


Chapter 6

From Competition to Conflict: Hate Speech in Multiplayer Online Battle Arena Games (MOBAs)

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the prevalence and dynamics of hate speech in one of the multiplayer online battle arena game (MOBA) named as Mobile Legends: Bang Bang using digital ethnography. Data were collected through participant observation across 540 matches and analyzed via content analysis, yielding 267 documented instances of hate speech. Findings reveal that hate speech is pervasive and disproportionately targets women, ethnic minorities (particularly Kurds and Arabs), LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities. Hate speech was most commonly delivered through in-game chat and intensified in higher-ranked, solo matches. Player reactions were largely passive, indicating a culture of normalization. Avatar-based discrimination further demonstrated the role of digital identity in shaping hostility. These results suggest that multiplayer games reflect and reproduce broader societal biases.

INTRODUCTION

Digital games have progressed beyond being simple forms of entertainment and now function as interactive platforms that connect people globally and influence cultural and social interactions. They now rival traditional media such as television and cinema, in some cases, surpass them. With 2.68 billion active players worldwide,

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a number expected to grow to 3.2 billion by 2029 (Clement, 2025), the gaming industry continues to expand rapidly. This growth supports the formation of virtual communities and new channels of social interaction among players. However, this digital expansion also presents certain challenges. One of the most pressing issues is the rising use of hate speech and discriminatory language in online games, which undermines positive communication and harms the player experience. In comparison to social media platforms, in-game communication systems are less regulated, allowing hate speech to spread more easily through anonymous user identities (Costa et al., 2023). This has emerged as a critical issue affecting the long-term health and sustainability of the gaming industry.

In recent years, digital games have received growing academic interest in areas such as consumer behavior, representation, psychological impacts, and player motivations (Williams, 2006; McLean & Griffiths, 2013; Wallenius et al., 2009). Although this literature has contributed to understanding the cultural and social dimensions of games, research on hate speech and discriminatory language in gaming environments is still limited. Existing studies mainly focus on three areas: discriminatory content in the game itself (offline gameplay), hate speech during online matches, and toxic behavior in gaming communities (Costa et al., 2020). However, there is a clear gap in research that directly observes how hate speech occurs during actual gameplay.

The aim of this study was to explore the prevalence and dynamics of hate speech in the context of the online multiplayer online battle arena game *Mobile Legends: Bang Bang*. To this end, digital ethnography was employed as the methodological framework. Data were collected through participant observation and analyzed using content analysis. The phenomenon of hate speech was examined across eight analytical dimensions: types of hate speech, distribution across competitive ranks (Epic, Legend, Mythic), targeted groups, forms of hate speech, prevalence in solo versus group gameplay, intensity of hate speech, player reactions to hate speech, and player responses to identity-based avatars.

The structure of this chapter reflects the progression of the study: the first section introduces the conceptual definition of hate speech; the second presents the relevant literature on hate speech and discriminatory language in digital games; the third outlines the methodology; and the fourth provides the research findings. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the results in relation to the broader sociocultural implications.

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