using simplistic stereotypes, resulting in one-dimensional and exploitative representations within the game's narratives, settings, and storylines. Games featuring black and brown characters treat them as expendable targets and violent figures, particularly in “urban/street” games. Through their analysis of games like *Grand Theft Auto*, they reveal how digital visual environments create “racialized pedagogical zones,” reinforcing societal perceptions of the proper roles for raced and criminalized bodies, especially for young players.

Games introduce novel methods of representation and communication, acting as platforms for shaping societies, cultures, and even religious aspects (Šisler et al., 2017:1). Game developers are increasingly drawing from mythologies and belief systems, establishing tangible links to the real world (Šisler, 2014:130). Game creators draw inspiration from and interact with established mainstream religious customs to imbue their games with significance and enjoyment. Within the fabric of games, intricate cultural dimensions are embedded, encompassing them while also being encompassed by them. These games also assume an active role as contributors within the broader societal and cultural framework, a role that involves both mirroring and reacting to the prevailing cultural milieu. (Geraci, 2012:106). Beyond the realm of mere rules and gameplay, all games encompass an array of cultural frameworks that both shape and are interwoven with the unfolding of the game itself. These cultural structures provide a backdrop that influences and is influenced by the gameplay experience, serving as a context within which the game unfolds. Every instance of

game design is inherently entwined with the cultural fabric, and astute designers harness this connection to craft captivating games. The cultural backdrop of a game may encompass its historical underpinnings, the spectrum of ideological principles it portrays and reshapes, or even how seamlessly the game integrates with the players' way of life (Salem and Zimmerman, 2004:508-509).

The portrayal of religion within the context of digital games constitutes a multifaceted and intricate subject that has undergone developmental changes over time. In contrast to the considerable focus dedicated to matters of race and gender, the depiction of religious identity as factors that establish an “othering” dynamic has garnered notably lesser scrutiny. Certain scholars have explored the phenomenon of portraying Islam as an “other” within the context of digital games. Vit Šisler (2008) found the stereotypical representations of Muslims and Arabs in American and European digital games. According to Šisler (2008:214), adventure and role-playing games commonly depict the Middle East using elements of fantasy or semi-historical context, using “Orientalist” visuals. In contrast, action games and particularly first-person shooters, depict the Middle East in a modern and notably confrontational setting, simplifying Arabs and Muslims into adversarial roles.

In conclusion, this section thoroughly explores key topics within the realm of digital games, revealing the intricate complexities associated with hate speech, gender portrayals, racial biases, LGBTQ+ underrepresentation, and the depiction of religious elements in the gaming world. By closely examining a wealth of research and academic studies, it becomes apparent that the gaming industry faces various issues concerning diversity, inclusivity, and ethical content development. This scrutiny underscores the necessity for ongoing research, industry-wide initiatives, and conscientious game development practices to cultivate a gaming environment that is more diverse and equitable for both players and creators. As the gaming sector continues to evolve, addressing these challenges remains paramount for fostering a genuinely inclusive gaming landscape that reflects a broader spectrum of perspectives and experiences.

2.7.2. Hate Speech in Online Gameplay

Online gaming engagement pertains to the interactive aspects of engaging with fellow players in multiplayer online gaming sessions. Frequently devoid of moderation, endeavors such as the establishment of gaming alliances, the dissemination of gaming tactics, and the utilization of voice communication channels have the potential to engender disputes or serve as conduits for disseminating hate speech. Real-time actions should not be exclusively construed as virtual occurrences, as they inherently project the gamer as an actual individual and may exert repercussions and influence beyond the confines of the virtual game environment, potentially resulting in interpersonal conflicts among acquaintances (Costa et al., 2020). Extensive research endeavors have been committed to examining the occurrence of prejudicial, offensive, or detrimental language or behaviors directed at fellow players within the realm of online gaming, explicitly concerning attributes such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability, or other legally safeguarded characteristics. Through ethnographic methodologies, scholars have effectively detected occurrences of hate speech within widely played digital games, yielding valuable understandings regarding its frequency and varied manifestations within online gaming experiences.

Women and the LGBTQ+ community are particular targets of hate speech during online gameplay (Uttarapong et al., 2021:8). According to research by Fox and Tang (2016), women encounter various forms of harassment, including general and sexual harassment, in online gaming environments. This harassment often leads to rumination, withdrawal, and the development of coping strategies among women. Furthermore, women's experiences in eSports have revealed a prevalence of sexual harassment compared to men, indicating a mixed and challenging environment for female gamers (Ruvalcaba et al., 2018). The impact of hate speech and harassment extends beyond the gaming environment, invading women's intimate relationships and domestic spheres, leading to hyper-vigilance and wariness among women in gaming culture (Butt, 2019).

The prevalence of hate speech and harassment directed at women in online gaming has been linked to broader cultural discourses of gender-based violence, both

globally and within specific communities. This is further exacerbated by the historical context of misogynistic discourse, such as the #GamerGate campaign, which has contributed to the normalization of online harassment targeting women in gaming (Shepherd et al., 2015). The experiences of women of color in online gaming communities have highlighted intersecting oppressions and the need for an intersectional framework to understand the multiple identities embodied by women in gaming spaces. The gendered nature of online gaming spaces has been a focus of research, with women often feeling like intruders in what is still predominantly perceived as a male domain (Vergel et al., 2023).

In online gaming realms, the LGBTQ+ community encounters notable obstacles, confronting hate speech and discriminatory actions that surpass mere gender confines. The landscape of hostility within these spaces underscores the broader spectrum of discrimination affecting marginalized groups. For example, in World of Warcraft (WoW), homophobic language is commonly used to express negativity towards LGBTQ-friendly environments, contributing to the normalization of heteronormative attitudes. Blizzard, the game developer, shapes player orientation towards normative character constructions, marginalizing LGBTQ communities and relegating discussions on LGBTQ issues to sanctioned forums. This reinforces a heteronormative framework, suppressing opposition and constraining queer identities and expressions within the game environment (Pulos, 2013: 81-92). In other research, Gillin and Signorella (2023:16) found that, negative remarks concerning sexual orientation and transgender, gender-nonconforming, or other nonbinary gender identities are more prevalent than positive comments. Consistent with Gillin and Signorella's findings, the research of Brenner Levoy (2023:392) also showed that self-identified queer men witnessed homophobic language during the online gameplay in addition to racist language.

Digital games also function as arenas for racial discourse, embodying and propagating racial ideology. According to Doane (2006:256), which conceptualizes racial ideology as frameworks that elucidate social dynamics and behaviors through racialized rhetoric. Within these virtual realms, social norms and belief structures emerge, facilitating the expression of racialized and discriminatory language that is

compartmentalized from offline reality. Multiplayer digital games engenders a distinct yet equally deleterious manifestation of racism, characterized by live player interactions frequently culminating in the harassment and marginalization of women and individuals from racial minority groups (Nakamura, 2019:126-129).

According to Condis (2021:317), the cultural landscape surrounding digital games is afflicted by pervasive manifestations of white supremacist inclinations. A ubiquitous presence of casual racism within online gaming environments is observable, akin to an omnipresent backdrop of radiation. Individuals identifying as Black, or perceived as such based on factors such as chosen usernames, avatar designs, or vocal attributes during chat interactions, frequently encounter persistent instances of harassment or “griefing” within gaming contexts, marked by targeted aggression and a deluge of racial slurs and derogatory remarks. Gray’s research over several years (2011, 2012, 2014, 2018) elucidates the phenomenon of African American gamers undergoing racialization within online gaming milieus, primarily through the practice of “trash talking.” This phenomenon encompasses linguistic profiling, interrogation, provocation, and ultimately, harassment through the deployment of racist language. One documented instance by Gray (2012) involves a white player responding to defeat against one of her study participants with racially derogatory comments, including questioning the player's racial identity and employing explicit racial epithets such as “Wait, are you Black? . . . is that another fucking nigger? . . . your mother sucks nigger dick . . .” (267-268). Similarly, Ortiz (2019:582) finds that men of color encounter frequent overt racism yet persist in engaging with unknown players, rarely utilizing muting or blocking functions during online gameplay, while also observing a phenomenon of emotional desensitization. As posited by Keum and Hearn (2021: 10-11), racial and ethnic minority emerging adults, particularly those identifying as Black, contend with an unequal distribution of racial discrimination within virtual gaming platforms. Research suggests that Black gamers face a disproportionately heightened risk of psychological distress stemming from both online gaming activities and encounters with racism compared to their Asian and Latinx counterparts.

In summary, the omnipresence of hate speech, harassment, and discriminatory practices within digital games presents substantial obstacles to the psychological

welfare and social interactions of marginalized demographics, encompassing women, the LGBTQ+ community, and racial and ethnic minorities. These occurrences transcend the digital sphere, permeating interpersonal connections and perpetuating overarching cultural narratives surrounding gender-related aggression, heteronormative assumptions, and racialized ideologies.

2.7.3. Hate Speech in Online Game Communities

The dissemination of hate speech within gaming platforms and associated communities has become a prevalent issue, with various platforms adopting different approaches to address this challenge. Discord, a platform designed for gamers to communicate, has taken a strong stance against hate speech by banning users associated with neo-Nazi or white supremacist ideologies and prohibiting harassment or threatening messages. In contrast, Steam, a gaming community and marketplace, has chosen not to censor games or content, positioning itself as a marketplace unaffected by cultural debates. Twitch and YouTube, platforms focused on streaming video game content, face challenges in filtering out hate speech due to the live nature of broadcasts, making it difficult to anticipate or prevent inappropriate actions (Costa et al., 2020:268; Condis, 2021: 317-319; Koehler et al., 2023:422-423).

Research indicates that extremists are highly active on online gaming platforms, with Dawey's (2021:5) study revealing the presence of an organized cohort of extremists within platforms like Steam. This presence highlights the existence of a discernible faction of extremists within the broader gaming community. Schlegel's (2021:11) work emphasizes how prevailing values and attitudes within gaming spheres, such as racism, anti-Semitism, and misogyny, resonate with individuals, fostering an environment where extremists and those susceptible to radicalization find a platform for their beliefs. The organic utilization of gaming environments by extremists and terrorists, as highlighted by Schlegel, underscores the flexible social networks that can form within gaming platforms, potentially transcending specific extremist organizations. O'Connor's (2021:4-5) findings on Twitch suggest occasional expressions of endorsement for extreme right-wing ideologies but no systematic targeting, grooming, or recruitment patterns. Additionally, Powell and Williams-Johnson's (2023) research on Twitch influencers revealed rhetoric perpetuating White

supremacy, including downplaying systemic racism and advocating for the freedom to express hateful speech. Furthermore, the existence of extremists in online gaming communities not only highlights the difficulties in creating inclusive spaces but also perpetuates instances of hate speech and discrimination, as demonstrated by the occurrence of hate raids during live streaming sessions (Meisner, 2023).

The occurrence of hate raids during live streaming sessions presents a formidable obstacle for content creators, characterized by the influx of offensive usernames and hate speech inundating chat windows, encompassing threats of violence and doxing. Meisner (2023:4) introduced the term “hate raids” to encapsulate this phenomenon, describing the automated inundation of channels with fake accounts bearing usernames containing language steeped in racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. Consequently, this deluge of hate speech frequently compels less established or supported streamers to prematurely terminate their broadcasts due to the overwhelming nature of these assaults. Han et al. (2023:2) further corroborate these assertions, highlighting the disproportionate targeting of minority communities in hate raids, with particular emphasis on instances of anti-Black racism and antisemitism.

Furthermore, the obstacles encountered by women broadcasters and marginalized groups in streaming environments are compounded by the perpetuation of hegemonic gender relationships within the content and culture of numerous digital games. The prevalence of hate raids, as highlighted by Meisner’s (2023) research, not only seems a obstacle for content creators but also causes to the normalization of hate speech and discriminatory behavior within gaming communities. This normalization, in turn, exacerbates the hostile environments fostered by incidents like GamerGate originating in 2014 following a blog post by Eron Gjoni containing unverified claims about the personal life of indie game developer Zoë Quinn. The ensuing torrent of online harassment and threats directed at Quinn, renowned for her game “Depression Quest,” escalated into a broader campaign targeting prominent women within the gaming industry, including critics such as Anita Sarkeesian (Mortensen, 2018:789-790). GamerGate, characterized by its misogynistic and racist nature, garnered extensive media coverage, fostering hostile environments for women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people of color. This phenomenon is underscored by the historical

prevalence of heteronormative, white masculinity in gaming culture, establishing this identity as the normative archetype (Consalvo, 2008:187; Gray et al., 2018:3).

CHAPTER III

EXAMINATION OF HATE SPEECH AND DISCRIMINATORY LANGUAGE IN DIGITAL GAMES

3.1. The Problem of Research

Digital games have evolved into a dominant form of entertainment, reaching an increasingly diverse and expansive user base. This transformation, driven by a growing number of players, broader demographic representation, and extended gameplay durations, has elevated digital games beyond mere recreational activities. However, alongside these advancements, the prevalence of hate speech and discriminatory language within gaming environments has emerged as a critical social issue. Hate speech in digital games not only disrupts individual player experiences but also contributes to wider societal concerns, reinforcing discrimination and exclusion. While often perceived as an issue affecting specific marginalized groups, its impact extends across diverse player communities, shaping broader social dynamics and online interactions. Despite its significance, research on the prevalence, social mechanisms, and consequences of hate speech in gaming remains limited, leaving a critical gap in understanding its far-reaching effects. Addressing this gap is essential for developing informed interventions, fostering inclusive gaming environments, and mitigating the harmful consequences of digital hate speech on both individuals and society at large.

3.2. Purpose and Importance of the Research

The examination of national and international literature indicates that research concerning hate speech and discriminatory language within digital gaming is predominantly concentrated in three primary domains: discrimination during offline gameplay, discrimination in online gameplay, and discrimination within online gaming communities. However, a critical analysis of the existing body of literature reveals a substantial deficiency in studies specifically focused on the processes of online gameplay and the corresponding player experiences. This gap highlights an urgent need for a nuanced understanding of the social dynamics surrounding hate

speech and discriminatory language within the digital gaming ecosystem and their implications at both individual and societal levels.

Accordingly, this study aims to systematically analyze the social structures and dynamics associated with hate speech and discriminatory language in digital game environments. It will also investigate players' experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies from diverse demographic backgrounds. Furthermore, the research aspires to provide theoretical and practical contributions to creating a safer, more inclusive, and equitable gaming environment by evaluating the social and psychological impacts of hate speech and discriminatory language on individuals. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute significantly to the academic discourse and sector-specific policies and practices, addressing the complex and multifaceted nature of hate speech and discriminatory language within digital gaming.

3.3. Research Questions

This thesis provides a comprehensive perspective on the social, cultural, and psychological dimensions of hate speech and discriminatory language in multiplayer online battle arena games. The structure of digital games, which brings together players from all demographic groups at the global level, makes it necessary to examine the types, intensity, and effects of hate speech that occur in-game environments. In this context, players' perceptions, reactions, and coping strategies regarding hate speech and its impact on social hierarchies, group dynamics, and identity representations will be investigated. The study's findings will provide suggestions for improvement in the digital game ecosystem and contribute to understanding how to increase diversity and inclusion in game culture. The research questions of this study can be listed as follows:

Q.1. What types of hate speech are seen in MLBB?

Q.2. What is the intensity of hate speech in MLBB?

Q.3. How do players react to avatars representing various identities in MLBB?

Q.4. What is the relationship between player ranks and the frequency of hate speech in MLBB?

Q.5. What is the relationship between individual and group play styles and the frequency of hate speech in MLBB?

Q.6. How do players define hate speech in digital game culture?

Q.7. Which factors are effective in the emergence of hate speech and discriminatory language in MLBB?

Q.8. How do players react when encountering hate speech in MLBB, and what strategies do they develop to cope with this situation?

Q.9. How do hate speech and discriminatory language in MLBB affect the emotional and psychological status of individuals?

3.4. Research Methodology

The methodology has three main approaches: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Numerical data are used in quantitative research, verbal data are used in qualitative research, and numerical and verbal data are used in mixed methods. When the studies in the literature from the past to the present are evaluated, it is observed that there were more studies by the quantitative design in the past, and today, there is an increase in studies by the qualitative design. Recent studies have observed that mixed method design has started to be used more (Alkan et al., 2019: 559). This thesis study will use a mixed-method design to obtain comprehensive findings on hate speech and discriminatory language in digital games.

In the academic literature, discussions on the definition of mixed method continue. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), the mixed method is a research approach in which qualitative and quantitative approaches are used to collect and analyze data and integrate the findings into the research program. Morse (2010) and O'Reilly and Kiyimba (2015) stated that studies in which qualitative or quantitative research techniques are used together can also be within the scope of mixed methods. In this thesis, the qualitative mixed method, which is a research design that combines more than one qualitative approach, will be utilized. While traditional mixed methods usually combine qualitative and quantitative methods, qualitative mixed methods focus on integrating more than one qualitative strategy into the research. This approach increases the depth and richness of findings by examining a research problem from different qualitative perspectives (Morse, 2010).

This study adopts a qualitative mixed methods design utilizing digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews to examine the phenomenon of hate speech in multiplayer online battle arena games. Following the framework set out by

Morse (2010), this study combines two qualitative methods to address the issue from complementary perspectives and increase the analysis's depth and breadth.

Digital ethnography and semi-structured interview data were analyzed independently using content and thematic analysis. The findings were synthesized to create a detailed narrative focusing on the emergent forms, effects, and underlying factors of hate speech in multiplayer online battle arena games. The study utilized a phased design, and the insights gained in the first phase were aligned with the principles of a qualitative mixed methods design to guide the development of the second phase.

In this research, the integration of the AI-based tool ChatGPT was exclusively confined to syntactic and grammatical editing of the manuscript. At no stage of the research process encompassing data acquisition, analytical operations, interpretative engagement, or inferential reasoning was artificial intelligence employed. This deliberate limitation was maintained to preserve the epistemological soundness and methodological rigor of the study.

3.4.1. Phase One: Digital Ethnography

Digital ethnography is a research method developed to understand the complex social dynamics offered by digital technologies and online environments. While in traditional ethnography, the culture, values, practices, and beliefs of a particular group are analyzed within the community (Jensen, 2012), digital ethnography takes this approach to online worlds. Sarah Pink is recognized as one of the pioneers of this method, which treats digital platforms as a research field. According to Pink, online interactions have become an integral part of our daily lives, and in this context, digital platforms are a tool and a research environment (Postill and Pink, 2012). This approach provides a broad framework for understanding, interpreting, and describing online cultures.

This methodological approach has been described using various terminologies within the digital ethnography literature. For instance, Garcia et al. (2009) employed the term "online ethnography", while Black (2016) opted for "cyberethnography". Hine (2000) referred to the method as "virtual ethnography", and Sade-Beck (2004) introduced the term "internet ethnography". Androutsopoulos (2008) proposed

“discourse-centered online ethnography”, Kozinets (2010) used the broader term “nethnography” in digital contexts, and Howard (2002) coined “network ethnography”. Although these terminological distinctions reflect nuanced perspectives on the study of online environments, they share a common objective: to explore, interpret, and understand the cultural practices, interactions, and meanings that emerge within digital spaces. Digital ethnography offers researchers an important tool for deep immersion in online environments and understanding the social dynamics in these spaces.

Postill and Pink (2012) identified five basic routines for digital researchers: keeping up to date (e.g., following events through Twitter or Facebook), sharing (sharing content through digital platforms), exploring (finding new areas of research through shared links), interacting (engaging with communities) and archiving (recording and organizing data). These routines provide a basic methodological framework for understanding the dynamics of digital environments.

Digital ethnography offers researchers unique advantages, especially when studying digital gaming culture. By engaging with gaming communities through participant observation, researchers can gain a detailed understanding of players' motivations, social interactions, and cultural practices. This method allows for holistic analysis by combining various data sources such as chat logs, video recordings, and multimedia platforms (Chee, 2015). Thus, gaining in-depth insights into gaming communities' complex and ever-changing social structures becomes possible.

Digital ethnography is also an effective method for analyzing virtual world identity formation and social interactions. This method, which emphasizes the interactions between technology and culture, can be used primarily in environments with unique dynamics, such as massively multiplayer online games. This interpretive approach makes it possible to understand how games intersect with social and cultural contexts, making digital ethnography an indispensable methodological tool for exploring the ever-changing nature of digital game culture (Chee, 2015).

Furthermore, digital ethnography is a powerful tool for understanding community norms and values that influence the prevalence of hate speech. Wullach et al. stated that understanding the context in which hate speech occurs is vital for

developing effective detection methods (Wullach et al., 2021). By interacting with players in natural game environments, researchers can uncover the social dynamics that favor or oppose hate speech and develop strategies that encourage healthier interactions.

Digital ethnography can also be integrated with automated hate speech detection methods. Davidson et al. (2017) highlight the limitations of automated systems in detecting less common forms of hate speech. By combining ethnographic insights with machine learning approaches, training datasets can be made more inclusive, enabling these systems to identify various forms of hate speech more effectively.

In conclusion, digital ethnography is an appropriate method for analyzing this field since digital games create a unique culture with their rules, mechanics, and player interactions. Digital ethnography is a method for understanding the dynamic structure of online communities, and it also provides a comprehensive framework for analysis. This study aims to understand how hate speech in digital games emerges, the dynamics through which it is fuelled, and the effects of these discourses on players. To this end, the values, beliefs, and behaviors specific to digital gaming field are examined in depth through digital ethnography. The research contributes to understanding sociological structure and dynamics of hate speech and discriminatory language in digital gaming environments.

3.4.1.1. Population and Sample

This study selected multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) games as the research universe to examine the online gaming culture and hate speech dynamics in Turkey. The MOBA genre draws attention with its structure, which requires intense interaction and competition between players and provides a suitable ground for the emergence of hate speech. In this context, Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB), which can be played on the mobile platform and has a large player base in Turkey, was preferred. MLBB has a fast-paced structure based on strategy and team play, where users enter the game directly from the main menu. Played in teams of five, the game allows players to choose a role to destroy the other team's central tower. In this process,

players can play with people they do not know through online random matches or with people they know through the tracking function. In this respect, MLBB provides a suitable platform for understanding players' community dynamics through new interpersonal interactions and existing social ties (Ong et al., 2023).

Mobile Legends: Bang Bang's in-game economy and gameplay mechanics are important elements that shape users' gaming experiences. Players can acquire the heroes they will use in the game with diamonds, which can be purchased through the Google Play Store or Apple Store. In addition, gold coins earned through in-game quests and rewards can be used for heroes and other in-game items. However, skins and unique designs, which are the aesthetic elements of the game, can only be obtained through lucky draws during special events or through the purchase of diamonds. This reinforces the game's competitive nature and creates an economic dynamic that can trigger divisions within the community based on material power. The game's duration usually varies between 10 and 15 minutes depending on the game layout, but in some cases, it can last up to 70 minutes.

The fact that MLBB can be played on mobile platforms increases the accessibility of the game and enables the participation of players from different socio-economic groups. MLBB has contributed to a broad base of player communities in Turkey thanks to the widespread use of mobile devices and low hardware requirements. According to the Gaming Turkey 2022 report, MLBB generated the highest revenue in the MOBA category. This demonstrates the popularity and economic power of the game in Turkey while also providing clues about the socio-economic structure of this community. Moreover, the organized national and international tournaments strengthen the players' individual skills, interactions, and social ties within the community (Gaming Turkey, 2022).

The fact that the researcher has been actively playing MLBB since 2018 gives the study significant depth and embeddedness. This long-term experience makes it possible to understand the game mechanics, community culture, and player behavior from an insider perspective. This embedded position of the researcher in the game provides a valuable advantage for more accurate identification and analysis of hate speech. This experience, which offers the opportunity to contextualize and analyze the

participants' behavior and discourse, increases the scope and methodological depth of the study.

In conclusion, the widespread use of MLBB in Turkey, its accessibility on a mobile platform, and the researcher's established experience within this community provide substantial grounds for selecting this game as the sample for the study. MLBB provides an ideal context for understanding interactions in online gaming communities and analyzing how hate speech emerges. Furthermore, the social dynamics within the game provide a suitable platform for understanding players' individual and societal motivations. This context creates an important opportunity to analyze sociological structure and dynamics of hate speech and discriminatory language in digital gaming environments.

3.4.1.2. Data Collection

Observation is defined by Dixon et Al. (2016) as the process of collecting information from participants or subjects in a natural rather than an artificial environment. Beuving and Vries (2015) emphasize that observations are not only limited to visual experiences but also include all kinds of information that an observer can obtain using all senses. This study used participant observation to analyze hate speech practices in online games. Participant observation is defined by Creswell and Poth (2018) as the observations made by the researcher while actively participating in the research field. This method enabled the researcher to be involved in the process as both an observer and a participant in understanding the emergence, context, and dynamics of hate speech in the game and created a suitable basis for an in-depth analysis.

In this study, the researcher conducted an analysis of the mobile game Mobile Legends: Bang Bang through the lens of participant observation. By actively engaging with other players during gameplay, the researcher assumed the role of a participant observer, taking part in matches and systematically documenting instances of hate speech and discriminatory language.

The duration of the research was determined in alignment with relevant studies in the literature. Meriç et al. (2021) identified that individuals from Generations X, Y,

and Z predominantly engage in gameplay during nighttime hours. Similarly, in a study by Öztekin and Öztekin (2020), participant observation was conducted in the game Agar.io for 15 minutes on weekdays over a period of eight weeks. Building on these precedents, the researcher in the present study conducted participant observation by playing Mobile Legends: Bang Bang for two hours daily between 22:00 and 24:00 over a three-month period. The observation began on 1 June 2024 and concluded on 1 September 2024. It was posited that extending the observation period beyond those of previous studies would facilitate the collection of more comprehensive and in-depth data.

Over a 12-week research period, the researcher engaged in 540 gameplay sessions, totaling 8,892 minutes of in-game activity. Participant observation was conducted across three competitive tiers Epic, Legend, and Mythic with approximately one month dedicated to each league. Data were collected through multiple in-game communication channels, including text-based chat, voice communication, and avatar-mediated interactions. To ensure systematic documentation, the researcher maintained a research diary, recording the date of each session alongside detailed notes on the occurrence, context, and forms of hate speech observed. All gameplay and data collection activities were conducted via the researcher's mobile device, as the game was pre-installed on this platform and alternative access options were unavailable.

The researcher employed a covert observation method, as outlined by Dixon et al. (2016), wherein the researcher's identity and role remain undisclosed throughout the study. Consequently, participants were unaware that they were being observed or included in this research. To address potential ethical concerns, the identities of all observed players were kept confidential. The use of gamertags (self-assigned pseudonyms) instead of participants' legal names does not constitute an ethical violation, as it upholds participant anonymity and confidentiality. Furthermore, an analysis of the privacy policy of Moonton, the developer of Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB), indicates that all in-game actions are considered public. The policy explicitly states that any personal information shared during gameplay may be read, collected, or used by other users. This public nature of in-game interactions supports the ethical basis of the data collection method employed in this study.

3.4.1.3. Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using the content analysis technique. Content analysis is preferred because this method offers a systematic, objective, and quantitative approach. The systematic feature of content analysis means that the content is selected based on specific rules, and scientific methods are applied in sample selection. Objectivity means eliminating subjectivity by ensuring that the same results are reached when different researchers repeat the study. The quantitative dimension makes the results more precise and reliable by enabling systematic interpretation and analysis of the data obtained (Meriç, 2025:85-86).

Content analysis requires the creation of categories with a systematic approach. Categories refer to content groups with common characteristics and should be mutually exclusive and comprehensive (Meriç, 2025). In this study, the determination of content analysis categories was based on the research in the existing literature. 267 cases of hate speech were detected from collected data. 267 cases of hate speech were analyzed in eight categories. These categories are: types of hate speech, forms of hate speech, target groups, the intensity of hate speech, the prevalence of hate speech in individual and group games, the prevalence of hate speech between levels (Epic-Legend-Mythic), reactions to hate speech, and reactions to different identities.

In the initial content analysis phase, 267 instances of hate speech were systematically categorized according to their respective types. The literature identifies seven distinct categories of hate speech, which include religious hate speech, gendered hate speech, political hate speech, racist hate speech, and hate speech targeting individuals with disabilities or severe diseases (Chatty and Alathur, 2018; Tuğrul Çomu and Binark, 2013; Castano-Pulgarín et al., 2021). This classification framework provides a comprehensive understanding of the various manifestations of hate speech as documented in scholarly research.

Secondly, an analysis was conducted to examine the prevalence of hate speech across different competitive tiers in Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB), specifically focusing on the Epic, Legend, and Mythic ranks. 180 matches were systematically observed and recorded within each designated rank to ensure a robust and representative sample size. This methodological approach was employed to investigate

the potential correlation between the incidence of hate speech and the varying levels of competitive play. The primary objective of this analysis was to explore whether the frequency of hate speech exhibits a statistically significant relationship with the skill-based divisions within the game, thereby providing insights into the behavioral dynamics of players across different ranks.

Thirdly, 267 instances of hate speech were analyzed about their targeted groups. Following an initial assessment, 17 distinct targets of hate speech were identified. These included women, men, Arabs, Iranians, Kurds, Afghans, refugees, Syrians, Israelis, Turks, Gypsies, children, Islam, atheists, members of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), members of the LGBTQ+ community, and individuals with disabilities.

Fourthly, the correlation between different gameplay modes, solo play, group play, and the occurrence of hate speech was systematically examined within the context of Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB). Solo play refers to matches in which players enter the game individually and are randomly assigned to a team with other unacquainted players. In contrast, group play involves players forming pre-arranged teams with friends or known teammates, fostering a more coordinated and communicative environment. To ensure a comprehensive analysis, a total of 270 gameplay sessions were conducted for each mode, providing a balanced dataset for comparison. This methodological approach allowed for an in-depth evaluation of how the social dynamics inherent in different gameplay settings influence the prevalence and intensity of hate speech in MLBB.

Fifthly, the various forms of hate speech in Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) were systematically examined. The dataset comprising 267 instances of hate speech was meticulously coded and categorized based on its mode of expression, including usernames, profile photos, and in-game communication channels such as text and voice chat. Usernames, often custom-created by players, can serve as a medium for implicit or explicit hate speech through the use of offensive language, discriminatory slurs, or derogatory references to specific groups. Similarly, profile photos whether selected from in-game options or uploaded as custom profile photos may contain symbols, imagery, or text intended to convey hateful or exclusionary

messages. Furthermore, in-game communication, both in the form of text-based chat and real-time voice chat, provides players with direct avenues for interpersonal interaction, which can facilitate the transmission of hate speech through insults, threats, or discriminatory remarks. By employing a structured coding framework, this analysis aimed to assess the prevalence and distribution of hate speech across these different communicative modes, thereby offering a nuanced understanding of how hate speech and discriminatory language are expressed in MLBB.

After examining the various forms of hate speech, the intensity of 267 hate speech was analyzed to assess the severity of the identified instances. The Hate Speech Intensity Scale developed by Bahador et al. (2019) was employed as the primary analytical framework to achieve this. This scale provides a systematic approach to categorizing hate speech into six distinct levels that is explained in Figure 2.1., namely: Disagreement, Negative Actions, Negative Character, Dehumanizing or Demonizing, Violence, and Death.

Seventhly, the reactions to hate speech was examined. Reactions to hate speech were categorized as positive, negative, neutral, and no reaction to understand how hate speech is received in the game environment. Positive reactions consist of statements that support or endorse hate speech, while negative reactions include statements that reject or criticize hate speech. Neutral reactions include statements that show no signs of support or opposition. In contrast, the no reaction category refers to situations without response to hate speech.

An analysis of reactions toward various identities was conducted based on data collected by the researcher. Over 24 days, encompassing 144 games in each league, the predominant forms of hate speech and their most frequent targets were identified. Following this identification, avatars symbolizing these specific targets were developed by modifying the username, flag, and profile photo to reflect the respective identities.

In the Epic League, gendered hate speech emerged as the most prevalent form, documented in 39 instances out of 144 games. Women were the primary targets, accounting for 38 cases. Consequently, a female avatar was created to represent this group. The avatar was named “Gamze,” a female name encountered by researcher in

MLBB was selected as username. It incorporated feminine gender indicators and pre-set images provided by the game to emphasize the avatar's gender. The Turkish flag was also used to engage Turkish players and observe their responses.

In the Legend League, racist hate speech was the most frequently observed type, with 43 instances recorded across 144 games. Arabs were the primary targets, comprising 14 cases. To reflect this, an avatar aligned with Arabic identity was developed. The avatar was named as "Arap King" a designation commonly encountered in the game and indicative of Arabic identity. The flag of Saudi Arabia, representing an Arab nation, was incorporated, and the avatar's image was selected from the game's pre-set options randomly, ensuring it remained gender-neutral.

Similarly, in the Mythic League, racist hate speech was the most dominant form, with 46 cases identified out of 144 games. Kurds were the primary targets, with 11 instances documented. An avatar reflecting Kurdish identity was therefore created. The avatar was named "Kurdish Tiger," a name frequently encountered in the game and representative of Kurdish identity. The avatar's image was chosen from the game's pre-set options, maintaining gender neutrality. The Turkish flag was also used to assess players' reactions within Turkey.

Validity and reliability, which are widely used in scientific research, are related to the accuracy and reproducibility of measurements (Karataş, 2015; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008; Metin and Ünal, 20-22). This doctoral study ensured validity by having the literature-based research categories and coding table reviewed and revised with feedback by the dissertation supervisor. For reliability, the researcher and a second coder coded 20 randomly selected examples of hate speech, and it was found that the results showed 90% agreement. Differences in coding were discussed, and a common coding framework was established. As 80% or more agreement is considered reliable in content analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002; Gheyle and Jacobs, 2017), the content analysis of this study was considered reliable.

3.4.1.4. Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, the focus of the study on the Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) in the context of the gaming community in Turkey limits the generalisability of the findings to other gaming environments, cultural contexts, and regions. As the dynamics of hate speech may vary between different games, platforms, and cultural contexts, the scope of the study is kept within a specific framework. Secondly, although only one researcher was involved in the data collection process, and inter-coder reliability was ensured, this may have led to certain limitations regarding potential biases. Although precautions were taken to minimize the subjective effects of the researcher's interpretation of the data, the inclusion of different coders could have increased the study's objectivity. Finally, although the duration and sample size of the study are comprehensive, they may not fully reflect long-term changes in the dynamics of hate speech in gaming communities.

3.4.2. Phase Two: Semi-structured Interviews

Interviews are widely regarded as a cornerstone of ethnographic research, as emphasized by Boellstorff et al. (2012) and T.L. Taylor (2006), in “Play Between Worlds”, highlights their importance in capturing the complexity and richness of virtual environments. Interviews are instrumental in uncovering the implicit and tacit ways individuals interpret and make sense of their lived experiences (Edwards and Holland, 2013). In the context of virtual worlds and online gaming research, ethnographic approaches and qualitative interviews are frequently combined to yield more profound insights. However, investigations into sensitive topics such as hate speech and discriminatory language in online gaming remain relatively scarce, with many studies opting for surveys or forum data instead. This study addresses this gap by conducting semi-structured interviews with Mobile Legends: Bang Bang players, offering a unique platform for participants to articulate their experiences and perspectives on hate speech and discriminatory language within multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) games.

As Güçlü (2019:103–104) explains, semi-structured interviews provide a flexible yet systematic data collection method, allowing researchers to adapt questions based on the interview's progression while still adhering to a predefined framework.

This approach enables the collection of rich, detailed data, making it particularly suitable for exploring complex and sensitive issues like hate speech in gaming environments.

3.4.2.1. Participants and Sampling Method

The current study adopted a purposive and snowball sampling approach to ensure that relevant experts with diverse opinions and experiences were selected as participants. In the context of purposive sampling, two main inclusion criteria were defined. The first requirement was that individuals must have at least one year experience of playing Mobile Legends: Bang Bang. This prerequisite ensured that participants had enough exposure to the game's mechanics, community interactions, and, most importantly, their experiences with hate speech. The second criterion focused on diversity so that participants belonged to different ages, genders, geographical locations, and gaming backgrounds. This intentionality was consistent with the purpose of the study, which was to undertake an exhaustive examination of the dynamics of hate speech within the lived experiences of experienced players.

Additionally, the study utilized snowball sampling as a supplementary recruitment method. This approach pinpoints an initial individual who fits the study's parameters and then asks them to refer other potential participants to the study who share the same characteristics (Cote and Raz, 2015:102). Considering that this research topic revolves around a sensitive phenomenon like hate speech and discriminatory language, the snowball sampling method was particularly beneficial; it provided a channel of reach to groups and populations whose knowledge might otherwise be unrepresented in the traditional sampling methods. Using this approach, the research included communal experiences among interlinked gaming networks and individual accounts, enhancing the richness and breadth of the data gathered.

The interviews took place between June and September 2024, using face-to-face meetings (10) and online communication platforms (15), such as WhatsApp and Telegram, with 25 participants. Participants were given the option to choose their preferred mode of communication, with the understanding that their responses would be audio-recorded. The interviews each lasted 15 to 60 minutes. This time was

considered sufficient to allow participants to discuss the questions and express their views comprehensively and freely. Recruitment of interviewees primarily occurred through online video game forums and the researcher's professional network, with additional participants identified through snowball sampling. Engaging with individuals with direct or indirect connections to the researcher's network can help create a sense of comfort and trust, which may encourage participants to share their experiences more openly. This can enhance the depth of qualitative data collected (McConnell-Henry et al., 2010). Such dynamics are especially important when discussing sensitive topics such as hate speech and discrimination (Brewis, 2014).

While familiarity can lead to greater disclosure of personal experiences, it also brings potential methodological challenges, including self-assessment and social desirability biases. People's self-perceptions do not always accurately reflect their actual behaviors and experiences, as self-assessment can be influenced by various cognitive and social factors (Dunning et al., 2004:69). Furthermore, participants may, either consciously or unconsciously, try to present themselves in a more socially acceptable way, which could affect the authenticity of their responses.

A widely recognized standard for establishing an appropriate sample size in qualitative research is the concept of saturation (Creswell and Miller, 2000; Morse, 1994), which is reached when additional participants no longer yield new information or insights. Although some scholars contend that interview depth may not always produce ample data for identifying patterns or forming conclusions, the 25 interviews conducted in this study yielded extensive, detailed narratives, personal accounts, and explanations. Despite variations in participants' age, gender, ethnicity, geographic location, and gaming experience in *Mobile Legends: Bang Bang*, significant consistencies were observed in their perceptions of hate speech and responses to open-ended questions. Consequently, thematic saturation was attained as recurring patterns and shared themes became evident across the dataset.

The age range of the participants was between 18-50 years. In terms of gender distribution, 13 participants were female, and 9 participants were male. Moreover, 3 participants identified as "other". Regarding educational background, 18 were high school graduates, while 4 had undergraduate education and 3 had associate degrees.

Regarding occupational status, 9 participants were students, while some were unemployed or engaged in various professional fields.

In terms of religious identity, 18 participants identified as Sunni Muslim, while others identified as Atheist (4 participants), Alevi Muslim (1 participant), Agnostic (1 participant), and Deist (1 participant). Regarding ethnic identity, 22 participants were Turkish, with 3 identifying as Kurdish. From a political perspective, 12 participants identified as “Kemalists”. In contrast, 13 participants stated they did not associate themselves with any particular political ideology.

Participant Number	Age	Gender	Job	Ethnic Identity	Politics
1	25	Male	Warehouse worker	Turk	Politically unaffiliated
2	23	Male	Student	Turk	Kemalist
3	31	Male	Unemployed	Turk	Kemalist
4	30	Male	Unemployed	Turk	Politically unaffiliated
5	29	Other	Municipality employee	Turk	Politically unaffiliated
6	27	Male	Accountant	Turk	Politically unaffiliated
7	28	Male	Unemployed	Turk	Politically unaffiliated
8	23	Male	Pianist	Kurd	Politically unaffiliated
9	27	Male	Marble Master	Kurd	Politically unaffiliated
10	25	Other	Teacher	Turk	Kemalist
11	27	Male	Security guard	Turk	Politically unaffiliated
12	18	Female	Intern	Turk	Politically unaffiliated
13	50	Female	Housewife	Turk	Kemalist
14	23	Female	Student	Turk	Kemalist
15	22	Female	Student	Turk	Kemalist
16	21	Female	Student	Turk	Politically unaffiliated
17	22	Female	Student	Turk	Kemalist
18	22	Female	Athlete	Turk	Kemalist
19	18	Female	Student	Turk	Politically unaffiliated

20	22	Female	Fabrika Çalışanı	Turk	Politically unaffiliated
21	19	Female	Student	Turk	Politically unaffiliated
22	23	Female	Student	Turk	Kemalist
23	19	Other	Student	Kurd	Kemalist
24	22	Female	Food Technician	Turk	Kemalist
25	18	Female	Unemployed	Turk	Kemalist

Table 3.1. Participant Demographics

3.4.2.2. Procedure

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the ethics committee of Istanbul University. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via online meetings and face-to-face interviews. The interview questions were guided by the work of Amanda Cote and Julia G. Raz (Cote and Raz, 2015). Based on their recommendations, the interviews were structured as follows: introduction, demographic questions, warm-up questions, leading questions, and conclusion. In the introduction, the researcher explained the study's purpose and the interview process and made the participants comfortable. Participants who agreed to participate in the interviews were provided with a consent form outlining the purpose of the study and the ethical considerations associated with their participation. This document specified that all participants' identities would be pseudonymized and that they retained the right to withdraw from the study at any time, should they choose to do so. Additionally, during interactions conducted via WhatsApp or Telegram, I reiterated these ethical considerations and explicitly sought permission to record the conversation before proceeding with the interview. In the demographic questions section, the participants were asked to fill out a sociodemographic information form, including age, gender, occupation, income, religion, and political views. This information was used to describe the participants' characteristics and include individuals from different backgrounds in the study.

The warm-up questions asked general questions about the participants' MOBA gaming experiences, such as "How did you start playing MOBA games?" or "Have you heard of the concept of hate speech before?" in order to help the participants adapt

to the interview process and talk in a comfortable environment. The main questions aimed to analyze the main themes of the research in-depth, and information was collected from the participants about their perceptions of hate speech, their experiences in the game, and their reactions to such situations through open-ended questions.

To address potential discomfort surrounding discussions of hate speech in gaming, a reflexive approach was incorporated into five interviews, wherein I disclosed my past engagement in such behavior (Pessoa et al., 2019). This strategy aimed to reduce the stigma associated with the topic, creating an environment where participants felt more at ease reflecting on their experiences. By employing this approach, I sought to diminish the hierarchical divide between researcher and participant, avoiding a potentially authoritative or intrusive position and presenting myself as a fellow gamer. This technique functioned as an implicit probing mechanism designed to facilitate open and honest discussions about the presence and impact of hate speech within gaming communities.

Furthermore, interview questions were structured to examine hate speech as a broader phenomenon rather than directly inquiring about participants' personal engagement in such behavior. This methodological decision was informed by recognizing that acknowledging involvement in hate speech could be perceived as socially undesirable, potentially influencing participants to modify or withhold their responses. However, this approach also introduces a limitation, as discussing socially sensitive topics in a generalized manner may restrict the extent to which participants provide personal disclosures, thus limiting the depth of insight into individual experiences of hate speech in gaming environments. At the end of the interviews, participants were asked if they had anything else they would like to add and if they would recommend the participation of another player in this study.

3.4.2.3. Data Analysis

Data from the interviews were translated from Turkish to English. The data was imported into Maxqda, a qualitative data analysis software tool, and were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a versatile approach used to identify, analyze, and present patterns or themes within qualitative data. It offers a detailed

dataset exploration and is particularly effective for condensing extensive data into meaningful insights (Hussain and Griffiths, 2009). This study utilized Braun and Clarke's (2021:4) thematic analysis, following a six-step process: familiarization with data, coding, generating initial themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting the findings. This approach ensured a systematic and rigorous analysis of the data.

In the initial phase, the researcher thoroughly reviewed all transcripts twice to gain a deep understanding of the data. Key themes were then identified based on the responses to each question. These responses were revisited, focusing on the themes that had surfaced during the first round of analysis. Similar responses were grouped under tentative theme categories and assigned preliminary labels and definitions. The data was examined again to ensure that no additional relevant information related to the provisional themes was overlooked. Finally, the themes were refined and finalized in collaboration with the researcher and his supervisor, ensuring their accuracy and relevance. The entire process of identifying, coding, and labeling themes was conducted using the software Maxqda.

The reliability and validity of this research were upheld by following established qualitative research principles, specifically credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as articulated by Lincoln and Guba in 1985 (Wahid et al., 2024). To bolster credibility, several methodological approaches were employed. Member checking enabled participants to review and refine their responses, ensuring their recounted experiences' accuracy and authenticity. Furthermore, reflexivity was integral in mitigating potential researcher bias. This involved consciously acknowledging the researcher's positionality and incorporating strategies such as self-disclosure during interviews to cultivate participant trust and openness. The study also adopted triangulation, leveraging multiple data sources such as in-person and virtual interviews to achieve a more nuanced and holistic understanding of hate speech phenomena within Mobile Legends: Bang Bang. Additionally, a semi-structured interview guide, informed by prior scholarly work (Cote and Raz, 2015), was employed to maintain methodological consistency while permitting the exploration of emerging themes.

Transferability was addressed by providing a thick description, which entailed detailed documentation of participant characteristics, gaming histories, and perspectives on hate speech. By including contextual information such as participants' age, gender, educational attainment, occupation, religious affiliation, ethnic identity, and political orientation this study facilitates the assessment of its findings' relevance to other gaming environments or cultural contexts. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a transparent and meticulously documented research process. This included the consistent application of Maxqda for thematic analysis, which supported systematic data coding and the development of robust themes. Lastly, confirmability was achieved through peer debriefing sessions with the research supervisor, ensuring that data interpretations remained firmly rooted in participant accounts rather than being influenced by researcher preconceptions. Ethical rigor was further reinforced through adherence to principles such as informed consent, pseudonymization, and the right to withdraw, thereby safeguarding participants' confidentiality and autonomy throughout the research process.

3.4.2.4. Limitations

Despite offering valuable insights, this study has several limitations. First, the use of purposive and snowball sampling may have introduced selection bias, restricting the generalizability of findings to broader gaming communities. Additionally, focusing solely on Mobile Legends: Bang Bang limits applicability to other gaming environments, where hate speech dynamics may differ. The reliance on self-reported data poses risks of social desirability bias, potentially affecting responses on a sensitive topic. While participants represented diverse demographics, saturation was not reached in each subgroup, hindering detailed analysis of age, gender, or cultural differences. Moreover, online interviews via WhatsApp and Telegram may have influenced engagement compared to face-to-face interactions. Lastly, translating interview data from Turkish to English carries the risk of interpretation shifts or contextual loss.

3.5. Findings

This section presents the findings from both the digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews. Initially, the results derived from the digital ethnographic analysis are outlined, followed by a detailed discussion of the findings obtained through semi-structured interviews.

3.5.1. Findings of Digital Ethnography

This section explores various aspects of hate speech within MLBB. First, the study identifies and examines different types of hate speech, assessing their frequency across various competitive ranks, including Epic, Legend, and Mythic. Second, the specific targets of hate speech are categorized. Third, the relationship between different playstyles such as solo and group play and the prevalence of hate speech is analyzed. Fourth, the study investigates the correlation between the frequency of hate speech and its manifestation across different forms, including usernames, profile pictures, text chat, and voice chat. Finally, the intensity of hate speech, players' responses to it, and the varying reactions to hate speech targeting different identities within MLBB are examined.

3.5.1.1. The Types of Hate Speech in MLBB

The Types of Hate Speech	Number of Hate Speech
Gender-Based Hate Speech	76
Racist Hate Speech	118
Disability or Severe Disease Hate Speech	33
Political Hate Speech	3
Homophobic Hate Speech	27
Religious Hate Speech	8
Age-Based Hate Speech	2
Total	267

Table 3.2. The Types of Hate Speech

The analysis presented in Table 1 identifies 267 instances of hate speech within the context of the game Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB), categorizing and evaluating these occurrences based on prevalent types of hate speech observed in the gaming environment. The findings reveal that in-game hate speech is concentrated

around specific themes, with racial hate speech emerging as the most frequently encountered type, accounting for 118 occurrences (44.2% of total cases). This is followed by gender-based hate speech, noted in 76 instances (28.5%), which underscores the evident discrimination based on gender identity during gameplay. Additionally, hate speech related to disabilities or severe health conditions was recorded in 33 cases (12.4%), highlighting significant concerns regarding negative discourse surrounding physical or mental health. Homophobic hate speech was documented 27 times (10.1%), indicating a notable level of discrimination based on sexual orientation. In comparison, instances of religious hate speech were observed 8 times (3.0%) and political hate speech 3 times (1.1%), suggesting relatively lower prevalence in these areas. Age-based hate speech was documented in only 2 cases (0.7%), making it the least prevalent form among those analyzed. Overall, these findings indicate that hate speech in digital games constitutes a systematic form of discrimination directed at particular groups, with race, gender, and health status being the most pronounced factors.

3.5.1.2. The Relationship Between Hate Speech and Ranks in MLBB

The Type of Hate Speech	Number of Hate Speech and Ranks			
	Epic	Legend	Mythic	Total
Gender-Based Hate Speech	46	13	17	76
Racist Hate Speech	21	51	46	118
Disability or Severe Disease Hate Speech	3	11	19	33
Political Hate Speech	0	0	3	3
Homophobic Hate Speech	6	7	14	27
Religious Hate Speech	2	5	1	8
Age-Based Hate Speech	2	0	0	2
Total	80	87	100	267

Table 3.3. The Relationship Between Hate Speech and Ranks

In line with the data in Table 2, it can be observed that hate speech incidents in Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) increase as the league level increases; 80 (30.0%) hate speech incidents were recorded in the Epic league, 87 (32.6%) in the

Legend league and 100 (37.5%) in the Mythic league. The most common type of hate speech in all leagues was racism, with the highest rate (58.6%) in Legend, followed by Mythic (46.0%) and Epic (44.2%). Gender-based hate speech was most prevalent in the Epic League (28.5%). In comparison, it remained at 14.9% and 17.0% in the Legend and Mythic leagues, respectively, suggesting that female players in the lower leagues are more likely to experience gender-based discrimination. Disability or severe illness hate speech was lowest in Epic (12.4%) and increased significantly in Legend (12.6%) and especially Mythic (19.0%), suggesting that at the most competitive level, players are more likely to use disability or severe health hate speech to belittle their opponents. Homophobic hate speech was similar in Epic (10.1%) and Legend (8.0%) but increased to 14.0% in Mythic, suggesting that hostile attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people are more prevalent in higher leagues. Religious hate speech was generally low, with the highest rate recorded in the Legend league (5.7%), followed by 3.0% in the Epic league and 1.0% in the Mythic league, which may indicate that religious topics are less likely to be discussed in the top leagues. Political hate speech was only recorded in the Mythic league (3.0%) and none in the other leagues, suggesting that political discourse generally remains at a low level in the game environment but increases slightly at the highest level of competition. Age-based hate speech was only observed in the Epic League (0.7%) and completely disappeared in the higher leagues. This suggests that age-based discrimination is more likely directed at new or young players in the lower leagues. Overall, hate speech incidents increase as you move up the leagues, with racism, disability-based hate speech, and homophobic hate speech being the most common types, suggesting that competitive environments can encourage discriminatory language and hate speech.

3.5.1.3. The Targets of Hate Speech in MLBB

The Targets of Hate Speech	Number of Hate Speech
Women	75
Men	1
Arabs	31
Iranians	15
Kurds	37
Afghans	2
Refugees	7
Syrians	12
Israelis	2
Turks	12
Gypsies	1
Children	2
Islam	6
Atheists	1
AKP members	3
LGBTQ+ members	27
Disabled individuals	33
Total	267

Table 3.4. The Targets of Hate Speech

Table 3 shows that out of 267 hate speech incidents in the game Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB), women were the most targeted group, with 75 incidents (28.1%) out of 267 hate speech incidents. Hate speech targeting women often consists of statements that reinforce sexist stereotypes and belittle the gaming skills of female players. For example, discourses such as “*Woman chaining,*” “*Sister jumping,*” and “*She's just a girl, she does not know*” show that women are not taken seriously in the gaming world and are seen as incompetent. This systematic discrimination against women goes beyond in-game competition and contributes to the exclusion of female players and the formation of a permanent toxic culture in the gaming community. Hate speech against men, on the other hand, remained at a rate of only 1 case (0.4%) and was limited to a single sexist statement such as “*Do men play Nana?*” (Nana is a feminine hero in the MLBB). This shows that gendered hate speech in gaming is

primarily targeted at women and reproduces gender inequality in gaming environments.

Hate speech targeting ethnic and national identity is also quite common, with 37 cases (13.9%) targeting Kurds, 31 cases (11.6%) targeting Arabs, 15 cases (5.6%) targeting Iranians, 12 cases (4.5%) each targeting Syrians and Turks, 7 cases (2.6%) targeting refugees and 2 cases (0.7%) targeting Afghans. Hate speech against Kurds generally involves discriminatory and politically motivated discourse targeting ethnic identity. For example, expressions such as *“Kurds do not have the right to speak,”* *“Kurdish animators should be burned”*, and *“You are a PKK member, Kurd”* use language that denigrates and criminalizes Kurdish identity. Hate speech against Arabs consists of exclusionary expressions combined with racism, expressions such as *“If you are Arab, go back to your country,”* *“You do not even have a country,”* *“If there are Arabs in the team, we are doomed to lose anyway”* show that Arab players are unwanted and excluded in the game environment. Similarly, hate speech against Iranians shows that nationalist prejudices are reflected in the dynamics of the game, with expressions such as *“Iranian dogs,”* and *“If there is an Iranian in the team, I will sell the game directly.”* Discourses against Syrians also include exclusionary and racist discourses and target refugees and immigrants with expressions such as *“There are Syrians everywhere,”* *“Fucking Syrian flag,”* *“There is a war in your country, why are you in the game, go to your country.”* Hate speech against Turks includes expressions such as *“Dog Turks,”* *“Turks are sheep,”* *“Turks are donkeys”*, and insults to national identity. Expressions such as *“The last refugee hunter”* and *“I do not want refugees in my country”* against refugees show that political and sociological anti-refugee attitudes have been transferred to the gaming environment.

Although hate speech based on religious identity was observed at relatively low rates, there were 6 cases (2.2%) of hate speech against Islam and 1 case (0.4%) of hate speech against atheists. Expressions such as *“Pigs love to eat Allah”* and *“Shut up for your Allah and your prophet”* show that hate speech against religious values is used in a humiliating and insulting way. The expression *“atheist enemy”* against atheists contains a direct opposition to non-belief.

LGBTQ+ people are also one of the groups targeted by in-game hate speech, with a total of 27 incidents (10.1%). Expressions such as *“Top, faggot”*, *“Gays hang yourself,”* and *“Do not play like a faggot”* show that homophobic and transphobic attitudes are pretty common in the game world. Such discourses lead to the exclusion of LGBTQ+ people from gaming communities and the perpetuation of in-game discrimination. It shows that competition in gaming is not only based on talent but also on sexual identity and that LGBTQ+ people are systematically targeted.

Disabled people are also one of the most targeted groups for in-game hate speech, with a total of 33 incidents (12.4%). Phrases such as *“Are you autistic, son?”*, *“People with autism should be burned with petrol,”* and *“Disabled people are fucking disabled”* show that disabled people are ridiculed and systematically excluded in the game environment. Such discourses show that insensitivity and discrimination against disabled people are deeply rooted in gaming culture.

Hate speech against political identities also manifested itself in the game environment. Hate speech against AKP members was detected in 3 cases (1.1%). It shows that individuals with a particular political view are targeted in the game environment with expressions such as *“The first one to die is from AKP,”* *“They are lords, they are from AKP,”* and *“There is no gang for AKP members”*. This shows that political identities are also subject to hate speech in the game and that such discriminatory attitudes are reflected in the competitive environment.

These data show that hate speech in the gaming environment is widespread and systematically targeted at specific groups. Women, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ people, and players with disabilities are the groups most often subjected to hate speech, suggesting that toxic in-game culture is not just about competition but is also influenced by social and political contexts. Underestimating women’s ability to play games, criminalizing ethnic minorities, making homophobic and transphobic remarks about LGBTQ+ people, and mocking disabled people show that social prejudices and discrimination in the gaming ecosystem carry over to digital platforms.

3.5.1.4. Types of Playing and Hate Speech

Different Types of Playing	Epic	Legend	Mythic	Total
Solo Playing	58	69	83	210
Group Playing	22	18	17	57
Total	80	87	100	267

Table 3.5. The Relationship Between Types of Playing and Hate Speech

The data in Table 4 shows the distribution of hate speech in Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) game shows the distribution of hate speech across leagues according to different game types (solo and group games). When analyzing a total of 267 hate speech incidents, 210 incidents (78.7%) were detected in individual (solo) games and 57 incidents (21.3%) in group (team) games. These results show that individual matches are exposed to significantly more hate speech than group matches.

When comparing leagues, in the Epic league, there were 54 incidents (72.5%) of hate speech in individual games and 22 incidents (27.5%) in group games. In the Legend League, 69 incidents (79.3%) of hate speech were reported in individual matches, and 18 incidents (20.7%) were reported in group matches. The Mythic League had the highest rate, with 83 incidents (83.0%) in individual matches and 17 incidents (17.0%) in group matches. These data show that the rate of hate speech in individual matches is higher than in group matches at all league levels. The rate of hate speech in individual matches increases as the league level increases.

3.5.1.5. Forms of Hate Speech in MLBB

Forms of Hate Speech	Epic	Legend	Mythic	Total
Username	20	10	12	42
Profile Photo	1	0	0	1
Text and Voice Chat	59	77	88	224
Total	80	87	100	267

Table 3.6. The Forms of Hate Speech

The data in Table 5 illustrates the prevalence of hate speech in Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) across various forms, including usernames, profile photos, and text/voice chat, along with the distribution of these forms by league level. In the Epic,

Legend, and Mythic leagues, the predominant form of hate speech was found in text and voice chat, accounting for 224 cases (83.9%). Specifically, there were 59 cases (73.8%) in the Epic League, 77 cases (88.5%) in the Legend League, and 88 cases (88.0%) in the Mythic League. These findings indicate that in-game hate speech primarily proliferates through direct communication channels. The incidence of hate speech via usernames was recorded at 42 cases (15.7%), with 20 cases (33.9%) in the Epic League, 10 cases (13.0%) in the Legend League, and 12 cases (13.6%) in the Mythic League. Meanwhile, occurrences of hate speech stemming from profile photos remained exceedingly low, with only one incident (0.4%) documented. This single incident occurred in the Epic League, while no incidents were reported in the Legend and Mythic leagues. In summary, text and voice chat are the most prevalent forms of hate speech in MLBB, and their occurrence rises with ascending league levels. Conversely, the rate of hate speech associated with avatar names decreases in higher leagues, and hate speech linked to avatar visuals is seldom observed.

3.5.1.6. The Intensity of Hate Speech in MLBB

Intensity of Hate Speech	Epic	Legend	Mythic	Total
Disagreement	0	0	0	0
Negative Actions	18	19	20	57
Negative Character	36	27	44	107
Demonizing and Dehumanizing	23	32	28	83
Violence	3	8	3	14
Death	0	1	5	6
Total	80	87	100	267

Table 3.7. The Intensity of Hate Speech

The data in Table 6 shows the categorization of hate speech in the Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) game and the distribution of hate speech across leagues. As a result of the analyses, no hate speech was found in the disagreement category, while negative characterization was the most common type of hate speech, with 107 incidents. In the Epic league, 36 incidents (45.0%); in the Legend league, 27 incidents (31.0%); and in the Mythic league, 44 incidents (44.0%) fell into the harmful

characterization category. Statements in this category directly characterize individuals or groups with negative qualities and include insults and humiliation towards them. Expressions such as *“Cancer faggot,” “Fuck your mother,” “These actresses are all such imbeciles,” “F**ck your sister,” “F**ck your governor, Karrie,” “I am messing with your mother, you have a lovely mother,”* etc. use humiliating language and target individuals with insults containing hate speech.

After negative characterization, the categories of demonization and dehumanization come second with 83 cases. This category includes 23 cases (28.8%) in the Epic league, 32 cases (36.8%) in the Legend league, and 28 cases (28.0%) in the Mythic league. The expressions in this category aim to discredit and humiliate specific communities by identifying them with animals or non-human beings. Expressions such as *“dog Turks,” “pigs love to eat Allah,” “Turk always cow,”* and *“Iranian dogs”* humiliate certain ethnic and religious groups and inhumanly position them. These discourses go beyond individual insults and contribute to developing a systematic language of exclusion toward specific communities.

The third most common category was negative actions, with a total of 57 cases: 18 cases (22.5%) in the Epic league, 19 cases (21.8%) in the Legend league, and 20 cases (20.0%) in the Mythic league. This category is based on the collective blaming of specific ethnic or cultural groups by associating them with failures in the game. We always lose because of those Kurds, *“Are there Kurds among us? We are sure to löse”, “This game is spoilt because of Kurds like you,” “What can you expect from a team with Arabs?”*, etc., show that players associate the presence of particular groups with the negative results of the game rather than with their performance. Such discourses increase discrimination by reinforcing prejudices against specific communities.

Incitement to violence comes fourth with a total of 14 incidents, including three incidents (3.8%) in the Epic league, eight incidents (9.2%) in the Legend league, and three incidents (3.0%) in the Mythic league. Violent phrases directly encourage physical attacks against certain groups. Phrases such as *“refugee beater,” “Arab slapper,” “last refugee hunter,”* etc., target refugees and certain ethnic groups and show an aggressive attitude towards them. Such discourses show that in-game hate

speech is not limited to insults but is also characterized by expressions that evoke physical attacks.

Death Summoning is the most dangerous category despite having the lowest number of cases. While there were no cases in the Epic league, there was 1 case (1.1%) in the Legend league and 5 cases (5.0%) in the Mythic league. Statements containing death threats directly call for the killing of specific groups and represent the most extreme form of hate speech. Expressions such as *“I will cut off your mother's sister's head,”* *“Kurdish animists should be burned,”* and *“Autists should be burned with petrol”* contain direct calls for violence and destruction against specific groups. These discourses show that hate speech is not limited to individual attacks but also includes threats to the very existence of specific communities.

3.5.1.7. The Reactions to Hate Speech in MLBB

The Reactions to Hate Speech	Epic	Legend	Mythic	Total
Positive	16	10	2	28
Negative	0	0	0	0
Nötr	7	11	9	27
No reaction	57	66	89	212
Total	80	87	100	267

Table 3.8. The Reactions to Identities

The data in Table 7 shows that reactions to in-game hate speech in the game Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) show that reactions to in-game hate speech are primarily passive. The 'no reaction' rate is highest in all levels, with 57 hate speeches (71.3%) in Epic, 66 hate speeches (75.9%) in Legend, and 89 hate speeches (89.0%) in Mythic receiving no reaction. In the table, 212 hate messages (79.4%) remained unanswered. This situation shows that hate speech is largely ignored. There were 16 (20.0%) instances of hate speech being replied to at the Epic level, 10 (11.5%) at the Legend level, and 2 (2.0%) at the Mythic level. The number of positive responses in the overall table is 28 (10.5%). These data show that the tendency to respond to hate speech with hate decreases as the game level increases. In contrast, no negative responses criticized hate speech (0.0%). Neutral responses were 7 (8.8%) in Epic, 11

(12.6%) in Legend, and 9 (9.0%) in Mythic, with a total of 27 hate speeches (10.1%) receiving a neutral response. Thus, the vast majority of hate speech is left unanswered, the rate of hateful responses decreases as the game level increases, and there are no responses criticizing hate speech at any level.

3.5.1.8. Reactions to Different Identities in MLBB

Playing with Different Identities in MLBB		
Rank	Number of Games with Women Avatar	Number of Hate Speech
Epic	36	7
	Number of Games with Arabic Avatar	Number of Hate Speech
Legend	36	8
	Number of Games with Kurdish Avatar	Number of Hate Speech
Mythic	36	8

Table 3.9. The Reactions to Identities

Table 8 presents data on the incidence of hate speech encountered in the game Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB), specifically focusing on games played with various avatars. The study examined a total of 36 games featuring female, Arab, and Kurdish identities, identifying instances of in-game hate speech.

In the Epic League, games with avatars representing women revealed hate speech in 7 instances, yielding a rate of 19.4%. These incidents often included remarks diminishing the abilities of female players, attempting to restrict their roles in the game, and reinforcing sexist stereotypes. Examples of such statements include: *“Those girls should not play the game! I hate girls who play Angela”* (Angela is a feminine hero in MLBB) and *“Girls do not know this game,”* both of which negatively assess the presence of female players and reflect an exclusionary mindset Furthermore, remarks such as *“She is a fucking girl! This will happen if we let the girl get a mid-show”* illustrate the notion that the performance of female characters is unjustly linked to their gender. This environment indicates that female gamers face discrimination within gaming communities, subjecting them to a hostile social atmosphere influenced by sexist biases.

In the Legend League, eight incidents of hate speech were identified in games featuring avatars that represent Arab identity, accounting for 22.2% of the total. Such hate speech against Arab identity manifests through direct discriminatory language and expressions that demean ethnic identity. For instance, phrases like *“Fucking Arab”* and *“I am going to make my name Arapsavar”* indicate that Arab players are specifically targeted in an attempt to exclude them from the game. Furthermore, the expression *“I wish no Arabs would play the game”* reflects the perception that the presence of Arab players detracts from the overall gaming experience. These discourses reveal that discrimination based on ethnicity is prevalent in gaming communities, resulting in the exclusion of players because of their identity.

A similar trend was noted in Mythic League games, where avatars symbolizing Kurdish identity were present. Eight cases of hate speech were detected in this context, constituting 22.2% of the incidents. The discourse targeting Kurdish identity includes explicitly derogatory and exclusionary language. For example, phrases like *“Kurd, what do you expect?”* and *“There are Kurds in the team”* imply that their ethnic background taints the performance of Kurdish players. Additionally, terms such as *“Stupid Kurd”* and *“Lurking Kurd”* highlight the prevalence of negative stereotypes associated with Kurdish players in the gaming environment. These findings underscore that hate speech rooted in ethnic identity is a significant issue within gaming communities.

3.5.2. Findings of Semi Structured Interviews

This section examines the hate speech experiences of MLBB players, detailing their motivations for engaging with MOBA games, encounters with hate speech within MLBB, underlying causes, emotional and psychological effects, and the coping mechanisms employed in response to such experiences.

3.5.2.1. MOBA Gaming Habits

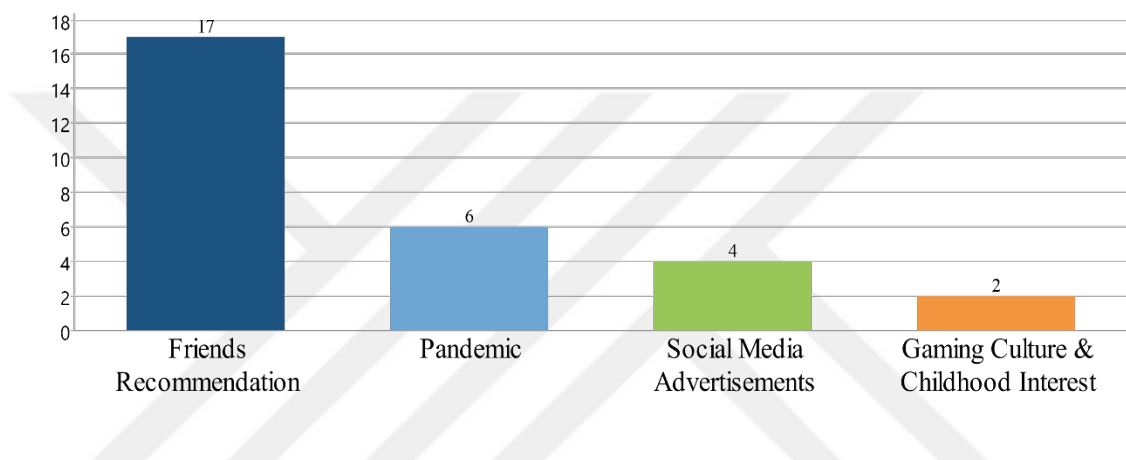


Figure 3.1. Interest to MOBA Games

Multiple factors play a role in initiating the participants' interest in MOBA games. The recommendation of friends and the desire to socialize is one of the most prominent reasons for interest in the game, and 16 participants mentioned this theme. Many participants stated that they started the game with the recommendations of their friends and emphasized that this was linked to the desire to strengthen their social ties. For example, a 19 years old female participant, 23, said, *"My friends used to play these games. They suggested it to me to spend time together and to strengthen our friendship, so I started playing"*. In addition, the pandemic period was an essential factor that increased interest in the game and was mentioned by 6 participants. Increased leisure time and physical isolation during the pandemic led individuals to online games. In this context, one participant said, *"There was not much to do during the pandemic. Out of boredom, I finally turned to such games and started playing"*.

In addition, social media advertisements were effective for 4 participants to start the game. The attractiveness of the advertisements and the interest in the game

led individuals to this experience. 25 years old male participant 1 said, *“I saw the game advertisement while browsing Instagram. I was curious and downloaded the game from the link”*. Finally, gaming culture and childhood interest were emphasized by 2 participants, which facilitated individuals' transition from their past experiences to MOBA games. Participant 18, a 22 years old female participant, said, *“My interest in these games has increased because I have been playing games regularly since I was a child, and I like interactive games,”* reveals this continuity. All these elements suggest that a combination of social, cultural, and individual factors shapes participants' interest in games.

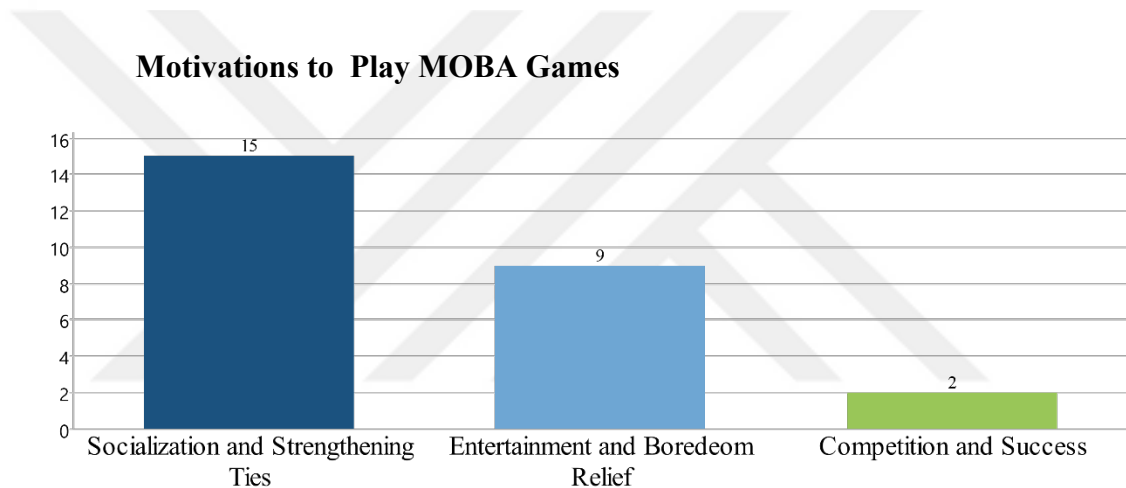


Figure 3.2. Motivations for MOBA games

Participants' motivations for playing games exhibit a multifaceted structure in which individual and social needs come together. Socializing and strengthening friendship ties was the most frequently mentioned theme and was emphasized by 15 participants. For example, the statements of 21 years old female participant 16, *“I started to spend time with my friends and socialize,”* and 23 years old female participant 22, *“I want to expand my social network by making new friends,”* show that games are a tool that strengthens social ties. In addition, 22 years old female participant 24 stated, *“I play with my boyfriend. When he is not there, I do not enter anyway,”* and 22 years old female participant 18's statements such as *“I play more with my brother”* reveal the place of games in family and romantic relationships.

The theme of entertainment and boredom relief was mentioned by 9 participants and emphasized the importance of games as a means of leisure. 27 years

old male participant 9 said, *“I play such games to have a good time and have fun with my friends,”* while 25 years old male participant 10 said, *“I play to get rid of boredom and have fun,”* and provided a similar justification. This situation reveals that games are a fun and relaxing activity for individuals.

Competition and success, another prominent theme, is an area of motivation that 2 participants drew attention to. The statements of 31 years old male participant 3, *“I am competitive and ambitious, that is why it motivated me,”* and 23 years old female participant 15, *“I play because there is the satisfaction of teamwork and competition in such games,”* show that the participants gained a sense of individual success from the games and fed their motivation based on struggle.

The pandemic period emerges as an essential context that shapes motivations. Participants said they turned to games due to the increased need for leisure time and socialization during the pandemic. For example, *“During the pandemic, I was playing with my friends for fun”* by 18 years old female participant 19 and *“During the pandemic, I started to get rid of boredom at home”* by 19 years old female participant 21 reveal the extent of this effect. However, rather than a source of motivation, the pandemic caused existing motivations to become more apparent.

In general, games have been evaluated as a tool that responds to the needs of individuals in different contexts, such as entertainment, socialization, and competition. While the most frequently cited motivation is socialization and strengthening friendship ties, entertainment, and individual achievement also play an essential role. The pandemic period has been a factor that has increased the importance of these motivations.

Participants' Game Playing Times

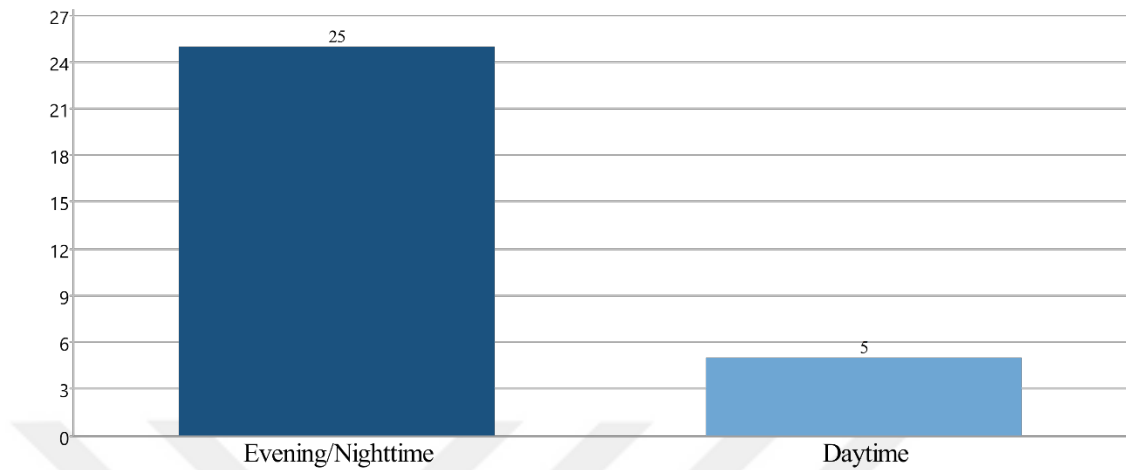


Figure 3.3. Game Playing Times

Participants' game-playing times varied depending on their daily schedules. Evening and nighttime were the most preferred periods by 25 participants. After daily responsibilities, evening hours offer a time of relaxation and socialization for individuals. Participant 5, a 29 years old male participant, explained this tendency by saying, *“By the time I get home from work, it is already evening, and there is not much to do afterward, so I play games.”*

Daytime hours are mainly preferred by 5 participants who play at work or on public transportation. For example, 27 years old male participant 9 stated, *“Depending on my shift, sometimes I play games during the daytime.”* 30 years old male participant 4 also expressed his ability to integrate play times into his daily schedule by saying, *“I can play day or night when I can be alone.”*

This analysis reveals that participants' space and time preferences are closely linked to their lifestyles and daily routines. While home and nighttime are preferred for longer and more focused play experiences, places such as workplaces and public transportation allow for shorter and more flexible play experiences.

Time Allocated to MOBA Games

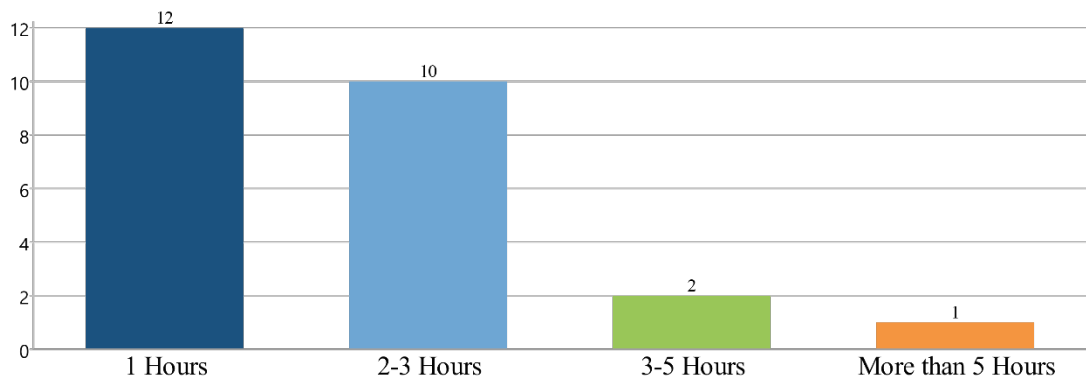


Figure 3.4. Daily Gaming Time

The time the participants allocate to MOBA games varies according to their preferences, lifestyles, and gaming motivations. Those who play for 1 hour daily constitute the largest group, with 12 participants. These participants generally consider gaming a social and fun activity and allocate gaming time in their free time at the end of the day. For example, participant 20, a 22 years old female participant, expressed this approach by saying, *“I usually play for 1 hour a day; I spend time in the evenings in my free time”*.

Those who play for 2-3 hours a day are in second place with 10 participants, and this group increases their playing time for reasons such as developing strategies and strengthening social ties. 17, a 22 years old female participant, explained this motivation by saying, *“I play 2 hours a day, I usually play with the team”*.

Participants who allocate 3-5 hours a day constitute a more limited group of 2 person, and this group prefers to play seriously in a competitive context. Participant 16, a 21 years old female participant, expressed her commitment to time by saying, *“I spend 3 to 5 hours developing strategy and tactics in the game.”*.

Those who play games for more than 5 hours a day are the least numerous with 1 participant, and this group sees games as a way of life. For example, the 19 years old female participant 21 emphasized this commitment by saying, *“I play 5-6 hours a day, almost like an addiction”*. This thematic analysis reveals that users shape their playing time according to their lifestyles and relationships with the game.

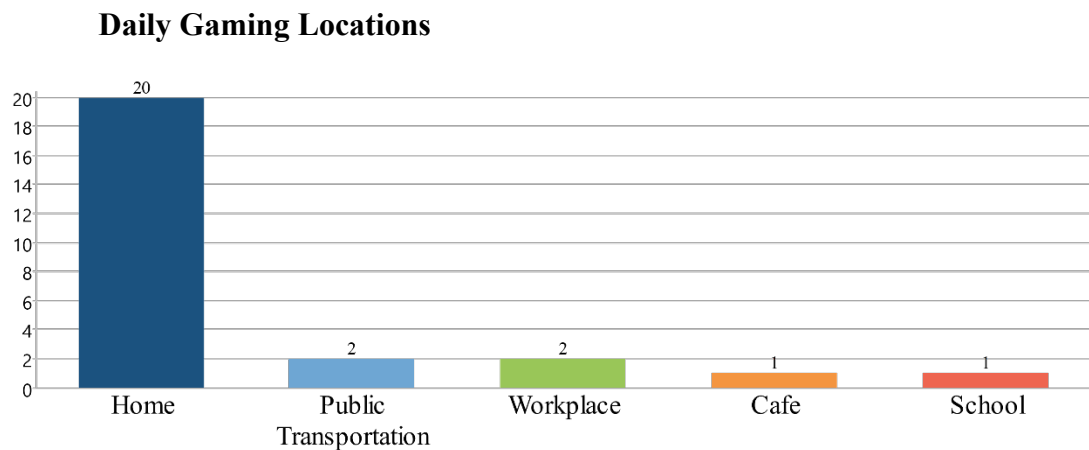


Figure 3.5. Daily Gaming Locations

The places where participants play MOBA games vary in line with their living conditions and preferences. The home environment is the primary gaming space for 20 participants. The main reason for this preference is that home provides individual space and comfort. For example, participant 19, an 18 years old female participant, stated, *“I usually play in my room away from my family because I play loudly, and it is hard to focus.”*

In addition, workplaces were mentioned by 2 participants as a place for playing games. Playing games in the workplace was generally associated with using leisure time. Participant 8, a 23 years old male participant, explained this preference by saying, *“I usually play where I work. When I have a free hour, I play.”*

Public and social spaces were mentioned as places to play games by 4 participants. Thanks to the flexibility of mobile devices, playing games in these places has become possible. For example, 23 years old female participant 14 emphasized this spatial flexibility by saying, *“I play by wearing headphones on public transportation.”*

Digital Games Played by Participants and Their Types

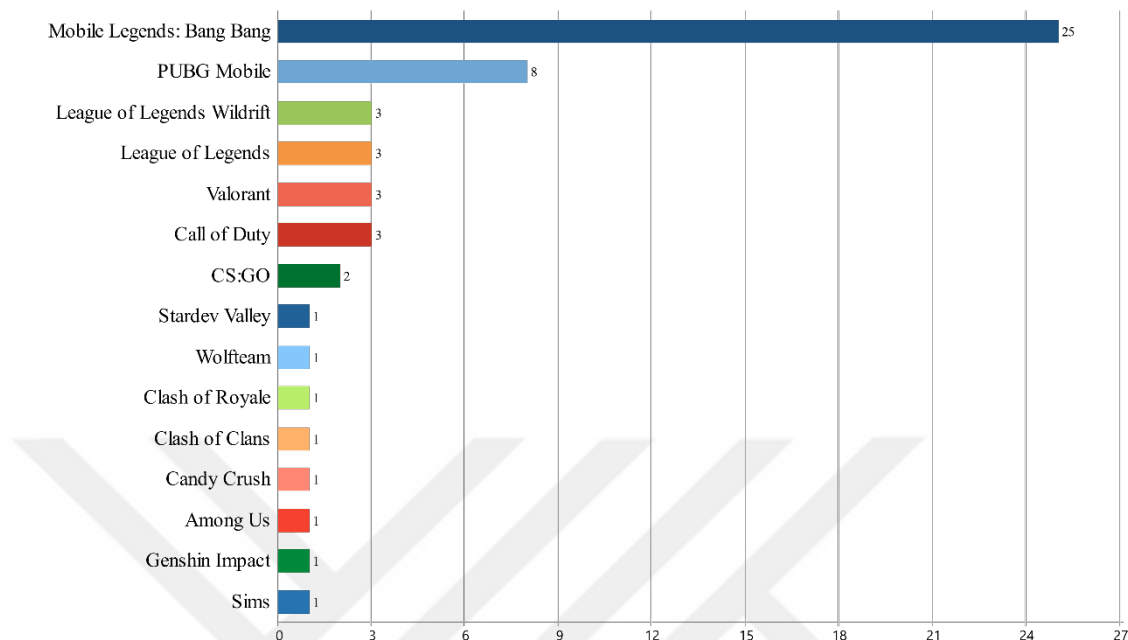


Figure 3.6. Players Favorite Digital Games

The games played by the participants varied according to individual preferences and game genres. Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) was the most popular game all participants (25 participants) played. The popularity of this MOBA-type game is related to its strategic game structure and team dynamics; as the 18 years old female participant explained, “*MLBB is my favorite because it is possible to play with friends as a team.*”

League of Legends and its mobile version, League of Legends: Wild Rift, respectively, were played by 3 participants each. As classic examples of the MOBA genre, these games stand out in their strategy and teamwork. On the other hand, the competitive first-person shooter (FPS) games Valorant and Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS: GO) were preferred by 3 and 2 participants, respectively. Call of Duty, another game in the FPS genre, was played by 3 participants and has a large player base on the mobile platform.

A lower number of participants represented an interest in simulation games. Stardew Valley and The Sims were played by one participant each. These games offer a relaxed gaming experience and individual play style. In the role-playing games

(RPG) category, Genshin Impact was the choice of 1 participant and is notable for its extensive world and story-based gameplay.

Among the social interaction-oriented and more casual games, Among Us and Candy Crush were preferred by one participant each. Also, in the strategy and mobile game category, Clash of Clans and Clash Royale were the favorite games of one participant each. In the Battle Royale genre, PUBG Mobile found a large player base with eight respondents.

Finally, Wolfteam, as a nostalgic game, was reported to be played by 1 participant. This distribution shows that participants distributed their game preferences evenly across genres, with Mobile Legends: Bang Bang being a dominant preference over other games.

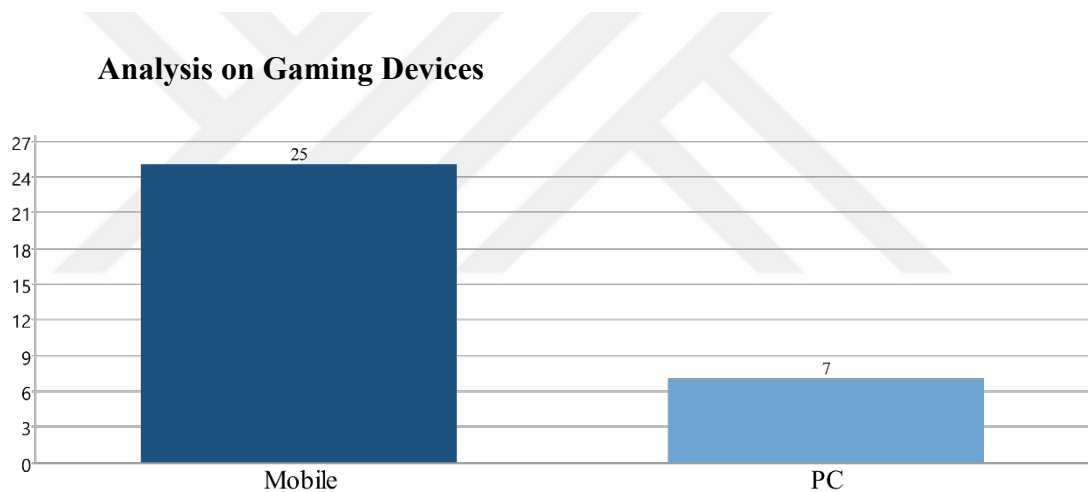


Figure 3.7. Gaming Devices

Participants varied the devices on which they played their games according to their individual preferences, living conditions, and the requirements of the game genres. Mobile platforms were by far the most preferred means of playing games. All 25 participants stated that they play their games on mobile devices. The main reasons for preferring mobile platforms are ease of use, portability, and the popularity of mobile-oriented games. Especially games such as Mobile Legends: Bang Bang are played intensively on mobile devices. Participant 14, a 23 years old female participant, expressed this situation by saying, *“I usually play on mobile because I can easily access it everywhere.”*

PC platforms ranked second among the respondents and were preferred by 7 respondents. PC is chosen especially for graphics-intensive games or games that require better control. Games such as Valorant and Counter-Strike: Global Offensive are concentrated on the PC platform due to their competitive nature and technical requirements. 18, a 22 years old female participant, emphasized the contribution of PC usage to the gaming experience by saying, *“I like playing on PC because it offers a better experience in games like Counter-Strike: Global Offensive.”*

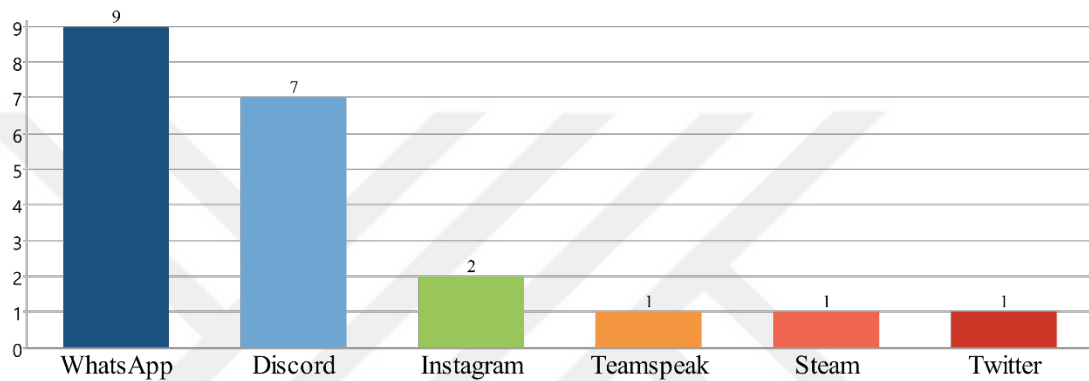


Figure 3.8. Social Platforms

In addition, some participants used social platforms such as WhatsApp (9), Discord (7), Instagram (2), X (1), TeamSpeak (1), and Steam (1) for post-game interactions and thus maintained their connections with the gaming community. Participants stated that they organized themselves before the game on these platforms, determined game strategies, and talked about what happened in the game with their friends after playing the game. Participant 12, an 18 years old female participant, emphasized the importance of platforms in establishing interaction between players by saying, *“We usually enter our Whatsapp group after the game is over and talk about what we did strategically right or not in the game.”*

As a result, participants diversified their gaming platforms and post-game interaction tools according to their preferences, living conditions, and the requirements of game genres. Mobile devices were the most preferred platform due to their ease of use and portability. On the other hand, PC platforms are preferred for competitive games with high technical requirements as they offer better graphics and control. In addition, participants actively use social platforms such as WhatsApp, Discord, and

Instagram for post-game interaction and strategy sharing. This shows that games are entertainment and important for social connections and collaboration.

3.5.2.2. Hate Speech in Daily Life

When the participants' definitions of hate speech are analyzed thematically, it is seen that the definitions are primarily shaped around the concepts of discrimination and aggression. The discrimination theme associated hate speech with prejudice and exclusionary behaviors towards personal characteristics such as race, religion, language, gender, or age. For example, 31 years old male participant 3 defined hate speech as *"prejudice against people for various reasons such as political views and race."* In contrast, 28 years old male participant 7 supported this view by saying, *"I know that it is called othering people because of their various characteristics. For example, I mean discrimination based on race, religion, etc."*

The theme of aggression and insult shows that hate speech is expressed more individually, with slang, insults, and insulting words. The 22 years old female participant 24, stated, *"I define hate speech as slang words."* In contrast, the 27 years old male participant 9, stated, *"I know it as saying bad words to others because of their race or gender."*

In addition, some participants defined hate speech in a more general framework and considered it derogatory statements directed at individuals or groups. For example, 23 years old female participant 14 defined hate speech as *"derogatory words and actions directed at a person or a group."* In contrast, 21 years old female participant 16 said, *"I think it is like bullying the other person."* These definitions reveal that participants generally perceive hate speech at the individual level through the themes of offensive language and discrimination.

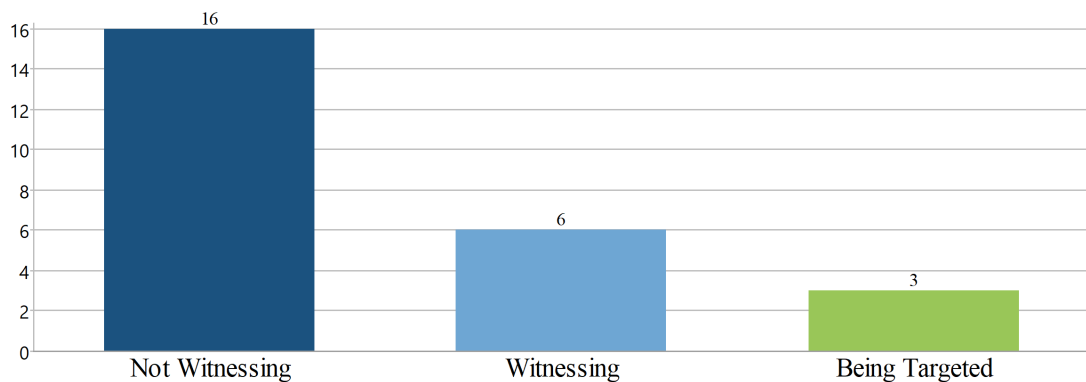


Figure 3.9. Direct Experience with Hate Speech

When analyzing the participants' experiences of encountering hate speech in daily life, it is observed that 3 participants were directly exposed to hate speech, 6 participants witnessed hate speech, and 16 participants neither experienced nor witnessed hate speech in their daily lives.

Participants directly exposed to hate speech report being targeted by discriminatory expressions in their daily lives due to factors such as gender and ethnic background. A female participant, who stated that she struggles more with prejudices than physical challenges in the workplace, emphasized that her professional competence is questioned based on her gender, saying, *“There are those who say, “You can’t do it,” just because I am a woman. They belittle my abilities and efforts. Such discourse often turns into a form of discrimination and mobbing that I encounter at work occasionally”*(K20, 19, Female). Similarly, another participant, who reported being subjected to insults in her social environment simply for rejecting someone, expressed, *“He demeaned me by calling me a 'Gypsy' and 'obese.' He belittled and insulted me just because I said no”* (K23, 19, Female), highlighting how her personal choices were met with hate speech. These experiences demonstrate that hate speech is not only a tool for individual insults but also a mechanism that reinforces societal norms and hierarchies.

Participants who have not been directly subjected to hate speech but have witnessed it describe how discrimination is perpetuated within social interactions. One participant, who observed widespread prejudice against Syrians in daily life, noted that *“individuals often judge Syrians solely based on their origins, approach them with*

preconceived biases, and systematically exclude them. He emphasized that discriminatory rhetoric and unjust generalizations against Syrians are pervasive in everyday life” (K6, 27, Male). This account illustrates how hate speech functions as a systematic mechanism of exclusion, reinforcing social divisions and contributing to the marginalization of specific groups.

Participants have reported that they are more frequently exposed to or witness hate speech indirectly through various digital tools, such as media channels, social media platforms, and digital games, rather than encountering it directly. In this context, traditional media and digital environments are significant facilitators in disseminating hate speech. A participant's statement, *“Women and homosexuals are exposed to a great deal of hate speech in daily life. It is also constantly present in the media and in the speeches of politicians”* (K10), further substantiates the role of the media in propagating hate speech.

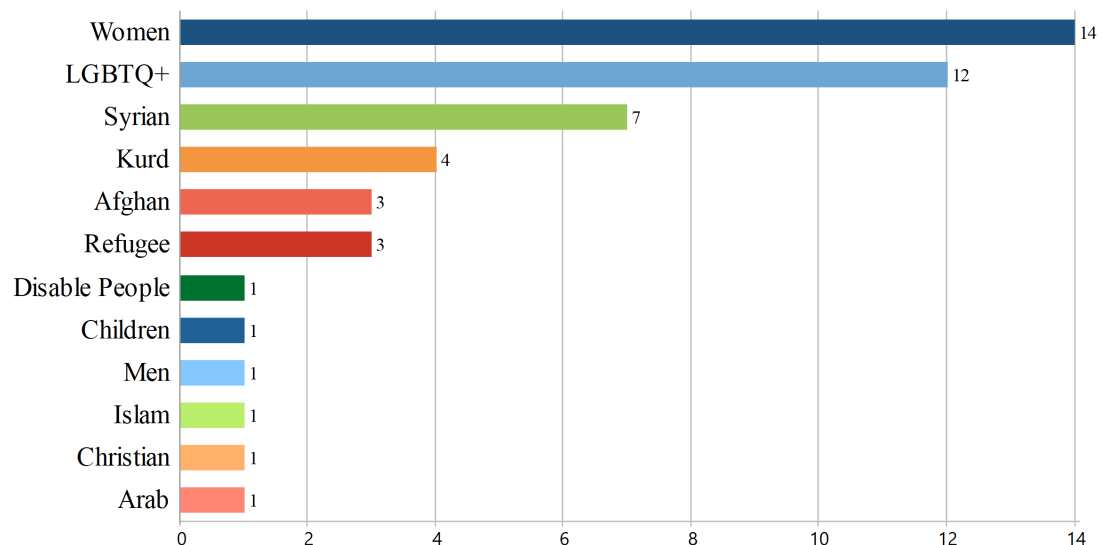


Figure 3.10. Targets of Hate Speech in Daily Life

When participants were asked which groups are most exposed to hate speech in daily life, the statements of the participants revealed that hate speech in daily life has a multidimensional structure in the context of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, age, and disability.

In the conducted interviews, 18 participants noted that racist hate speech is most commonly encountered indirectly within everyday contexts. Of these participants, 7 identified Syrians as the primary target of such discourse, 4 pointed to

Kurds, 3 to Afghans, 3 to refugees broadly, and 1 to Arabs. A 25 years old male participant 1 highlighted that these groups face heightened discrimination during political election cycles, often due to socioeconomic disparities. He remarked, *“I observe significant hostility toward Syrians and Afghans in daily life. Certain political parties also exploited this sentiment during the election period.”* This underscores the role of ethnic and national identity as a critical demarcation in the manifestation of hate speech.

In the conducted interviews, 15 participants stated that gendered hate speech is the most prevalent form of hate speech encountered in daily life. Among these participants, 14 indicated that hate speech targeting women is more widespread, while one participant acknowledged the presence of hate speech directed at men. Participant 24, a 22 years old female respondent, provided an example, stating:

“For example, if a woman dresses in revealing clothing, it often leads to passersby commenting or harassing her. Remarks like, ‘Is this how you should dress?’ or ‘Is it appropriate to dress like this?’ are used to criticize her style. Even derogatory language is employed, such as, ‘You are walking around shamelessly’ or ‘You are acting like a whore.’”

Within the category of sexual orientation, LGBTI+ individuals (12) were identified as one of the most frequently targeted groups for hate speech. Participant 25, an 18 years old female, provided a specific example, stating: *“For instance, during my time in high school, I had a friend who was gay. Others consistently marginalized him due to his appearance. Peers would derogatorily refer to him using slurs such as ‘fag,’ ‘stinky,’ ‘dirty,’ or ‘cursed.’”* This account highlights the pervasive discrimination and stigmatization faced by LGBTI+ individuals, underscoring the role of hate speech in reinforcing social exclusion and prejudice.

Furthermore, two participants identified religious hate speech as a common occurrence, with Christians (1) and Muslims (1) being the primary targets. Hate speech related to disability or severe illness was reported by one participant, who noted that individuals with disabilities are the main targets of such discriminatory discourse. Additionally, one participant highlighted the prevalence of age-based hate speech, specifying that children are the primary victims. These findings suggest that hate

speech in daily interactions extends beyond ethnicity and gender, encompassing religious affiliation, disability status, and age, thereby reinforcing social exclusion and marginalization across multiple identity groups.

3.5.2.3. Hate Speech in MLBB

As a result of the interviews, it was determined that all 25 participants were exposed to or witnessed discriminatory language and hate speech during the game. This situation impacted players' perceptions of safety in the game. While 60% of the participants (15) stated they did not feel safe during the game, 40% (10) indicated no concerns about safety.

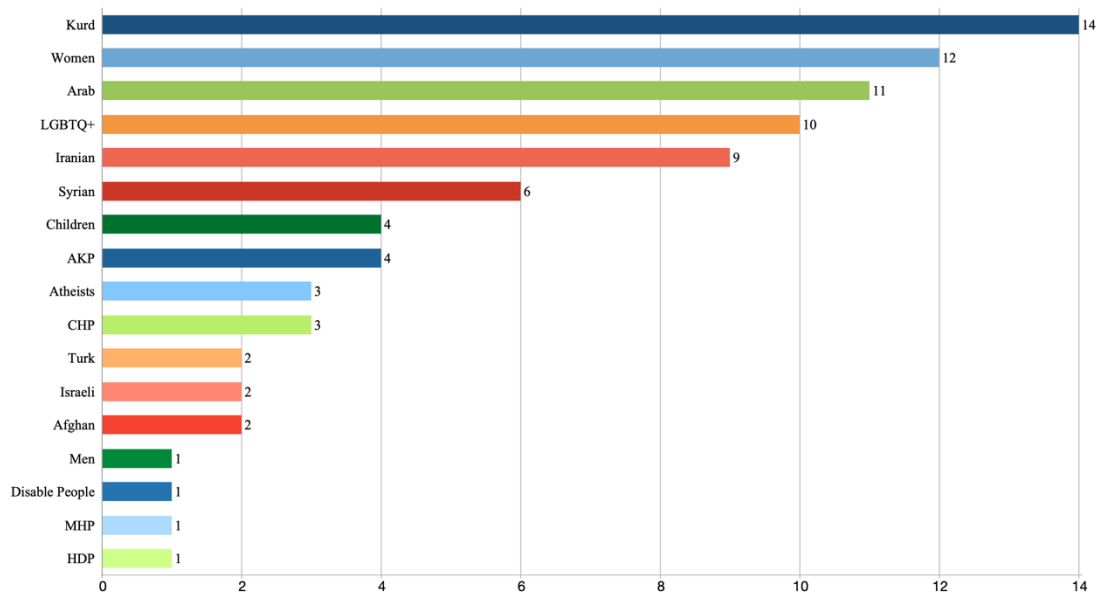


Figure 3.11. Targets of Hate Speech in MLBB

In the Mobile Legends: Bang Bang game, it was observed that different categories of hate speech were common. Within the scope of this study, the statements of the participants revealed that the most common types of hate speech in the game are racist hate speech, gendered hate speech, anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech, religious hate speech, disability or severe disease hate speech, and age-based hate speech.

Racist Hate Speech

Racist hate speech within the context of Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) emerges as a prevalent form of discriminatory behavior frequently observed among its

players. Findings derived from qualitative interviews indicate that 17 participants reported regularly encountering or witnessing such hate speech during gameplay. This highlights the significant presence of ethnicity-based discrimination within the MLBB community. These discriminatory discourses are often rooted in players' vocal characteristics, such as tone and accent, language use, preferred national symbols (e.g., flags), or direct references to ethnic identity.

Kurds have been identified as the most frequently targeted group in cases of hate speech within the gaming environment, as reported by 14 participants. This form of discriminatory rhetoric often takes the shape of demonization, where Kurdish identity is unjustly associated with terrorism, betrayal, and criminality, as well as dehumanization, which portrays Kurds as primitive or inferior. For instance, one participant noted that *“Players who identify as Kurdish are frequently labeled as ‘terrorists,’ ‘PKK members’ or ‘traitors’ during gameplay”* (P6, 27, Male). Another participant highlighted that *“Kurds are subjected to humiliating remarks such as being called terrorists, stateless, mountain dwellers, or child killers”* (P8, 23, Male). Such derogatory expressions serve to delegitimize and dehumanize Kurdish identity, perpetuating the perception of Kurds as a threat rather than as equal participants in the gaming community. Furthermore, Kurdish players are often singled out and marginalized based on their accents. As one participant explained, *“when a player’s microphone is active and their accent is noticeably distinct, they are frequently questioned with statements like Are you Kurdish? or Do you live in the east?”* (P18, 22, Female). This practice exacerbates their sense of “otherness” within the gaming community, rendering them consistent targets of discrimination and exclusion.

Arabs are identified as second of the most frequently targeted groups in cases of hate speech within the MLBB, as reported by 11 participants. This discriminatory rhetoric often takes the form of demonization, where Arab players are portrayed as detrimental to their teams, and dehumanization, which reduces them to a stereotype of incompetence rather than acknowledging their individual abilities. One participant explains, *“When someone uses an Arab flag, they immediately face hate speech. Right at the start of the game, people type things like ‘Where did this Arab come from?’ or ‘We’ve definitely lost now.’”* (P24, 22, Female). Such comments perpetuate the notion

that Arab players are inherently deficient, denying them their individuality and framing them as automatic liabilities. Similarly, another participant observes, *“If they find out there's an Arab on their team, they type 'GG, we lost' before the game even starts. Sometimes, they even deliberately sabotage the game, saying 'No game for Arabs!’”* (P4, 30, Male). This behavior reflects demonization by constructing Arab players not merely as underperformers but as direct threats to team success, thereby justifying their exclusion and the hostility directed toward them. The phrase “No game for Arabs!” exemplifies a complete denial of their right to participate, transforming their identity into a basis for deliberate in-game discrimination. By normalizing such attitudes, these practices legitimize the systematic marginalization of Arab players, further entrenching their exclusion within the gaming community.

Iranians are identified as the third most frequently targeted group in cases of hate speech within MLBB, as indicated by the reports of 9 participants. This discriminatory rhetoric often takes the form of demonization, where Iranian players are portrayed as inherently lacking in skill, and dehumanization, which reduces them to a monolithic, negative stereotype that overlooks their individual capabilities. One participant explains, *“If someone is Iranian, they immediately get insulted because there's a stereotype that 'Iranians are bad at the game anyway.’”* (P6, 27, Male). This assumption denies Iranian players their agency, framing them as naturally inferior and rationalizing their exclusion and mistreatment. Furthermore, another participant notes that *“For example, when an Iranian player joins the team and performs poorly, insults extend even to women's headscarves.”* (P17, 21, Female). This expansion of hate speech reflects both dehumanization and demonization, as the hostility is no longer confined to the player's performance but extends to broader cultural and religious symbols. Such derogatory remarks reinforce the notion that Iranian identity itself is a legitimate target for attack, depriving players of their dignity and reducing them to objects of ridicule and disdain. These behaviors perpetuate a cycle of exclusion and discrimination, further marginalizing Iranian players within the gaming community.

Syrians are identified as the fourth most frequently targeted group in cases of hate speech within the MLBB, as reported by 6 participants. This discriminatory rhetoric often takes the form of dehumanization, where Syrian players are reduced to

symbols of technical issues or instability, and demonization, which associates their identity with negative stereotypes tied to their refugee status. One participant explains, *“In online matches, the game only starts when all players have a stable connection. If there's a delay, someone almost always blurts out, ‘Who’s connecting from Syria?’”* (P21, 19, Female). Such comments strip Syrian players of their individuality, framing them as a source of disruption rather than equal participants. Another participant notes, *“Even during a game, the conversation randomly shifts to Syrians. When someone gets angry, they use ‘Are you Syrian or what?’ as an insult, even if the person isn’t Syrian.”* (P17, 21, Female). This reflects demonization by positioning Syrians as an inherent cause of frustration, using their identity as a derogatory label irrespective of the situation. These hostile expressions, often influenced by broader societal perceptions of Syrian refugees in Turkey, reinforce their marginalization within the gaming community, creating an environment where their presence is met with immediate prejudice and exclusion. Such behaviors perpetuate a cycle of discrimination, further alienating Syrian players and denying them the opportunity to participate on equal terms.

Turks, Israelis, and Afghans are identified as less frequently targeted groups in instances of hate speech within the game, as reported by participants. However, discriminatory discourse against these groups still occurs, particularly in interactions with other players. As one participant notes, *“From time to time, derogatory expressions are used against Turkish players.”* (P6, 27, Male), indicating that while Turks are not primary targets, they still experience hostility in specific contexts. Similarly, another participant states, *“When the Israeli flag is seen, hate speech against Jews emerges.”* (P9, 27, Male), reflecting demonization through antisemitic rhetoric that associates Israeli identity with broader prejudices against Jewish people. Additionally, Afghan players face particularly severe hostility, as one participant emphasizes, *“Afghans face intense hatred in the play environment.”* (P1, 25, Male). This suggests dehumanization, as Afghan players are not just insulted but are subjected to widespread and systemic hostility, reducing them to a negatively perceived collective identity rather than being treated as individuals. While these groups may be targeted less frequently than others, their experiences highlight the persistent presence

of ethnic and national discrimination within the gaming space, where identity becomes a basis for exclusion and hostility. These findings show the prevalence of ethnicity-based hate speech in the gaming environment and that such discourse constitutes a systematic problem against different ethnic groups.

Gendered Hate Speech

Interviews with participants revealed that gendered hate speech is a pervasive issue within the gaming environment, manifesting through both hostile and benevolent sexism. Specifically, 12 participants highlighted that female gamers are the primary targets of discriminatory discourse, underscoring the disproportionate impact of this issue on women.

Female players frequently encounter hostile sexism, which includes overtly derogatory remarks, exclusionary attitudes, and the entrenched belief that gaming particularly war-based or competitive games is inherently a male-dominated space. One participant described this dynamic, stating, *“When male players realize that I am a woman, they belittle my performance with expressions like ‘she is a girl, what to expect’ and think that women should not take part in the play.”* (P12, 18, Female). Similarly, another participant emphasized the explicit exclusion women face, noting, *“Why do girls play this game? It’s a man’s game.”* (P16, 21, Female), which reinforces the perception that gaming spaces are reserved for men. This sentiment is further supported by another respondent, who explained, *“Male players think that war games belong to men and we should not be in the game.”* (P14, 23, Female). These examples illustrate how hostile sexism not only discourages female participation but also delegitimizes their presence in the gaming environment.

In addition to overt hostility, benevolent sexism also shapes the gaming experience for female players, often manifesting as patronizing attitudes and rigid role expectations. Many male players assume that women are inherently less skilled and, consequently, should occupy supportive or secondary roles rather than taking on high-impact or leadership positions. As one participant observed, *“They generally believe that women are not good at this game. They often pressure us to play support roles.”* (P25, 18, Female). Although this form of sexism is less overtly aggressive than hostile

sexism, it still functions as a mechanism of exclusion by reinforcing traditional gender roles and limiting women's opportunities to engage in competitive play.

While the majority of participants identified gender-based hate speech as primarily targeting women, one participant offered a contrasting perspective regarding the experiences of male gamers. A 19 years old female participant suggested that men, rather than women, are subjected to greater levels of hate speech due to the game's predominantly male player base: "*Since this game is mostly aimed at men, men are exposed to hate speech more.*" (P23, 19, Other). However, this view was expressed by only one participant and did not align with the broader patterns reported by others.

These findings demonstrate that gender-based discrimination in the gaming environment is predominantly directed at female players, operating through both hostile and benevolent sexism. While hostile sexism seeks to exclude women through direct aggression and marginalization, benevolent sexism enforces exclusion more subtly by confining female players to passive or secondary roles. Together, these dynamics perpetuate an unequal and exclusionary gaming culture, systematically discouraging female gamers from fully participating as equals.

Political Hate Speech

Hate speech rooted in political views tends to intensify significantly, particularly during election cycles or periods of heightened political polarization. Interviews with participants revealed that 6 individuals observed a notable increase in politically motivated hate speech within the game during such times. These discussions often arise from players' self-expression, speech patterns, or the use of symbols that are perceived to align with specific political ideologies. This type of hate speech is typically marked by insults, derogatory language, and sarcasm, further deepening divisions among players.

A significant factor contributing to political hate speech in the game is the conflation of election outcomes and political preferences with ethnic identities. One participant explained, "*For example, when CHP won the election, I saw a lot of hate speech against CHP members. They were saying 'PKK members.'*" (P3, 31, Male). Similarly, another participant noted, "*After the election, for example, I saw it against*

AKP members. I see it against Kurds; they call them 'terrorists' because of HDP." (P20, 22, Female). These observations underscore how political affiliations are often weaponized to reinforce ethnic and ideological divides, resulting in targeted hate speech within the gaming environment.

These findings indicate that societal political tensions are directly mirrored in online gaming spaces, where electoral results and political allegiances act as triggers for discriminatory discourse. The gaming environment, rather than serving as a neutral or inclusive space, becomes a reflection of broader societal conflicts, perpetuating divisions and fostering hostility among players.

Age-based Hate Speech

Age-based hate speech in MLBB predominantly manifests through discriminatory and condescending discourse directed at younger players, as reported by four participants. This form of hate speech is closely tied to the perception that younger players demonstrate lower in-game performance, resulting in their marginalization through age-related derogatory remarks. Younger players are frequently subjected to ridicule, belittlement, and exclusion, perpetuating the stereotype that age is a determinant of skill level in the game.

Participants emphasized that child players often face age-based insults and dismissive comments, which serve to undermine their legitimacy within the gaming environment. One participant stated, *"When young players perform badly, they are immediately insulted as 'brats.'"* (P18, 22, Female). Similarly, another participant noted, *"A child actress was insulted by male players for playing badly, but when she played well, their behavior changed completely."* (P21, 19, Female). This observation highlights that hostility toward younger players is often contingent on their performance, with their acceptance into the gaming community being conditional upon meeting specific skill expectations. Another participant described a scenario where *"A younger player was constantly criticized and ridiculed by other male players in the team because of his poor performance."* (P17, 22, Female), demonstrating the systematic nature of age-based discrimination, particularly in male-dominated gaming environments.

Derogatory phrases such as ‘brat,’ ‘go to sleep,’ and ‘you have school tomorrow’ are frequently employed to trivialize and delegitimize younger players’ presence in the gaming space, further reinforcing their exclusion. These findings indicate that age-based hate speech not only marginalizes younger players but also fosters a gaming culture where skill and competence are rigidly associated with age, thereby limiting inclusivity within the community. This dynamic perpetuates an environment where younger players are systematically disadvantaged and discouraged from participating fully in the gaming experience.

Anti-LGBTQ Hate Speech

Hate speech based on sexual orientation is a significant issue in MLBB, as reported by ten participants. This form of discrimination is often rooted in dehumanization and demonization, perpetuating exclusionary attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals within the gaming environment. Homophobic discourse typically manifests through derogatory language, ridicule, and exclusion, reducing LGBTQ+ players to harmful stereotypes and denying them equal participation.

Male players, in particular, are frequently targeted with homophobic slurs and insults when their voice, speech, or behavior deviates from traditional masculine norms. One participant noted, “*Hate speech against homosexuals is widespread, especially expressions like ‘faggot’ are frequently used.*” (P11, 27, Male). Such language dehumanizes LGBTQ+ players by reducing them to offensive labels, stripping them of their individuality, and reinforcing the notion that non-heteronormative identities are inherently unacceptable. Similarly, another participant explained, “*If a player's speech is more polite or their voice is higher-pitched compared to a typical male voice, they are immediately subjected to derogatory remarks such as ‘Are you gay?’ or homophobic slurs like ‘fagot.’*” (P18, 22, Female). This reflects demonization, as it constructs non-masculine expressions as deviant or undesirable, positioning LGBTQ+ individuals as outsiders who do not belong in gaming spaces.

These findings underscore that LGBTQ+ players in MLBB face both direct verbal aggression and systemic exclusion, further entrenching their marginalization

within the gaming community. By framing non-heteronormative identities as inferior or abnormal, the gaming environment cultivates a culture in which LGBTQ+ players are not only subjected to hate speech but are also systematically excluded as unwelcome participants.

Disability or Severe Disease Hate Speech

Hate speech targeting individuals with disabilities or severe disease is a form of discrimination observed in MLBB, as reported by one participant. Although less frequently cited compared to other forms of hate speech, this discourse reflects both dehumanization and social exclusion by reducing individuals to their perceived disabilities and using such identities as insults.

This type of hate speech typically manifests through mockery, belittlement, and derogatory labeling, often stemming from assumptions about a player's physical or mental condition. Discriminatory remarks are frequently triggered when players underperform or exhibit differences in speech patterns during voice chat, leading to targeted verbal attacks. As one participant explained, *"Players who do not have a photo on their profile or have a different way of speaking in voice chat are humiliated with expressions such as 'autistic,' 'disabled,' 'handicapped.'"* (P18, 22, Female).

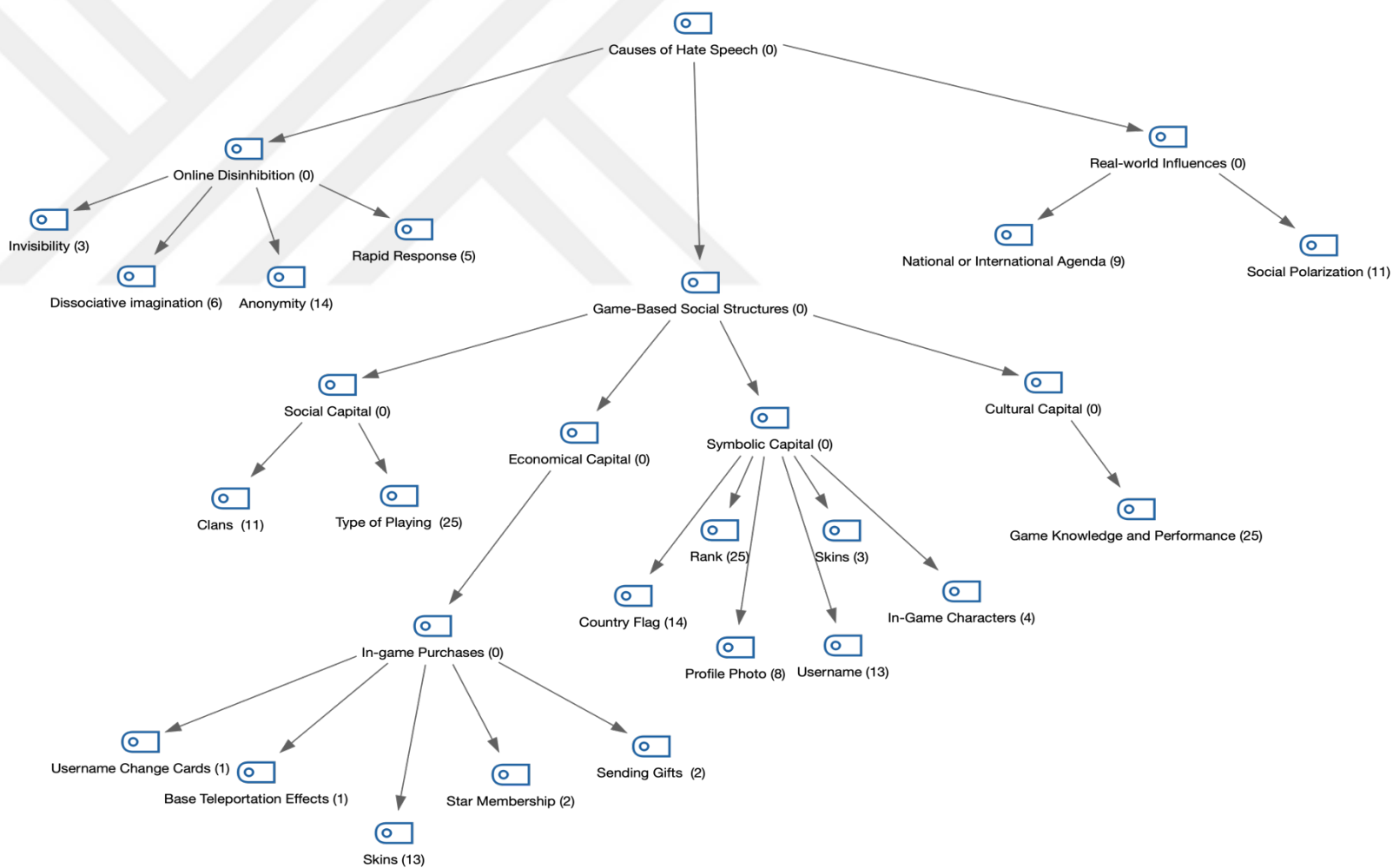


Figure 3.12. Causes of Hate Speech

3.5.2.3.1. Causes of Hate Speech in MLBB

3.5.2.3.1.1. Economic Capital and Hate Speech

In Mobile Legends: Bang Bang, economic capital, as theorized by Pierre Bourdieu, plays a pivotal role in influencing in-game competitiveness and fostering social mobility among players. Similar to its real-world counterpart, economic capital within the game can be accumulated through two main avenues: achievements earned through gameplay or direct monetary investments. The game's economy is centered on "diamonds," a premium currency that can be acquired using real money and grants players substantial in-game benefits. Within this system, economic capital in MLBB is fundamentally connected to the procurement of diamonds, as they provide a competitive advantage by enabling quicker progression, access to exclusive content, and an improved gaming experience. Players with greater access to diamonds can progress more rapidly and effectively, demonstrating how economic capital functions as a crucial factor in determining both status and success within the game's virtual ecosystem.

In the real world, economic capital provides individuals with access to superior living conditions, luxury goods, and prestigious social networks. This dynamic is mirrored in gaming environments, where economic capital manifests through high-quality in-game items, visually appealing costumes, and more powerful heroes, all of which contribute to a player's status and perceived competence. From a Goffmanian dramaturgical perspective, these in-game purchases function as performative props in a player's "front stage" performance, strategically employed to construct an identity that conveys skill, dedication, and legitimacy within the gaming community.

Interviews with participants revealed that economic capital plays a significant role in both gaming gear investments and in-game purchases within MLBB. Among the 16 participants who reported spending money on the game, 9 allocated funds for gaming gear, with 1 upgrading their phone, 8 purchasing gaming headsets, and 2 acquiring gaming chairs to enhance their gaming experience. Additionally, 13 participants engaged in in-game purchases, with all 13 investing in hero skins, 2

purchasing gifts for other players, 2 subscribing to star membership, 1 acquiring a username change card, and 1 buying base teleportation effects.

A notable aspect of these expenditures is that a significant portion of players (nine participants) financed their gaming-related purchases without a stable source of income. Instead, they relied on financial support from their families, effectively treating their gaming investments as a means of social differentiation within the digital sphere. This reflects Goffman's concept of "back stage" reality, where the economic power projected in the gaming environment contrasts with the players' actual financial dependency outside the game. The front stage projection of wealth and status within the game is thus a carefully constructed performance, masking the backstage reliance on external financial sources.

Economic capital within MLBB not only enhances in-game progression but also establishes symbolic status, leading to the differentiation of players based on their capacity to invest in premium content. Players who accumulate significant in-game economic capital through exclusive skins and advanced heroes are often perceived as more experienced, committed, and strategically superior. As a result, economic capital serves as both a competitive advantage and a marker of prestige, shaping players' perceptions of their opponents and teammates.

Participants' responses indicate that hero skins and premium in-game content influence assumptions about a player's skill level and dedication. One participant noted, *"During matchmaking in the game, when we face opponents with epic or higher-level heroes with cool and vibrant costumes, we assume that these players are better and we are more likely to lose. In the case of opponents with unsuited heroes, we assume that we can easily beat them. Players with expensive costumes that do not have test cards often give the impression that they take the game more seriously."* (P17, 22, Female). Similarly, another participant stated, *"When I see players in front of me with the best costumes of the heroes, this is what I see: He spends time here, he spends money here, this team is good. If there are no costumes, I think everyone is new or does not know the game well."* (P18, 22, Female). These remarks highlight the strong association between financial investment and perceived skill, reinforcing the notion that economic capital translates into gaming credibility. From a dramaturgical

perspective, hero skins and premium items function as props in a well-constructed performance, reinforcing a player's desired image within the gaming space.

Furthermore, in-game purchases contribute to aesthetic prestige and perceived commitment to the game. As another participant explained, *"These purchases look more prestigious in terms of appearance. I honestly think it is good. I think those who have costumes play better because, for me, if they spend on costumes, it means they take the game seriously."* (P1, 25, Male). This suggests that financial investment in MLBB is not only linked to functional advantages but also to the symbolic representation of dedication and expertise. The act of purchasing premium items becomes a performative statement, reinforcing the player's engagement and seriousness about the game.

Additionally, interviews revealed that costumes purchased in the game are not merely aesthetic elements but also serve as a form of capital that enhances in-game motivation and fosters a sense of belonging. One participant stated, *"It feels better to play in costume. You are visually different from other actors, and this motivates me."* (P22, 23, Female). Another participant shared, *"I feel better and superior when I play my favorite heroes with their colorful, beautiful costumes, and I want to play the game more."* (P16, 21, Female). Similarly, a third participant noted, *"Buying costumes of my favorite heroes motivates me mentally better and makes me feel different."* (P7, 28, Male). These responses underscore how in-game purchases not only elevate a player's status but also enhance their emotional connection to the game, further motivating their participation and engagement.

Interviews with participants revealed that economic capital plays a pivotal role in shaping player status, social dynamics, and in-game hierarchies within MLBB. Economic disparities not only reinforce social divisions but also act as a significant catalyst for conflict and hate speech between players who invest heavily in in-game purchases and those who do not engage in monetary transactions. A total of 15 participants emphasized that economic capital contributes to hostility and verbal aggression, particularly when financial investment fails to align with expected performance levels.

Players who purchase premium content, such as high-cost hero skins, are often perceived as more skilled and experienced. However, this perception creates heightened expectations, and when these expectations are not met, financially invested players become targets of ridicule and hate speech. As one participant noted, *“I do not like people who spend much money on the game. I think they do it for show and have little intelligence. On top of that, when they play badly, they are exposed to a lot of hate speech.”* (P4, 30, Male). Similarly, another participant observed, *“People who spend money and buy costumes are ridiculed a lot and seen as suckers when their performance is not enough.”* (P19, 18, Female).

This phenomenon is further illustrated by the heightened scrutiny faced by players who purchase newly released skins. One participant shared an example: “A player bought the newly released Moskov skin, and one of his teammates immediately heckled him: ‘Bro, you paid so much for that skin, at least play well!’ In other words, people automatically expect those who spend money on the game to play better, and when expectations are not met, they react with aggression and hate speech.” (P8, 23, Male). This suggests that economic capital not only serves as a marker of status but also generates performance-related pressures that can escalate into verbal hostility.

On the other hand, players who do not engage in monetary transactions within the game often face exclusion, belittlement, and economic-based hate speech. Those without financial investment are frequently labeled as “losers” or “incompetent,” particularly at lower levels of gameplay. One participant recounted their experience, stating: *“For example, I even heard people say, ‘You broke guy, what are you doing in this game?’ because I don’t buy diamonds with the money I earn. I don’t know if people really care that much about money, but it’s incredibly ridiculous that I get insulted just because I don’t spend money in the game!”* (P1, 25, Male).

This economic discrimination is further reinforced by the perception that players who do not spend money are inherently less skilled. As another participant asserted, *“I see people who do not spend in the game as losers because they usually do not perform well enough.”* (P7, 28, Male). The tendency to equate financial investment with competence and superiority exacerbates the marginalization of non-paying players, positioning them as outsiders within the gaming community.

The findings indicate that economic capital in MLBB functions as both a source of prestige and a divisive factor, contributing to the normalization of hate speech. Players with limited financial resources are often labeled with derogatory terms such as “poor” or “stupid,” while those who invest heavily in the game are subject to criticism and ridicule if they fail to meet expectations. One participant summarized this dynamic: *“Economic differences in the game directly lead to hate speech. Players who do not have costumes are belittled by calling them ‘poor,’ and those who do not spend money on the game are described as ‘stupid.’ Those who do not spend are seen as inadequate, while those who spend more money are criticized, which creates a constant division between players.”* (P10, 25, Other).

Similarly, another participant highlighted the exclusionary nature of economic capital in MLBB, explaining: *“I was marginalized by other players with expressions like ‘poor’ or ‘quit this game’ because I did not have a costume.”* (P12, 18, Female). These experiences underscore how economic capital not only structures in-game social hierarchies but also normalizes economic-based discrimination, reinforcing a dualistic system where both financially invested and non-invested players are subjected to different forms of hate speech.

The findings reveal that economic capital in gaming transcends mere performance enhancement, functioning as a social marker that significantly influences player interactions, competitive dynamics, and hierarchical structures within MLBB. The visible and material manifestations of financial investment shape perceptions of skill, dedication, and legitimacy, reinforcing hierarchies that parallel real-world economic systems. Players actively engage in impression management, crafting their in-game identities through strategic investments in premium content, mirroring broader societal trends of status performance and symbolic distinction. Economic capital acts as a mechanism of stratification, simultaneously fostering social inclusion and exclusion within the game. While financial investment is frequently linked to status and prestige, it also generates heightened performance expectations, which, when unmet, result in hostility and ridicule. On the other hand, players lacking economic capital often encounter discrimination and marginalization, further deepening social divides. Ultimately, economic disparities within MLBB not only

shape player relationships but also act as a catalyst for conflict, hate speech, and the perpetuation of hierarchical structures, reflecting the inequalities prevalent in real-world social and economic systems.

3.5.2.3.1.2. Cultural Capital and Hate Speech

Although cultural capital in MLBB does not overlap with Pierre Bourdieu's definition, there are some parallels in the in-game dynamics. While cultural capital is shaped by individuals' knowledge and behavior regarding social and cultural norms, in the game world, this capital manifests itself based on players' game knowledge, strategic skills, and aesthetic preferences of their avatars. While Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital in the real world is shaped by an individual's lifelong experiences, habitus, and doxa, in the game world, cultural capital emerges through a combination of in-game performance and aesthetic preferences.

In the context of MLBB, game knowledge has emerged as a significant dimension of cultural capital, profoundly influencing players' in-game performance, social interactions, and their standing within the gaming community. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of cultural capital as a set of knowledge, skills, and competencies that confer social advantages, game knowledge in MLBB operates as a form of cultural capital. It enhances players' strategic decision-making, gameplay efficiency, and their ability to integrate into the broader player community.

Findings from interviews reveal notable disparities in the levels of cultural capital among MLBB players. When asked to self-assess their knowledge of the game, participants exhibited a wide range of expertise. Specifically, 11 participants reported a high level of proficiency in strategies and tactics, 8 described their knowledge as moderate, and 6 indicated a limited understanding of the game. These findings suggest that players with greater game knowledge, often accumulated through prolonged engagement typically spanning five years or more possess a more comprehensive grasp of game mechanics, strategic nuances, and the specialized lexicon prevalent within the MLBB community.

The acquisition and reinforcement of cultural capital within the context of MLBB are significantly mediated through active engagement with social media

platforms and community-based learning mechanisms. The data derived from interviews indicate that 16 participants leverage YouTube as a primary resource, while 6 utilize Instagram, 5 engage with TikTok, and 2 access Twitch to enhance their game knowledge. These platforms are predominantly used to consume live streams and instructional gameplay content, which serve as critical tools for skill development. Furthermore, a substantial number of players improve their competencies by seeking mentorship from peers who possess higher levels of cultural capital, highlighting the pivotal role of social networks in the dissemination of knowledge. A central element of this learning process involves the active following of prominent MLBB streamers and professional players, including notable figures such as Mocker, Paranoid, Orange, Tienzy, Apex, Kitty, Stansfield, Elwind, and Typer. These influencers function as key conduits of cultural capital, providing players with strategic insights, updates on the evolving meta, and advanced gameplay techniques, thereby enabling them to refine their in-game performance and deepen their understanding of the game.

The significance of cultural capital in MLBB is further illustrated by participants' reflections on their learning trajectories. One participant highlighted the role of sustained engagement and media consumption in skill development, stating: *"I feel that my skills have significantly improved over the past 5-6 years of playing the game. However, improvement is not solely a result of playing; I also dedicate time to learning. I regularly watch streamers like Paranoid on TikTok and YouTube. For instance, Fanny is widely regarded as the most challenging hero to master, but by studying these videos, I have gained a better understanding of her mechanics. This approach allows me to continuously expand my game knowledge."* (P5, 29, Other). This account underscores the incremental accumulation of cultural capital through a combination of practical experience and mediated learning.

Similarly, another participant emphasized the necessity of supplementing in-game experience with external knowledge sources to achieve expertise: *"I believe my proficiency in the game stems from nearly six years of playing, but in-game experience alone is insufficient. I follow players like Paranoid and Type on YouTube and Twitch, and I incorporate the strategies I learn from their content into my own gameplay. The more I watch, the more diverse strategies I develop, which ultimately enhances my*

performance.” (P2, 23, Male). This narrative highlights the strategic utilization of external resources to reinforce and expand cultural capital, thereby positioning these players at a competitive advantage within the gaming community.

The importance of structured practice and formalized knowledge acquisition is further underscored by another participant, who stated: *“I have been playing MLBB for six years, and I have noticed significant improvement, particularly over the past two years. While I now possess a solid foundation of game knowledge, I remain committed to learning. For example, I frequently use the practice mode to experiment with new heroes. Additionally, I follow the game’s official Instagram account, watch competitive tournaments on YouTube, and closely observe the gameplay of players like Tienzy. The more I engage with these resources, the more my game knowledge expands, enabling continuous improvement.”* (P17, 22, Female). This reflection highlights the role of institutionalized learning environments such as practice modes, official game channels, and competitive tournaments as platforms for the systematic accumulation of cultural capital.

Game knowledge and performance are pivotal factors in shaping players' social positioning, acceptance, and treatment within MLBB. The disparity between players possessing high game knowledge and those with limited understanding significantly influences in-game dynamics and often serves as a catalyst for hate speech and exclusionary behaviors. Players with lower levels of game knowledge and suboptimal in-game performance are frequently subjected to verbal harassment, discrimination, and hate speech, thereby reinforcing hierarchical structures within the gaming environment.

Interviews with participants revealed that players with limited game knowledge are often met with hostility, particularly in competitive game modes. All of the respondents reported that individuals who make mistakes, lack game awareness, or underperform are immediately targeted with discrimination and hate speech. One participant explicitly stated, *“If a player has low game knowledge, they shouldn’t even be playing. I get really frustrated, and sometimes I say harsh words. Especially Iranians and female players perform poorly, and there are too many teenagers ruining the game.”* (P1, 25, Male). This statement reflects a deeply ingrained bias that not only

devalues inexperienced players but also perpetuates ethnic and gender-based stereotypes, further exacerbating discrimination within the game.

A recurring theme in the data is the lack of patience and tolerance for new or less skilled players. One participant emphasized the immediate and aggressive reactions inexperienced players face after making mistakes: *“There is a very negative attitude in the game. As soon as you make a single mistake, harassment begins, this includes insults directed at family values, ethnic identity, and personal characteristics. For instance, if a player is Kurdish, they are immediately associated with terrorism.”* (P2, 23, Male). This demonstrates that game knowledge is not the sole determinant of in-game hostility; players' real-world identities also intersect with their perceived competence, amplifying hate speech.

The competitive nature of MLBB intensifies the divide between high and low game knowledge players, making mistakes less tolerable, particularly in ranked matches. Participants frequently described a hostile environment where underperforming players are not given opportunities to learn but are instead blamed for team losses and subjected to verbal abuse. As one respondent noted, *“If someone plays poorly, they are instantly ridiculed and insulted. If they have a visible indicator of their identity, such as a national flag or a political symbol, the insults are directly aimed at that.”* (P3, 31, Male). This finding highlights how poor performance serves as a trigger for broader discriminatory behaviors, where players' real-world attributes are weaponized as part of hate speech within the game.

Another factor contributing to the marginalization of players with low game knowledge is the use of identity-based insults. Many respondents indicated that players' nationality, gender, or perceived physical and mental abilities become targets for abuse when they underperform. One interviewee described the nature of these insults: *“If a player does not have a profile photo, they are insulted based on assumed physical characteristics. Terms like “autistic,” “disabled,” or “handicapped” are commonly used as slurs. If they have an accent or state they are from a specific region, such as Diyarbakır, they are immediately insulted at the end of the game.”* (P17, 22, Female). This suggests that low performance is often equated with inferiority, leading to dehumanizing rhetoric that extends beyond the game itself.

Gender-based discrimination also intersects with game knowledge and performance-related hate speech, often reflecting both hostile and benevolent sexism. Female players, in particular, face greater scrutiny and verbal abuse regardless of their skill level. One participant noted, *“If I underperform, I am either insulted for being a woman or targeted for my ethnic identity. This is just how the game works.”* (P12, 18, Female). This demonstrates hostile sexism, where women are met with aggression and exclusion when they do not meet performance expectations. At the same time, benevolent sexism can be observed in the double standard female players face, where their abilities are often questioned or dismissed. One participant highlighted this contradiction: *“I have seen how male players, even if they perform worse than me, do not receive the same level of hate speech. I often face harassment just because I am a woman, even when I play at an average level.”* (P14, 23, Female). This suggests that while male players are granted more leniency for mistakes, women must constantly prove their competence yet still face gendered biases in how their performance is perceived.

The negative attitudes toward low game knowledge players also impact new players' ability to improve. Many participants expressed frustration at this that discourages learning and development. One respondent stated, *“If you are new to the game and do not know the map or pick the wrong items, people immediately call you ‘stupid’ or ‘brain dead.’ Instead of helping, they try to push you out of the game entirely. How are new players supposed to improve in an environment like this?”* (P22, 19, Female). This highlights how the MLBB players often prioritizes exclusion over mentorship and guidance, further alienating inexperienced players.

In summary, game knowledge in MLBB functions as a significant form of cultural capital, shaping both in-game performance and social positioning within the community. While players with advanced expertise often garner respect and acceptance, those with limited skills frequently encounter marginalization and hate speech, perpetuating a toxic and exclusionary environment. The competitive framework of the game exacerbates intolerance, fostering a culture that prioritizes elitism over constructive mentorship, thereby hindering the development of novice players. Furthermore, factors such as gender, ethnicity, and perceived disabilities

exacerbate discriminatory practices, mirroring broader societal biases that manifest within the gaming sphere.

3.5.2.3.1.3. Social Capital and Hate Speech

Pierre Bourdieu (1986) conceptualizes social capital as a collection of resources derived from an individual's network of relationships, encompassing not only close friends and family but also acquaintances, colleagues, and broader community connections. In digital gaming environments, social capital functions similarly, influencing players' in-game experiences, status, and competitive opportunities. Within Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB), social capital serves not only as a means of fostering strategic alliances and meaningful friendships but also as a mechanism that reinforces hierarchy, exclusion, and the proliferation of hate speech. Players utilize social connections through clans, group play, and livestreaming to gain advantages, yet these networks can also become sources of interpersonal conflict and discriminatory behavior.

Clans serve as a key mechanism for accumulating social capital, offering players a structured way to improve rankings, enhance gameplay coordination, and increase prestige. Many players actively seek membership in strong clans to advance through the game's competitive tiers. One participant explained, *"I think I have a good network in the game, which is why I belong to a prestigious clan. At the beginning of the season, it is easier to move up from the Epic League to the Mystic League. Because I play the Angela character well, I get invitations from teams and can switch to different teams. This increases my prestige in the game while expanding my social circle."* (P17, 22, Female).

However, social capital in clans is not purely functional; it also fosters strong in-group loyalty and collective identity, sometimes leading to conflict with rival clans or exclusion of non-members. Hate speech often emerges as a form of group solidarity, where insults are directed at opponents or external players who challenge a clan's status. One participant detailed this dynamic: *"If someone insults a member of my clan, we collectively retaliate. If I were alone, I might ignore it, but in a group setting, we feel a duty to protect one another. Leaving an insult unanswered is not an option."*

(P1, 25, Male). Another participant described how clan-related tensions can escalate into outright discrimination: *“If I had been in a stronger clan, people would have perceived me differently. But as soon as they see my clan, they develop a prejudice against me before the match even starts.”* (P14, 23, Female).

Beyond external rivalry, internal power struggles within clans can also fuel tensions and discriminatory behaviors. Clans are not free from hierarchical disputes, gender dynamics, and personal conflicts, which sometimes escalate into verbal aggression or exclusionary practices. One participant recounted how gendered conflicts led to tensions within their clan: *“Sometimes, leadership struggles happen within clans. They don’t express it directly, but you can feel the tension in the game. I experienced conflicts, especially when my girlfriend was involved—some members flirted with her, and when I reacted, I resorted to swearing at them. Eventually, I left the clan.”* (P2, 23, Male). Similarly, another participant noted, *“A few friends in my team harassed others in the group, which eventually led to the team breaking apart. These conflicts often emerge due to relationships within the team, and when personal matters get involved, things spiral out of control.”* (P13, 50, Female).

The influence of social capital on hate speech dynamics is also evident in solo vs. group play. Players consistently reported that hate speech is more frequent in solo play, where low social accountability allows for uninhibited hostility. One participant described this as follows: *“When I enter solo, people I don’t know can insult me much more easily. But when I enter as a team, this doesn’t happen. Whether I play well or badly, my teammates already know me and my playstyle.”* (P24, 22, Female). Another player emphasized the lack of accountability in solo play, stating: *“People feel like they can say anything in solo matches because they don’t know you. There’s no responsibility, no consequences. But in a team, they hold back because they don’t want to damage their reputation among their friends.”* (P10, 25, Other).

In solo games, players lack mutual recognition, trust, or accountability, making it easier for aggression to escalate quickly. By contrast, group play provides a level of protection, as familiarity among teammates fosters mutual respect and tolerance. However, group play does not eliminate hate speech entirely, it often reshapes it into a form of humor or bonding. One participant explained, *“When we play as a group,*

we joke around and sometimes insult each other, but it's not meant seriously. Still, it can sometimes go too far." (P23, 19, Other). Another participant confirmed this, stating: *"Sometimes, when we're in a group, we use insults in a joking manner. But even if it's meant as a joke, it still reinforces a toxic culture."* (P18, 22, Female).

Additionally, group dynamics can contribute to a "mob mentality," where hate speech is not merely tolerated but collectively reinforced. If a team leader expresses hostility toward an opponent or teammate, others often follow suit, amplifying the aggression. One participant illustrated this pattern: *"In group play, if the team leader starts speaking negatively about someone, everyone else automatically joins in. It becomes a pack mentality, and the target gets overwhelmed with insults."* (P19, 18, Female). Another noted, *"When you play with friends, if one of them starts to mock an opponent, everyone jumps in. You don't even realize how quickly it escalates."* (P12, 18, Female).

Even within close-knit teams, discriminatory language is often normalized under the guise of humor, leading to internalized and routinized forms of verbal aggression. One player detailed this process: *"When playing as a group, some of our friends insult each other as a joke. They use words like 'ball,' 'faggot,' and 'asshole' toward one another."* (P17, 22, Female). Another participant shared a similar experience: *"Friends pick on me because I do not play as well as them. They do not do it for a bad purpose; they do it to be funny but still swear. Sometimes it's funny, but sometimes it's exhausting."* (P23, 19, Other).

Beyond clans and team play, livestreaming represents another dimension of social capital in MLBB, offering visibility, influence, and economic benefits. While not all participants engaged in livestreaming, those who did viewed it as a means of increasing both social prestige and in-game resources. One player described how livestreaming translated into financial and social advantages: *"Now, when we broadcast live from the game, we can turn gifts from other viewers into diamonds in the game. We can buy costumes with these diamonds. This helps expand our friend network and social presence in the game."* (P21, 19, Female). Another participant explained: *"If you stream, you naturally become more well-known in the community."*

This helps you join better teams, meet more experienced players, and get more rewards.” (P22, 23, Female).

The findings demonstrate that social capital in MLBB is a complex and multifaceted force that both facilitates cooperation and fosters division. Clans provide status and strategic advantages, but they also perpetuate rivalry, hierarchy, and group-based hate speech. Group play offers protection from random verbal attacks but can also lead to collective discrimination and the normalization of offensive language. Solo play, by contrast, exposes players to high levels of hostility due to the lack of accountability and social familiarity. Livestreaming introduces a new dimension of social capital, where visibility and economic benefits intersect with reputation-building.

3.5.2.3.1.4. Symbolic Capital and Hate Speech

Symbolic capital refers to the value and reputation a person acquires through economic, cultural, and social capital types. This capital, which cannot be directly measured in tangible things, determines a person's symbolic value and power in society or the social sphere, as these elements combine into prestige, recognition, and respect. All the types of capital mentioned earlier are transformed into symbolic capital in the game in the context of how they are acquired and presented. The game's username, country flag, profile photo, skins, ranks and heroes are important elements of symbolic capital. While these elements create status and differentiation between players, they can also create an environment where these differences trigger othering and hate speech.

Username

Username serve as pivotal elements in the construction of player identity, the dynamics of community interaction, and the facilitation of social engagement within gaming environments. Functioning as symbolic markers, they encapsulate individual players' personalities, social standings, and gaming personas (Aldrin, 2019). Beyond their role as mere identifiers, usernames significantly influence players' reputations, their inclusion in teams or clans, and even the expectations surrounding their

performance in competitive settings (Frommel et al., 2020). However, usernames also possess the potential to perpetuate discrimination, hate speech, and social stratification within gaming communities.

Gaming communities represent intricate social ecosystems wherein usernames act as both an introduction and a declaration of identity. These digital identifiers often convey gaming preferences, cultural affiliations, and power dynamics within the virtual realm. For instance, the selection of specific usernames can signal alliances, cultural connections, and hierarchical positioning. By adopting particular names, players can enhance their reputations, shape perceptions, and establish a distinct status among peers. Thus, the influence of usernames extends beyond gameplay mechanics, permeating the social fabric of gaming communities, where perception and symbolism play central roles.

Drawing on Erving Goffman's (1959) theory of self-presentation, usernames can be conceptualized as a form of identity performance within digital spaces. Players meticulously curate their usernames to project specific personas, akin to how individuals manage impressions in face-to-face interactions. Usernames function as part of the "front stage," where players perform for an audience comprising peers, competitors, and potential allies. This curated identity can facilitate social acceptance, reinforce group belonging, or signify social standing within gaming communities.

Usernames frequently become intertwined with in-game reputation. For example, some players deliberately select humorous, ironic, or enigmatic names to engage others or attract attention. Conversely, others may choose intimidating or aggressive names to convey dominance or expertise. These naming strategies reflect not only personal preferences but also the underlying social structures of online gaming environments. Players who cultivate strong reputations through their usernames often find themselves more readily integrated into gaming circles, underscoring the strategic utility of these digital identities in navigating virtual communities.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of symbolic capital provides a valuable framework for understanding the prestige associated with certain types of usernames. Symbolic capital encompasses non-material forms of capital, such as prestige, honor,

and recognition, which shape social hierarchies. In gaming communities, usernames incorporating foreign languages particularly English, Japanese, Korean, or Chinese often function as symbolic capital, signaling a player's cultural literacy and alignment with global gaming culture. One participant (P16, 21, Female) noted, *"Players who use anime names, warrior character names, or foreign terms appear to perform better. Usernames in English, Japanese, Chinese, or Korean convey an impression of greater skill."* Another participant (P17, 22, Female) echoed this sentiment, stating, *"Using foreign characters instead of Turkish letters enhances the aesthetic appeal of an account, lending it a more prestigious appearance. Conversely, usernames based on real names often seem careless."*

The preference for foreign-language usernames reflects the broader influence of globalization on gaming culture. Such names are perceived as modern and internationally relevant due to their associations with anime, K-pop, Hollywood, and the gaming industry. In contrast, usernames rooted in local names are often viewed as informal, less prestigious, and indicative of lower skill levels. This perception underscores the social significance players attach to their usernames, treating them as tools for constructing and maintaining specific identities within the gaming world. Notably, despite all participants residing in Turkey, none employed Turkish usernames, suggesting that Turkish names lack symbolic capital compared to their foreign-language counterparts. This reinforces the notion that international identities hold higher status within gaming communities.

Beyond their role in aesthetic and performance expectations, usernames also function as identity markers, frequently leading to ethnic, cultural, and gender-based discrimination. 4 participants observed that usernames associated with Kurdish or Arabic names often become targets of hostility and hate speech. P1 (25, Male) remarked, *"When Kurdish names appear, players often face derogatory remarks such as 'no support for Kurds,' 'Kurdish ambush,' 'PKK member,' or 'terrorist' during moments of tension."*

Similarly, P6 (27, Male) noted, "Non-Kurdish players sometimes adopt Kurdish names to provoke discrimination and hostility, fostering an 'us versus them' mentality. This often results in insults like "traitor" or "PKK supporter" during heated

exchanges.” Other participants emphasized that a player’s real identity may not align with their chosen username, as some users deliberately adopt culturally distinctive names to incite tension or elicit specific reactions. This highlights the performative nature of usernames within competitive gaming environments.

The use of usernames as instruments of exclusion underscores how digital spaces mirror broader societal structures. Just as in offline communities, markers of identity such as ethnicity, language, and gender can become focal points for bias and marginalization. Gaming platforms thus function as microcosms of the real world, where usernames serve as powerful tools for defining inclusion and exclusion.

Gender discrimination also emerges as a significant issue in the context of usernames. 2 participants reported that female usernames often elicit differential treatment, including harassment, excessive attention, or dismissive attitudes. P15 (22, Female) observed, *“When a female username appears, male players’ behavior shifts immediately. They often divert their focus from the game to make inappropriate comments or belittle female players with remarks like ‘girls can’t play this game. Consequently, many female players opt for male or gender-neutral usernames to avoid harassment.”* This strategic choice reflects players’ awareness of social dynamics and the necessity of impression management in gaming communities.

Additionally, certain usernames serve as explicit indicators of toxic behavior. P24 (22, Female) stated, *“Usernames containing derogatory or aggressive connotations often signal the likelihood of hate speech. Such players are expected to create disruptions in the chat.”* Another participant (P23, 19, Female) added, *“Provocative usernames, particularly those containing offensive language, often precede aggressive or discriminatory behavior.”* The ability to predict behavior based on usernames suggests that they function as social markers, enabling players to anticipate interactions before they occur.

Usernames in gaming environments transcend their role as mere digital identifiers; they shape social hierarchies, reflect cultural perceptions, and influence inclusion and exclusion within communities. Through the lens of Goffman’s framework, usernames can be understood as tools for impression management, enabling players to present curated identities that shape how they are perceived by

others. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital further elucidates why certain usernames particularly those linked to global cultural influences are accorded prestige, while local names are often devalued. The ways in which usernames mediate interactions within gaming communities illustrate the broader social dynamics at play in digital environments, where issues of prestige, identity, and exclusion manifest in seemingly mundane choices such as a player's in-game name. This underscores the profound influence of usernames not only as gaming tools but also as reflections of larger societal dynamics.

Country Flag

In Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB), national flags serve as a critical element of self-presentation and symbolic capital within the gaming community. These flags are not merely representations of players' national identities but also function as strategic tools that influence perceptions of skill, social hierarchy, and group dynamics. However, the use of national flags in the game transcends individual identity expression, as it reinforces pre-existing biases, hierarchical structures, and discriminatory behaviors, reflecting broader societal inequalities within digital spaces.

Within the MLBB community, national flags are closely tied to perceptions of player performance, often reflecting real-world stereotypes and biases. Participants frequently associate skill levels with specific national affiliations, aligning these perceptions with broader socio-economic and technological hierarchies. For instance, a 22 years old female participant 24 noted, *"In real life, Korea is a developed country, excelling in technology, business, and other areas. In contrast, Middle Eastern countries are often perceived as lagging behind. These perceptions are mirrored in the game."* This observation highlights how in-game evaluations of skill and competence are influenced by real-world economic and technological disparities. As a result, players from Middle Eastern countries are often subjected to negative stereotypes. A 29 years old male participant 5 stated, *"When we see flags from Middle Eastern countries, such as Syria or Arab nations, we assume they will perform poorly. Matching with them often leads to losses."* Similarly, a 25 years old male participant 1 emphasized, *"Iranian players are often perceived as weak, and their flags trigger*

frustration among teammates.”. These biases not only shape individual attitudes but also influence collective gaming strategies, as players actively avoid matching with individuals from certain national backgrounds.

While some flags are associated with negative perceptions, others are viewed as indicators of superior performance. A 22 years old female participant 24 explained, *“Flags from Korea and Japan are associated with strong performance due to their prominence in esports. Conversely, flags from Middle Eastern countries, such as Afghanistan or Syria, are often linked to poor performance and anticipated losses.”*. This perspective underscores how national symbols are embedded in global hierarchies that privilege certain regions over others, perpetuating existing biases within digital gaming environments.

Beyond shaping performance perceptions, national flags also function as tools for accumulating symbolic capital. Players strategically select flags to enhance their perceived status within the community. A 22 years old female participant 17 elaborated, *“As Turks, we sometimes use flags from countries like Germany, England, or Italy to appear more prestigious. Similarly, flags from Japan and Korea are popular due to their association with high skill levels.”*. This demonstrates how players manipulate national symbols to align themselves with prestigious gaming cultures, reinforcing regional hierarchies within the game. Another participant, also a 22 years old female, echoed this sentiment, stating, *“Many players avoid using their own flags and instead choose flags that complement their profiles. Flags from England, France, or Japan are commonly preferred.”* (P20). This strategic selection of flags indicates that national symbols are not merely reflections of identity but also mechanisms for social mobility and perceived expertise. Furthermore, the association of specific flags with high-ranking players contributes to the formation of an in-game elite. A 19 years old female participant 21 observed, *“The England flag is widely used, often by skilled players.”*. This suggests that national flags serve as markers of both identity and social stratification within the game.

Interestingly, interviews revealed that the majority of Turkish participants avoided using the Turkish flag, despite being Turkish citizens. This finding suggests that players are acutely aware of the perceptions associated with national flags and

strategically navigate these biases to enhance their in-game experience. The reluctance to use the Turkish flag can be interpreted as an effort to avoid negative stereotypes or assumptions. Instead, many Turkish players opt for flags associated with higher prestige and superior performance, such as those of European or East Asian countries. This aligns with the broader trend in which players selectively choose national flags not as representations of their real-world identities but as instruments of symbolic capital and social mobility within the gaming environment.

However, the symbolic power of national flags extends beyond performance and prestige; it also serves as a catalyst for exclusion and hate speech. Political and social tensions manifest through flag selection, leading to targeted discrimination. A 23 years old male participant 2 recounted, *“For example, when a player with an Israeli flag came, they swore at him a lot because of the current Palestinian issue”*. This illustrates how real-world geopolitical conflicts are mirrored within gaming environments, reinforcing offline hostilities in digital spaces. Additionally, national biases are not only linked to performance but also extend to assumptions about players’ technical capabilities. A 19 years old female participant 21 noted, *“There is a perception in the game that players from the Middle East always have problems with their internet connections. For example, when the player connected to the game late, they would say, ‘Are you Syrian?’”*. Such remarks reflect a broader discourse in which national identity is conflated with technological and infrastructural inferiority, further perpetuating regional stereotypes.

Moreover, national identities play a significant role in shaping in-group and out-group dynamics within the game. Some players explicitly prefer to engage with individuals from their own national backgrounds while displaying hostility toward others. A female participant 23 stated, *“I prefer to play with Turks. Communication with foreigners is challenging due to language barriers, and I feel more comfortable playing with fellow Turks. I dislike Middle Eastern flags and often mock players who use them.”*. This statement reveals how national symbols function as markers of inclusion and exclusion, reinforcing segregation within online gaming communities.

In conclusion, national flags in MLBB serve as more than mere identity markers; they actively shape perceptions of player skill, contribute to the accumulation

of symbolic capital, and reinforce regional hierarchies and biases. While some players leverage national flags to enhance their status, others face exclusion and discrimination based on the perceived characteristics associated with their flags. The reluctance of Turkish players to use their national flag exemplifies how these dynamics influence player behavior, demonstrating that flag selection is often a calculated decision rather than a simple expression of identity.

Profile Photo

In digital gaming communities, the ways in which players present themselves play a decisive role in shaping in-game social hierarchies and dynamics. In Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB), the self-presentation of players through profile photo is interpreted and evaluated by others, often assigning specific meanings to these images. This process shapes the formation of symbolic capital within the game and can lead to the exclusion of certain groups or even expose them to hate speech.

Profile photos emerge as one of the key tools determining players' social acceptance and status within the game. These images directly influence perceptions of gaming skill, fostering strong biases about players. For instance, there is a widespread perception that players with certain types of profile photos are more skilled. One participant described this phenomenon as follows: *"We used to be very scared of players with anime profile photos during matchmaking, for example. When we saw an anime profile photo, we wouldn't play because they were usually very good players."* (P17, 22, Female). Similarly, a 21 years old female participant 16 noted, *"When a player with an anime picture joins, you can predict that they might play better than those who use their own photos."*, highlighting the connection between this perception and in-game status. Conversely, default or beginner-level profile photos are often associated with poor performance. A 23 years old female participant 22 stated, *"If someone has the default profile photo, I assume they are a bad player."*, clearly illustrating this association.

Profile photos not only reflect skill perceptions but also reveal players' strategies for building symbolic capital. Players consciously choose profile photos to showcase their social status and gain prestige within the gaming community. A 19

years old female participant 21 explained, *“They never use their own photos. It could be a cat picture, an icon, or any image they found on Pinterest. In this perception, your in-game rank becomes very important.”*, emphasizing how profile photos represent players' in-game status.

However, this symbolic capital is not always equally accepted. Sexist and discriminatory biases often exacerbate discrimination against players with certain profile photos. A 22 years old female participant 17 stated, *“When a female player uses an anime profile photo, they face a lot of bullying. The anime interests of women are not taken seriously because male players associate themes like war and power with masculinity. As a result, they belittle women’s interest in anime.”*, revealing how female players are marginalized and subjected to sexist discourse within gaming communities. This reflects the dominance of male-centric norms in the gaming ecosystem and the marginalization of female players within this framework.

On the other hand, profile photos can also become tools for hate speech and discrimination. 29 year-old male participant 5 noted, *“In the game, there are photos used by players related to LGBT groups. However, because of these photos, they are often subjected to humiliation.”*, highlighting how specific identities are targeted and discriminated against within the game. Similarly, a 22 years old female participant 18 stated, *“I have seen tensions arise in the game due to profile photos containing religious and political symbols.”*, demonstrating how political and religious identities are used as symbolic capital, leading to polarization among players. In particular, symbols related to the Israel-Palestine conflict have been observed to increase tensions and fuel discriminatory attitudes among players.

These findings illustrate how self-presentation and symbolic capital in MLBB shape discrimination and hate speech among players. Profile photos have become a factor that determines players’ social positioning and influences how they are perceived within the community. Identity expressions, perceptions of gaming skill, political and religious symbols, and gender-based discrimination contribute to the formation of exclusionary and polarizing structures within gaming communities.

Skins

In online gaming environments, hero skins function as more than mere aesthetic elements; they serve as crucial markers of status and identity. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, these skins become objects of distinction, reinforcing social hierarchies within gaming communities. Simultaneously, Goffman's framework of presentation of self in everyday life helps explain how players use skins as performative tools to craft and maintain their digital personas, seeking recognition and acceptance from their peers. However, this system of symbolic differentiation also leads to exclusionary practices, including hate speech directed at those who fail to conform to the prevailing aesthetic and economic standards of the gaming subculture.

From Bourdieu's perspective, symbolic capital, in the form of rare and expensive skins, is an essential mechanism for social stratification within gaming communities. Just as economic capital translates into prestige in the real world, in-game purchases often requiring real-world financial investment become a currency of distinction. Players with prestigious skins gain social legitimacy, reinforcing their position in the game's informal hierarchy. This symbolic economy fosters a form of digital elitism, where those unable or unwilling to invest in skins face exclusion, mockery, or marginalization. A 22 years old female participant 20 explains this dynamic: *"When other players open your profile and see the most valuable and rare costumes, they say I should play with this. Personally, I immediately want to add them from the game and enter together. There are more people who want to play, but no one will look at an account without a costume."* This quote illustrates the social gatekeeping function of skins: rare and costly visual assets act as entry passes into desirable social circles. Those without such symbolic capital are often ignored, excluded, or even ridiculed.

Goffman's concept of impression management further clarifies this phenomenon. In gaming, avatars and skins are extensions of self-presentation, allowing players to construct idealized identities that conform to community expectations. Players strategically curate their appearance to command respect, influence group dynamics, and avoid stigma. A 27 years old male participant 9 describes how skins influence in-game social interactions: *"In terms of appearance,*

having rare and expensive costumes makes you different from others and gives you an advantage in terms of motivation for the game. People want to communicate with you more if you have good costumes. You look richer in terms of status. However, if you do not have a costume, no one will even look at your face; they will not play.” This suggests that skins function as identity signals that either elevate or diminish a player's social standing. In this way, gaming environments reproduce the logic of social distinction, privileging players who can acquire high-value skins while marginalizing those who cannot.

The hierarchical structure created by skins does not merely shape in-game relationships; it also fosters forms of social exclusion, including hate speech. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic power explains how dominant groups normalize exclusionary practices, reinforcing the marginalization of less privileged players. In gaming, this manifests in hate speech targeting players perceived as “low-status” based on their skins. One participant stated that *“When I first started playing the game and progressed through levels, I noticed that other players often dismissed me simply because I didn't have any skins. I encountered comments like, “don't even have a skin, obviously a noob. Go play with bots!”* (P25, 18, Female). This phrase illustrates how symbolic exclusion is enacted through language, transforming economic and aesthetic differentiation into active forms of social discrimination. The result is a hostile gaming environment where access to symbolic capital dictates not only social acceptance but also exposure to verbal aggression.

Furthermore, Goffman's concept of stigma helps explain how players without prestigious skins experience social degradation. Stigma in this context arises from failing to meet community expectations regarding status signaling through skins. This leads to identity discrediting, where “no skins” are seen as less competent, less worthy of respect, and more deserving of hostility.

By examining in-game skins through the lenses of Bourdieu and Goffman, it is seen that gaming environments reproduce real-world patterns of social stratification, exclusion, and symbolic power. Skins operate as markers of prestige and belonging, structuring in-game interactions through symbolic capital. However, this economy of distinction also fosters hate speech and social marginalization, turning gaming

communities into contested spaces where access to virtual goods determines social legitimacy.

Rank

Ranks within the game emerge as a significant element that reflects player status and establishes symbolic capital within the community. While different ranks symbolize players' competence, experience, and in-game performance, they also function as a mechanism that can foster discriminatory attitudes and hate speech. High-ranking players are often perceived as more prestigious, while those with lower ranks face ostracization and belittlement, highlighting the dual role of ranks as both a marker of achievement and a source of division.

Participants' narratives reveal the centrality of rank in constructing symbolic capital. Higher ranks are associated with prestige and desirability, as illustrated by a 19 years old female participant 23, who stated, *"When you have a high rank, you are more prestigious in the game. Everybody wants to play with you."* This demonstrates that high-ranking players are viewed as valuable members of the community, whose presence is actively sought after. In contrast, lower ranks are frequently linked to incompetence and marginalization. A 23 years old female participant 14 observed, *"Because I am low-ranked, there is prejudice during the game, and insults start as if we have lost. Low-ranking players are called nob."* This underscores how lower ranks diminish a player's symbolic capital, leading to social exclusion and negative labeling.

Further testimonies emphasize how rank shapes self-presentation and symbolic capital within the MLBB community. A 28 years old male participant 7 explained, *"When people with lower ranks join the team, they may not perform well. The quality of play decreases, and tensions arise."* This highlights how symbolic capital is not only accumulated but also fiercely protected. When low-ranked players enter high-ranked matches, they are often perceived as disruptors, triggering frustration and, in some cases, verbal aggression. Another participant (P9, male, 27) elaborated on this dynamic, stating, *"There is more hate speech at higher ranks because of the competition."* The competitive environment intensifies rank-based discrimination, as

high-ranking players may resort to hate speech to maintain their status and distance themselves from those perceived as less skilled.

All participants acknowledged that the social hierarchy created by ranks is closely tied to hate speech and discrimination. A 27 years old male participant 6 noted, *“When people with high ranks join, they are respected more. However, if someone is lower-ranked and performs poorly, hate speech starts immediately.”* This indicates that rank disparities are a primary driver of discriminatory attitudes. Similarly, a 25 years old male participant 1 stated, *“When low-ranking players join, they are immediately looked down upon. They are called things like “loser,” “trash,” or “armless,”* illustrating how lower ranks are subjected to marginalizing discourses within gaming communities. This demonstrates that ranks function not only as performance indicators but also as mechanisms that facilitate discrimination.

Additionally, several participants admitted to using derogatory language when lower-ranked players joined their matches. One participant (P12,18,Female) confessed, *“I also get frustrated when lower-ranked players join, and I might say things like “fucking noob,” “traitor,” or “cowards,” but this is entirely due to the competitive nature of the game.”* This admission underscores how rank-based distinctions are used to justify discriminatory behavior, normalizing hate speech as an inherent aspect of in-game interactions. Furthermore, another participant (P17, 22, Female) pointed out, *“If these players have their microphones on and their identities are known, such as their hometown, the hate speech increases.”* This suggests that rank intersects with other social identifiers, amplifying discrimination beyond skill-based categorization.

The findings indicate that ranks serve not only as metrics of performance but also as tools for social distinction. High-ranking players leverage their status to assert superiority, while low-ranking players contend with negative stereotypes that undermine their in-game agency.

In-game Characters

In digital gaming environments such as Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB), heroes are encoded with distinct attributes by developers, which subsequently acquire symbolic significance for players. Datas from participant interviews suggests that in-game roles significantly influence the process of meaning-making, particularly in relation to gender norms. The categorization of heroes based on these norms shapes player self-presentation and character selection within the game.

One participant articulated their preference for the tank role, stating, “I predominantly choose the tank role because I think it’s more masculine” (P3, 31, Male). This perspective underscores the association of in-game characters with gendered attributes and highlights how players integrate these norms into their self-representation strategies. Similarly, another participant expressed a preference for assassin characters, explaining, *“I mostly play assassins. Assassins are more masculine, oppressive characters, that's why I play them. Some of them are very feminine characters, like Angela, played by women. That's why I don't play them.”* (P7, 28, Male). This commentary illustrates how characters are often classified according to gendered identities, influencing player choices and self-presentation in the game.

The symbolic capital associated with in-game characters can also function as a conduit for discriminatory practices, including hate speech. In MLBB, certain heroes are linked to specific social identities, rendering them targets of prejudice. For instance, one participant noted that the character Natalia has been used to perpetuate stereotypes about ethnic groups: “For example, Natalia is an invisible assassin hero in the game. Since she is invisible, she can easily kill everyone. I especially saw references to Kurds through this hero.” (P1, 25, Male). This observation reveals how in-game avatars can serve as proxies for real-world social boundaries and discriminatory rhetoric, extending beyond their functional roles within the game mechanics to encompass broader symbolic meanings.

Furthermore, support roles in MLBB are frequently subjected to gendered and sexual orientation stereotypes. One participant recounted personal experiences of being mischaracterized based on their role selection: *“I encountered assumptions*

about my gender and sexual orientation simply because I played a support role. Others presumed I was either female or homosexual” (K10, 25, Other). The classification of support roles as inherently “feminine” reflects the pervasive influence of gendered perceptions within the gaming community. Player self-presentation is thus intricately tied not only to the characters they select but also to the social connotations ascribed to these roles. The interplay between in-game roles and social identity formation underscores the profound impact of gaming dynamics on individual experiences and status within virtual environments.

In conclusion, character selection and role preferences in MLBB are shaped by societal gender norms and symbolic meanings, influencing player self-presentation. Gendered stereotypes extend to roles like support, often associated with femininity or specific sexual orientations, while certain heroes become vehicles for real-world discrimination.

3.5.2.3.1.5. Real-World Influences

National and International Agenda

It has been observed that current events in Turkey and globally significantly influence the development of discriminatory language and hate speech against specific groups within the gaming community. Prejudices held by players regarding real-world events often translate into segregation and conflict within the game, reflecting the broader societal tensions that permeate digital spaces. 8 participants expressed the effect of agenda on hate speech in MLBB. Eight participants highlighted the influence of current events on the prevalence of hate speech in Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB).

The impact of real-world agendas is directly mirrored in the behavior and discourse of players. A 27 years old male participant 11 noted, *“We can observe the reflection of any significant event occurring in the country within the game. Players immediately discuss these events in the general chat. For instance, this is particularly common during election periods.”* This highlights how social and political events shape in-game conversations. Political tensions are especially evident during election periods, as described by a 29 years old male participant 5 *“When I logged in after the*

election, the tension between CHP and AKP supporters was palpable in the game. They were openly insulting each other.” This illustrates how political polarization in the real world influences interactions within the game. Similarly, another participant stated, *“For example, I noticed significant tension in the game following the Fenerbahçe-Galatasaray match,”* indicating how national sports rivalries also affect player interactions (P1, Male, 25).

Global events similarly shape the discourse within the game. A 25 years old male participant 1 explained, *“Following the Israel-Gaza conflict, there was a surge in hate speech against Israel. Phrases like dirty Jews, baby killers, and death to Israel became prevalent.”* This demonstrates how international conflicts generate hate speech within the gaming community. Similarly, a 23 years old male participant 7 stated, *“For example, Israel’s actions in Palestine have a profound impact on us. When we encounter the Israeli flag in the game, we instinctively respond with hostility.”* This reflects how global events trigger discriminatory language and reinforce biases within the game.

Hate speech against refugees in Turkey is another notable issue influenced by real-world agendas. An 18 years old female participant 19 explained, *“Unfortunately, the national agenda affects our in-game conversations. For instance, during the election process, certain political parties made statements against refugees. This led to a significant increase in hate speech against refugees within the game.”* This illustrates how political rhetoric during election periods translates into discriminatory behavior within the gaming community.

In conclusion, both national and global events significantly shape the dynamics of the gaming community, often popularizing hate speech and discriminatory practices. The gaming environment becomes an arena of broader societal tensions, where real-world prejudices and conflicts are reproduced and amplified.

Traces of Social Polarization in Games

Players often transfer their existing social, cultural, and political biases into gaming environments, resulting in the proliferation of discriminatory practices and hate speech within in-game interactions. 10 participants highlighted the significant impact of social polarization on the prevalence of discrimination and hate speech in Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB). The findings reveal that societal divisions in Turkey, such as ethnic and political tensions, permeate the game, exacerbating intergroup conflicts. For instance, a 23 years old male participant 2 noted, *“I think the polarization in the country is the biggest factor. For example, the Turkish-Kurdish divide and Syrians receive a lot of hate speech in the game,”* Similarly, a 19 years old female participant 21 emphasized the transfer of real-world prejudices into the digital sphere, stating, *“Since there is already hatred against Kurds in our country, there is a lot of hate speech against Kurds in the game.”*

Ethnic identity emerged as a central theme in discriminatory in-game discourse. A 22 years old female participant 24 reported encountering derogatory remarks such as, *“No, this is Kurdish, nothing can happen from this. He cannot play the game; they say Kurds cannot do anything in the game”*. This reflects the prevalence of condescending attitudes toward Kurdish players. Another 22 years old female participant 17 explained how individual actions are generalized to entire ethnic groups, stating, *“When they get angry with a player, they say 'dirty Kurd,' for example. In general, all ethnicities are marginalized because of what one person does in the country,”*

The patriarchal structure of society also influences interactions within the game, as evidenced by participants' accounts. A 22 years old female participant 18 observed, *“The patriarchy in the society is also reflected in the game. There is much discrimination against women by men in the game. They think that women should not play this game”* Such narratives highlight the persistence of gender inequality within gaming communities, where female players are frequently subjected to minimizing and discriminatory remarks.

Additionally, societal prejudices against refugees are replicated in the game. Participant 17 noted, *“For example, even if the person is not Syrian, they can insult*

them” illustrating how anti-refugee sentiment is generalized and perpetuated within the gaming context. This demonstrates the capacity of gaming communities to reinforce and amplify real-world biases against marginalized groups. In summary, the findings indicate that players’ everyday prejudices are transposed into the digital realm, manifesting as discrimination and hate speech targeting ethnic minorities, women, and refugees.

3.5.2.3.1.6. Online Disinhibition Effect

This section will outline four key differences between communication in digital gaming environments and offline interactions, which contribute to the online disinhibition effect. The online disinhibition effect refers to the phenomenon where individuals behave more openly and with fewer social constraints in online settings compared to face-to-face interactions (Suler, 2004:321). In the context of digital gaming, this effect is amplified by four factors: anonymity, invisibility, dissociative imagination, and rapid response. These elements, facilitated by the structure of online gaming platforms, encourage players to feel less restrained and more liberated (Kilvington, 2021:261).

The immersive and often competitive nature of digital games further intensifies these dynamics, creating an environment where players may act in ways they would not in offline settings. This heightened disinhibition can lead to negative behaviors like online hate speech. Thus, the unique combination of these factors in digital gaming environments underscores the distinct psychological and social dynamics that differentiate online interactions from offline ones.

Anonymity

Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) offers players an interactive social environment where competitive and cooperative dynamics shape in-game experiences. However, the absence of real-world identity disclosure fosters a psychological detachment, enabling behaviors that individuals would typically refrain from in face-to-face interactions. This phenomenon is encapsulated by the concept of online disinhibition, wherein anonymity allows players to act without the constraints of real-world consequences.

A prevalent theme among participants is that anonymity emboldens players to engage in hate speech without fear of repercussions. As one respondent noted, *“Because they are anonymous, people can easily say things here that they cannot say to someone’s face in daily life”* (P3, 31, Male). This aligns with the online disinhibition effect, where the absence of real-world accountability leads individuals to disregard social norms and responsibilities. Similarly, another participant highlighted the protective barrier anonymity provides, stating, *“People can easily use hate speech here, which they cannot express openly in daily life because they are afraid of legal sanctions. Statements that would normally be subject to defamation lawsuits remain unpunished in the game thanks to anonymity.”* (P6, 27, Male). The lack of tangible consequences removes the legal and social restraints that ordinarily regulate behavior, facilitating toxic interactions.

Beyond the removal of personal accountability, anonymity enables players to construct alternative personas, which can further exacerbate discrimination and conflict. One participant described how players manipulate their identities:

“In the game, everyone can create an identity however they want, and this sometimes triggers hate speech. For example, someone tries to make their username Bergen look like a female profile, or someone chooses a military name and puts images from their military service on their profile photo to give the impression of I am a soldier. But is it really so? You never know. People only comment on their profile photos and usernames, sometimes praising them and sometimes belittling them. This can lead to unnecessary judgments and even hate speech in the game.” (P8, 23, Male).

Such identity *play* often provokes unwarranted judgments and targeted hate speech, as players react to perceived rather than genuine characteristics. Another respondent emphasized the unpredictability of interactions due to fabricated identities: *“Players do not reflect their true identities at all; instead, they create entirely different personas. Anonymity allows people to act as someone they are not”* (P10, 25, Male). This aligns with Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical analysis, where the “frontstage” performance in online spaces diverges significantly from real-world behavior, enabling more reckless and aggressive conduct.

Anonymity not only *facilitates* hate speech but also fosters psychological detachment from its emotional impact. As one participant explained, *“The fact that players are anonymous gives them a sense of comfort. This applies not only to MLBB but also to platforms like Discord and Instagram”* (P16, 21, Female). This detachment from real-world identity creates an environment where players feel invulnerable, leading to heightened hostility. Furthermore, anonymity allows individuals to channel real-life frustrations into the game, intensifying toxic interactions. One respondent observed, *“People reflect the anger they have accumulated against a person or group in their daily lives into the game. I think the most important factor in this is that these people are anonymous. Everyone is very comfortable because everyone is thinking, What will happen to me?”* (P17, 22, Female). This underscores how anonymity serves as an outlet for external frustrations, transforming MLBB into a space where unfiltered aggression thrives.

Another critical *effect* of anonymity is the process of deindividuation, wherein individuals lose their sense of personal responsibility in group settings (Yılmaz, 2022). One participant described this dynamic: *“When low-ranking players make mistakes, they are immediately attacked. It is normal for us to make mistakes, but instead of understanding this, they put even more pressure on us. Even if we apologize, they continue to swear. Since no one can reach anyone, everyone can humiliate others as they wish.”* (P23, 19, Female). This mirrors findings in social psychology, where anonymity within groups fosters impulsive and often aggressive behavior.

Additionally, *anonymity* exacerbates conflicts when identity markers, such as nationality, become sources of division. One respondent noted, *“The more someone*

reveals their identity, the more hate speech they encounter. When identities remain concealed, the game becomes more comfortable. For example, conflicts between countries often fuel such tensions” (P4, 30, Male). This suggests that while anonymity can protect individuals from targeted discrimination, it also creates an environment where disclosed identity markers may provoke hostility, reinforcing the dual role of anonymity as both a facilitator of aggression and a shield against it.

In summary, *the* anonymity provided by MLBB fosters a psychological environment where players feel detached from the consequences of their actions, enabling behaviors such as hate speech, identity manipulation, and unfiltered aggression. This phenomenon is rooted in the online disinhibition effect, deindividuation, and the ability to construct alternative personas, all of which contribute to hate speech within the game.

Invisibility

Interviews with *participants* revealed that online invisibility is a crucial factor that increases hate speech in Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB). This invisibility stemming from the lack of physical presence in online spaces enables individuals to ignore the social feedback that typically regulates behavior in offline communication. As part of the broader online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004), invisibility fosters an environment where individuals feel detached from the consequences of their words and actions, thereby amplifying aggressive and harmful speech.

For female players, *however*, invisibility functions as both a defense mechanism and a double-edged sword. Participant 18, a 22 years old female player, expressed, *“Because I am a woman, I can't even turn on the sound in the game because we are billed for the slightest mistake.”* This suggests that while invisibility shields marginalized groups from direct harassment, it also perpetuates a hostile environment by allowing unchecked aggression. On the other hand, many participants noted that this very lack of visibility encourages toxic behavior. Participant 8, a 23 years old male player, stated, *“Invisibility gives people the right to say whatever they want. No one is physically in front of them, so they can say whatever they want and pass by.”* This

illustrates how invisibility facilitates a form of toxic disinhibition, where social responsibility is abandoned in favor of impulsive, uninhibited speech.

Goffman's (1959) provides a useful framework for understanding how online invisibility promotes hate speech. In face-to-face interactions, individuals regulate their behavior based on verbal and nonverbal cues. However, online environments strip away these regulatory mechanisms, allowing individuals to act independently of social feedback. Participant 14, a 23 years old female player, observed: *"They say as harsh words as they want because they don't see how what they say affects the other person. When the game is over, everything is erased."* This statement underscores how invisibility weakens moral and social accountability, reinforcing dissociative anonymity, where users feel disconnected from the impact of their words.

As Farrington et al. (2015) emphasize, invisibility prevents the perpetrators of hate speech from witnessing the emotional reactions of their victims, reinforcing the logic of "hit and run" aggression. This notion was echoed by Participant 1, a 25 years old male player, who remarked, *"When you make a mistake, people attack you directly. Because they don't have to see the consequences of what they say."* In this sense, online invisibility dismantles empathy and emboldens individuals to engage in hate speech without the psychological deterrents present in offline interactions.

In sum, online invisibility integral to the online disinhibition effect creates an environment where hate speech flourishes due to the lack of social accountability, direct feedback, and immediate consequences.

Dissociative Imagination

The concept of dissociative imagination, as articulated by Suler (2004), posits that the internet is often perceived as a make-believe dimension, separate and apart from the demands and responsibilities of the real world (p. 323). This dissociation allows users to create or embellish identities, as they view online interactions as distinct from offline realities. Suler further emphasizes that users often believe they can leave behind their online personas and behaviors once they disconnect, reinforcing the notion that the digital realm is a space devoid of real-world consequences.

The dissociative imagination framework helps explain why individuals engage in hate speech within online games like Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB). Participants in this study frequently described how the perceived separation between the game and real life enables them to vent frustrations and express hostility without fear of repercussions. As one participant noted, *“Most people who enter the game see it as independent of their real lives. They vent their hatred at the slightest thing because they are aware that what they say here will have no consequences. Insults and curses become a normal part of the game. When the game is over, they relieve their stress and forget everything”* (P8, 23, Male). This sentiment aligns with the idea that online spaces are perceived as a “make-believe” dimension where actions lack real-world significance.

Similarly, another participant highlighted how the anonymity and dissociation of online gaming allow individuals to project real life frustrations and suppressed anger onto others: *“People take out their real-life failures or suppressed anger by attacking others in the game. In real life, they cannot do these things to anyone because of their lack of self-confidence. People who would not be able to say anything if they came face to face in reality can comfortably insult others here on the keyboard”* (P10, 25, Other). This behavior is further exacerbated by the competitive nature of the game, as one participant admitted, *“I also get nervous when lower-ranked players come, and I can say things like fuck faggot, dishonorable, or bitch. But this is completely due to the anger that comes from the competition of the game. We forget everything at the end of the game anyway”* (P12, 18, Female). These accounts illustrate how dissociative imagination enables individuals to compartmentalize their online and offline selves, viewing in-game hostility as a transient and inconsequential act.

The lack of real-world identity in online spaces further facilitates this dissociation. As one participant explained, *“Someone who is not confident in real life speaks however they want here because they have no identity here. They relax by doing things they cannot do in the real World”* (P13, 50, Female). This anonymity creates a psychological barrier that allows individuals to engage in behaviors they would otherwise avoid. Another participant echoed this sentiment, stating, *“Since I can't do this in real life, I can easily insult people I don't know in the virtual world. Nobody*

knows anyone; they can insult anyone they want. They do this with the passion the game gives them at the moment, and then they forget about it” (P24, 22, Female). This detachment from real-world consequences is further reinforced by the perception of in-game interactions as momentary and insignificant. As one participant remarked, *“When I get angry at someone and call them trash, it just seems like something momentary. I don't think it has any meaning outside the game. I talk like that in the game because I see it as part of the game. I don't think we should take it seriously”* (P25, 18, Female).

In conclusion, dissociative imagination plays a critical role in enabling hate speech within online spaces like MLBB. The perceived separation between online and offline realities allows individuals to engage in hostile behaviors without fear of consequences, while anonymity and the competitive nature of gaming further exacerbate these tendencies.

Rapid Response

In Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB), the rapid response functionality within the chat and voice communication systems plays a significant role in facilitating the proliferation of hate speech. The game's fast-paced environment fosters immediate emotional reactions, leaving players with little time to deliberate before sending messages. As Participant 9 (27, Male) notes, *“I often encounter hate speech in the game chat. These chats allow tensions to escalate rapidly because players can respond to each other instantly. This issue worsens exponentially, especially when players perform poorly.”* This observation underscores how real-time interactions can quickly intensify conflicts, as players react impulsively without considering the consequences of their words.

The ability to send messages or use voice chat instantly exacerbates negative interactions, particularly during moments of frustration. Participant 11 (27, Male) explains, *“The fast and instantaneous nature of interactions also fuels hate speech; people react without thinking and end up insulting each other.”* This suggests that the speed of communication eliminates the natural pauses that would typically allow individuals to reflect on their responses. Instead, emotions are expressed immediately,

often resulting in offensive and aggressive language. Participant 12 (18, Female) further emphasizes this point, stating, *“When you make a mistake, you might say something in anger right away without thinking. For example, you might curse at someone in the heat of the moment. These features provided by the game actually contribute to more hate speech.”* The immediacy of communication increases the likelihood of impulsive and hostile reactions, transforming brief frustrations into prolonged hostile exchanges.

Furthermore, the fast-paced nature of the gameplay itself contributes to unfiltered and rapid communication. Participant 25 (18, Female) elaborates, *“Everything happens so quickly in the game that there’s often no time to think. In ranked matches, where split-second decisions are crucial, mistakes can lead to immediate anger and reactions. Since the chat system and instant messaging allow for real-time communication, players often reflexively type swear words or insults. Later, I might regret what I said, but because everything happens in seconds, it’s hard to control myself.”* This highlights how the pressure of competitive gameplay, combined with the speed of the chat system, encourages players to react instantly with harsh and unfiltered language.

Additionally, the ability to extend conversations beyond the match itself means that conflicts often persist even after the game ends. Participant 15 (22, Female) describes how instant chat and voice features prolong arguments: *“During the game, the stress and competitive atmosphere lead players to react quickly and act without thinking. When voice communication is enabled, they often curse at each other in the heat of the moment. The same applies to messaging; players may impulsively send insulting messages. Moreover, these conflicts don’t always end with the game. Some players continue the argument in the lobby or send private messages to further insult their opponents.”* This demonstrates that the rapid response features not only escalate in-game conflicts but also extend them beyond the match, perpetuating hostility over time.

In summary, the rapid response features in MLBB’s chat and voice communication systems create an environment where hate speech spreads quickly due to the lack of time for reflection, the intensity of competitive gameplay, and the ability

to prolong conflicts beyond the match. Because players can react instantly in moments of frustration, offensive language becomes a reflexive response rather than a considered one. Consequently, the game’s communication system amplifies emotional outbursts, making hate speech more prevalent and difficult to mitigate.

3.5.2.3.2. The Effects of Hate Speech on Players

The prevalence of hate speech within MLBB (Mobile Legends: Bang Bang) exerts significant emotional, behavioral, and psychological consequences on players, influencing their engagement, mental health, and social interactions. These impacts vary depending on individual coping mechanisms and the frequency of exposure to toxic behavior. While some players react with anger or frustration, others may withdraw, retaliate, or become desensitized to the hostile environment. This section analyzes the diverse effects of hate speech on players, categorized into emotional, behavioral, and psychological dimensions.

3.5.2.3.2.1. Emotional Effects

Hate speech provokes intense emotional reactions that shape players’ experiences and perceptions of the game. Common emotional responses include anger, anxiety, and shame.

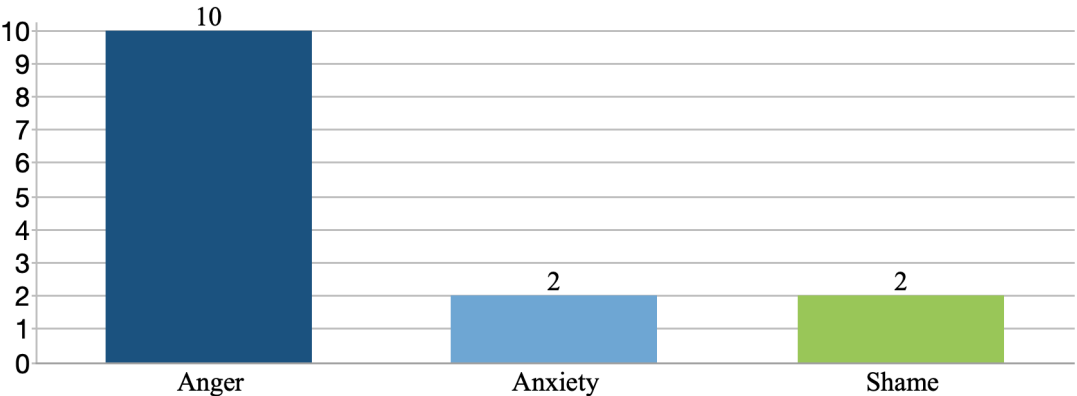


Figure 3.13. Emotional Effects of Hate Speech

Anger

Among the participants, 10 explicitly reported experiencing heightened levels of anger as a direct result of exposure to hate speech during gameplay. Many players report that when they encounter hate speech, they feel a buildup of anger, which directly impacts their in-game behavior. One player stated, *“When I am exposed to hate speech, I get upset, and anger builds up inside me. Over time, I become resentful and feel more irritable.”* (P1, 25, Male). This highlights that hate speech does not only cause a momentary emotional shift but also alters gaming motivation. This situation creates more stress and tension in the game.

The anger caused by hate speech negatively affects not only individual gaming experiences but also team dynamics. Another player expressed, *“I get angry due to the injustices, mistakes, or aggressive attitudes of teammates during the game.”* (P4, 30, Male) This indicates that anger combines with a sense of unfairness in the game, disrupting players' emotional balance. Similarly, direct statements such as *“I feel angry,”* (P5) *“I feel angry, it affects me negatively,”* (P12) reveal that players exposed to hate speech respond with anger.

Anger sometimes leads players to exhibit a more tense attitude in the game. For example, one player stated, *“I usually don’t feel anxious because I know they want to bring me down. That’s why I often get angry and might do the same to the other side.”* (P17, 22, Women). This shows that hate speech not only creates a sense of victimization but also triggers the urge to retaliate.

Anxiety

Among the participants, 2 explicitly reported experiencing heightened levels of anxiety as a direct result of exposure to hate speech in MLBB. Two participants highlighted that hate speech not only affects their in-game experiences but also induces anxiety even before the game begins. For instance, Participant 25 (18, Female) stated, *“I now feel tense even before entering the game. I worry about whether my teammates will criticize or insult me if I perform poorly. Sometimes, I don’t even open the game because of this.”* This statement underscores that hate speech is not merely a source of momentary stress but also diminishes the motivation to play the game. Similarly,

Participant 14 (22, Female) expressed, *“In the beginning, I used to feel anxious even before starting the game because I was afraid everyone would attack me if I played badly.”* These accounts illustrate how hate speech extends its negative impact beyond the game itself, creating a sense of apprehension that discourages players from engaging with the game altogether.

Shame

Interviews conducted with participants revealed that hate speech generates a profound sense of shame among players. Players exposed to hate speech not only experience discomfort during the game but also suffer from a loss of self-confidence and feelings of inadequacy regarding their overall gaming experience. Participant 14 (23, Female) stated, *“When they call me ‘stupid’ or say ‘how can you be so bad?’ in front of everyone, I usually feel terrible.”* This statement highlights that such insults do not merely cause momentary discomfort but also damage an individual's self-worth.

Similarly, Participant 25 (18, Female) shared, *“When I make a wrong move, they immediately say things like ‘are you an idiot, uninstall the game.’ I feel stupid at that moment, and I become even more anxious about my next move.”* This emphasizes that the shame caused by hate speech is not limited to the immediate moment but also affects the individual's future in-game behavior, leading to anxiety and hesitation. This situation illustrates that shame has a long-term impact, causing players to develop a negative self-perception.

3.5.2.3.2.2. Psychological Effects

Beyond immediate emotional and behavioral responses, hate speech can have enduring psychological effects, including desensitization, self-esteem issues, and social anxiety.

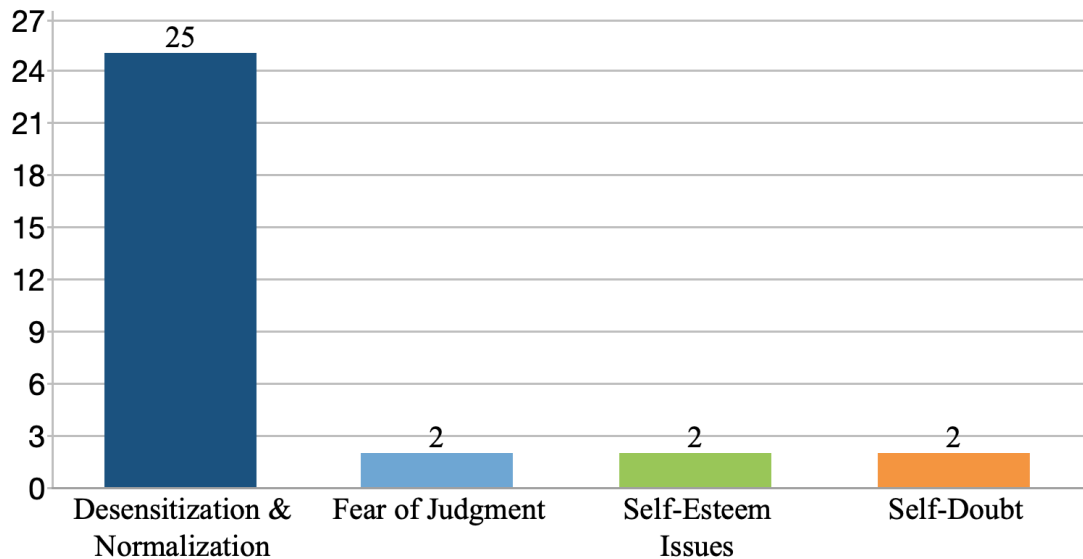


Figure 3.14. Psychological Effects of Hate Speech

Desensitization and Normalization

Repeated exposure to hate speech in MLBB often leads to desensitization, a process in which players become less emotionally responsive to such behavior. All of the participants report that prolonged exposure to offensive language and insults diminishes their sensitivity and willingness to engage with these interactions. One participant explains, *“Over time, you become desensitized, and eventually, you stop reacting. It’s so pervasive that responding feels pointless”* (P11, 27, Male). Another participant echoes this sentiment, stating, *“I don’t take it seriously anymore; it happens so frequently. Why should I care about someone who gets upset over trivial things?”* (P4, 30, Male). This desensitization is further reinforced by the overwhelming prevalence of hate speech, as expressed by one player: *“There’s so much toxicity that it no longer surprises me, and I don’t even bother taking extra measures to avoid it”* (P17, 22, Female). When hate speech becomes a constant presence, players often choose to ignore or tolerate it rather than confront it, as noted

by another participant: “Why let it ruin my mood? There’s nothing I can do to stop it anyway” (P12, 18, Female). Over time, the emotional impact of these interactions diminishes, leading players to disengage and avoid addressing hate speech.

Beyond desensitization, normalization occurs when hate speech becomes widely accepted as an inherent part of the gaming experience. All of the players acknowledge that hate speech has become a standard feature of MLBB, with one participant stating, *“It’s not just normalized, it’s completely ordinary now. The sheer frequency of it has made it that way”* (P5, 29, Other). Another participant reflects on how social dynamics within the game reinforce this normalization, explaining, *“In gaming, cursing and insults seem like a natural part of the experience. If you don’t engage in it, you come across as passive or overly polite”* (P14, 23, Female). This normalization extends beyond competitive play, influencing even casual interactions among friends: *“Now, even when there’s no reason, we sometimes insult each other because it’s so common, especially when playing with close friends. No one takes it seriously anymore”* (P23, 19, Female). Players also highlight the lack of resistance or intervention as a factor that perpetuates hate speech, with one participant noting, *“No one really cares. They just play the game and move on. At most, they might report it to customer service, but that’s the extent of it”* (P20, 22, Female). As hate speech continues to go unchecked, it creates a cyclical pattern where new players adopt the same behaviors, as described by another participant: *“You join a game, hear an insult, and a few days later, you hear the same thing in another match. It’s like a chain reaction—everyone starts mimicking each other”* (P21, 19, Female).

Self-doubt

Regular encounters with hate speech in MLBB often result in self-doubt, causing players to second-guess their abilities despite being skilled. One participant (P7, 30, Male) explains how constant criticism affects their view of their own performance: *“Even if you believe you’re good at the game, the flood of negative comments makes you doubt yourself. It’s hard not to question your skills when you’re constantly being criticized.”* This demonstrates how external negativity can overshadow a player’s self-confidence, creating hesitation and uncertainty.

Similarly, another participant (P23, 19, Other) shares, *“When I first started playing, I kept hearing things like ‘you’re terrible at this,’ and it made me overanalyze every move. I started second-guessing even the most basic decisions.”* This illustrates how ongoing criticism can lead to overthinking and a loss of trust in one’s own judgment.

However, both participants also highlight the importance of social support in countering self-doubt. Participant 23 adds, *“Once I began playing with friends and treated the game more casually, I got used to the negativity and stopped taking it so seriously.”* These experiences suggest that while toxic environments can fuel self-doubt, positive and supportive interactions can help players regain their confidence.

Self-Esteem Issues

Self-esteem challenges often emerge when players absorb negative remarks, leading to feelings of diminished worth or ability. Gender-based bias in gaming is a significant contributor to this issue, as highlighted by Participant 12 (18, Female) : *“Occasionally, it affects my confidence when people make comments about me being a girl.”* This implies that gender stereotypes foster an unwelcoming atmosphere where individuals are evaluated based on their identity rather than their abilities.

In a similar vein, Participant 24 (22, Female) shared how persistent criticism influenced their self-view: *“When I began playing, the constant negative remarks made me think I wasn’t good at the game.”* This demonstrates how ongoing negativity can cause players to adopt damaging beliefs about themselves, eroding their self-esteem.

However, Participant 24 also emphasized the role of positive reinforcement in rebuilding confidence, noting, *“After forming friendships, I realized that wasn’t the case. My boyfriend helped me see that the critics were just bullies, and he helped me feel more confident.”* This underscores the importance of supportive relationships in mitigating the impact of toxic behavior in gaming and fostering a healthier self-perception.

Fear of Judgment

The fear of being judged due to hate speech significantly impacts players' experiences and their choices of roles in MLBB. One participant (P10, 25, Male) explains, *“When I first started playing, I was scared of making mistakes because I knew I’d be judged immediately. If I tried a new character or had a poor match, they’d say things like ‘useless’ or ‘uninstall the game.’ Sometimes I stick to characters I’m comfortable with just to avoid criticism, I don’t want to take risks. The constant fear of being judged makes the game more stressful.”* To escape such negativity, they opt for familiar characters rather than experimenting with new ones, adding, *“I avoid taking risks because the thought of being criticized constantly adds unnecessary pressure.”*

Similarly, another participant (P12, 18, Female) shares how gender-based assumptions influence their gameplay, stating, *“I usually play mage, support, or tank roles, but mostly mage and support. Since there are more male players on the team, they assume that women are better suited for these roles.”* This expectation creates added stress, as they feel “pressured and restricted” by these stereotypes.

3.5.2.3.3. Coping Mechanisms for Hate Speech in MLBB

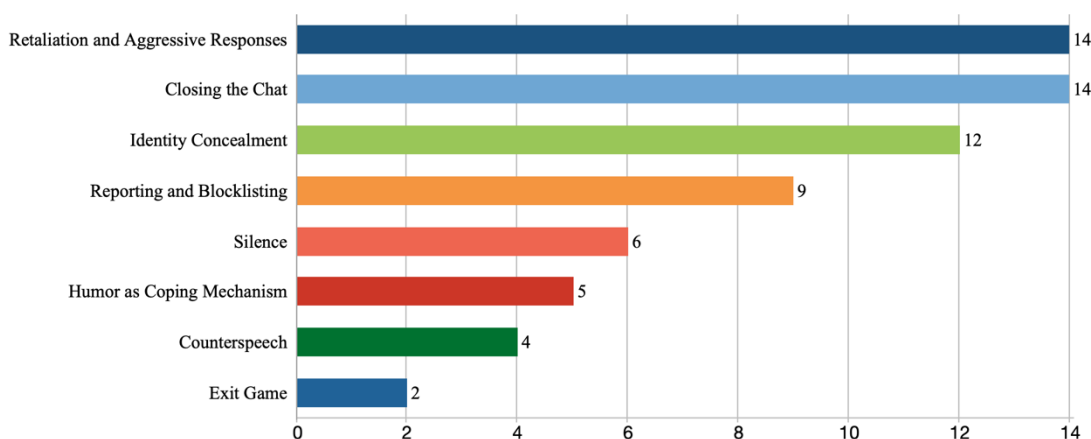


Figure 3.15. Coping Mechanism for Hate Speech

Players in Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) utilize various coping mechanisms to manage hate speech encountered during gameplay. These strategies can be classified into 8 primary categories: closing chat, silence, exit game, retaliation and aggressive responses, humor as coping mechanism, identity concealment, and

anonymity, reporting and blocklisting, and counterspeech. Each approach reflects varying degrees of engagement with hate speech, from disengagement and passive avoidance to active confrontation and advocacy against hate speech.

Closing Chat

13 participants mentioned that they often turn off chat features to avoid hate speech. Instead of getting into arguments, many choose to shut down chat completely to avoid toxic interactions. For example, one participant said, *“I just close the chat so they can’t talk to me,”* (P1, 25, Male) while another participant simply said, *“I close the chat.”* (P2, 23, Male). This shows that many players believe muting communication is the best way to avoid unnecessary conflict and keep the gaming experience enjoyable.

For some, turning off chat helps them focus on the game and protect their mental well-being. One participant shared, *“I close the chat and play comfortably,”* explaining that removing communication lets them enjoy the game without distractions (P10, 25, Other). Similarly, another participant said, *“I mute the chat because there’s no point in hearing unnecessary comments from people I don’t even know”* (P22, 23, Female) suggesting that cutting off communication helps reduce stress and frustration.

Silence

Many participants choose to remain silent rather than engaging in arguments or attempting to counter hostile interactions. Participant 4 (30, male) explains, *“I prefer to stay silent to avoid conflicts. However, constantly facing such tension in the game is exhausting.”* This suggests that silence is not merely an immediate reaction but a learned behavior developed over time due to repeated exposure to hate speech. Initially, players may attempt to respond, but they often realize their efforts rarely lead to meaningful change, making silence a more practical and sustainable coping mechanism.

For some participants, staying silent serves as a form of emotional self-protection. Participant 9 (23, Male) states, *“I usually stay silent when everyone targets*

me. There's no point in arguing with someone who's ignorant. If I respond, they'll just continue swearing and talking endlessly." This indicates that some players view silence as the only effective way to de-escalate toxic situations and avoid further hostility. Others, like participant 18 (22, Female), use silence to maintain focus on the game, stating, *"I withdraw into silence and concentrate on playing."* These responses highlight that for many players, disengaging from verbal interactions allows them to continue enjoying the game without being emotionally affected by hate speech.

Exit Game

One participant opts to entirely exit the game as a strategy to avoid further exposure to hate speech. Participant explains, *"When I come across hate speech, I sometimes get frustrated and shut down the game entirely. I log out because I don't want to continue engaging."* (P23, 19, Other). Another participant states that *"If I am overwhelmed by hate speech, I find the opportunity to refocus by briefly stepping away from the game."* (P15, 22, Female). This indicates that, for some players, disengagement goes beyond simply muting or ignoring hate speech and involves completely removing themselves from the gaming environment. Leaving the game acts as an immediate escape, enabling the player to regain emotional control and avoid extended exposure to hate speech.

Retaliation and Aggressive Responses

Players frequently encounter hate speech in online gaming environments, leading some to adopt retaliatory and aggressive responses as a coping mechanism. The reveal interviews that 14 participants employ such strategies to address the pervasive issue of hate speech.

Several participants reported initially attempting to remain calm but ultimately resorting to retaliation when subjected to sustained hate speech. For example, one participant stated, *"I try to be patient, but after a while, I also respond by insulting"* (P2, 23, Male). Another participant expressed a similar experience, explaining, *"When I constantly face hate speech in the game, I inevitably become more aggressive. At first, I try to stay calm, but after a point, I can't hold back and respond harshly"* (P3,

31, Male). These accounts highlight the emotional strain players endure, where prolonged exposure to hate speech often triggers aggressive reactions.

The competitive dynamics of MLBB further intensify these tensions, as players frequently feel unfairly targeted or criticized during gameplay. One participant noted, *“Especially when I’m blamed or belittled for no reason, I find it hard to control myself. Being directly insulted or demeaned for making a mistake ruins my enjoyment of the game and makes me aggressive”* (P4, 30, Male). Similarly, another participant emphasized the inevitability of retaliation in high-pressure scenarios: *“In the heat of competition and tension, this becomes unavoidable”* (P6, 27, Male).

For some players, retaliation functions as a means of self-assertion and resistance against victimization. One participant explained, *“Sometimes I retaliate to avoid being pushed around”* (P12, 18, Female). Another participant adopted a more calculated approach, using retaliation to provoke further aggression from the harasser, which they then reported to customer service: *“The way I react is usually to provoke the person even more. Later, I take a screenshot and report it to customer service”* (P21, 19, Female). This strategy not only allows the player to retaliate but also ensures that the harasser faces formal consequences for their actions.

However, some participants acknowledged that their retaliatory behavior occasionally extends beyond self-defense, targeting others based on personal biases or stereotypes. One participant admitted, *“For example, if an Arab or Syrian player joins, I bully them a lot. I tell them to go pray instead of playing the game or to go back to their country”* (P23, 19, Female). Such responses underscore the complex and often problematic dynamics within the gaming community, where recognition can perpetuate cycles of hate speech and discrimination.

While retaliation is a common response, some participants indicated that they rarely engage in such behavior. For instance, one participant stated, *“I rarely insult others”* (P16, 21, Female), while another emphasized their preference for reporting over retaliation: *“If I get tired of the reactions, I insult them back in the same way. At the end of the game, I also report them to the platform”* (P9, 27, Male). These responses suggest that, although retaliation is a prevalent coping mechanism, some players prioritize formal reporting systems to address hate speech.

Humor as a Coping Mechanism

5 participants in the study reported employing humor as a coping mechanism to deal with hate speech, often perceiving the absurdity of the insults as amusing rather than offensive. For example, one participant remarked, *“I know they’re exaggerating, but in the moment, it feels that way. Still, it’s funny sometimes because the things they say are so ridiculous. That’s why, most of the time, instead of reacting, I just laugh it off or stay silent. There’s no point in engaging in an argument”* (P20, 22, Female). This response demonstrates how humor can function as a protective barrier, enabling players to detach themselves from negativity and maintain emotional resilience.

For other participants, observing others lose their temper became a source of amusement. One participant noted, *“Watching people who can’t control their anger is sometimes funny, and it makes me feel entertained”* (P21, 19, Female). This perspective illustrates how humor can reframe potentially stressful situations into moments of entertainment, allowing players to view their experiences in a more positive light.

Humor also plays a crucial role in building camaraderie among friends and clan members. One participant explained, *“When playing with friends, there are sometimes vulgar jokes, and it feels like part of the environment. Especially in clan games, where everyone knows each other, people act more freely, and these kinds of conversations feel fun. They don’t have a serious meaning; on the contrary, they feel like something that enhances the enjoyment of the game”* (P22, 23, Female). This suggests that humor, when shared within a trusted group, can strengthen social connections and foster a sense of belonging, even in the presence of external hostility.

Additionally, some participants used humor as a deliberate tactic to provoke or unsettle harassers. One participant shared, *“Honestly, sometimes when I’m exposed to hate speech, I just laugh because it makes people even angrier. I even tell my friends about it so they can have a laugh too”* (P23, 19, Female). This approach not only diminishes the emotional impact of hate speech but also shifts the power dynamic, enabling the targeted individual to regain a sense of control.

Another participant described finding amusement in the limitations of their harassers, stating, *“Sometimes I mock them. Yes, I enjoy it. For example, it amuses me*

that they can't do anything except type fast" (P24, 22, Female). This response highlights how humor can trivialize the efforts of those engaging in hate speech, rendering their actions ineffective and even laughable.

Identity Concealment and Anonymity

12 participants reported employing strategies to avoid sharing personal photographs, real names, or any identifiable information in their gaming profiles. Male participants, in particular, expressed a reluctance to upload personal images, citing concerns about hate speech and harassment. For example, participant 3 (31, Male) stated, *"I don't put a photo,"* while participant 7 (28, Male) similarly remarked, *"I don't post a photo."* Participant 11 (27, Male) further clarified this behavior, explaining, *"I don't post any photos to protect myself from hate speech."* These responses indicate a common understanding among male players that concealing visual identifiers helps mitigate the risk of targeted abuse.

Female participants, however, demonstrated a heightened need for anonymity due to gender-based discrimination. Participant 12 (18, Female) noted, *"I try not to post my own photo because I get harassed,"* underscoring the gendered nature of online hosting. Similarly, participant 18 (22, Female) described her approach of using alternative images to obscure her gender: *"I try not to show that I'm a woman during the game. I don't post my own photo as a profile photo. I post a cartoon character or an anime character. I either post a celebrity or a character from the game, but I never post my own photo."* This deliberate effort to avoid gender recognition highlights the challenges female players encounter in a predominantly male gaming environment.

The practice of identity concealment extended beyond photographs to include the omission of real names and other personal details. Participant 19 (18, Female) stated, *"I don't write my own photo or my name,"* while participant 24 (22, Female) emphasized, *"I don't use my own name. I don't give anything about myself. My profile picture is not me anyway."* These accounts illustrate the extensive measures players take to anonymize their online presence, ensuring a clear separation between their real-world identities and their gaming personas.

For some female participants, identity concealment also functioned as a strategy to overcome gender-based exclusion in gameplay. Participant 21 (19, Female) explained, *“To play the roles I enjoy, I present myself as male. Female players are often excluded from certain roles, such as forester, when their gender is known.”* This intentional masking of gender reveals systemic biases within the gaming community, where female players are frequently restricted to stereotypical roles or excluded from specific positions altogether.

By anonymizing their profiles, participants sought to create a safer gaming environment, free from the biases and prejudices that disproportionately affect isolated groups, particularly women. As participant 22 (23, Female) noted, *“I keep my identity secret; I don't post a profile photo so no one knows who I am.”* This approach not only protects them from direct harassment but also enables them to participate more freely in gameplay, unencumbered by social stereotypes.

Reporting and Blocklisting

Another strategy for addressing hate speech involves reporting players and placing them on blocklists, a method utilized by 10 participants. However, many participants expressed doubts regarding the efficacy of in-game reporting systems, highlighting the issue of insufficient or lenient consequences as a notable drawback.

A significant number of participants highlight reporting as their primary method of addressing hate speech. For instance, participant 9 (27, Male) notes, *“After the game concludes, I report the incident to the platform,”* while Participant 15 (22, Female) elaborates, *“I typically choose to report the issue to resolve it. Rather than engaging in unnecessary arguments during the game, it is more effective to directly file a complaint with the platform.”* This indicates that reporting is perceived as a more practical and less emotionally taxing approach to managing hate speech. Some participants, however, reserve reporting for severe cases, as P19 explains, *“If the behavior is particularly extreme, I report it to the platform.”*

In addition to reporting, certain participants adopt further measures to minimize future interactions with individuals who engage in hate speech. Participant 22 (23, Female) states, *“I report the incident to the platform and add the individual to my*

blacklist,” illustrating a dual strategy of both addressing the behavior and avoiding further contact with the offender. Participant 24 (22, Female) further clarifies, “*Once the game ends, there is typically an option in these games to block or blacklist a user. I utilize this feature to block the individual. Additionally, I submit a complaint regarding the inappropriate communication.*” This demonstrates that participants actively work to curate their gaming environment by reducing exposure to those who perpetuate hate speech.

Counter speech

Counter speech serves as a strategy to address hate speech, functioning as a grassroots approach to combat harmful content. It seeks to reduce such behavior, halt its spread, or offer support to those targeted by exposing inconsistencies in hateful remarks or using evidence-based information to correct false claims (Wachs, 2023). Among the participants, four utilized counter speech by fostering constructive conversations, voicing ethical objections, delivering preemptive cautions, and stepping in during hostile exchanges.

A frequent method involves steering discussions toward more positive interactions. For example, one participant mentioned, “*At times, I try to defuse the situation by staying patient and saying, ‘Let’s avoid swearing, stay calm.’*” (P6, 27, Male). This approach aims to reduce tension by shifting the tone from aggression to constructive communication. Rather than responding with hostility, the individual gently discourages inappropriate language and encourages a more civil exchange.

Another participant addresses hate speech by expressing moral concerns, stating, “*Why are you behaving this way? Isn’t this shameful? What you’re doing is completely wrong.*” (P12, 18, Female). By questioning the offender’s actions and labeling them as unacceptable, this method appeals to ethical standards and societal norms. The intention is to prompt the aggressor to reflect on their behavior by emphasizing its harmful consequences.

Some participants take proactive measures by monitoring interactions and offering warnings when needed. One participant explained, “*Occasionally, I observe others and caution them against engaging in such behavior.*” (P16, 21, Female). This

strategy involves actively watching in-game conduct and intervening before conflicts intensify. By addressing negative behavior early, the participant aims to prevent hate speech from becoming normalized in the gaming environment.

Direct intervention is another common tactic among players. One participant shared, *“When someone uses hate speech during the game, I usually address it right away. I respond by saying, ‘There’s no need for that’ or ‘Why are you speaking like this?’ I try to promote respectful communication.”* (P25, 18, Female). This type of response directly confronts offensive language while advocating for respect. By addressing the issue immediately, the player aims to influence both the offender and others who may be witnessing the interaction.

3.6. Discussion of Findings

3.6.1. The Digital Divide: Identity, Exclusion, and Hate in MLBB

The examination of hate speech within Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) through the application of digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews underscores the systemic nature of discrimination prevalent in online gaming environments. The convergence of observational data and participant testimonies reveals that hate speech in MLBB is not an isolated phenomenon but rather a structural issue that perpetuates existing societal inequalities (Lopez and Argüello-Gutierrez, 2025; Kim and Ortiz, 2024; Cesare et al., 2023; Kowert and Cook, 2022; Gray, 2011a). This alignment between observations and qualitative insights suggests that gaming platforms function as digital extensions of broader societal prejudices rather than neutral arenas for competition and interaction. Furthermore, the classification of hate speech observed in MLBB reveals varying levels of intensity, with negative characterization being the most frequent form, followed by demonization and dehumanization, adverse actions, incitement to violence, and death summoning. The presence of such extreme manifestations of hate speech indicates that in-game hostility transcends interpersonal conflicts, reflecting more profound structural discrimination.

Both digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews highlight ethnic hate speech as a predominant form of discrimination in MLBB, with Kurds, Arabs, Iranians, and Syrians emerging as primary targets. The in-game discourse documented during ethnographic analysis aligns with interview findings, wherein Kurdish players reported being labeled as “terrorists” or “traitors,” echoing broader nationalist narratives that link Kurdish identity with political conflict. Similarly, Arab and Iranian players frequently encounter exclusionary remarks that stereotype them as incompetent or detrimental to team performance, reinforcing xenophobic biases identified in prior studies (Sengün et al., 2019; Ortiz, 2019; da Silva et al., 2020; Costa et al., 2020; TaeHyuk Keum and Hearus, 2022; Costa et al., 2023; Costa et al., 2024a; AlAfnan, 2025). The category of negative actions further substantiates this trend, as evidenced by expressions such as “We always lose because of those Kurds” and “What can you expect from a team with Arabs?” These statements illustrate how specific ethnic groups are scapegoated for in-game failures. Additionally, demonization and

dehumanization equating ethnic minorities to animals or subhuman entities further entrench nationalist and exclusionary discourses, as seen in phrases like “dog Turks” or “Iranian dogs.”

This pattern is corroborated by findings presented in Table 8, which documents hate speech directed at avatars representing Kurdish and Arab identities in MLBB matches. In the Legend League, 22.2% of games featuring Arab avatars contained hate speech, with expressions such as “Fucking Arab” and “I am going to make my name Arapsavar” exemplifying targeted hostility. Similarly, in the Mythic League, Kurdish avatars were subjected to discriminatory remarks in 22.2% of games, reinforcing the perception that ethnic identity is inherently disadvantageous. Statements like “Kurd, what do you expect?” and “There are Kurds in the team” suggest that players’ ethnic backgrounds are directly associated with negative assumptions about their in-game performance. These findings underscore that ethnic hate speech in MLBB is not incidental but a profoundly entrenched form of discrimination that permeates player interactions and character representation.

The systematic marginalization of female players in MLBB is strongly supported by both digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews. Ethnographic data reveal that gendered hate speech manifests in two primary forms: hostile sexism, which actively undermines female players through derogatory remarks, and benevolent sexism, which confines them to passive roles. This pattern is corroborated by interview participants, with female gamers frequently reporting being told that “war games are for men” or that their participation is unwelcome. These findings align with existing literature on gender-based discrimination in gaming culture, which highlights the exclusion and skepticism women face regarding their gaming abilities (Brehm, 2013; Kuznekoff and Rose, 2013; Fox and Tang, 2016; Richard and Gray, 2018; Hayday and Collison, 2020; Naido et al., 2019; Silva et al., 2021; Kordyaka, 2022; Krobová and Švelch, 2023; Bihari and Pattanaik, 2023; Esteban-Ramiro et al., 2025; Römer-Pieretti et al., 2025). Negative characterization plays a significant role in gender-based hate speech, with insults targeting female players often reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies.

Additionally, Table 8 findings indicate that in the Epic League, 19.4% of games featuring female avatars contained hate speech, illustrating the significant discrimination female gamers face in gaming environments. Common expressions such as “Those girls should not play the game! I hate girls who play Angela” and “She is a fucking girl! This will happen if we let the girl get a mid-show” suggest that the perceived in-game performance of female players is closely tied to sexist stereotypes rather than individual skill. This further supports the semi-structured interview findings, where participants frequently reported experiences of being undermined and excluded based on gender. These findings highlight that female gamers are not only subjected to direct verbal hostility but also to structural exclusionary attitudes that delegitimize their presence in gaming spaces.

The exclusionary treatment of LGBTQ+ players in MLBB is evident across both ethnographic data and semi-structured interviews, with both sources highlighting the frequent use of homophobic and transphobic slurs. Digital observations reveal that players who exhibit non-normative speech patterns, such as a high-pitched voice or polite speech, are often immediately labeled with homophobic insults. This trend is echoed in interview responses, where participants reported similar experiences of being verbally harassed for not conforming to traditional masculine norms. The reinforcement of heteronormativity and cisnormativity in gaming aligns with previous studies documenting systemic digital discrimination against LGBTQ+ players (Gillin and Signorella, 2024; Brenner Levoy, 2023; Ruberg, 2020; Passmore and Mandryk). Furthermore, both digital and interview data show that LGBTQ+ players are often denied legitimacy in gaming spaces, as their identities become a focal point of exclusion rather than an accepted aspect of player diversity. The presence of incitement to violence and death further highlights the severity of LGBTQ+ discrimination, as some recorded cases involve direct threats of harm against LGBTQ+ individuals.

Hate speech targeting players with disabilities is observed both in digital ethnography and interview findings, though it occurs less frequently than other forms of discrimination. Ethnographic data highlight the frequent use of derogatory terms such as “autistic” or “handicapped” as insults, particularly when players underperform.

This trend is validated by interview participants, who report being subjected to verbal abuse due to differences in voice or gameplay performance. These findings align with research on ableism in digital spaces, which demonstrates that disabled players are often excluded through both verbal discrimination and structural barriers to participation (Ellcessor, 2016; Goggin and Newell, 2003; Crooks and Magnet, 2018; Escobar-Lamanna, 2024; Fontaine, 2024). However, death summoning, while rare, presents the most extreme form of ableist hate speech, as some recorded cases explicitly call for the extermination of disabled individuals.

While political and religious hate speech is less prevalent in MLBB, both digital ethnography and interview data confirm its presence, particularly during election cycles or periods of political unrest. Digital observations reveal that players use political affiliations to justify exclusionary discourse, often equating specific political identities with criminality or extremism. This is corroborated by interview findings, where participants report a notable increase in political hate speech following elections. Similarly, religious hate speech, whether targeting religious groups or atheists, reinforces ideological polarization within gaming spaces (Soto de la Cruz et al., 2025; Newhouse and Kowert, 2024; Svegaard et al., 2023; Koehler et al., 2023; Moreno-López and Argüello-Gutiérrez, 2025; Evolvi, 2018; Zempi and Awan, 2016).

Both ethnographic and interview data reveal that younger players are commonly dismissed or ridiculed based on age. However, this form of hate speech is less prominent than gender or ethnic discrimination. Digital observations confirm the frequent use of terms such as “brat” or “go to sleep,” trivializing the presence of younger players. Interview participants similarly report that child gamers are often belittled, mainly when they perform poorly in matches. These findings are consistent with existing research on age discrimination in digital spaces, where younger and older players face marginalization (Vale Costa et al., 2019; Wu and Guo, 2020). The correlation between digital and interview data suggests that age-based hate speech is present but secondary to more dominant forms of exclusion in MLBB.

3.6.2. Unveiling the Hidden Structures of Power and Exclusion in MLBB

The examination of hate speech within Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) reveals that various forms of capital such as economic, cultural, social, and symbolic combined with real-world influences and the online disinhibition effect shape the dynamics of discrimination and hate speech in the game. These findings resonate with prior studies on the intersection of online gaming, social stratification, and digital toxicity, illustrating that virtual environments often mirror broader societal inequalities rather than serving as neutral spaces for competition and entertainment (Schulzke, 2014; Richard and Gray, 2018; Apperley and Grey, 2020).

Economic capital plays a pivotal role in structuring player interactions and reinforcing social hierarchies within MLBB, highlighting the connection between financial investment and perceived competence. The correlation between in-game purchases and player status aligns with earlier research suggesting that economic capital in gaming translates into prestige and credibility, akin to its role in offline social stratification (Paul, 2018; Desmichel and Rucker, 2024). The performative nature of economic capital in MLBB, as demonstrated by players' investments in premium skins and gaming accessories, echoes Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective, which posits that individuals craft their self-presentation to project desired identities. However, this study reveals a nuanced dynamic: Players who fail to meet performance expectations despite financial investment often face ridicule and hate speech, indicating that economic capital alone does not ensure social acceptance. This finding adds complexity to prior research, underscoring the limitations of in-game purchases (Korkeila, 2023). Furthermore, economic discrimination is evident in the marginalization of non-paying players, reinforcing Bourdieu's (1984) concept of social distinction, where access to resources dictates inclusion and exclusion.

Cultural capital in MLBB is manifested through in-game knowledge and strategic expertise, which shape players' standing within the gaming community. This study corroborates earlier literature suggesting that digital competence functions as cultural capital, with experienced players attaining higher status while less knowledgeable players are marginalized (Paaben et al., 2016; Korkeila and Hamari, 2020). Consistent with Bourdieu's (1984) framework, cultural capital in MLBB is

accrued through in-game experience, mastery of mechanics, and familiarity with gaming conventions rather than external sources such as esports or online content creators. The findings indicate that players with a profound understanding of game mechanics, hero selection, and tactical decision-making are granted greater in-game credibility. Conversely, those lacking such expertise are often ridiculed and excluded. However, the study also reveals that hate speech directed at low-skill players frequently intersects with ethnic, gender, and age-based discrimination, suggesting that cultural capital does not operate in isolation but is influenced by other social markers. Players who underperform are not merely criticized for their lack of skill; their real-world identities, such as nationality, gender, or perceived cognitive abilities, often become additional targets of hate speech. This supports the notion that gaming spaces reproduce existing social biases rather than neutralizing them, as cultural capital alone does not determine status in MLBB; social and symbolic markers further shape inclusion and exclusion (Jenson and Castell, 2018; Naidoo et al., 2019; Verwiebe and Hagemann, 2024).

Social capital in MLBB functions both as a protective mechanism and a catalyst for hate speech, influencing player interactions through clan affiliations, team dynamics, and social networks. As Bourdieu (1986) emphasizes, social capital arises from relationships and group memberships, affecting one's status and treatment within a community. In MLBB, team-based play fosters accountability and reduces hate speech, whereas solo matches, where players lack social ties, become breeding grounds for hate speech. Digital ethnography data confirms this pattern, revealing that 78.7% of hate speech incidents occur in solo games, compared to only 21.3% in group matches. These findings align with research on deindividuation (Suler, 2004), which suggests that anonymity and the absence of social consequences exacerbate hate speech. However, social capital in MLBB is not solely protective; it also fuels exclusionary practices and group-based hostility (Sachan et al., 2025). While clans and teams provide security and coordination benefits, they reinforce in-group favoritism and justify aggression toward non-members, often escalating conflicts rather than mitigating them (Lee et al., 2013; Li et al., 2022). This dynamic mirrors AlAfnan's (2025) findings on gaming communities as both support networks and sites of

exclusion. Thus, social capital in MLBB operates as a double-edged sword, curbing hate speech within established groups while simultaneously fostering hostility toward outsiders, amplifying the game's competitive and polarized environment.

Symbolic capital shapes in-game status, player perceptions, and exclusionary behaviors within MLBB. Usernames, national flags, and profile photos are immediate visual indicators of identity, often influencing how players are treated. This study aligns with prior research indicating that foreign-language usernames (e.g., English, Japanese, or Korean) are perceived as prestigious, while Kurdish and Arabic names frequently become targets of hate speech (Corneliussen and Rettberg, 2008; van der Nagel, 2017; Chen, 2024). Similarly, national flags function as markers of symbolic power, reinforcing real-world geopolitical hierarchies; Middle Eastern flags, particularly those of Syria and Iran, are often associated with low skill, while Korean and Japanese flags are linked to competitive credibility (Vatansever, 2021). While profile photos serve as another layer of self-presentation, their role in generating hate speech is relatively minimal compared to other symbolic markers, except in cases where they contain LGBTQ+ symbols or anime images associated with female players, both of which were disproportionately subjected to discrimination. These findings support Bourdieu's (1986) concept of symbolic power, demonstrating that specific cultural signifiers enhance status while others invite exclusion and hostility.

Beyond personal identifiers, in-game aesthetics and rank-based status further shape symbolic capital, reinforcing hierarchical structures that influence social inclusion and exclusion. These results align with previous studies on digital economies and performative consumption in gaming, as players who purchase expensive skins are often assumed to be more skilled, reinforcing the connection between economic capital and symbolic prestige (Korkeila, 2023). However, this study reveals a paradox within this system: players who invest heavily in premium content but fail to meet performance expectations face heightened scrutiny and hate speech, a dynamic not thoroughly explored in prior research. Ranks further intensify competition-driven discrimination, with higher leagues exhibiting increased levels of racism, homophobia, and disability-based hate speech. Ethnographic data confirms that as competitive pressure rises, players are more likely to weaponize discriminatory language,

particularly against those perceived as weak or unskilled. This suggests that symbolic capital in MLBB is not merely performative but directly tied to players' expectations of skill and contribution.

Character selection in MLBB further reinforces ingrained social norms and exclusionary discourses, as certain roles become gender-coded and culturally associated with specific identities. Prior research highlights that gaming avatars serve as identity markers, shaping player interactions and in-game treatment (Dietrich, 2013). This study extends this argument by showing that tank and assassin roles are predominantly chosen by male players due to their association with masculinity, while support roles, such as Angela, are linked to femininity and frequently targeted for hate speech. This reflects Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus, where social structures dictate individual choices and reinforce established power dynamics. Additionally, certain heroes become proxies for real-world discrimination, such as Natalia, an invisible assassin, being associated with ethnic stereotyping against Kurdish players. These findings demonstrate that symbolic capital in MLBB extends beyond aesthetics to encompass gameplay roles and character associations, further entrenching discriminatory hierarchies within competitive gaming spaces.

The influence of real-world events on in-game hate speech underscores the intersection of digital and offline socio-political contexts. These findings align with research demonstrating that online gaming communities are extensions of national and global conflicts, where real-world political divisions manifest in digital interactions (Lau, 2010; Kowert et al., 2022; Bilen et al., 2024). The surge in hate speech during elections, sports rivalries, and geopolitical crises reflects previous studies on how political polarization fuels hate speech (Nwazor et al., 2022; Lupu et al., 2023; Bajari et al., 2023). However, this study offers additional insight by showing that hate speech against refugees, particularly Syrians, intensifies in response to anti-refugee rhetoric in mainstream politics, demonstrating a direct link between national discourse and gaming behavior.

The online disinhibition effect further amplifies the prevalence of hate speech in MLBB, facilitated by anonymity, invisibility, dissociative imagination, and rapid response. These findings strongly support Suler's (2004) framework, demonstrating

that the absence of real-world consequences encourages players to engage in hate speech without restraint. The role of anonymity in fostering hate speech aligns with existing research indicating that removing personal accountability increases online hostility (Zhang and Luo, 2019; Leo and Russo, 2023; Mubarak et al., 2024). Similarly, invisibility reduces social feedback and supports previous findings that the lack of nonverbal cues in online spaces diminishes empathy and heightens hate speech (Fox and Tang, 2016; Farrington, 2017; Kilvington, 2021). The study also confirms that dissociative imagination enables players to compartmentalize in-game actions from their real-world identities, reinforcing the perception that digital hostility carries no real consequences (Suler, 2004; Kilvington, 2021). However, this study contributes a new perspective by showing how the rapid-response nature of MLBB intensifies hate speech, as instant communication fosters impulsive, emotionally driven insults. This finding expands on prior research by emphasizing the role of platform design in exacerbating online hate speech (Kilvington, 2021).

3.6.3. Emotional and Psychological Challenges in MLBB

The findings from Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) underscore the profound emotional and psychological repercussions of hate speech on players, manifesting as anxiety, anger, shame, fear of judgment, self-doubt, diminished self-esteem, and desensitization. A significant proportion of participants reported experiencing pre-game anxiety, driven by the anticipation of verbal abuse in the event of poor performance. This aligns with existing research indicating that hate speech serves as a deterrent to participation, particularly among marginalized groups, who are more likely to withdraw from competitive environments due to fear of discrimination (Rodis, 2023). Anger emerged as another prevalent response, often escalating into frustration or retaliatory behavior. This observation is consistent with the frustration-aggression hypothesis, which posits that negative emotional states can trigger aggressive reactions (Costa et al., 2024b). Additionally, shame, particularly stemming from public humiliation, contributed to feelings of incompetence among players. This finding supports studies on stereotype reinforcement in gaming, where negative feedback reinforces existing biases and undermines players' confidence (Costa et al., 2024a). The fear of judgment observed in MLBB players mirrors research on

stereotype threat, wherein individuals from marginalized groups, such as women and lower-skilled players, feel heightened pressure to avoid mistakes to minimize criticism (Rothgerber and Wolsiefer, 2014). Furthermore, self-doubt and self-esteem issues were prevalent, as players internalized negative feedback, reducing motivation to engage with the game. This dynamic reinforces social hierarchies that position certain groups as less competent, perpetuating cycles of exclusion and discrimination (Fox and Tang, 2016).

A particularly striking finding was the widespread desensitization among players, wherein repeated exposure to hate speech led to its normalization as an inherent aspect of gaming culture rather than a problem requiring intervention. Many participants reported no longer reacting to insults, perceiving them as an unavoidable element of the gaming experience. This reflects a broader pattern of normalization, consistent with studies on the habituation effect in digital spaces, where continuous exposure to hate speech diminishes emotional responses and fosters acceptance of aggressive discourse as a normative behavior (Soral et al., 2018; Ortiz, 2019; Beres et al., 2021; Costa et al., 2023). Research on gaming communities has demonstrated that when hate speech becomes routine, new players are more likely to adopt similar behaviors, perpetuating cycles of verbal hostility (Cowert and Cook, 2022; Ortiz, 2019). Moreover, the absence of robust enforcement mechanisms or effective reporting systems exacerbates this normalization, as players perceive no tangible consequences for engaging in or ignoring hate speech (Bilewicz and Soral, 2020). This desensitization not only reduces the likelihood of intervention against hate speech but also contributes to the perpetuation of a hostile gaming culture where exclusion and discrimination persist unchallenged. Consequently, vulnerable player groups are further marginalized, reinforcing systemic inequities within online gaming environments.

3.6.4. Between Silence and Resistance: Coping Strategies in MLBB

The findings from Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) reveal that players adopt a range of coping strategies to navigate hate speech, including avoidance, passive disengagement, active resistance, and retaliation. These strategies reflect broader patterns observed in digital gaming research, where players must balance emotional self-preservation with their participation in competitive environments (Costa et al., 2023). Avoidance strategies, such as muting chat, remaining silent, or exiting the game, emerged as common responses. This aligns with prior studies suggesting that players often disengage from hostile interactions to preserve their enjoyment of the game (Frommel and Mandryk, 2016). Muting chat or ignoring offensive language serves as a protective mechanism, reducing direct exposure to hate speech and preventing emotional escalation (Ortiz, 2019; Türkay et al., 2020). However, complete disengagement, such as quitting the game, underscores the detrimental impact of hate speech on player retention and participation. This reinforces existing research on how digital hostility discourages long-term engagement in gaming communities.

Digital ethnography findings further support these patterns, revealing that the majority of hate speech incidents in MLBB remain unaddressed (79.4%), with no recorded instances of direct criticism against such behavior. This aligns with Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence Theory, which posits that individuals avoid opposing dominant discourses when they perceive themselves to be in the minority or fear social repercussions (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). In competitive gaming environments, where hostility is normalized, many players may refrain from challenging hate speech, believing their efforts would be ineffective or could provoke further aggression. The data also indicate that as league levels increase, the rate of retaliatory responses decreases while passive silence becomes more prevalent. This suggests that higher-ranked players may prioritize competitive success over social engagement, further entrenching the normalization of hate speech.

In contrast, retaliation and aggressive responses were also observed, with some players responding to hate speech with counter-insults or adopting hostile attitudes. This aligns with toxic reciprocity, where exposure to verbal hostility fuels further

aggression, perpetuating negative player interactions (Kilvington, 2021). Cultivation Theory (Gerbner, 1976) provides a relevant framework for understanding this phenomenon, as it suggests that repeated exposure to aggression in media environments can normalize hostile responses. Ethnographic findings indicate that while the overall rate of retaliation decreases at higher league levels, it remains a significant coping mechanism for some players, particularly those who feel unfairly targeted. This supports prior research indicating that players exposed to frequent in-game hostility may internalize aggression as an expected aspect of digital competition (Beres et al., 2021). Additionally, humor emerged as a coping mechanism, with some players trivializing hate speech or mocking aggressors. Previous research suggests that humor can serve as a detachment strategy, reducing the emotional impact of hostile interactions and reframing verbal aggression as absurd rather than threatening (Fritz et al., 2017; Canestrari, 2021). However, humor also risks normalizing hate speech, as repeated exposure can desensitize players and reinforce its acceptance as an inevitable aspect of gaming culture (Zinigrad, 2024).

Other coping mechanisms, such as identity concealment and reporting or blocklisting, reflect strategic adaptations to the gaming environment. Female players, in particular, frequently concealed their identities to avoid gender-based harassment, consistent with prior findings on the invisibility strategies adopted by marginalized groups in online spaces (Fox and Tang, 2016). Similarly, reporting and blocklisting were standard but often perceived as ineffective due to weak enforcement mechanisms; a critique echoed broader studies on online game content moderation failures (Adinolf and Türkay, 2018). In contrast, counter-speech, though less frequently employed, was used by some participants to challenge hate speech and encourage positive interactions directly. This aligns with research on constructive resistance, where players use ethical arguments, preemptive warnings, or direct confrontation to disrupt hostile behaviors and promote digital civility (Obermaier et al., 2021). However, counter-speech remains a minority strategy, as most players prefer disengagement or passive avoidance over direct confrontation, reinforcing the persistence of hate speech in gaming spaces (Mathew, 2019).

CONCLUSION

More than just a means of entertainment, digital games have become one of the most influential areas of cultural and social interaction today. As Johan Huizinga (1980) points out, “play is one of the cornerstones of culture” and plays a vital role in constructing social values, norms, and identities. Games create dynamic environments where individuals spend time and express their identities, form social bonds, and gain collective experiences. However, as well as providing positive experiences, these interactive structures also pave the way for the spread of discrimination and hate speech. This doctoral research aimed to explore the social structure and dynamics of hate speech and discriminatory language produced in digital game environments and to analyze the experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies developed by players from different demographic groups. By examining how in-game interactions are shaped in the context of social norms, identity construction, and power relations, the study aims to reveal the mechanisms that ensure the sustainability of discrimination and hate speech in digital game ecosystems. To examine the dynamics of online gaming culture and hate speech in Turkey, this study selected Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) games, which require intense interaction and competition, as its population. Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB), with its large player base, mobile accessibility, and competitive structure, was chosen as the sample, providing a favorable environment for observing hate speech. Using a qualitative mixed-methods design based on digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews, this study analyzed the social structure and dynamics of hate speech and discriminatory language through systematic observation of in-game interactions and evaluation of players' experiences through individual narratives; it examined the experiences, perceptions, coping strategies, and emotional and psychological effects of hate speech on players belonging to different demographic groups.

Findings from digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews show that hate speech in the game Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) game, hate speech is most prevalent in text and voice chat channels. These chat environments have become a space where discriminatory practices are reproduced and legitimized, going beyond being just a means of communication. Hate speech targeting players on many axes,

such as ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability status, political and religious identities, and age, combined with the competitive nature of digital game culture, becomes a systematic mechanism of exclusion. In particular, ethnic hate speech targets groups such as Kurds, Arabs, Iranians, and Syrians, marginalizing specific identities in line with nationalist and exclusionary narratives, and is reinforced by blaming these groups for in-game failures. Similarly, while gendered hate speech reinforces male-dominated gaming culture through skepticism about female players' abilities and exclusionary discourses, LGBTQ+ people are constantly marginalized and targeted with homophobic discourses in line with heteronormative and cisnormative expectations. The skill and speed-oriented discourse of digital games identifies disability with in-game failure and reproduces this perception through language and conversational practices. Although less frequent, political and religious hate speech paves the way for in-game discrimination by associating particular identities with extremism or criminality, while age-based hate speech manifests itself in the form of belittling young players and questioning their competence. It is shown that the frequency of hate speech increases as the league rises and that it is not limited to individual insults but has become a language of systematic exclusion, violence, and existential threats.

The results show that hate speech is intertwined with economic, cultural, social, and symbolic forms of capital and determines in-game status dynamics. Economic capital is directly related to in-game prestige and perceived competence. However, players who make financial investments are subject to harsher criticism and hate speech when they fail to perform as expected. The harsher ostracism of players who purchase premium in-game content but fail to meet performance expectations shows that economic capital only makes sense in combination with other forms of capital. Cultural capital is shaped not only by game knowledge but also by players' identities, and the association of factors such as ethnicity, gender, and age with low skill further deepens hate speech. Players are targeted not only for their lack of game skills but also for their social and cultural identities. Social capital can potentially reduce hate speech through in-game communities and clans, but it also fuels discriminatory practices against out-group players while strengthening in-group solidarity.

The results show that symbolic capital is a key determinant of in-game identities and social hierarchies. Usernames, national flags, rank systems, profile photos, and character choices function as elements that shape players' status; specific languages, cultural markers, and in-game preferences lead to the exclusion of specific identities. In particular, female players and LGBTQ+ individuals are disproportionately targeted for their avatar choices and gender norms. The association of in-game roles with gender leads to players who make confident character choices being stigmatized and subjected to hate speech. Similarly, associating specific national identities with low skill levels suggests that digital gaming communities reproduce global geopolitical narratives. In-game hate speech was found to increase in direct correlation with real-world events such as elections, refugee crises, and geopolitical tensions, suggesting that online gaming environments are not only virtual spaces but also digital reflections of social tensions. The online disengagement effect also emerges as a determining factor in the spread of hate speech. Anonymity, invisibility, discrete images, and instant communication mechanisms weaken players' sense of social responsibility, making hate speech more impulsive and uncontrolled. By hiding their identities, players avoid social sanctions, and hate speech is further legitimized within the competitive dynamic. The fast communication structure, based on instant reactions, makes hate speech harsher and more widespread.

Players develop different strategies to cope with hate speech in digital games. Players' coping mechanisms include a range of strategies such as limiting communication, remaining silent, leaving the game, retaliation, using humor, concealing identity, reporting, and counter-discourse. While limiting communication aims to avoid hate speech by muting or shutting down the conversation, remaining silent reflects the tendency to protect the gaming experience by preventing conflict. However, in the context of the Spiral of Silence theory, this can contribute to the proliferation and normalization of hate speech in gaming communities. While the strategy of leaving the game altogether aims to protect one's emotional health and distance oneself from the toxic environment, in the long run, it can lead to the exclusion of players from gaming communities. Some players respond to hate speech with retaliation and aggressive responses, paving the way for the reproduction of hostility

in online environments. While humor stands out as a strategy that reduces the impact of hate speech and allows players to maintain psychological distance, it is thought that continued exposure may lead to desensitization and promote normalization. Identity concealment and anonymity is a common strategy used by female gamers, in particular, to avoid gender-based discrimination, revealing the existence of systematic discrimination in online gaming communities. Reporting and blocking, another method gamers use to combat hate speech, was found insufficient by many gamers, even though it theoretically aims to reduce hate speech. Finally, counter-discourse is an active strategy that aims to reduce hate speech by directly opposing hate speech, issuing ethical warnings, and encouraging constructive dialogue. However, it is less favored by actors and is generally dominated by conflict avoidance. The findings suggest that strategies for dealing with hate speech remain primarily at the individual level and that a collective resistance mechanism to prevent the spread of hate speech in gaming communities has not developed.

The results showed that hate speech has emotional and psychological effects on players, such as anxiety, anger, shame, fear of judgment, self-doubt, and low self-esteem. Players experience pre-game anxiety in anticipation of being subjected to hate speech, mainly if they perform poorly, which increases the likelihood of minority groups withdrawing from competitive environments. Anger was a common reaction, which can escalate into frustration or retaliatory behaviour. Shame and fear of judgment reinforce feelings of inadequacy and reduce motivation to participate in the game, particularly in groups such as women and low-skilled players. At the same time, the internalization of negative feedback exacerbates self-doubt and self-esteem issues. Desensitization leads to the normalization of hate speech as a natural part of gaming culture, which contributes to players' failure to respond to and perpetuate aggressive behavior. Continued exposure to hate speech reduces emotional responses. It encourages acceptance of offensive discourse as normative behavior, reinforcing cycles of hate speech, particularly by increasing the likelihood that new players will engage in similar behavior. The lack of strong enforcement mechanisms and effective reporting systems exacerbates this normalization and leads to the marginalization of vulnerable groups of players.

As digital games have the potential to propagate hate speech both through characters, narratives, and stereotypes in game design and player interactions, young people need to be able to evaluate such messages critically, but being 'literate' in the context of digital game culture is not yet seen as a valuable skill by many parents and educators in Turkey. However, digital literacy in games is not limited to understanding the technical aspects and design elements of games but also includes the ability to recognize and analyze representations, ideological subtexts, and harmful interactions such as hate speech between players (Gee, 2003; Zagal, 2008; Zagal, 2010; WeBel, 2020). Hate speech, which is common among players, especially in online games, can hurt young people's psychological and social development; therefore, digital gaming literacy plays a vital role in enabling young people to identify hate speech arising from both game design and player interactions, to develop a critical attitude towards it and to develop strategies to deal with such behavior. Disseminating these skills in Turkey will only be possible if parents and educators understand that digital games are entertainment tools and communication platforms with cultural, social, and psychological implications. In this way, adverse effects, such as hate speech, arising from the design of digital games and player interactions can be minimized. At the same time, young people's critical thinking, media literacy, and effective communication skills can be strengthened.

To effectively combat hate speech in online multiplayer games such as Mobile Legends: Bang Bang, game developers must also fulfill their responsibilities. Firstly, to minimize the impact of hate speech on the gaming community, developers must communicate directly and transparently with players to clearly explain what behavior is considered hate speech and what sanctions will be imposed for such behavior; to this end, the reporting system needs to be more detailed and allow players to report specific types of hate speech in a more targeted manner. In addition, more dissuasive sanctions, such as temporary account suspensions for players reported for hate speech and anonymized information about them, would increase players' confidence in the system and strengthen their sense of fairness. However, a reward system should be developed rather than a punitive approach to encourage positive behavior. By offering different recognition categories for players who communicate positively, help their

teammates, or show strategic leadership, players can be encouraged to adopt a more constructive game culture. To make this system more functional, players with high recognition scores should be encouraged to participate in special events or receive in-game benefits to promote positive behavior within the community. Finally, to raise awareness of hate speech, the developers must organize awareness campaigns through the official Mobile Legends: Bang Bang social media accounts, in-game announcements, and community events. These campaigns should highlight the damage that hate speech can do to the game experience and instill a sense of responsibility in players to build a healthier community. This holistic strategy will help reduce hate speech in the Mobile Legends: Bang Bang community, allowing the game to provide a more inclusive and fairer environment.

Future academic studies can explore this complex issue more deeply by looking at hate speech in digital games from several angles. First, the relationship between players' motivations for playing games and the likelihood of engaging in hate speech can be explored. In particular, it can be analyzed how different motivations such as competition, achievement, social interaction, or escape lead to hate speech or trigger such behavior. In addition, studies focusing on how character representations in games feed hate speech and players' perceptions of these representations can reveal the reflection of stereotypes and prejudices in the game world. In the context of Turkey, research can be conducted on the hate speech that different minority groups, such as LGBTQ+, Kurd, and Syrians, are exposed to in digital games and how this situation affects their gaming experience. The psychological and social effects of exposure to hate speech, especially for children under the age of 18, can be analyzed from a developmental perspective, and protective strategies can be developed for this age group. Neuroscientific techniques can be used to observe the short- and long-term effects of hate speech in digital games on players and to analyze the impact of this situation on cognitive and emotional processes. Finally, the relationship between digital game literacy and hate speech can be explored through experimental studies to assess the role and effectiveness of literacy skills in reducing hate speech. These studies are anticipated to provide an essential basis for tackling hate speech in the digital gaming ecosystem and creating a more inclusive gaming culture.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Sociodemographic Information Form

Aktif olarak Mobile Legends: Bang Bang oyuncusu musunuz? (Evet/Hayır)

Yanıtınız “evet” ise bu oyunu kaç yıldır oynuyorsunuz? Bu oyunu en az bir yıldır oynuyorsanız ilerideki soruları cevaplayınız.

1. Yaşınız:
2. Cinsiyetiniz:
 - ☐ Kadın
 - ☐ Erkek
 - ☐ Diğer
3. Eğitim Durumunuz:
 - ☐ İlkokul
 - ☐ Ortaokul
 - ☐ Lise
 - ☐ Ön-Lisans Üniversite
 - ☐ Lisans Üniversite
 - ☐ Yüksek Lisans
 - ☐ Doktora
4. Mesleğiniz:
5. Gelir Düzeyiniz:
6. Dini kimliğinizi nasıl tanımlarsınız?
 - ☐ Herhangi bir dine inanmıyorum
 - ☐ Müslüman–Sünni
 - ☐ Müslüman–Alevi
 - ☐ Hristiyan
 - ☐ Musevi
 - ☐ Ezidi
 - ☐ Diğer (lütfen belirtiniz)_____
7. Etnik kimliğinizi nasıl tanımlarsınız?
 - ☐ Türk
 - ☐ Kürt
 - ☐ Ermeni
 - ☐ Rum
 - ☐ Arap
 - ☐ Çerkez

- Laz
- Yahudi
- Süryani
- Diğer (lütfen belirtiniz) _____

8. Aşağıdaki kategorilerden hangisini politik görüşünüz olarak kabul ediyorsunuz? (lütfen sadece en yakın olduğunuz “bir” seçeneği işaretleyin)

- Anarşist
- Liberal
- Milli görüş
- Ülkücü
- Ulusalcı
- Sosyalist
- Sosyal Demokrat
- Milliyetçi
- Muhafazakâr
- Kemalist
- Komünist
- İslamcı
- Kendimi ait hissettiğim bir politik görüş yok
- Diğer(lütfen belirtiniz) _____

Appendix 2: Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. MOBA oyunlarına olan ilginiz nasıl başladı? MOBA oyunlarını oynamanızı motive eden faktörler nelerdir?
2. Haftada kaç gün ve kaç saat MOBA oyunları oynuyorsunuz? MOBA oyunlarını genellikle nerede ve ne zaman oynuyorsunuz?
3. Hangi MOBA oyunlarını oynuyorsunuz?
4. Nefret söylemi kavramını daha önce duydunuz mu? Nefret söylemini nasıl tanımlarsınız?
5. Sizce gündelik hayatta hangi birey veya gruplar daha fazla nefret söylemine maruz kalıyor? Gündelik hayatta nefret söylemine maruz kaldınız mı veya şahit oldunuz mu?
6. Mobile Legends: Bang Bang oyununa dair ne kadar bilginiz var? Oyundaki farklı stratejiler ve taktikler hakkındaki bilginizi ve deneyiminizi nasıl değerlendiriyorsunuz? Bunları geliştirmek için neler yapıyorsunuz? Bu bilgileri nerelerden ulaşıyorsunuz?
7. Oyun bilgisi düşük ve yetersiz olan bireylere karşı oyunda nasıl bir tutum var? Bu sebeplerden ötürü nefret söylemine maruz kaldınız mı veya şahit oldunuz mu?
8. Oyunda para harcıyor musunuz? Oyunda nelere para harcıyorsunuz? Oyun içi satın alımlar mobil oyun deneyiminizi nasıl etkiliyor? Bu tür özelliklere nasıl yaklaşıyorsunuz? Sizin diğer oyuncularından farklılaşmanızı sağlıyor mu?
9. Oyuna özel konsol, kulaklık, oyun sandalyesi vb. harcamalarınız var mı?
10. Oyundaki yüksek veya az harcamalarınızdan dolayı nefret söylemine maruz kaldınız mı veya böyle bir olaya şahit oyun oynarken oldunuz mu?
11. Oyun oynarken solo (tek başına) oynamayı mı tercih ediyorsunuz yoksa bir takım içinde oynamayı mı? Takım oyunlarındaki rolünüzü veya pozisyonunuzu açıklar mısınız?
12. Bireysel veya grup olarak oyun oynadığınızda nefret söyleminin görülme sıklığında değişiklik oluyor mu? Hangisinde daha fazla nefret söylemine maruz kalıyorsunuz veya şahit oluyorsunuz?

13. Oyunda güçlü bir sosyal ağına sahip olduğunuzu düşünüyor musunuz? Oyunda canlı yayın açıyor musunuz? Güçlü bir klan üyesiniz? Bunlar size nasıl bir avantaj sağlıyor?

14. Oyun içindeki sosyal ilişkileriniz veya ittifaklarınızla bağlantılı olarak diğer oyuncular tarafından nefret söylemine maruz kaldınız mı veya bir başkasına nefret söylemi yönelttiniz mi?

15. Oyunda hangi rütbedesiniz? Yüksek veya düşük rütbeyle sahip olmanın oyunda sağladığı avantajlar veya dezavantajlar nedir? Oyundaki rütbeler dolayısıyla oyuncular arasında gerilimler yaşanıyor mu? Sizden daha düşük bir rütbeyle sahip oyuncu gördüğünüzde kullandığınız kelimeler, kalıplar var mı?

16. Mobil oyunlarda kullanılan semboller, kullanıcı adları veya avatarlar, oyuncuların farklı sosyal sınıflara veya kültürlere ait olduklarını nasıl yansıtıyor? Bu semboller veya estetik tercihler hakkında ne düşünüyorsunuz?

17. Oyundaki nefret söyleminin nedenleri hakkında ne düşünüyorsunuz? Hangi faktörler veya oyuncu davranışları bu tür söylemlerin ortaya çıkmasına yol açabilir?

18. Oyunda nefret söylemiyle karşılaştığınızda nasıl tepki veriyorsunuz?

19. Nefret söylemlerinin oyunlarda normalleştirildiğini düşünüyor musunuz? Sizce bunun altında yatan sebepler neler?

20. Oyunlardaki nefret söylemini sizi duygusal ve psikolojik olarak nasıl etkiliyor?

21. Nefret söylemiyle başa çıkma yöntemleri konusunda deneyimlerinizi paylaşabilir misiniz? Kendinizi korumak ve rahatsız edici deneyimleri azaltmak için neler yapıyorsunuz?

22. Ayrımcı dil ve nefret söylemiyle mücadele etmek için oyun geliştiricilerinin ve platform sağlayıcılarının neler yapabileceğini düşünüyorsunuz?

Appendix 3: Ethics Committee Approval

Tarih ve Sayı: 16.05.2024-2564062



T.C.
İSTANBUL ÜNİVERSİTESİ REKTÖRLÜĞÜ
Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu
Başkanlığı



Sayı :E-35980450-663.05-2564062

Konu :Emre MERİÇ

Sayın Emre MERİÇ

İlgi : 04.04.2024 tarih, 2514900 sayılı yazı

Sorumlu araştırmacılığını üstlendiğiniz 2024/139 dosya numaralı "Çok Oyunculu Çevrimiçi Savaş Arenası Oyunlarında Nefret Söylemi ve Ayrımcı Dil: Oyuncu Deneyimleri Üzerine Karma Yöntem Çalışması" başlıklı çalışma, Kurulumuzun 29.04.2024 tarih ve 04 sayılı toplantısında görüşülerek etik yönden uygun bulunmuş olup, karar ekte sunulmuştur.

Bilgilerinize sunarım.

Prof. Dr. Naci Tolga SARUÇ
Başkan

Ek:Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu Kararı

Appendix 4: Decision of the Graduate School of Social Sciences on Writing the Thesis in English



**T.C.
İSTANBUL ÜNİVERSİTESİ
Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Müdürlüğü**



Tarih ve Sayı: 02.06.2022-913717

Sayı :E-44850192-302.14.03-913717
Konu :Tezin İngilizce Yazılması Hakkında

DAĞITIM YERLERİNE

Enstitümüz Yönetim Kurulu'nun 02.06.2022 tarihli ve 19 sayılı toplantısının 86. maddesi aşağıya çıkartılmıştır.

Bilgilerinizi ve gereğini rica ederim.

Madde:86

Gelen Evrak; Tarih/Sayı: 01.06.2022/902111

Talep: Halkla İlişkiler ve Tanıtım Anabilim Dalı'nda 2502200171 numara ile kayıtlı doktora öğrencisi Emre MERİÇ'in;

*28.04.2022 tarihli Yönetim Kurulu'nda tez konusu atandı.

**Bilim Dalı Kurul Kararı ekte sunulmuş olup, tezin İngilizce yazılması talebi.

Karar:

28.04.2022 tarihli Yönetim Kurulu'nda atanan tez konusunun İngilizce olarak yazılmasının kabulüne oybirliği ile karar verildi.

Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Şerif Emre GÖKÇAY
Enstitü Müdür Yardımcısı

DAĞITIM

Gereği:

Sayın Emre MERİÇ

Sayın Doç. Dr. Nilnur TANDAÇGÜNEŞ

KAHRAMAN

Bilgi:

Sayın Prof. Dr. Sevimece KARADOĞAN DORUK

CURRICULUM VITAE

Emre Meriç earned a double degree from Kadir Has University in 2018, graduating from the Faculty of Communication with majors in Public Relations and Information, as well as New Media. He then pursued a master's degree in Corporate Communication and Public Relations Management at Kadir Has University, specializing in communication sciences. Beginning his graduate studies in 2018, he successfully defended his thesis, titled "Food and Nutrition Literacy in Social Media and the Problem of False Information," in 2020.

Continuing his academic journey, Meriç commenced his doctoral studies in Public Relations and Publicity at Istanbul University's Graduate School of Social Sciences in 2020, conducting his research in English. His commitment to scholarship led to the successful completion of his PhD in 2025. His research interests encompass public relations, health communication, game studies and new media.

