

**TACKLING TOXICITY: IDENTIFYING AND ADDRESSING TOXIC BEHAVIOR IN
ONLINE VIDEO GAMES**

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**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Arts in Public Relations
Seton Hall University
South Orange, NJ 07079
2020**


SETON HALL UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF COMMUNICATION AND THE ARTS
GRADUATE STUDIES

APPROVAL FOR SUCCESSFUL PRESENTATION

Master's Candidate, Matthew Lapolla, has successfully presented and made the required modifications to the text of the master's project for the Master of Arts degree during this 2020.

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Abstract

Online video games are plagued with toxic behavior, which has a strong potential to cause a reputation crisis for online video game developers. A grounded theory study was conducted to determine what online video game players consider to be toxic. An analysis of online forums for *Overwatch* and *League of Legends* was conducted alongside the observation of player behavior in *Apex: Legends*. Behaviors that were found to be toxic include flaming, poor teamwork, trolling, cyberbullying, and hate speech. The results were used to create a series of recommendations for online video game developers in their attempts to address toxicity. Recommendations included emphasizing transparency with a game's player base, overhauling the in-game report function, and introducing a system for reinforcing positive behaviors.

Keywords: video games, online video games, public relations, reputation management, reputation crises, toxic behavior, online toxicity, online content moderation, grounded theory, textual analysis

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Chapter 1

Statement of the Problem

Contemporary society is centered around the internet. Millions of people around the world are connected to at least one digital device, whether in the workplace or at home. The internet has become a space where people can perform several activities that were once exclusively done outside of the virtual world, like shopping, playing games, and developing personal relationships (Casas, Ruiz-Olivares, & Ortega-Ruiz, 2013). As internet platforms grow in use and popularity, the understanding of their processes and functions becomes more of a necessity. One of the most important of these functions is communication; according to Jadalhaq and Alqodsi (2018), "...the internet represents the most relevant form of electronic communication today, with the ability to radically to transform the media industry, cultural and intellectual debate, and political discourse" (p. 284). Amichai-Hamburger, Kingsbury, and Schneider (2013) state that information and communication technologies are among the most important contexts for socialization of adolescents and young people. Online communication is essential in contemporary society, which means that communication researchers must continue investigating its effects, benefits, and consequences.

Research indicates that there are several benefits for those who participate in online communication. The aspects of anonymity and asynchronicity (the lag in time between sending and receiving messages) allow users several advantages, like the ability to strategically select behaviors or to be flexible in self-presentation (Kamalou, Shaughnessy, & Moscovitch, 2019). This in turn makes it easier for users to discuss a wider range of topics and feel more comfortable in discussing personal or sensitive matters (Peter & Valkenburg, 2006). Those who suffer from shyness or social anxiety have the ability to use the internet to make better

impressions on others in comparison to offline communication because of this anonymity (Kamalou et al., 2019). It is important to note that the specific consequences of online communication are heavily dependent on user behavior. Clark and Green (2018) assert that users "...who believe online interactions can contribute to their social lives are more likely to be willing to engage in relationship-building social processes...and this willingness translates into more positive expectations for online interactions' aftermath (p. 75).

However, there are also several negatives that plague users who participate in online communication. The anonymous nature of online communication can lead to legal issues for corporations because those users have limited risk of being targeted for their statements, criticism, or comments (Jadalhaq & Alqodsi, 2018). This kind of technological abuse occurs when a person becomes socially isolated after reducing face-to-face activities in favor of spending excessive time on digital devices, which impacts the way that they communicate with others (Caplan, 2003). Those who abuse technology can cause psychological and social difficulties in another person's life, whether at school or in the workplace (Beard and Wolf, 2001). Similar issues result from other harmful behaviors that are pervasive on the internet, like sexism and racism. Women in online communities feel compelled to abandon them altogether or make their own communities specifically for women in order to escape overt and covert forms of harassment (Fox & Tang, 2016; Workman, 2012). Online racism also exists in subtle and blatant forms, and several spaces exist for groups to spread content that demeans and marginalizes people of color (Keum & Miller, 2017; Van Blarcum, 2005). All of these behaviors can lead users to lose enjoyment in online communication, have a lower chance of receiving the benefits of online communication, or leave online communities altogether. For these reasons, the research in the field of online communication is important for online content owners.

While the internet grows and the potential benefits and consequences of communication are explored, similar research and results begin to appear in the world of video games. As technology and knowledge of the platform developed, video game developers were able to implement online functions within their games. Typically, these online games are “multiplayer,” meaning that they connect multiple users to the same shared experience. Online video games have exploded in popularity within the last two decades; in the United States alone, there are 55.2 million gamers who play online games on consoles, and this number is expected to increase by 3% in 2020 (WePC, 2019). The online gaming market was valued at \$38.4 billion in 2017, and is expected to grow to \$44.2 billion in 2020 (Capcom, 2018). Online games can have hundreds of millions of online players throughout their lifetime; for example, *PlayerUnknown’s Battlegrounds* has reached 400 million worldwide players since its release in 2017 (McWhertor, 2018). Gaming is no longer a simple leisure activity, but an integral part of life for millions of people all over the world (Kim, Kim, & Oh, 2014).

Research on gaming is not only important because of the medium’s popularity, but because of the potential benefits that players can experience. The Entertainment Software Association (2019) reports that 79% of gamers find that playing games provide mental stimulation, and 78% believe that games offer relaxation and stress-relief. Online games in particular can motivate players to socialize with others, providing gamers with feelings of sociability and belonging with others (McLean & Griffiths, 2018). Studies have shown that online games not only allow players to connect with people outside of their “real lives,” but that playing online games with family and friends will bring those relationships closer and provide more enjoyment (Cole & Griffiths, 2007). There are a variety of factors that motivate gamers to play online games, which Yee (2006) breaks down into individual categories of discovery,

teamwork, role-playing, advancement, and escapism. *Discovery* entails the process of finding things that other players have not discovered; *role-playing* involves creating a persona with a unique background and interacting with the personas of other players; *teamwork* is centered around satisfaction from being a part of a group effort; *advancement* refers to the desire to gain power and progress by accumulating in-game symbols of wealth or status; and *escapism* is defined as using online games to relax or escape from the problems of one's "real life." The multitude of potential benefits that online games provide for gamers, particularly the ideas of escapism and sociability, are similar to the benefits for online communication in general.

At the same time, the potential consequences for those who play online games are also similar to the consequences of online communication. Ehrett (2016) stated that online harassment is an epidemic in many digital communities, including the online gaming world. Harassment in the setting of an online game is often referred to as "toxic behavior," which includes offensive language, verbal abuse, negative attitudes, inappropriate names, spamming, and refusing to communicate (Kwak, Blackburn, & Han, 2015). It can also refer to several in-game behaviors that would not necessarily exist outside of an online community; one example would be "feeding," which entails a player intentionally and repeatedly allowing their controlled character to be "killed" or "eliminated" by an opposing team or player to the detriment of their teammates. Another common "toxic" behavior is going "AFK," or "away from the keyboard," which means that a player will intentionally remain inactive throughout an individual match to give the opposition an advantage and potentially sabotage their own team (Kwak et al., 2015). These behaviors are associated with depressive symptoms, delinquent behavior, and substance abuse, and players who experience these behaviors have a greater motivation to stop playing online games altogether. (De Letter, Van Rooij, & Van Looy, 2017).

Despite the fact that “toxic behavior” is pervasive in online games, two issues arise in reviewing the literature. The first is that there is not a set list of what behaviors qualify as “toxic.” Kwak et al. (2015) highlighted specific behaviors that are considered toxic and that the gaming community as a collective will use the term “toxic,” yet the definition of the term is still open-ended. It is unclear if all negative communication behaviors contribute to a toxic environment, and it has yet to be determined if toxic behaviors are unique to online games or if they are consistent throughout other online communities, like those on social networking sites or internet forums. Another issue is that there is a significant lack of research on moderation for online gaming. As previously mentioned, research into online communities, including online games, is important in order to maintain enjoyment for users and prevent them from leaving the platform(s). Effective moderation can potentially remove the drawbacks that come with playing online games and maximize the potential for gamers to benefit from them. Moderation can protect players from harassment while also allowing developers to control user behavior (Kou & Nardi, 2015). Despite this, there is a lack of research on what policies and strategies could be effective to moderate online games and tackle the toxic attitudes that plague the platform. The research in this paper sought to develop a clear list of behaviors that are considered to be toxic in online video games, and form guidelines for moderation that address these behaviors.

Toxic behavior also has the potential to negatively impact the reputation of an online video game developer. Medeiros (2019) defines reputation as “...an informational mechanism for making decisions about whether to trust or collaborate with others” (p. 161). Reputation is not something that a person or an organization owns, but it is the perceptions that others own and then assign. Effectively managing an organization’s reputation involves earning acceptability and legitimacy from a wide audience (Griffin, 2014). If online gaming developers can build and

maintain good reputations, they can attract better candidates for employment and generate free press that can be as valuable as advertising (Doorley & Garcia, 2010). However, the persistence of toxic behavior in online games has the potential to cause certain developers and their games to become associated with toxicity. An association with negative behaviors could then lead to a reputation crisis in which a developer sees a loss in acceptability and legitimacy from an online video game's player base.

The reputation of online video game developers is at an even higher risk because of the responsibility that they assume in crises that occur surrounding toxicity. Hagan (2011) refers to a report from the Institute of Crisis Management (2008) that says most organizational crises are "smoldering," in which management knows about problems or issues before they gain widespread recognition or media attention. Toxicity in online gaming can be considered a smoldering crisis according to Ehrett (2016), who states that online organizations choose to ignore the problem of online harassment as long as it is not severe enough to cause a noticeable drop in traffic. Knowledge of a crisis before it happens gives organizations more responsibility in dealing with them because they are preventable. According to Schoofs, Claeys, Waele, and Cauberghe (2019), preventable crises are handled by organizations through the use of "rebuild" strategies that allow organizations to take full responsibility for a crisis by offering apologies or compensating victims because the organization is responsible for the underlying cause of a crisis. They also assert that "...the more responsible an organization is considered for a crisis, the more its reputation suffers" (p. 2).

Online video game developers can use public relations to more effectively navigate the reputation crisis that toxicity may cause. Hagan (2011) defines public relations as the study of how public opinion is shaped and influenced by media. She writes that public relations can

improve relationships with constituents and improve the representation of an organization, and effectively handle crises before they happen. Proactively addressing crises is essential in the public relations field according to Leighton and Shelton (2008), who write that public relations practitioners have to protect the reputation of their organization by communicating the right message to the right people at the right time. This is relevant to the examination of toxicity in online video games, as its prevalence could lead to a crisis and damage the reputation of a developer. Public relations practitioners in the video game industry must address these concerns before they spiral out of control for the developer and generate negative publicity. The research in this paper focused on improving in-game moderation systems in order to improve or maintain a game developer's reputation and address the crisis of toxicity before its impact becomes too severe to manage.

In this paper, a grounded theory study was conducted to determine what online video game players consider to be toxic behavior. A textual analysis of posts in online public forums about video games was carried out in order to uncover a broad understanding of what toxicity is while also keeping track of specific behaviors that gamers consider to be toxic. The researcher simultaneously underwent observations of online video game players to obtain concrete examples of toxic behavior that was noted in the forum posts. The findings from the textual analysis and observations were then used to create a series of recommendations for public relations practitioners in developing systems for online video game developers to improve moderation of toxic behaviors. These recommendations were organized into two artifacts that online video game developers and their public relations practitioners can use to guide their efforts to address toxicity. The following questions guided the researcher throughout this project:

RQ1: What communication behaviors are considered “toxic” in online video games?

RQ2: How can online video game developers use public relations to address toxic behavior?

The second chapter features an overview of the literature about toxic behaviors in other online platforms and how they are moderated, showing that the unique qualities of every online platform shape the basis for which behaviors qualify as toxic and how they should be moderated. The third chapter outlines the grounded theory research methodology and the data collection and analysis procedures that the researcher used in this study, explaining why each choice was made in order to properly examine the behaviors that online video game players consider to be toxic. The fourth chapter features an analysis of the data, breaking down and offering specific examples of each individual toxic behavior mentioned by players in the forums. The fifth chapter compares the information found in the data analysis to the information in the literature review, highlighting similarities and differences in toxic behaviors within online video games when compared to toxic behaviors within other online platforms. These similarities and differences were used to guide the creation of a series of recommendations for online game developers to consider when addressing toxicity, which are summarized in two artifacts located in the appendix.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

In order to properly define the behaviors that are considered to be toxic in online games, the specific communication behaviors that lead to a toxic online environment must be identified. This literature review begins with the identification of four specific online behaviors that are associated with toxic environments: trolling, cyberbullying, sexism, and racism. Through examining these behaviors, toxicity in online environments is defined as it relates to gaming environments. The final section of the literature review examines how online corporations have begun to address toxicity in digital platforms. The following section begins with an analysis of online trolling, a well-researched and complex toxic behavior.

Trolling

The term “trolling” encompasses a multitude of actions and behaviors in online settings. Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus (2014) define online trolling as “...the practice of behaving in a deceptive, destructive, or disruptive manner in a social setting on the internet with no apparent instrumental purpose” (p. 97). Golf-Papez and Veer (2017) describe the actions of “trolls” as “...deliberate, deceptive, and mischievous attempts that are engineered to elicit a reaction from the target(s), are performed for the benefit of the troll(s) and their followers and may have negative consequences for people and firms involved.” (p. 1339). Simply put, trolling is the use of deceptive and disruptive actions in an online setting to provoke a negative emotional response from the target, such as anger and frustration.

Trolling as a communication behavior is unique for several reasons, the most apparent being the requirement of deception. Trolling requires the offender to intentionally deceive their

target in order to elicit a reaction and disrupt any ongoing communication (Craker and March, 2016). The disruption that results from deception is another factor that makes trolling a unique communication behavior. Trolls are identified as “attention-seekers” in that they want their target to pay attention to what they are saying and elicit a response of frustration or anger (Golf-Papez and Veer, 2017).

These deceptive and disruptive actions that trolls subject their victims to vary in purpose. Shachaf and Hara (2010) identified several key themes that motivated the behavior of trolls on Wikipedia, including boredom, attention seeking, revenge, pleasure, and the desire to cause damage to the community. All of these reasons lead to the conclusion that trolling is exploitative; as Golf-Papez and Veer (2017) indicate, trolling “...is designed for the benefit of the troll or their followers (i.e. audience members who find trolling entertaining)” (p. 1340-1341). This behavior is also widely known by internet users, who often use the phrase “don’t feed the trolls” to encourage other users to ignore those who participate in trolling (Golf-Papez & Veer, 2017).

Examples of trolling behavior vary depending on context and platform. Initially, Donath (1999) used trolling to refer to an activity of “baiting” certain kinds of posts. This involved asking “stupid” questions and waiting for “clueless” users to take the bait, which would start a fight between members of a community. Hardaker (2010) emphasized a similar behavior, saying that many trolls enter a conversation in an online setting and ask an abundance of questions to derail the discussion. Trolls also tend to repeat themselves and their actions to further interrupt any attempts at a serious conversation (Shachaf & Hara, 2010). All of these actions lead to the exploitation and disruption of online communities.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is another complicated communication behavior that persists in toxic online environments. Understanding the multitude of actions and behaviors associated with cyberbullying is necessary in order to fully understand the phenomenon and place it among other toxic behaviors. Some researchers prefer a broad description of cyberbullying as bullying via an electronic medium (Weber & Pelfrey, 2014). Others prefer to be more specific when describing the behavior; for example, Juvonen and Gross (2008) define cyberbullying as insulting or threatening someone through the use of the internet or other digital communications. A similar definition is brought up by Smith, Mahadvi, Carvalho, Fisher, Ruseel, and Tippett (2008), where they define cyberbullying as "... an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself" (p. 376). It is important to note that while there is no universal or agreed upon definition, it is still necessary to identify specific behaviors that are associated with cyberbullying (Mc Guckin & Corcoran, 2016).

Barlett, Chamberlin, and Witkower (2019) note important differences in online bullying and traditional face-to-face bullying. They note that the nature of cyberbullying "...necessitates that the bully and the victim do not physically touch, which suggests that cyberbullying is manifested as verbal and or relational aggression" (p. 1). Because of this, cyberbullying ignores the traditional requirement of a bully being "stronger" or "bigger" than their victim. Any individual can "attack" another online, regardless of how popular, strong, or tall either party is (Barlett et al., 2017). While the physical aspect is ignored, the verbal and psychological dimensions of bullying are even more apparent in an online setting (Hanish & Guerra, 2000). The repetitive quality of cyberbullying is further enhanced by the ability for a specific act to be

widely disseminated, copied, and reposted (Menesini & Nocentini, 2009). A larger audience can witness specific instances of cyberbullying due to its online setting (Kowalski, Limber, & Agaston, 2008). These instances can also be archived, making it possible for both victims and bullies to continuously re-read and/or re-experience each transgression (Law, Shapka, Hymel, Olson, & Waterhouse, 2012).

As with traditional bullying, cyberbullying has a distinct characteristic of “aggressiveness” that is especially apparent when compared to other toxic behaviors. This aggression comes in several forms that can vary in motivation. Mc Guckin and Corcoran (2016) highlight four forms of aggression that are found in bullying and, subsequently, cyberbullying: hostile, proactive, direct, and indirect. *Hostile* (or “*reactive*”) aggression is characteristically impulsive and unplanned, motivated by anger with a focus on harming the target as a response to a perceived provocation (Griffin & Gross, 2004). *Proactive aggression* involves more premeditated tactics and has a primary goal of something other than harming a target (Anderson & Bushman, 2002); in the case of bullying, this goal may be domination or intimidation (Mc Guckin & Corcoran, 2016). *Direct* (or “*overt*”) aggression features confrontational behavior towards others, like verbal threats or physical assault (Connor, Melloni, & Harrison, 1998), while *indirect* (or “*relational*”) consists of behaviors that do not contain direct content between an aggressor and a victim, like social rejection, rumor spreading, and public embarrassment (Griffin & Gross, 2004).

It is important to note that while cyberbullying shares several characteristics with trolling, there are a few differences between the two behaviors. Cyberbullying occurs on a more personal level than trolling; cyberbullies often know their victims in real life, and the actions of cyberbullies are direct and specifically targeted toward their victims (Dooley, Pyżalski, & Cross

2010; Steffgen, König, Pfetsch, & Melzer, 2011). The qualities of directness and targeting are not present in trolling behavior, which is characteristically provocative, deceptive, and disruptive. The aspect of aggression is also not vital to trolling like it is to cyberbullying.

Sexism

Sexism can be defined as “...an ideology of the derision of people based upon gender status manifested socio-structurally and through cultural institutional practice as well as beliefs, attitudes, and actions of the individual” (Nic Giolla Easpaig, 2018, p. 120; Swim & Hyers, 2009). This definition allows a flexible and broad understanding of the concept that allows it to be examined in an online setting (Nic Giolla Easpaig, 2018). Sexism online can take several forms; Fox, Cruz, and Lee (2015) highlight two different yet equally dangerous ways that sexism persists. The first is “direct harassment,” which entails directly targeting a person based on their gender. The second is referred to as “ambient sexism,” which entails a subtler and more subliminal form of harassment. Fox et al. (2015) write “...if sexist attitudes and behavior are prevalent in an environment, this atmosphere can have negative effects regardless of whether an individual is directly targeted by sexism or sexual harassment” (p. 436). The attitudes that a community displays about a certain gender can alone reinforce a toxic environment long before a direct act of sexism occurs.

One of the behaviors that can contribute to ambient sexism is the view that most sexist comments are intended to be jokes, which suggests that they are less serious than direct sexual harassment (Ford & Ferguson, 2004). Marwick (2013) discusses the idea that, even if the jokes are not hostile in tone, they can still be dangerous. She writes that sexist humor in online settings “reinforces male entitlement and conventional gender stereotypes while normalizing egregiously sexist behavior” (p. 12). Swim, Hyers, Cohen, and Ferguson (2001) further echo this sentiment

by saying that “everyday sexism” can be as detrimental as other forms of sexism no matter what the offender’s intentions are. Victims of ambient sexism experience similar negative effects to victims of direct harassment (Boxer & Ford, 2010). In addition, men who participate in sexist humor often believe sexism to be normal, which leads the perpetrators to deflect blame away from themselves and further engage in discriminatory behavior online (Ford, Boxer, Armstrong, & Edel, 2008).

While sexism is a well-researched communication behavior, there is a significantly smaller body of research on sexism in an online setting when compared to the behavior in other settings, like face-to-face or workplace communication. Drakett, Rickett, Day, and Milnes (2018) write that as online sexism and harassment are on the rise, scholarly research that addresses these issues has either decreased or relies too heavily on dated literature. Sexism has been identified as an ongoing issue on several online platforms, including blogs, online forums, social networking sites, and video games (Fox et al., 2015). A survey from the Pew Research Center conducted in 2014 indicated that online communities are viewed as more hostile towards women than men, and women report greater emotional distress because of online harassment (Duggan, 2014). This disparity means that women are less likely to remain on online communities compared to their male counterparts (Fox & Tang, 2016).

The combination of women facing more harassment and the normalization of sexist behaviors contribute to the idea that online settings have a quality called “male normativity” (Marwick, 2013). This is the idea that things that are classified as “male-gendered” are more valuable than things that are “female-gendered.” This results in the universalized male body and experience being considered “normal” and female experiences as a variation from the norm.

Marwick (2013) writes that technology, including the internet, is male normative because a disproportionate number of men and women are involved in designing and engineering.

Subsequently, many online communities have different “normative guidelines” for male and female users. Herring (2005) asserts that, in mixed-gendered online communities, women are more likely to be apologetic, justify their actions, and be upset by violations of politeness when communicating. On the other hand, men tend to violate politeness norms, assert their own opinions as facts, and use more assertive language. This leads women to create their own communities in order to properly address their interests online. Herring (2005) believes this suggests “...that the default activities on the Internet address the interests of men” (p. 221). Workman (2012) further supports this idea in her analysis of the Reddit community “TwoXChromosomes” (referred to as “2X”). The community fulfills a specific need for a safe place for women on the internet when other places are not as welcoming. Workman writes that 2X “...provides information and camaraderie that community members feel they cannot find in their offline lives for any variety of reasons” (p. 2). Online communities are inherently male-centric, which means that women are compelled to make their own communities to escape ambient and direct sexism.

Racism

Racism is another complex communication behavior that plagues online communities. This research uses a definition of racism offered by Clark, Anderson, Clark, and Williams (1999): “...beliefs, attitudes, institutional agreements, and acts that tend to denigrate individuals and groups because of phenotypic characteristics or ethnic group affiliations” (p. 805). This definition combines the aspects of racial prejudice (specific individual beliefs) and racial discrimination (institutional agreements and behaviors) into something more broad (Bliuc,

Faulkner, Jakubowicz, & McGarty, 2018). Racism is not just an action of a belief, it is an ideology and the use of power to prevent other groups from obtaining equal opportunities and freedoms (Dovidio, 2001). People of color experience racism at individual, group, and systematic levels, often in explicit and direct ways (Keum & Miller, 2017).

Research indicates that racism online has become commonplace (Daniels, 2013). Bliuc et al. (2018) developed a definition for racism that exists in an online setting, or “cyber-racism.” They assert that “any form of communication via electronic or digital media by groups or individuals which seek to denigrate or discriminate against individuals (by denying their equal rights, freedom, and opportunities) or groups because of their race or ethnicity” (p. 76) can be considered cyber-racism. Not all literature indicates online racism as “cyber-racism,” but the ideas that they discuss run in line with the definition offered by Bliuc et al. (2018). Like with online sexism, there is a noticeable gap in literature for online racism despite its noted prevalence.

Racist messages that appear online have been documented as either subtle or blatant, although Keum and Miller (2017) found that these messages are blatant more often than not. Online racism is pervasive in comparison to its offline counterpart; Bonilla and Rosa (2015) mention that there is an abundance of online racist content that is created daily and is easily available for other users to view and share. The content is also dynamic in nature, appearing in several different forms including text, photo, and video. The internet itself is a potent digital landscape that allows online racism to evolve through the use of multiple platforms and formats (Hughey & Daniels, 2013). This content, like most other online content, has an aspect of permanence due to the platforms it originates and is spread from. Keum & Miller (2017) contend that online racism is inherently more dangerous than offline racism because of this

permanence. They use the example of a racist comment posted on a social media page, saying that “...not bound to a discrete point in time because the actual events continue to exist online and are available for individuals to relive and re-experience” (p. 311).

The internet contains many spaces where racism can flourish. Van Blarcum (2005) mentions that internet platforms are a “safe haven” for those who want to avoid being labelled as “racists” for their views and be free from political correctness. Several white supremacist groups use the internet to promote their ideologies; Daniels (2009) specifically examined how the white supremacist movements in Europe and North America use the internet to expand their reach across national boundaries. At the same time, individuals still facilitate online racism without the pressure of group ideologies. This is indicated by Tynes, Rose, and Markoe (2013), who state that individuals will focus on excluding others on a variety of platforms with no affiliation to a white supremacist group. A reason for both group and individual accounts of online racism is the quality of anonymity that the internet offers. Suler (2004) argues that online anonymity minimizes any influence that social norms have on general face-to-face interactions. There is a psychological and emotional detachment that occurs between two individuals when they communicate online because of the “virtual distance” between them (Lojeski & Reilly, 2008).

Response to Toxicity

While the previous section indicated that online toxic behavior is persistent, there is a considerable lack of research on effective methods of online content moderation. The research that does exist indicates that internet corporations use several different frameworks to moderate toxic content in online communities. When discussing how these corporations address toxicity, it is important to note a few factors. The first is that economic incentives play a large role in guiding corporate policies on online content moderation. Ehrett (2016) asserts that corporate

desire to make profits prevents any chance of a corporation imposing “stringent top-down controls” for online misconduct. Effectively moderating online content is not costless, regardless of whether or not the company uses an automated moderation system or human technicians. Many organizations view it to be more cost-effective to ignore the problem as long as harassment is not severe enough to cause a noticeable drop in traffic (Ehrett, 2016).

Another important factor in creating a framework to moderate online content is the difference in norms based on platform and community. Kiesler, Kraut, Resnick, and Kittur. (2012) mention that “Communities differ on which behaviors are normative and which are not” (p. 125), which means that there can never be one set framework to properly guide behavior in every online setting. They compare the content on Huffington Post to the content on Wikipedia; the Huffington Post will encourage guest bloggers to express their own opinions and personal viewpoints, while Wikipedia expects writers to be neutral and unbiased when writing articles. A final factor is also noted by Ehrett (2016): the difficulty of levying criminal charges against those who violate behavioral norms in online communities. He notes that “Not only would it be challenging to prove the requisite guilty intent to justify criminal sanction, but legal anti-harassment measures would likely clash with established First Amendment law” (p. 275). Because it is impractical for legal action to be taken against toxic players, more creative solutions must be developed to deter the behavior. It is important to keep all of these factors in mind when exploring potential solutions to toxicity because there is no simple fix to the problem; every community has its own norms, expected behaviors, and unique user base that must be considered.

Many online communities have simple rulesets that outline how users should behave on the platform. These rulesets include End User License Agreements (called “EULAs”), codes of

conduct, and laws (Kou & Nardi, 2014). However, researchers have indicated that rules are not always the best method of governing user behavior. For example, Adrian (2011) notes that user agreements and agreed upon codes of conduct in video games are written to protect corporations rather than the interests of players. Foo (2008) echoed a similar sentiment, saying that players do not have any representative rights in online games. Many users will accept terms of service agreements in order to enter an online community without actually reading and understanding the terms that they agree to (Lastowka, 2011). As toxic behaviors continue to plague online communities, some companies have decided to take more action to remedy the problem.

A well-researched framework of online content moderation involves giving power directly to the community members themselves. Taylor (2006) argues that game companies should give players the ability to govern their online communities because they are active and engaged agents within the community. Ehrett (2016) offers a similar solution, referring to community self-policing as an “e-judiciary” system. He writes “...online organizations should strive to promote mass participation in the task of community self-governance. The success or failure of an e-judiciary system rests on individuals’ diligent reporting of material they believe violates community norms” (291). Kiesler et al. (2012) claim that moderation decided by members of the community is perceived as more legitimate, meaning that the moderation is more effective. They mention that that while members of an online community often have mixed feelings about moderators, they feel more positively about them if they have a say in who is selected to fill the roles. These moderators who earn or deserve these positions “...are more likely to be perceived as less biased and more likely to reflect the prevailing standards of the community more than those who are self-appointed or appointed by site owners” (p. 133).

One example of an online community that adopted self-governing procedures is the online game *League of Legends*. Like in many other online games, *League of Legends* features a chat function that allows players to communicate with their team – something important to the strategy and teamwork necessary to play effectively. Ehrett (2016) notes that because of the intensity of the game, it is common for players to express extreme rage and/or frustration and, in many cases, act in a hostile manner towards their teammates or other players. This toxic behavior is something that the game is known for, as Kou and Nardi (2014) state that “The *League of Legends* community is famous for its players’ disruptive behavior” (p. 2). In order to counteract this toxicity, Riot Games (the developer and publisher of *League of Legends*) developed an e-judiciary system known as the “Tribunal.” The Tribunal is defined as “...a crowdsourcing system that empowers players to identify and punish disruptive players” (Kou & Nardi, 2014, p. 2). A developer that helped design the Tribunal stated that one of the key philosophies of the system involves Riot Games and the player community engaging and collaborating to solve problematic player behavior together (Kou & Nardi, 2014). This coincides with what Ehrett (2016) describes as an e-judiciary system, giving power to the players in the same way that Taylor (2006) envisioned.

The way in which the Tribunal worked is outlined by both Ehrett (2016) and Kou and Nardi (2014). When a match in *League of Legends* ends, players immediately have the ability to report disruptive players. If a certain player was reported by more than one player, then the Tribunal would create a “case” for that player. The Tribunal itself was a voluntary program that allows players to judge the actions and behaviors of their fellow players. Each Tribunal consisted of anywhere from 100 to 150 players that are high-levelled and experienced (In *League of Legends*, the maximum account level is 30, and players must be at least level 20 to participate

as a “judge” in a Tribunal). These judges could not see the player’s username or whether or not the player had been punished before, and they could not see the specific sentence that would be imposed on that player; the only thing a judge could see were the specific actions that sent the subject to “trial.” This included a chat log to check for toxic behavior and language as well as the specific behavior that other players reported following the end of a match. The judges chose between two options: to “punish” or to “pardon” the offending player. Judges could also elect to skip a case if they were uncertain about a verdict. If the majority of the judges chose to punish, then the offending player faced a warning or a temporary or permanent account suspension. The Tribunal would then send the punished player a link to a “reform card” that detailed the disruptive behaviors that triggered the punishment.

The Tribunal was implemented from May 2011, and in its first year over 47 million votes were cast judging toxic behavior; seventy-four percent of the players that faced disciplinary actions for toxicity subsequently improved their behavior in-game (Kou & Nardi, 2014). *League of Legends* players stated that the Tribunal allowed them to understand what behavior is acceptable and unacceptable. The participation in and judgement received from Tribunals were often discussed on Riot Games’ official forums, and through these discussions players were able to discuss and determine what behavior is normative (Kou & Nardi, 2014). Riot Games deactivated the Tribunal system in favor of the “Instant Feedback System,” or “IFS,” in 2014. The IFS operates in a similar but much more efficient manner compared to the Tribunal, doling out necessary punishments within 15 minutes of a game’s end. The IFS still relies on player reports to accurately and properly moderate toxic behavior, as Riot Games still wanted to give their players agency in having an impact in the punishment of toxic players (Riot Games, 2018).

While there are policies and systems that exist within online communities to reduce and/or remove toxicity, it is unclear how effective these processes are. As stated in the first chapter, there is no official or widely accepted list of toxic behaviors; as a result, online content moderators do not have set frameworks for how to respond to potential negative behaviors that users will experience. This research is necessary both to understand the types of behaviors that gamers consider to be problematic and to develop a way for online game developers to reduce them.

Chapter 3

Methods

This research had two main objectives: to better understand the forms of negative communication behaviors that exist in online games and to use that information to guide online video game developers in addressing these kinds of behaviors in their games. While research exists on the subjects of online video games, negative online communication, and online content moderation, there is a noticeable lack of research into a connection between the three subjects. This research sought to bridge that gap, and the following research questions guided this endeavor:

RQ1: What communication behaviors are considered “toxic” in online video games?

RQ2: How can online video game developers use public relations to address toxic behavior?

This chapter breaks down the processes that the researcher used in order to answer these questions. The first section gives an overview of the grounded theory research methodology, discussing why it was appropriate for this study and the limitations that are associated with it. The next section goes over the specific procedures that were used to collect data in this study, explaining why they were chosen and how they were implemented. It also outlines how the data was coded and themed into specific categories based on player behavior. The following section is a breakdown of grounded theory and why it was the most appropriate research methodology for this study.

Research Methodology

A grounded theory study was selected as the research methodology for this project. Grounded theory is defined by Charmaz, Thornberg, and Keane (2018) as "...a flexible, systematic, comparative method of constructing theory from data" (p. 411). Grounded theory is based around the of idea analytic induction, in which reoccurring commonalities in the data lead to a description and explanation of a phenomena (Krathwohl, 1998). This allows researchers to develop a theory about the research directly from data analysis. Part of the formation of theoretical findings in a grounded theory study involve the constant comparison of collected data. According to Regmi and Kottler (2010), this comparison forces the researcher to consider different aspects of the phenomenon being investigated, which in turn reveals new insights for a theory grounded in research to be developed.

The grounded theory methodology was appropriate for this study for a variety of reasons. The literature revealed that there is not a universal understanding of what behaviors are considered toxic in online video games, nor is there a definitive strategy for organizations to address toxic behavior in online video games. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), grounded theory is useful when an existing theory is not available to explain or understand a process. They also note that the literature may have models available that are not appropriate for the current study because they were tested on samples and populations other than what the researcher is examining. This was relevant for two aspects of this research project; the existing literature for both negative online communication behaviors and online content moderation are not centered around online video games. Research into online video games can reveal aspects of negative communication and content moderation that either would not apply to or would not be effective in other online communication channels, like social media or online forums. While theories and

ideas about these areas of study certainly apply to moderation in online video games, they were not tested against the populations that were sampled in this study. Charmaz (2004) states that grounded theory research provides an explanation of phenomena that other researchers can form hypotheses from, which is appropriate for this research project's goal of developing a framework for online game developers to use to better understand and address toxic behaviors. A clear and grounded list of toxic behaviors was developed, which was used to form a series of recommendations for how online video game developers can address these behaviors

While appropriate for this research, grounded theory studies are not without flaws. Creswell and Poth (2018) note that a challenge for grounded theory researchers is the need to set aside their own theoretical ideas in order to let a theory emerge from the data itself by following the systematic approach to research. In order to make sure that previous theoretical presumptions did not cloud the research, the data collection and data analysis occurred simultaneously rather than sequentially. This means that any identified themes were developed from initial data collection and were then tested against emergent themes as the study progressed to ensure that they are worthy of inclusion, which is a key strength of grounded theory studies (Charmaz et al., 2018). De Chesnay and Banner (2015) mention that another limitation of grounded theory studies is a tendency for researchers to approach their research from a blank slate. While this does avoid the issues that Creswell and Poth (2018) mention, it does mean that the researcher can miss aspects of the research that could inform theory building and data collection. This limitation was not an issue for this study, however; while research into online gaming moderation may be scarce, there is an abundance of research into negative online behaviors. That research informed this and provided a template for the kind of behaviors that were examined and observed.

Data Collection

Data was collected through two different methods in this study. The first method was a textual analysis of public forums for online games. Textual analysis is defined by Saldaña (2011) as the study of “...texts and images that reflect and metaphorically represent their creators’ ideologies and value systems” (p. 54). This methodology is common in many disciplines, including communication and media studies (Lockyer, 2008). Textual analysis is useful for research that intends to examine how particular cultures make sense of the world around them (McKee, 2003). In this study, textual analysis was used to gain an understanding of how gamers view toxic behaviors, which began the process of defining what toxicity in online gaming is.

Posts from forums for two games, *League of Legends* and *Overwatch*, were reviewed for data collection. *Overwatch*, a “first-person team based shooter,” has had over 40 million unique players since its 2016 release (Blizzard, 2019). In *Overwatch*, two teams of six players compete to carry out a variety of objectives, like escorting a vehicle called a “payload” across a map or capturing an area that is defended by the opposing team. *League of Legends* has had even more commercial success; the “multiplayer online battle arena” (or “MOBA”), has obtained a monthly player count of over 100 million (Volk, 2016). *League of Legends* features two teams of five players competing to destroy the opposition’s “nexus,” a building that is guarded by a variety of defensive structures. Both of these games promote teamwork, communication, and coordination, and both have active forums on their developer-run websites (<https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/Overwatch/> and <https://boards.na.leagueoflegends.com/en/>) and on Reddit (<https://www.reddit.com/r/Overwatch/> and

<https://www.reddit.com/r/leagueoflegends/>) where players discuss a variety of topics related to the games.

Posts on these forums were monitored throughout a four-week period to ensure that a large body of data was reviewed. The researcher searched the term “toxic” throughout this four-week period and collected any post that featured a discussion about toxic behavior. A total of 318 forum posts were collected from January 12, 2020 to February 8, 2020. 175 posts were gathered from the official *Overwatch* forum, and 39 posts were gathered from the *Overwatch* subreddit. 73 posts were collected from the *League of Legends* subreddit, while only 31 posts were collected from the official *League of Legends* forum. Several spreadsheets were made in order to easily keep track of the collected data. Individual spreadsheets for each forum and subreddit were made to keep track of the total number of forum posts collected by source. Another spreadsheet was made for each behavior that was discussed in order to keep track of the total number of times that certain behaviors were mentioned across all four websites. Each spreadsheet contained links to these posts, the date of each post’s creation, an overview of their content, and the toxic behaviors that were mentioned and discussed.

Another data collection method used in this study was the observation of player behavior in online video games. Observation is defined by Dixon, Singleton, and Straits (2016) as the gathering of information from subjects or participants in a natural setting rather than in a contrived setting. Beuving and Vries (2015) mention that observations are not limited to just what is seen, but also entail any information an observer can gather using all of their senses. For this project, participant observation was used to examine the kinds of toxic behaviors that exist in online games. Participant observation is defined by Creswell and Poth (2018) as observations made while the researcher is participating in the activity at the research site. In this study, the

researcher became a participant-observer by playing and engaging with other players in the online game *Apex: Legends*. *Apex: Legends* is a “battle-royale” shooting game that was released in March of 2019. In *Apex: Legends*, several teams of three players compete to survive on an island while scavenging for weapons and equipment. The play area gradually shrinks over time, and the last squad left standing is declared the victor. Since its launch, *Apex: Legends* has had 70 million unique players worldwide (Peres, 2019). The researcher participated in matches within the game and documented any toxic behaviors that occurred.

A total of 80 individual matches of *Apex: Legends* were played over the same four-week period as the textual analysis. 27 of those 80 matches featured at least one form of toxic behavior that was also noted in the analysis of the forum posts. Observations took place on the PlayStation 4 home console due to its accessibility to the researcher, who already had the game installed on the system and had no other platform to play it. The researcher exercised what Dixon et al. (2016) refer to as *covert observation*, which is a form of observation in which the status and identity of the researcher are concealed. As a result, participants in the observation were not aware that they were being observed or reported on in this study. To avoid any ethical dilemmas, the identities of all observed players remained hidden. This process was possible thanks to the anonymous nature of online play; the researcher only had access to the unique usernames of other encountered players, and these usernames were not detailed in the observation notes so that each participant’s privacy was fully protected. The researcher created a spreadsheet in order to keep notes about each observed match. The spreadsheet contained the date in which each individual match was played and a breakdown of any toxic behavior that was examined.

Data Analysis

Data analysis took place simultaneously with data collection, as recommended by Charmaz et al. (2018). Data analysis began by coding the data collected throughout the textual analysis. Coding is defined by Schwandt (2001) as the process of disaggregating data by breaking it down into manageable and named segments. For the textual analysis of forum posts, these segments were categorized by specific, identified negative behaviors. The categories in this study were “Racism,” “Sexism,” “Hate Speech,” “Cyberbullying,” “Flaming,” “Trolling,” and “Poor Teamwork.” Breaking down the posts into these segments allowed information to quickly and easily be retrieved for further analysis, which assisted in the process of discovering patterns and relating concepts as recommended by Babbie (2011). Most of the collected posts featured a discussion of more than one toxic behavior, so an additional spreadsheet was created to keep track of the total number of posts that mentioned each type of behavior. The behaviors coded throughout the initial textual analysis were further examined throughout the observation process. Behaviors that occurred in the observation that were also indicated in the textual analysis were included in the proposed list of behaviors that are considered toxic. The observation of any behaviors that were not also noted in the forum posts prompted further examination of the coded data to check for any potential errors.

Grounded theory studies seek to provide a new theory or model for researching a subject that is not yet thoroughly explored. Rather than adopting a template for moderating other forms of online content, this research developed a new model to better understand and respond to negative communication behaviors that exist in online video games. Through a textual analysis of forum posts and observation of online gamers, a concrete and grounded understanding of

“toxicity” was formed. This paved the way for the creation of a public relations artifact that online video game developers can use to better address toxicity in their games.

Chapter 4

Findings

The data collected in this study was analyzed in order to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What communication behaviors are considered “toxic” in online video games?

RQ2: How can online video game developers use public relations to address toxic behavior?

This chapter breaks down each individual category of toxic behavior that was noted in the data analysis. Each section of this chapter features examples from the forum posts of what each behavior entails, and clarifies whether or not the behavior was experienced in the observation process. Once the behaviors are explained, a further analysis of player opinions on toxicity is conducted. The final two sections discuss greater problems that online game developers face when dealing with high amounts of toxicity. The next section begins with an analysis of flaming, which was the most common behavior noted in the forums.

Flaming

A total of 170 posts collected mentioned flaming, making it by far the most discussed toxic behavior across the forums. Flaming is a term commonly used in the gaming community to refer to insults, especially with the use of profanity. A player on the *Overwatch* forums started a thread asking about what the word “toxic” actually constitutes, and several other players mentioned that commenting about another player with the specific intent to hurt or anger them, or “flaming,” would be toxic. It is important to note that the term “flaming” is broad, and that other categories of toxicity discussed in this chapter also feature behavior that constitutes

flaming. Behavior outlined in the racism, sexism, and cyberbullying categories may feature flaming, but flaming does not necessarily need to contain any of those behaviors.

Many posts that discussed flaming featured players criticizing their teammates for playing poorly or making mistakes. One player in the *Overwatch* forums started a post admitting that they become toxic towards their teammates when they play matches in the competitive game mode. They mention that they will “go on voice chat and just shit on” teammates who are performing poorly, like those who “can’t aim” (cchaos, 2020). Another player in the forums commented that he will be criticized by “toxic” teammates for not consistently “landing headshots” on opposing players (Floofdoof, 2020). In *Overwatch*, players will deal extra damage to their target if they hit the opposing character in the head; criticizing someone for not “landing headshots” is a direct criticism of their ability to aim properly and perform well. This criticism can also lead to accusations of other forms of toxic behavior, like trolling or feeding (both of which will be discussed later in this chapter). One player on the *League of Legends* subreddit recalled a game in which a teammate continually accused them of intentionally trying to lose a match, even though the player was making simple mistakes. This teammate called the player a “troll” over text chat, even though the player mentioned that they were actually trying to win (nickvng12, 2020). This kind of toxicity even caused one player in the *League of Legends* subreddit to hesitate in returning to the game. They wrote that they had not played in over two years and were considering picking the game back up, but they would rather not “be an active detriment to the team and get flamed for it” (Pablo59, 2020).

Another basis for flaming in *Overwatch* and *League of Legends* was character selection. In competitive online games such as these, the term “meta” is used to describe the characters that are considered to be the best, or those that are used at the highest level of play in professional

leagues. Several posts across the forums mentioned that players will face heavy criticism for picking “off-meta” characters, regardless of how they perform. One player in the *League of Legends* subreddit pointed out this behavior as toxic, saying that there are players who “make sure to let you know just how much they loathe you when you do something that isn’t according to what they think is good” (AtreusIsBack, 2020). Another player on the subreddit mentioned that they received criticism immediately upon selecting a certain hero, which led a toxic player to call them “trash” and a “noob” throughout the match even though the player continually ignored their insults (adric03, 2020). In this instance, the toxic player was angered to the point of insulting the other player before the match even began solely because of their character selection.

There is a particular element of aggression that is associated with the incidents of flaming described in the forums. Actively yelling and using vulgar language commonly accompanied the insults that were considered to be flaming. For example, a player in the *Overwatch* forums mentions that “I know what toxicity is, but I’m not the guy who yells and swears every game...not to the point where I can insult people rapidly” (maggot, 2020). Several players reported that they were told to “kill themselves” for their poor play or character selection. One player on the *Overwatch* forums even states that players who “throw tantrums like little kids as well as throwing out very harsh verbal abuse” would completely deter them from playing the game (RoadhogsButt, 2020). A player on the *League of Legends* subreddit writes that a teammate once told them that they hope their mother dies from cancer (schigger98, 2020), while another player recalls playing for the first time and being repeatedly told to blow his head off (Scoobie_Doobie11). Several players of *Overwatch* and *League of Legends* refer to this anger as being “tilted” because of their own poor performance or as a result of losing a game. As one player on the *League of Legends* subreddit states, players that “flame you all game” are “super

toxic” because they’re “tilted about losing” (BubbleBlower__, 2020). The mentality of many toxic players appears to be centered around frustration over in-game performances or results, and they often take out this frustration on their teammates.

Flaming was seen several times in the observation of *Apex: Legends* matches. Eight of the 80 *Apex: Legends* matches contained at least one player that flamed their teammates. In one match, the team that the observer played on was eliminated within the first two minutes of the match. After the final player was eliminated, a player entered the voice chat and yelled “You guys fucking suck” before leaving the match. In another match, a teammate was repeatedly knocked down by enemy teams and needed to be revived. Every time the player was knocked down, the other teammate would groan and yell “not this fucking guy again.” This player repeatedly called the teammate “trash” as well. In several games, a player was criticized for their hero selection and not using specific abilities properly. One character, Lifeline, has the ability to heal her teammates by placing a drone. In three matches, a teammate complained that the Lifeline player was not properly using her heal drone; one player demanded that the Lifeline “never pick this character again.”

Because of its inherent qualities of vulgar language and personal insults, flaming is a behavior that is considered toxic. Flaming features a combination of aggression and vulgarity, often discouraging or distracting players from focusing on the game itself. Because of its repeated mention on the forums, it qualifies as one of the toxic behaviors that video game developers need to address.

Poor Teamwork

A total of 110 posts across the *Overwatch* and *League of Legends* forums discussed different aspects of poor teamwork as toxic behavior. The behaviors that were sorted into this category contained underlying aspects of poor sportsmanship, communication, and coordination that team-oriented online games require. Players who fail to work as a team can damage the experience for others, and several players believe this to be toxic. One player on the *Overwatch* subreddit mentions that the amount of toxic players appears to be on the rise in recent months, while the “genuinely nice or helpful people, or those just trying to play as a team” are being drowned out (Sitiya, 2020). Another player on the *League of Legends* subreddit offers a similar sentiment, saying that toxicity will prevent any effective communication from occurring, and that if he tries to use the chat function, he will only end up arguing with other players rather than developing an actual strategy (MeowingMango, 2020). There appears to be a desire to work together as a team through the available communication channels, but toxic behavior makes this incredibly difficult. This type of toxicity also has the potential to drive some players away from competitive game modes and into more casual ones, as one player on the *Overwatch* subreddit mentions that in the “quick play” game mode, everyone communicates well and is “genuinely super friendly and nice” (Swinight22, 2020).

Lack of coordination can come in many forms in *Overwatch* and *League of Legends*. It is common practice for players to “call out” specific things that the enemy team is doing, like setting up in a certain formation or using certain abilities that can be dangerous for teammates. One player on the *Overwatch* forum finds that “Almost no one listens to simple, valid callouts, so even trying to use callouts is moot” (Mox, 2020). Another player on the forum states that “Its annoying when your team fails to communicate, ignoring important callouts like enemies

attacking from behind and above” (SpiritMystic, 2020). This player asserted that players who do not pay attention to callouts is “the toxic community messing with the game for their own entertainment.” Acting in an uncooperative manner was also considered to be a toxic behavior by many players on the forum. One player on the *League of Legends* subreddit finds that many toxic players are “on their own vibe” and do not care about working with the rest of their teammates (WhatDoIDoDood, 2020). Another player on the *Overwatch* subreddit mentions that new players often opt to play for themselves rather than for their teammates. The player writes that “If you’re all about the win, the stress and the fear of loss will take over and winning will not really compensate you for how bad you feel. AKA – you become toxic” and that “If you don’t mind your team, you will suffer yourself” (b3lial666, 2020).

Several players commented on the propensity for toxic players to shift blame away from themselves in-game. One player on the *Overwatch* forum states that because of the need for cooperation, players can very easily deflect responsibility away from themselves when they lose a match or make a mistake. They write that “*Overwatch* gives you space to blame others and excuse yourselves. Overlooking good plays and looking only for the mistakes makes us toxic” (Smurfette, 2020). Reported incidents of blaming others often feature other forms of toxic behavior as well. A player on the *Overwatch* subreddit believes that players will continue to go off on their own and “immediately blame others” instead of playing with the team (POOBEARHONEYPOT, 2020). In this instance, players are already being uncooperative by not playing around their team, and then they will continue to be a bad teammate by blaming others as the team is losing. Another player on the *Overwatch* forum mentions that players will be “cussed out, shat on in text and voice chat, and at times not even healed out of spite” if his

team does not successfully defend an objective (Stodt, 2020). The player is being blamed for the team losing the match, and will be ignored by his teammates and flamed as a result.

Another toxic behavior associated with poor teamwork that was mentioned on the forums is leaving. “Leaving” in online games refers to a player withdrawing from the game in the middle of the match. This can be a significant detriment to one’s team, as a team that has a lower number of players compared to the opposition will be at a serious disadvantage. Both *Overwatch* and *League of Legends* will punish players for leaving games early, but some toxic players choose to do so anyway. Several posts on the *Overwatch* and *League of Legends* forums listed “leaving” as a toxic behavior akin to flaming. One player on the *Overwatch* forum states that reducing the number of leavers would create “a substantially less toxic environment” in the game (604life, 2020). There is also an element of aggression that is associated with leaving, leading the behavior to often be referred to as “rage-quitting.” For example, one player on the *League of Legends* forums mentions that toxic players at their competitive rank will get angry after their teammates make a small error and eventually leave the match in frustration (Sett a trap, 2020).

Poor teamwork was the toxic behavior encountered the most often in the observation process. 15 matches of *Apex: Legends* contained some aspect of poor teamwork as indicated by the forum posts. In 7 individual matches, one player on the team acted in an uncooperative manner by straying far from the other two players. It is important in *Apex: Legends* to not wander too far from one’s teammates in case an enemy team approaches; the player who abandons their team is liable to either be singled out by an opposing squad or leave their other two teammates without necessary assistance. In several matches, both the researcher and the second teammate attempted to communicate with the player who separated from the group;

however, the third player never responded to any attempt at coordination. The researcher also encountered players leaving in the middle of the game in 12 individual matches. Most of these incidents occurred almost immediately after the player was knocked down; rather than wait to see if a teammate could revive them, the player opted to leave the game and leave their teammates to continue without a third player.

While poor teamwork may include different behaviors based on the game, it is unequivocally a behavior that is prevalent in toxic environments. The combination of poor sportsmanship, a lack of coordination or communication, and a lack of care for one's teammates all actively detract from other players' ability to enjoy a game. Whether a player leaves the game in the middle of the match or refuses to acknowledge their own shortcomings in favor of shifting the blame to their teammates, any aspect of poor teamwork can contribute to toxicity in an online video game.

Cyberbullying

30 posts collected from the forums discussed some form of cyberbullying as toxic behavior. While not every post in this category used the word "cyberbullying" or "bullying," each one discussed actions, attitudes, or behavior that qualifies as cyberbullying based on the literature review. Two central qualities led to this distinction: aggression and targeted or repeated behavior. It is important to note that other examples of toxic behavior discussed in this research may mention or contain these aspects of cyberbullying. However, the posts that were sorted into this category contained discussions that best exemplified these two qualities and explicitly mentioned the behavior as toxic. There were specific posts that mentioned the word "bullying" as a toxic behavior. For example, a player in the *Overwatch* forum mentions that certain qualities of gameplay can lead to players being "bullied" into swapping in-game from one

character to another, which would “elevate the basis for toxicity” (PuffyPony, 2020). Another player on the forums mentions a similar incident where players are “bullied” for playing an “off-meta” character (IdolOfRoses, 2020). In the post in question, the player has seen his teammates get “bullied” for playing characters that are not considered to be the best. The player mentions seeing other players go as far as to encourage other players to report these “off-meta” players simply for their character selection.

One of the most common forms of cyberbullying mentioned on the forums as a toxic behavior actually occurs outside of the game. Several players discussed receiving “hate mail” through either the game’s or the gaming console’s internal messaging systems. These systems allow players to speak with each other outside of in-game voice or text channels. One player in the *League of Legends* subreddit recalls a game in which his computer malfunctioned and he was disconnected from the game, resulting in a loss. He received a message from a teammate after the game, in which the teammate berated him for making team lose and told him to kill himself. That player mentions that while he felt horrible for making his teammates lose and he understood that the game can be stressful, the disconnection was out of his control and there is “no excuse for this amount of toxicity” (UJustGotSlain, 2020). Another player, in a post titled “A Tale of Toxicity on PS4,” recounts a series of matches in which a player repeatedly sent him angry messages through the PlayStation 4’s messaging system. The two players were initially teammates, and the toxic player sent him messages throughout and after their game criticizing his gameplay. After the player blocked and reported them, the toxic player appeared on the enemy team in the following match and continued to send hateful messages (Chance, 2020). Another player on the forum mentions that he was repeatedly harassed by a player who accused him of cheating. The player would block the toxic player in question from sending him

messages, only for the toxic player to log onto alternate accounts and repeatedly message the player and continue to harass him (revale, 2020). All of these instances include specific acts of singling out a player and using external methods to harass or insult them, and each of the posts discussing this behavior used the word “toxic” in describing it.

Players are also targeted for their competitive ranks and their overall playtime, both of which are considered to be toxic behaviors. The “competitive” game modes in both *League of Legends* and *Overwatch* feature a “ladder” in which players can “rise through the ranks” by winning matches. The more a player wins and improves their skills, the better their rank will be. Player ranks are displayed upon entering a match in each competitive mode, and ranks from previous dates are able to be accessed by viewing a specific player’s profile if the player has not made their profile private. A player in the *Overwatch* forum mentions that he has experienced players being made fun of for their rank and play time, mentioning that those at a lower rank or who spent too much time playing the game will be shamed and belittled by toxic players (SwankyPants, 2020). Another player on the *Overwatch* subreddit mentions that he was made fun of for being in the lowest competitive rank often enough to where communication was interrupted. He says that whenever he tried to point something out to his team, they would dismiss his callout and say “you’re in bronze also” – which he called “a toxic comment” (-thac0, 2020).

No instances of cyberbullying occurred in the observation of *Apex: Legends* matches. It is possible that an instance occurred between two other teammates through the PlayStation 4 messaging system, but the observer did not have access to that information. In addition, the observer was not messaged by any of the teammates encountered during the observations.

Player-reported incidents of cyberbullying featured key characteristics of targeted, aggressive communication that focused on a specific quality to humiliate another player. While the term “cyberbullying” may not have been used in each of these examples, the actions and underlying motivation behind these actions clearly constitute cyberbullying, and clearly qualify the behavior as toxic.

Trolling, Throwing, Feeding, and Smurfing

98 posts across the *Overwatch* and *League of Legends* forums and subreddits described trolling as a toxic behavior. This category had a similar quality as the “cyberbullying” category in that not every post explicitly mentioned the word “trolling” or “troll,” but each post in this category described actions or behavior that qualified as trolling based on the literature review. Two toxic behaviors were heavily discussed in both *Overwatch* and *League of Legends* as closely related to trolling: throwing and feeding. “Throwing” describes any action or behavior in which a player is intentionally causing their team to lose. The *League of Legends* community occasionally referred to this behavior as “inting” (based off of the word “intentional”), but both the *League of Legends* and *Overwatch* communities used the word “throwing” as well. Throwing can occur in a variety of ways, one of which is “feeding.” Feeding occurs when a player deliberately allows themselves to be killed or eliminated by the opposing team. It is important to note that throwing and feeding are not equivalent to poor play. While newer players may make mistakes, they are not intentionally trying to hinder their team like “throwers” and “feeders” will.

Throwing and feeding appeared to be understood by players of *Overwatch* and *League of Legends* as behaviors associated with toxicity. A player on the *Overwatch* forum equates flaming with throwing, saying that “in games there are always some toxic players that throw constant

insults, throw games, troll, etc.” (VictorLagina, 2020). Another player on the *League of Legends* subreddit mentions that in most games at least two teammates will start flaming and “inting” as soon as they think that the team is losing (BodyMovementIsTaken, 2020). Several players even mention that flaming can devolve into throwing. For example, a player in the *League of Legends* subreddit recounts a game in which a teammate stated that the other players in the match “deserve to lose” and proceeded to throw the game. The player says that this is “by far the most toxic thing I see people say in this game” and that players who do this are only trying to “tilt” the rest of their team (RigLicker, 2020). The player discussed in this post did not only insult the rest of their teammates, but further acted in a toxic way by attempting to force them to lose.

Throwing can also occur in different forms aside from feeding. A heavily discussed form of throwing was inactivity, in which players would deliberately not move their characters in-game. This is often referred to as going “AFK,” or “away from the keyboard.” It is important to note that being inactive is not always a toxic behavior; there are instances where a player’s system or controller malfunctions or something outside of the game causes them to turn their attention away from the game. The inactivity described by the players on forums, however, specifically refers to intentionally choosing to not move one’s character. This accomplishes a similar goal as feeding, as players who go inactive are sabotaging their own team by removing themselves from the action of the game. For example, a player on the *Overwatch* forum discusses an instance where they played with a “toxic” teammate who “just sat down mid-game,” which made it difficult for their team to win the match because they were effectively down a player (Seraph, 2020). Another instance was noted on the *League of Legends* subreddit, in which one player started “throwing” the game by ignoring their assignment, which caused a second player to go AFK (FortnightlyBorough, 2020). While not directly moving their characters into

the enemy team, these players were still “throwing” the game by actively assisting the opposition.

Multiple posts mentioned that throwing is particularly common among players who are smurfing. “Smurfing” occurs when a player, typically at a high skill level, creates an alternate account to play with players at a lower skill level. To do this, the player who is “smurfing” has to intentionally play poorly to lose games and be placed into a lower skill ranking. Once the players are ranked among players who are not as skilled, they are able to win games with little trouble. Several posts mentioned smurfing as a toxic behavior for a variety of reasons. One reason is that smurfs will intentionally throw games in order to be ranked lowly. A player in the *Overwatch* forums states that players who are “overtly toxic” and “throw matches just to stay at lower ranks” will ultimately damage the average player’s ability to improve their skill in the game (FweenTSP, 2020). Another reason is that smurfs often exhibit other toxic behaviors outside of throwing. For example, a player in the *Overwatch* forums recounts a match with a smurf who consistently flamed the rest of the team for making mistakes. The smurf was angrily telling his teammates how to play their respective characters and told the player who posted the thread to “uninstall this game, you worthless piece of shit” (Miksolo, 2020). The tendency for hostile communication and the requirement of throwing led several players in the forums to criticize smurfing as a toxic behavior.

No instances of trolling or throwing were encountered in the observation process. It is possible that one or more smurfs were encountered while playing *Apex: Legends*, but there were no observed incidents of throwing and no other indication that a smurf was on the same team as the observer.

Trolling in online video games seems to appear most frequently in the form of throwing and smurfing. Whether a player is throwing to obtain a lower skill rank or going “AFK” after getting frustrated by their teammates, the trolling that exists in online video games is inherently disruptive to the experience of other players. The propensity for these behaviors to elicit frustrated and angered responses from teammates, coupled with the fact that these behaviors are often accompanied by another form of toxicity, clearly indicated that trolling in online video games is a toxic behavior.

Racism, Sexism, and Hate Speech

Several players who posted in the forums brought up racism as a behavior that is associated with toxicity. In total, 26 different posts mentioned racism as a behavior associated with toxicity. In a conversation on the *League of Legends* subreddit, a commenter notes that racism, homophobia, and other forms of hate speech are all examples of different kinds of behaviors that are toxic (Mr Sett, 2020). Another discussion on the forum features a player noting that, according to the rules of *League of Legends*, saying racist things will earn an offender a two-week suspension even if they had never been suspended for something else that was “toxic” (2Charmnot2Charm, 2020). This example shows that racism seems to be a clear example of a behavior that is considered toxic by the player base because there is an understanding that using those kinds of slurs will result in a harsher punishment from the developer. In addition, the understanding among players that racism is toxic points to its commonality in the gaming sphere. One player in the *Overwatch* subreddit started a thread asking if it was necessary to enter the in-game voice channel because they are often met with “typical slurs” when they do (any580, 2020). This suggests that racism is encountered often in

online games, which further emphasizes the need for developers to address it and other toxic behaviors.

Several posts across the four forums gave specific examples of racist behavior when discussing toxicity. One player in the *Overwatch* forums mentions that they are from Malaysia and are of Chinese ethnicity. The player states that one teammate said that “only proper English speakers from America should be allowed to play,” and another mimicked their voice with an “exaggerated Chinese accent that is popular in American movies.” The player decided to “just report these toxic racists” and try not to dwell on it (stormy001, 2020). Several posts mentioned the use of racial slurs as toxic behaviors, like the player on the *League of Legends* subreddit who recounts that they were greeted by “racial slurs” during their first session in the game’s competitive mode (Jxcedoe, 2020). A player in the *Overwatch* forum also mentions an incident where they reported another player for “calling black people gorillas and talking about slavery and flaming all game calling people the N word.” After filing a report, the player noticed that this teammate was not punished and found him on the same team acting in a similar matter in multiple other games (NerfBearger, 2020). A few players on the forums also mentioned hearing “the hard R,” which refers to the use of the N-word with a deliberately pronounced final syllable, used towards black players.

Sexism was also noted on the forums as a toxic behavior, although there were substantially less conversations about sexism than racism. Only 13 collected posts mentioned sexism, half of the amount that mentioned racism. Most posts that mentioned sexism also mentioned racism in their discussions on toxic behavior, equating the two as clear examples of toxicity. Most of the discussion about sexism specifically was geared towards discrimination or harassment of women, although one post on the *Overwatch* forum mentions that men have faced

some degree of sexism in the game. The player notes that he has heard men shamed and criticized for playing as female characters rather than male characters in-game (AK1174, 2020). Aside from this post, however, the majority of discussions about sexism dealt with what women experience.

Specific examples that were discussed in these posts conveyed that women are targeted for their gender in online games. One player in the *Overwatch* forum notes that toxic players will criticize women for their gender rather than their gameplay, mentioning that he would rather toxic players criticize others for poor gameplay instead of hearing that a female teammate should “get offline and back in the kitchen” (Gatsby, 2020). Another player on the forum also recalls hearing a male player tell a female player to “go back to the kitchen.” He clarifies, however, that this comment “was the nicest thing he said” to this female player, indicating that more aggressive or harsh sexist comments were made (Jaheira, 2020). Aggression was seen by another player who was a male but used the name “Julia” as his username. He states that he has experienced threats of sexual assault “simply because of my battletag” before players even find out that he is not a woman (Julia, 2020).

Other forms of hate speech were discussed as toxic behaviors as well, though discussion about them was not as common as racism or sexism. Some of the aforementioned posts that mention racism and sexism as clearly toxic behaviors also mention “hate speech,” including homophobia. Several posts mention that toxic players will casually use homophobic slurs or discriminate against someone based on their sexuality. These posts accordingly say that homophobia, like racism, is a behavior that will result in harsher punishments from game developers based on the rules and regulations that individual games already have in place. One player on the *Overwatch* subreddit notes that he was called a homophobic slur and told to kill

himself even though he played well in the match, and was confused why some players are “toxic for no reason” (12saf991h, 2020). Hate speech directed towards those with disabilities was also mentioned on the forums. One player in the *Overwatch* forum finds that toxic players that are ranked highly in the competitive mode will often call their teammates “retarded” (TheMuffin27, 2020). Another player recalls several incidents where he was made fun of for his hearing impairment; when he had trouble listening to his teammates’ directions, he was called “deaf and dumb” for not following them. That player also mentions that he would face this kind of toxicity even if he alerted his teammates of his condition at the start of a match (JetSetRadio, 2020). Although each of these forms of hate speech were not widely discussed, there still seems to be an understanding that this kind of behavior qualifies as toxic.

The researcher did not encounter any instances of direct harassment based on race, gender, sexuality, or disability during the observation process. However, four individual matches of *Apex: Legends* saw the use of derogatory slurs used by teammates. In one match of *Apex: Legends*, the researcher was teamed up with a pair of players who appeared to be friends, as they were discussing the previous match that they had played. They mentioned that their previous third teammate was a “retard” who kept running into enemy teams without alerting their teammates. Another match featured a player who was struggling to eliminate a certain player on the enemy team. This player said several times “This faggot Pathfinder won’t die!” upon continuously failing to eliminate them.

While there were not many posts that described or discussed racism, sexism, or other forms of hate speech, the discussions that did mention those behaviors unequivocally recognized them as toxic. These behaviors were also mentioned as commonplace in online video games, to the point that posters that belong to minority groups appeared to expect this discrimination in

Overwatch and *League of Legends*. Actions that were discussed as toxic included both the use of slurs against a specific minority group and also jokes made at the expense of those groups.

Lack of Effective Systems

Multiple posts about toxic behaviors on the *Overwatch* and *League of Legends* forums also featured discussions about ineffective systems for addressing toxicity that exist within each game. A total of 52 collected posts featured a discussion about systems that are ineffective in addressing toxicity. Many of these posts featured players venting frustrations not only about one or more of the aforementioned toxic behaviors, but also about the fact that Blizzard and Riot Games, the developers of *Overwatch* and *League of Legends* respectively, are not properly controlling these behaviors. There is an understanding that this lack of a proper response to toxicity further compounds the issues that toxic behavior causes, making it even more important for video game developers to make a more focused effort to address it.

Numerous individual policies were criticized in the forum posts. For example, two separate posts on the *Overwatch* forums had players mention teammates with a “high endorsement level” still being racist and toxic. The Endorsement system in *Overwatch* allows players to positively endorse their teammates for good sportsmanship, strong leadership, and/or good teamwork. Receiving endorsements from other players will increase one’s endorsement level, which ranges from 1 to 5. Players at the highest endorsement rank are expected to be positive communicators with good sportsmanship, but these two posts on the *Overwatch* forums both mentioned examples of players that were highly endorsed displaying racist behaviors. The first player asks in the *Overwatch* forum if people “actually think having a high endorsement level means you aren’t toxic” (Jaeger, 2020). They mention that they have been called “the hard R” by more players at endorsement level three or higher than they have been by those at the

lowest endorsement level. The other poster states that they specifically remember meeting players at endorsement level four who used homophobic and racist slurs in game (FruityXNinja, 2020). These encounters stuck out to the player not only because of their toxicity, but because they were at a high endorsement level and the player did not think that they deserved to be ranked where they were. Both of these posts suggest that *Overwatch*'s endorsement system is not effective; at the very least, the system is not entirely accurate in assuring players that their teammates will not be toxic. In addition, experiencing toxicity from a highly endorsed player has the chance to be more impactful because of the expectation of good communication or behavior. Seeing a highly endorsed player could raise expectations and any subsequent toxicity is potentially even more memorable or lasting.

Several other systems within *Overwatch* and *League of Legends* were criticized by players in their respective forums. For example, a thread on the *Overwatch* forum featured a discussion by players about hiding in-game "levels" that indicate total playtime. One player mentions that removing indication of how much time a player has on a game would "eliminate a lot of toxicity and harassment from Upper Tier players, and the high society children that play this game just to bully and be toxic to others" (BrokenNinja, 2020). Other players in the thread agree that, at the very least, players should have the option to hide indicators of total playtime to avoid potential toxicity. Another player on the *League of Legends* forums criticized the reporting system of the game in a post titled "This game promotes nothing but toxic behavior." They write that *League of Legends* has "too many fucking trolls and inters that never get punished because the system to catch them is garbage" (RenSnow, 2020). The player also implored Riot Games to work on improving player experience in order to reduce toxicity. Another player in the *League of Legends* subreddit mentions the abundance of racial and

misogynistic slurs in player usernames, suggesting that the system to detect and delete or punish those with offensive language in their usernames is not working effectively (inamontnytf, 2020).

In many discussions about toxicity on the forums, a common response was the suggestion of “muting” those who were behaving in a toxic way. If someone was flaming or using hate speech, the player witnessing or experiencing the behavior is expected to use the in-game “mute” function to cut off all forms of contact with the toxic player. While muting does silence any verbal or text-based toxicity, it does not completely resolve the issue. In response to a post questioning why players complain about toxicity, one player on the *League of Legends* subreddit comments that players “Can’t mute someone from inting,” or “throwing” (oceansnak, 2020). While toxicity encompasses several communicative behaviors, it also includes behaviors that cannot be avoided just by cutting off all forms of contact. Game-oriented behaviors like throwing, feeding, trolling, and poor teamwork are all toxic, yet they cannot be solved by muting another player. This suggests that alternate forms of addressing those behaviors must be implemented by game developers.

Atmosphere of Toxicity

The lack of effective systems for addressing toxic behavior also seems to contribute to a perceived atmosphere of toxicity in certain online games. Several posts across the forums indicated that an overall atmosphere of toxicity in *Overwatch* and *League of Legends*. A total of 69 posts collected used language to suggest that toxicity occurs far too often to be considered a series of isolated incidents. Many of these posts featured players venting about a multitude of toxic behaviors that are reducing their enjoyment of one of the games. For example, a player in the *Overwatch* forum states that toxicity is at an all-time high because of the abundance of

smurfs, leavers, and bullies (Deuslrae, 2020). Another player on the *League of Legends* subreddit states that toxicity, inactivity, and throwing are “rampant” and “universal,” saying that other players will be unsurprised whenever a game has someone toxic in it because they likely just left another game with another toxic player (NyukaNyuka, 2020). When these behaviors become too common, members of the player base may start to expect to run into toxicity before it actually happens.

Multiple posts on the forums featured players opting to stop playing one of the two games altogether because of repeated encounters with toxic players. For example, a player on the *Overwatch* forum states that “The single biggest thing that has made people quit *Overwatch* is people. Throwers, smurfs, trolls, and toxic players” (Comixfan, 2020). Another player on the *League of Legends* subreddit remarks that the current competitive season of the game is the “worst experience I ever had with this game” due to the frequency of people flaming, going inactive, or leaving matches (Slayosadc, 2020). Complaints about the communities of the games were also common, as seen in a post titled “Competitive Toxicity at all time high (Opinion)” in the *Overwatch* forum. A user named BrokenNinja (2020) remarks that there is “no reason I should be playing” *Overwatch* because of the rampant flaming, smurfing, and trolling that regularly occurs. The frequency of these behaviors not only contributes to a toxic environment, but it contributes to players losing motivation to continue playing the game.

This atmosphere of toxicity has also caused some people to feel forced to opt out of entering in-game communication channels in the first place. Many players remarked that they will not enter the voice chat of *Overwatch* or immediately “mute all” text chat in *League of Legends* to avoid encountering any verbal or written forms of toxicity. One player in the *Overwatch* forums jokingly states that the “mute all” function is “magical,” saying that their

games instantly become “50% less toxic” (aeggin, 2020). Another player in the *Overwatch* subreddit questions whether or not entering voice chat was necessary because they wanted to avoid typical slurs and harassment (any580, 2020). The disruption that certain forms of toxicity can cause is leading players to not even enter communication channels out of fear. Many players will choose that not communicating with the team at all is a better alternative than dealing with toxicity for any amount of time. In games like *Overwatch* and *League of Legends*, where teamwork and coordination can be integral to the experience, this trend is alarming.

Toxicity in online video games can appear in a variety of forms. Each of the behaviors discussed throughout this chapter were not only repeatedly mentioned by different users across four separate online forums, but they were specifically mentioned alongside the term “toxic.” The incidents and examples that *Overwatch* and *League of Legends* players discussed helped the researcher gain a better understanding of what each behavior entails within the context of online gaming. It also illuminated on larger issues of ineffective systems for addressing these behaviors and an overall atmosphere of toxicity that permeates across these two communities. These issues give further insight into what needs to be corrected and implemented in the future when online video game developers attempt to address and moderate toxicity in their games.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The two goals of this research were to understand what behaviors are considered toxic in online video games and to use that understanding to assist online video game developers in their attempts to address toxicity. The following questions guided the research in accomplishing those goals:

RQ1: What communication behaviors are considered “toxic” in online video games?

RQ2: How can online video game developers use public relations to address toxic behavior?

This chapter features three sections that bring together the previous four chapters and answer these two questions. The first section features a comparison of the data collected about toxic behaviors that exist in online video games to the toxic behaviors that were identified in the literature review. A comparison of common behaviors is conducted, pointing out similarities in toxic behaviors in online platforms like blogs and social media sites as well as the differences that these behaviors possess when examined within online video games. The second section uses the collected data and the differences noted to provide recommendations for online video game developers and their public relations teams to better address issues relating to toxicity that exist or could possibly exist within their games. These recommendations seek to proactively address the potential reputation crisis that toxicity could cause. A summarization of the recommendations in the format of two easily accessible and readable artifacts is located in the appendix of this paper. The final section concludes the study, goes over limitations that were present in the study, and gives recommendations for other researchers who are pursuing or considering a study on toxicity in online video games.

Comparison to Behaviors Noted in the Literature

Based on the data collection and analysis, the research in this paper asserts that toxic behavior in online video games has several key differences and similarities to toxicity found in other online platforms. The literature review revealed several different types of toxicity that exist in platforms like online forums and social media websites, including trolling, cyberbullying, racism, and sexism. All of these behaviors were discussed by online gamers on the *Overwatch* and *League of Legends* forums, revealing that the behaviors exist in online games and are considered to be toxic by the community. However, these behaviors have their own unique qualities that make addressing them in online video games different from addressing them in another online platform.

Certain types of trolling in online gaming feature a large departure from one of the behavior's defining qualities as indicated in the literature review. Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhaus (2014) and Golf-Papez and Veer (2017) described trolling as a behavior centered around deceiving a target to elicit an emotional response. However, behaviors like throwing, feeding, and inactivity do not involve any form of deception. These are all intentional acts committed by toxic players, often accompanied by other toxic behaviors like flaming, racism, or sexism. While deception is not a key characteristic of these behaviors, they all entail disruptive actions that intentionally elicit negative reactions from the victim or victims. Players who throw games, whether in frustration at the performance of a teammate or in order to intentionally lower their competitive ranking, disrupt the integrity of the game and potentially the enjoyment of other players. Golf-Papez and Veer (2017) indicated that trolls are attention-seekers, which appears to be the case for those who throw, feed, or have a smurf account in online video games. The fact that these behaviors are often accompanied by some other aspect of toxicity points to

the idea that those who engage in these actions are seeking to gain attention from their teammates.

On the contrary, cyberbullying in online gaming is a behavior that featured several similarities with key characteristics that were identified in the literature review. While online gaming is a vastly different platform than those that previous research on cyberbullying were centered on, the types of motivations and specific tendencies that define cyberbullying were similar. Kowalski, Limber, and Agaston (2008) assert that a larger audience is able to see specific acts of cyberbullying because of its online nature, which certainly can be the case for cyberbullying in online gaming. When players are targeted for their character selection, for example, any act of aggression or targeted comment towards that player is either read or heard by the other members of the team. In the case of text chat, it is possible for these messages to be read by members of the opposing team as well, should the sender decide to type in the “match chat” channel rather than “team chat” channel.

The different forms of aggression and motivation that drive cyberbullying were also seen in the examples noted from online games. The hostile aggression noted by Griffin and Gross (2004) was seen in online gaming in instances where toxic players would message teammates after a game to insult or belittle them. These instances were characteristically impulsive and motivated by anger after a perceived provocation, which in this research was typically noted as performing poorly. Proactive aggression was seen as well, in which cyberbullying has a goal of something other than harm like domination or intimidation (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). In the instances where players were “bullied” into playing as another character, the primary motivation was more centered on controlling who plays which character rather than harming the target.

However, not every aspect of cyberbullying in online gaming was similar to those defined in the literature review. One characteristic that differed when comparing cyberbullying in online gaming to cyberbullying in other online platform's is the permanence of the behavior. Cyberbullying was described by Menesini and Nocentini (2009) as something that could be widely disseminated, copied or reposted. The cyberbullying that occurs in online gaming typically only lasts for a single match or a short time after the match if the cyberbully continually messages a specific victim. The nature of other online platforms, like forums and social media websites, facilitate the spread of particular acts of cyberbullying. In addition, it is difficult to determine whether or not indirect aggression is present in the online gaming setting. Cyberbullying with indirect aggression is associated with social rejection and rumor spreading (Griffin & Gross, 2004); in the analysis of the forum posts, there was no discussion about any social rejection or rumor spreading occurring in-game, which suggests that it is not an issue on the platform. However, further research may need to be conducted in this area before a qualified answer can be determined.

Online racism and sexism also share their own similarities with the behaviors that were found to exist in online video games. Both racism and sexism were found to be among the behaviors that were universally understood to be toxic. This coincides with what Fox et al. (2015) stated saying that sexism is an ongoing issue in several online platforms, and the research in this paper confirms that it is an issue in online gaming. It also confirms Daniels's (2013) assertion that racism in online platforms has become commonplace; the number of posts mentioning individual incidents of racism suggest that it continues to be an issue for people of color who play video games online. Examples of racism and sexism that were noted in the analysis of forum posts mainly featured direct harassment rather than subtle or atmospheric

harassment. In the instances of racism, this confirms Keum and Miller's (2017) suggestion that racist messages in online platforms are blatant more often than not.

There were also examples in the forum posts of ambient sexism as noted by Fox et al. (2015). Those noted instances of toxic players making jokes about female players by telling them to "go back to the kitchen" reinforces several aspects of online sexism that occur on other platforms. As Marwick (2013) asserts, the belief that these kinds of jokes are less harmful than examples of direct harassment only further reinforces male entitlement and normalizes sexist behavior. The previously noted atmosphere of toxicity that occurs in online platforms is similar to the atmosphere of sexism that results from ambient sexism. As toxic behaviors, including sexism, are normalized and expected from the consumers of or participants in an online platform, they will begin to drive people away in a similar way to Fox and Tang's (2016) assertion that online sexism drives women away from online platforms.

Each of the toxic online behaviors that were examined in the literature review appeared in the analysis of forum posts of online video games. While certain qualities and aspects of each behavior may have varied across different platforms, their existence and toxic nature cannot be denied. The analysis also revealed new actions that each behavior entails, laying the foundation for further analysis into toxic online video game behaviors. Now that each behavior and the qualities that make those behaviors unique in online gaming have been identified, the issue of toxicity in online games can begin to be addressed.

Addressing Toxicity through Public Relations

As discussed in the literature review, methods of monitoring and addressing toxicity in other online platforms may not be the most effective way to address the problems in online video

games. For example, if an online content moderation model centered around monitoring toxicity in an online forum were to be applied to one of the online video games examined in this project, there would be no way to address things like throwing, inactivity, leaving, feeding, and smurfing. In addition, the nature of toxic behaviors that exist on other online platforms do not always manifest the same characteristics when they appear in online gaming. As mentioned in the previous section, a behavior like trolling may not necessarily be deceptive when occurring in an online game despite deception being a defining characteristic of trolling in other online content. For these reasons, it is important to look for alternate methods of addressing and minimizing the existence of harmful behaviors within online gaming. This section will detail recommendations for online game developers when creating or reworking systems that address these behaviors.

One of the main goals in addressing toxicity in online video games is to prevent a reputation crisis from occurring for video game developers. The data collected in this study revealed an atmosphere of toxicity that exists within online video games like *Overwatch* and *League of Legends*, in which players expect toxicity to occur before an individual match even begins. This drives some players to avoid toxicity by either choosing to not enter communication channels or by outright quitting the game altogether. This gives certain online games a negative reputation; players are starting to believe that a game's community is toxic or that the game itself induces toxic behaviors from players. As stated by Ehrett (2016), many developers are aware of issues surrounding toxicity but choose to not address the issue until it causing a larger exodus of players. This makes toxicity an example of a "smoldering" crisis as defined by the Institute of Crisis Management (2008) where corporate leaders are aware of issues before a crisis gets out of control. Having a reputation of toxicity can lead a game or a game's

developers to lose acceptability and legitimacy from their player base and potential new players, which is a direct result of poor reputation management as stated by Griffin (2014).

The research in this paper suggests that game developers can use public relations to proactively address this crisis. If the atmosphere of toxicity is causing players to not play a game and, in turn, damages the reputation of that game and its developer, then a reputation crisis could potentially occur. Public relations can be useful in protecting the reputation of the organization by monitoring and addressing the issue before a full-blown crisis occurs (Hagan, 2011). In order to properly address the issues surrounding toxicity, public relations practitioners need to communicate the right messages to the right people at the right time (Leighton & Sheldon, 2008). In the case of toxicity in online video gaming, the messages must include the condemnation of the behaviors discussed throughout this study and the promotion of behaviors that support teamwork and communication. These messages must be communicated to the player base of the game in question, and they must be communicated before the game's reputation becomes too associated with toxicity. The recommendations detailed in this section provide information on how these messages can be communicated in an effective and proactive manner.

The first recommendation is to increase transparency between the developers of an online video game and the player base of that game. While the exact nature of each behavior and what actions specifically qualify as toxic is integral to this study, it is also important to note the source of this information. Using an analysis of forum posts for two of the most popular online video games, the researcher was able to determine what behaviors are toxic by taking feedback directly from each game's player base. The identification of toxic behavior was based not on what is considered toxic in other online platforms, but specifically what online video game players

believe to be toxic. This grants two advantages for video game developers in addressing these behaviors. The first is that the behaviors are specifically targeted and understood to be different from similar behaviors on other online platforms. Using the information from this research to build a system in addressing toxicity indicates that online game developers are looking to specifically address the issues in their platforms and that they understand that the behaviors (and, therefore, the means in which they must address these behaviors) are inherently unique. The second is that it indicates a level of understanding between the developers and the player base. Using their feedback indicates that they are directly listening to player opinions about not just what is and is not toxic, but larger issues like inefficient existing systems and an atmosphere of toxicity that permeates throughout the community.

Being transparent with the player base involves embracing their ideas about what specific behaviors are toxic and implementing their feedback and criticism about how these behaviors are being addressed. One step to show that developers are taking player opinions and considerations seriously is to implement their feedback directly into in-game systems. This includes the “report” feature that nearly every online game contains, through which players are allowed to report a toxic player for specific behaviors to the game developers in order for some form of punishment to be delivered. Maintaining transparency through the report function involves allowing players to be as specific as possible in describing what behavior counted as toxic. The report feature in *Overwatch*, for example, allows players to manually write in the exact behaviors and actions that another player participated in to warrant the report. In addition to having this feature, game developers should have an exhaustive list of toxic behaviors as indicated by their own player base. If the community of a specific game is voicing their frustrations and concerns about a certain behavior, the in-game report function should easily allow players to report others

who commit that behavior without needing to manually type out the events that transpired in a particular incident.

This increased transparency should also continue throughout the punishment stage. Players should be aware of the potential penalties that they face if they participate in toxic behavior; whether the developer decides to temporarily ban the player from participating in the game or outright suspend their user license to play the game, there needs to be an understanding of what exactly will happen if they engage in toxicity. This involves the developers directly communicating to the players the length of punishments and the number of offenses that can occur before more severe punishments are given. An improved punishment system should also give the reporting player feedback if a toxic player that they reported actually receives a punishment. Even if game developers would prefer to keep both the identity of the toxic player and the exact punishment that they received private, it is still beneficial to be transparent with the player who initially filed the report. Receiving notice from the developer that a toxic player was disciplined for their actions shows not only that the developer is listening, but that they are actively working to address the atmosphere of toxicity that may exist in an online game.

The second recommendation is the implementation of more effective systems outside of the reporting function to encourage good behavior among the player base. Some online games have other systems that exist in order to limit or address toxic behavior. An example of one of these systems is *Overwatch*'s endorsement system, which was mentioned in chapter four as a way for players to endorse teammates who behave or act properly in the communication channels during a match. Endorsements in *Overwatch* are broken down into three categories: "shot caller" for those who assume a role as a leader; "good teammate" for those who have helpful and effective communication, like warning others about an incoming attack or the

location of an enemy team member; and “sportsmanship” for those who act in a positive and respectful manner towards teammates and opposing players alike. *Overwatch* players also have an “endorsement level” from one to five that will rise as they give and receive more endorsements. While this may be a good idea in theory, the analysis of *Overwatch* forums revealed that the system is not completely effective and a high endorsement level does not always accurately indicate whether or not a player is actually a good teammate.

To improve anti-toxicity mechanics like *Overwatch*’s endorsement system, a higher degree of rigor must be implemented. In the case of the endorsement system, more positive behaviors should be included to positively reinforce players who do not act in a toxic way. Rather than keeping the categories that exist broad, players should be allowed to select specific aspects of the categories that a player exemplified. Endorsing a player in the “shot caller” category, for example, entails a very broad range of potential behaviors and actions. Rather than simply endorsing a player as a good leader, game developers should allow players to select a more targeted aspect of leadership, like strategy development, decision-making, encouragement, or accountability for mistakes. Other categories of good behavior can be implemented for recognition, which makes every endorsement received translate into an encouragement of a specific behavior rather than a broad title. This system allows developers to set a specific standard for how players should act and interact with others when playing a certain game.

An improved endorsement system can be further fleshed out through a more dynamic levelling system and better in-game rewards for players who participate in the system. Some complaints from players in the *Overwatch* forum noted that players with high endorsement levels still acted in a toxic manner. One way to avoid this would be to expand the level range; judging whether or not a player is toxic may be easier to do if the range changed from one through five to

one through ten, for example. The high end of the endorsement range would be difficult to achieve in this system, requiring several endorsements from teammates. However, making the top level difficult to achieve can be beneficial, as it can encourage players to communicate and act in as healthy a way as possible in order to reach the top. In addition, increasing the level range and the difficulty to achieve the highest rank would reduce the amount of confusion that could come from previously highly endorsed players being toxic. To further incentivize players to act in a non-toxic manner, developers should implement more in-game rewards for taking part in systems that combat toxicity. Many online games feature cosmetic items that have no impact on gameplay yet remain highly popular among gaming communities. Giving players who use mechanics like the endorsement system access to more cosmetic items, or even unique cosmetic items, would further encourage the player base to behave in a non-toxic manner. Making these rewards frequently obtainable through participation and increasing the number of rewards for higher-endorsed players could further incentivize use of anti-toxicity mechanics.

These recommendations are summarized in two separate artifacts located in the appendix of this paper. The first artifact is a one-page break down of the key results of this study. Basic information about the kinds of behaviors that are considered toxic in online video games, the importance of addressing these behaviors, what online video game developers and their public relations staff should focus on when addressing these behaviors, and goals in improving or introducing reporting and reinforcement systems are all included in this artifact. The second artifact is separated into three pages, but gives a more detailed breakdown of this information. The first page goes over each toxic behavior and gives specific information about what the behaviors entail in the setting of an online video game. The second page features a succinct graphic that answers the questions of “why” and “how” should online video game developers

address toxicity. The third page contains a more in-depth breakdown of improving in-game reporting functions and reinforcement systems in order to proactively address toxic behaviors. Two separate artifacts were created with the goal of offering different summarizations for different types of readers; those looking for a one-page breakdown of this study's findings should look to the first artifact, while the second artifact is more suitable for those who want a more in-depth breakdown that is still easily conveyed through a series of graphics.

Conclusion, Limitations, and Recommendations for Future Studies

This study had two main objectives: to determine what behaviors are considered to be toxic by players of online video games and to use knowledge of those behaviors to inform game developers about more effective procedures and systems to address them. Through an analysis of forum posts for two of the most popular online video games, *League of Legends* and *Overwatch*, coupled with observations of player behavior in *Apex: Legends*, the researcher was able to discover a variety of different behaviors that are considered toxic. Many of these behaviors were already noted as being toxic in research about negative communication behaviors on other online platforms; however, most of the behaviors previously noted were found to exist in somewhat different ways in the setting of online video games. As a result, the moderation tactics that developers must implement should focus on addressing the unique qualities that toxic online video game behaviors possess. Increasing transparency between developers and the player base while also implementing reward systems for good behavior are recommended based on the complaints that players in the forums voiced about an overall atmosphere of toxicity and currently ineffective methods of addressing toxicity that exist in many online video games.

There was a plethora of limitations in this study. Perhaps the most apparent is that one of the data collection methods did not prove to be as fruitful as intended. Observing player

behavior in *Apex: Legends* was intended to better triangulate the collected data on toxic behavior by allowing the researcher to place themselves within an online gaming environment and confirm the existence of the behaviors that were noted in the forums. However, in a study of this manner, more time was needed to collect a larger sample of individual observations. Many of the games played by the researcher did not even feature any other players entering into the voice communication channel, so any chance of encountering verbal toxicity like flaming, racism, and sexism were severely limited. In addition, while *Apex: Legends* is very team-oriented with a focus on coordination, there are only three players on a team at a time in a match; compared to *Overwatch*'s six-player teams and *League of Legend*'s five player teams, this is a significantly smaller sample size per game played. The researcher would only be able to communicate with two players at a time; had another game with more teammates been observed, it is possible that more observation of toxicity could have occurred. The researcher also planned on recording individual matches in order to more accurately report on specific toxic behaviors. Unfortunately, technical limitations prevented recordings from occurring, as the PlayStation 4 system that was used in the observation process is nearly seven years old and would often freeze upon attempting to capture the previous 30 minutes of gameplay. The researcher still took detailed observation notes to ensure that the behaviors were properly recorded, but having video evidence would have been ideal.

Timing was another major limitation in this study. As the researcher was a graduate student, only so much time was able to be dedicated to this project. As a result, the period in which the observation and textual analysis were conducted was limited to one month. In different circumstances, a more rigorous and exhaustive data collection process would have been possible, and likely would better illuminate on the types of toxic behaviors that exist in online

video games. More time would also allow for more games to be researched, and the data collected would be more dynamic in considering different genres or styles of gameplay and how different player bases view different toxic behaviors.

Future studies have a variety of potential avenues to further research this topic. The researcher was initially planning on performing interviews instead of observations. This remains an interesting potential methodology for collecting data, as interviewing gamers would yield more nuanced and in-depth opinions about what toxicity entails. Gamers would also be able to give their opinions on toxic atmospheres and effectiveness of anti-toxicity systems currently in place, which would further inform any reformation of existing systems or development of new ones.

Appendix A

Summary of Findings and Recommendations

Behaviors that are considered "toxic"

- **Flaming:** aggressively insulting other players, for benign actions like making mistakes and choosing certain characters
- **Poor teamwork:** Poor sportsmanship, ineffective communication, and a lack of effort to coordinate. Also entails outright leaving a match
- **Cyberbullying:** Targetting another player and continually harassing them. Often occurs outside of the match through exterior communication channels, like a console's messaging system
- **Trolling:** Disruptive actions meant to anger and frustrate other players. Includes behaviors like intentionally losing matches (throwing), allowing one's character to be easily eliminated by an enemy team (feeding), and making an alternate account to play with others at a lower skill level
- **Hate Speech:** Targetting and harassing someone based on race, gender, sexual orientation, or a disability

Objectives for Game Developers in Addressing Toxicity

- Prevent the reputation that a game and/or a game developer has from becoming too associated with toxic behaviors
- Reduce the existence of a toxic atmosphere in which players expect toxicity to occur when they play
- Proactively address a reputation crisis before it spirals out of control

Ways to Address Toxicity

- Increase the level of transparency between developers and players
- Overhaul reporting systems to more accurately punish behaviors that the player base considers toxic
- Introduce a system to reinforce good behavior and set standards for how players should interact with each other in-game

Reporting Bad Behavior

- Describe in detail each behavior that is reportable and punishable
- Base the reportable and punishable behaviors on what the player base considers to be toxic
- Allow players to be specific in describing the behavior or action that they are reporting
- Directly communicate the length and form of punishments that can be given if a player acts in a toxic manner
- Give feedback to the player that files a report if any action is taken against a reported player

Reinforcing Good Behavior

- Introduce a comprehensive and exhaustive system for players to positively reinforce those who do not act in a toxic way
- Allow players to commend others for a wide variety of targeted and specific aspects of behaviors like leadership, teamwork, and good communication
- Give incentive to participate in the reinforcement system through a dynamic levelling system and in-game rewards like cosmetics
- Reward players who receive and give reinforcements often, allowing for more rewards for those who participate in the system frequently

Appendix B

In-Depth Breakdown of Findings and Recommendations

What behaviors are considered "toxic" in online video games?

Flaming

- Aggressively insulting other players, usually with profanity
- Criticizing players for certain in-game actions, like making mistakes or selecting a certain character

Poor Teamwork

- Poor sportsmanship, communication, and coordination
 - Leaving during the middle of a match and abandoning the rest of the team
 - Acting selfishly instead of cooperating
 - Blaming teammates when things go wrong

Cyberbullying

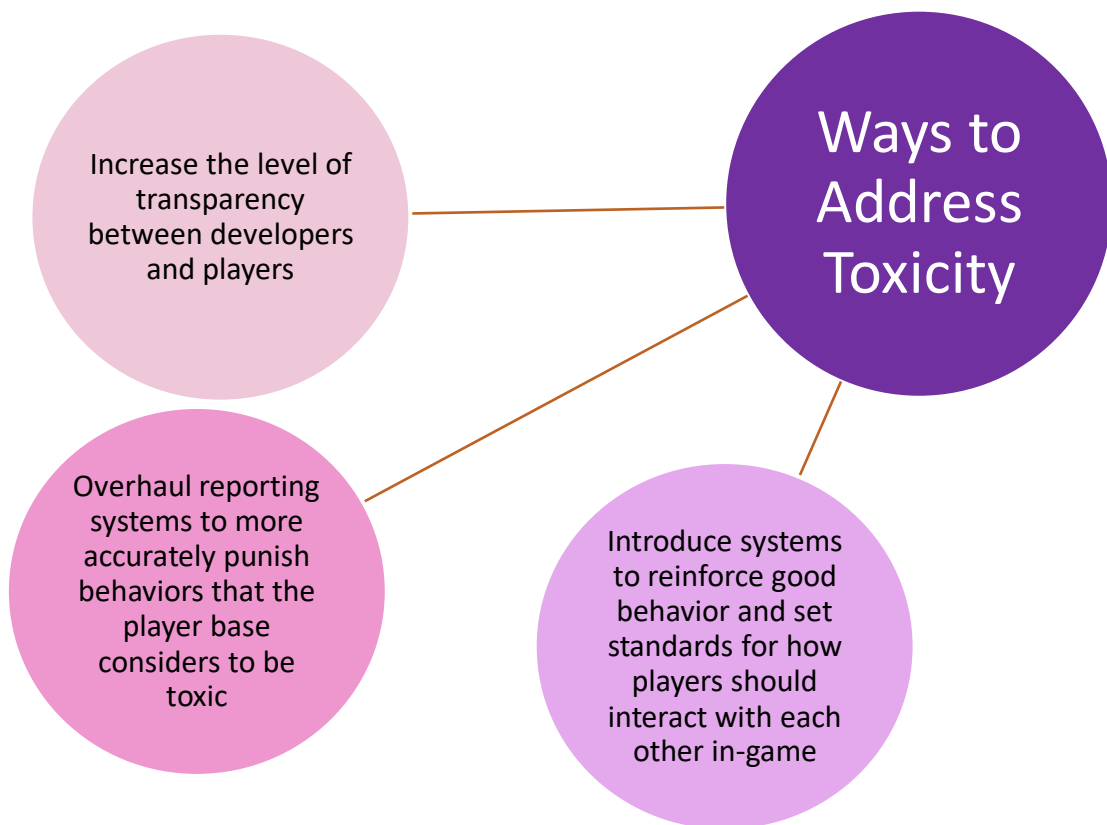
- Aggressively and repeatedly targetting another player
 - Sending "hate mail" after a match
 - Encouraging others to criticize or harass a specific target
 - Making fun of players for aspects unique to them, like overall play time and competitive ranking

Trolling

- Disruptive actions that elicit frustration or anger from a target
- "Throwing" (or "inting") - intentional attempt to lose a match
 - "Feeding" - Allowing oneself to be eliminated by the opposing team
 - "Inactivity" - Deliberately not moving one's character in a match
- "Smurfing"- Creating an alternate account and intentionally losing matches in order to be placed into a lower competitive ranking

Hate Speech

- Discrimination or harassment based on race, gender, sexual orientation, or disability
- Jokes or comments made at the expense of a minority group



Reporting Bad Behavior

- Describe in detail each behavior that is reportable and punishable
- Base the reportable behaviors on what the player base considers to be toxic
- Allow players to be specific in describing the offense that they are reporting
- Directly communicate the length and form of punishments that will be given if a player acts in a toxic way
- Give feedback to the player that files a report if any action is taken against a reported player

Reinforcing Good Behavior

- Introduce a comprehensive and exhaustive system for players to positively reinforce those who do not act in a toxic way
- Allow players to commend others for a variety of specific behaviors like leadership, teamwork, and good communication
- Give incentive to participate in this system through a dynamic levelling system and in-game cosmetic rewards
- Reward players who receive and give reinforcements often, allowing them to receive more rewards if they participate frequently

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