

Conflict in The Gaming World (The Phenomenon of Toxic Behaviour in Valorant)

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Abstract

In social life, humans are inextricably linked to conflict. This research was conducted in a community that includes Valorant players. The researchers aimed to understand the conflicts that occur among Valorant players and examine the impact of friendships after a conflict, using conflict theory by Ralf Dahrendorf and Lewis A. Coser. This study used a qualitative approach, with a phenomenological approach. Data collection was conducted through observation, interviews, and documentation. The results revealed disappointment among players when things don't go as expected. Superordination and subordination within Valorant also occurred, leading to perpetrators and victims of toxic behavior. Most of these relationships between perpetrators and victims ultimately resulted in strained relationships due to toxic behavior.

Keywords: online game, conflict, toxic.

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Introduction

Human life cannot be separated from social interactions that occur constantly, whether in school environments, workplaces, families, or among friends. Advances in technology have made it easier for us to socialize with others who are far away, anytime and anywhere. Online games have become one of the ways for people to socialize, expand their networks of friendship, and enhance teamwork through various activities such as sharing strategies and common interests. It is essential for online games to provide a space where players can communicate with one another, forming a virtual relationship among them. (Putri et al., 2023). Although technological advancements have brought positive impacts in the form of broader social networks, they have also opened opportunities for negative behaviors, particularly in interactions that may occur impulsively or become toxic due to the lack of emotional bonds or empathy.

Valorant is a strategic first-person shooter (FPS) online game developed and published by Riot Games in 2020. The game combines elements of tactics, individual skills, and teamwork, thereby requiring effective coordination and communication among players. Similar to other online FPS games, Valorant provides various communication features, such as text and voice chat, which

enable interaction among players within the same team as well as with opposing teams. The text chat feature includes team chat, private whispers, party chat with teammates, and all-chat that can be read by both teams. Meanwhile, the voice chat feature allows verbal communication among team members or friends within the same team. However, the communication features provided by the game may also trigger conflicts due to toxic behavior from one player toward another, which often manifests in the form of insults, harassment, or other negative actions.

Based on data reported by the Indonesian toxic community caster news source and findings presented by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) Game Industry survey, Valorant was identified as the game with the most toxic community in 2021. Furthermore, all Valorant players I have encountered personally agreed with this statement. This phenomenon can also be observed in the comment sections of various Valorant tournaments, where individuals engage not only in trash talk during gameplay but also throughout the tournament events themselves.

The phenomenon of toxic behavior is commonly found in online games. *Trash talk* refers to offensive or disrespectful remarks directed by one individual toward another, often expressed as a form of hate speech or frustration toward the other (Kniffin & Palacio, 2018). Trash talk is not only done by players, the coaches are also often doing it (Eveslage & Delaney, 1998; Trammelet al., 2017). Trash talk may occur not only during the course of a match but also prior to its commencement, reflecting the pervasive nature of toxic communication in competitive gaming contexts (Cook et al., 2017). And then, *Trolling* refers to a deliberate form of disruptive behavior intended to provoke or disturb others within an online environment (Fichman, Pnina & Sanfilippo, 2016). In the context of video games, *trash talk* can even be classified as a form of *trolling* aimed at disrupting other players' experiences. Moreover, *trash talk* may also occur among teammates, for instance, when mocking or criticizing a player's poor performance (Irwin et al., 2023). According on data from Indonesian *toxic community caster* news source and the findings presented by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) Game Industry survey, the results indicated that Valorant was identified as the game with the most toxic community in 2021.

In general, *toxic* behavior refers to actions that intentionally disrupt or harm the comfort of others. The term *toxic*, which originates from the English word meaning "poison," carries various interpretations depending on the context. Within the gaming environment, the term *toxic* is commonly used to describe players, often referred to as *toxic users* or *toxic players*, who engage in behaviors that negatively affect or disadvantage their teammates (Sugiono, 2019). providing a clear definition of toxicity is complex due to differences that exist across various online games. Behaviors that are considered toxic vary across the contexts of different games and

the established norms, rules, and player expectations of each community. (Beres et al., 2021).

Gamers often perceive *toxic* habits as a normal occurrence within video games. Many players believe that *trash talk* is a “key” of the gaming experience and defend their right to engage in similar behavior, such as responding with *trash talk* of their own (Sukma & Anshori, 2022). In online games, *trash talk* frequently arises as a reaction to actions that disadvantage the team, such as mistakes made by novice players. This behavior is often regarded as part of the gaming culture (Zarkasih & Mustaqimmah, 2025). Repeated exposure of players to *trash talk* can create a psychological suggestion within themselves, eventually shaping a habitual pattern of behavior (Putri et al., 2023).

In previous studies, discussions regarding the game *Valorant* remain very limited and often focus primarily on *toxic* behavior directed toward strangers. Earlier research on *toxic* behavior in gaming environments has generally concentrated on *trash talk* and its relation to communicative behavior. Only a few studies have explored *toxic* behavior in online games through the lens of conflict theory. Although conflict theory has been applied in several prior studies, it is rarely associated with research on online gaming. Therefore, this study aims to describe *toxic* behavior occurring in the online game *Valorant* from both the victims’ and perpetrators’ perspectives, employing conflict theory as a framework to examine the behavior and its impact on interpersonal relationships.

Method

This study employs a qualitative method with a phenomenological research design. The use of a phenomenological approach allows the researcher to apply their own perspective in understanding the meanings of various events that occur within a specific context (Salim & Syahrur, 2012). This study was conducted over a period of approximately eight months, from late 2024 to early 2025, involving 11 informants. Among them, three were identified as perpetrators and nine as victims, with one participant having experienced both roles. The informants were aged between 14 and 28 years and were *Valorant* players who played the game with their friends as members of the *Valorant Indonesia Community*.

The data in this study were collected using several techniques: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, documentation, and literature review. In participant observation, the researcher was directly involved in the informants’ gaming activities, allowing for more comprehensive and in-depth data collection that captures the meaning behind each observed behavior. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by employing probing questions to explore emerging issues during the interview process. Documentation involved the collection, organization, storage, and retrieval of recorded information in various forms such

as written texts, audio, images, or videos. Meanwhile, the literature review entailed gathering data through the examination of written documents such as journals, books, and articles. The collected data were analyzed using triangulation techniques and were continuously examined until data saturation was achieved. (Sugiyono, 2015).

Results and Discussion

A. Types of Toxic Behavior Occurring in the Game *Valorant*

The toxic behaviors that occur in the game *Valorant* can be categorized into two types, verbal and non-verbal toxic behavior.

1. Verbal Toxic Behavior

The word “*toxic*” derives from the English term meaning “poisonous” or “harmful,” referring to something that possesses destructive or damaging qualities (Marcella & Sazali, 2023). In simple terms, *toxic* refers to various forms of negative behavior that involve harsh or offensive communication directed toward others (Beres et al., 2021). *Trash talk* is a form of aggressive or mocking verbal behavior that frequently occurs within the context of competition or rivalry. This behavior involves the use of demeaning or sarcastic language directed at opponents for specific purposes, such as to intimidate, disrupt concentration, or even to motivate one’s own team. *Trash talking* can generally be categorized into two types: the first serves as a means of satisfaction or entertainment, and the second is intended to enhance gameplay performance or for strategic purposes (Marcella & Sazali, 2023). Toxic behavior refers to a range of harmful attitudes and actions that an individual may exhibit, which have the potential to endanger others either physically or mentally. Such behavior may manifest in the use of harsh language, threats, violations of personal boundaries, and other negative actions. In the context of online communication, this type of behavior can be particularly detrimental, as it may spread negative energy and affect the emotional well-being of others (Nwanta, 2023).

The victims in this study frequently reported receiving *trash talk* in the form of words such as “bitch,” “stupid,” “dog,” and other offensive expressions. Such incidents typically occur for various reasons, including losing a round, being eliminated in the game, making mistakes during play, and other in-game situations. *Toxic* players often tend to blame others, including their own teammates, when they feel frustrated or upset. This *toxic* behavior is almost unavoidable among players, even when playing together with friends.

2. Non-Verbal Toxic Behavior

Non-verbal toxic behaviors commonly found in the game *Valorant* include *rage quitting* and *trolling*. *Rage quitting* refers to a behavior in which a player loses

control over their emotions and actions during gameplay due to deep frustration—whether directed at themselves, their teammates, opponents, or technical issues within the game. Players experiencing such anger often demonstrate noticeable changes in their gameplay, including aggressive behavior, poor decision-making, and intense negative emotions that may lead them to abruptly and impulsively leave the game out of anger.

Meanwhile, *trolling* in gaming refers to behavior in which a player deliberately engages in actions that disturb, annoy, or disadvantage others during gameplay. In *Valorant*, *trolling* often manifests in the form of spamming, intentionally injuring or killing teammates, or disrupting team strategies. The motivations behind *trolling* may vary, ranging from self-entertainment through creating chaos to the deliberate intent of ruining others' gaming experiences.

Both *rage quitting* and *trolling* behaviors often make victims feel uncomfortable, as they destroy the enjoyment of play and create an unpleasant gaming atmosphere. The victims of such behaviors are frequently friends of the perpetrators themselves, resulting in strained friendships beyond the gaming context. This poses a greater risk, as toxic players' actions can undermine the core purpose of the game itself. Unlike verbal toxic behavior, which primarily involves offensive speech, non-verbal toxic behavior is often accompanied by verbal toxicity, intensifying the victims' feelings of disturbance.

B. Factors Causing Toxic Behavior

1. Superordinate and Subordinate Roles

In *Valorant*, when a player is perceived as being more skilled or superior, it is not uncommon for that player to exhibit dominance over others. This dominance can give rise to negative behaviors that may trigger conflict. A *superordinate* player typically exerts control or dominance in the game through several means, such as:

- a. Scoreboard. Each player can view the scoreboard during the match as well as after the game has ended. The in-game scoreboard presents a simplified overview, displaying only the number of kills, deaths, and assists. This allows all players to identify who is currently dominating or playing a key role during the match. Additionally, the scoreboard appears in the match history of every account with more detailed information. This detailed version provides data such as defuse statistics and insights into opponents' tactics during gameplay.
- b. Rank. The ranking system can be viewed by all players once the game has ended. Player ranks are recalculated after every win or loss. When a player loses a match but demonstrates strong dominance during

gameplay, the point deduction they receive is typically smaller compared to players who perform less effectively. Additionally, the ranking system undergoes a reset twice a year, requiring players to actively participate in matches if they wish to maintain or improve their rank as calculated by the game developer. Consequently, even if a player consistently wins matches, achieving a higher rank remains challenging if their skill level is not sufficient to meet the performance standards required for that rank.

- c. Level. Another indicator of gameplay experience is the player's level, which reflects the frequency and duration of their engagement with the game, the higher the level, the more experience the player has accumulated.

These factors can trigger an individual to perceive themselves as having greater power within the game. Consequently, players in a superordinate position tend to feel more dominant and may attempt to control or even act arbitrarily toward subordinates. As stated by Dahrendorf, various positions within society possess differing levels of authority. Authority does not reside within the individual but within the position itself. Implicitly, authority denotes the existence of superordination and subordination, where those who occupy positions of authority are expected to exercise control over their subordinates (Tualeka, 2017). According to Dahrendorf, authority is not fixed, as it resides in positions rather than in individuals. Therefore, a person who holds authority in one context does not necessarily occupy an authoritative position in another. Similarly, an individual who holds a subordinate position in one group may occupy a superordinate position in another. From Dahrendorf's argument, it can be inferred that society consists of a number of units that he refers to as *imperatively coordinated associations*. These may be viewed as human associations governed by a hierarchy of authority positions. Since society contains many such associations, an individual may hold a position of authority within one association while simultaneously occupying a subordinate position in another (George Ritzer, 2012).

Several victim informants admitted that they received toxic remarks or behaviors from players who held higher ranks, levels, or positions on the scoreboard. The treatment commonly experienced by subordinate players included mockery, verbal abuse, and commands that primarily benefited the superordinate players, allowing them to appear more competent at the expense of their subordinates. For example, one informant reported playing with a friend who had been playing *Valorant* longer than they had. During the match, the friend became frustrated whenever the informant's character died and frequently complained, creating discomfort among other teammates during gameplay.

2. Players Feelings of Disappointment

In gameplay, the desire to achieve victory is a natural part of the player experience. However, when feelings of disappointment are not properly communicated, they can lead to misinterpretations, which in turn may escalate into conflicts (Arung Triantoro, 2019). Players often express their disappointment in excessive or inappropriate ways, including verbally insulting others, using offensive language, or engaging in disruptive actions intended to vent their emotional frustration.

As stated by Coser, conflict can be categorized into two types, one of which is realistic conflict a form of conflict that arises from frustration related to specific demands within social relationships, as well as from expectations of potential gains for the parties involved. This type of conflict is generally directed toward the perceived source of dissatisfaction. The characteristics of realistic conflict include its emergence as a result of frustration over unmet demands in social interactions and expectations of personal or collective benefit. Moreover, such conflict reflects the desire of individuals or groups to obtain certain advantages or achievements. (Saud, et al., 2020).

In other cases, informants often reported experiencing disagreements with their friends due to disappointment over unmet goals in the game. Such feelings of disappointment may develop into frustration, leading players—either intentionally or unintentionally—to direct harsh words toward their teammates, including their own friends. It is also common for these failures to cause disappointed players to place blame on others and initiate arguments among teammates, which ultimately strain their interpersonal relationships.

C. The Relationship Between Perpetrators and Victims

The relationship between perpetrators and victims of toxic behavior often begins with friendship and mutual camaraderie. Over time, as various situations occur, these friendships may reach a point of conflict within the *Valorant* game. Some friendships become strained following such conflicts, particularly when the issues remain unresolved despite attempts at communication between the parties. However, in other cases, these conflicts serve as valuable lessons, prompting both individuals to develop mutual understanding and work toward reconciliation in order to preserve their relationship.

This concept is also explained by Coser, who asserts that conflict can be positively functional insofar as it serves to strengthen a structure, and negatively functional insofar as it acts against that structure. Coser emphasizes that determining whether a conflict is functional depends on the nature of the issue at the center of the conflict. A conflict is considered positively functional when it does not challenge the fundamental basis of the relationship, whereas it becomes

negatively functional when it threatens or undermines the core values of the structure. (Saud, et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The phenomenon of toxic behavior in *Valorant* emerges from misunderstandings in player communication and a lack of awareness among perpetrators regarding the impact of their actions. The absence of reprimand or response from others often leads such behavior to be perceived as acceptable and, consequently, normalized. Based on Ralf Dahrendorf's conflict theory, toxic behavior is influenced by differences in player roles, in which superordinate players tend to dominate while subordinate players are often subjected to pressure. Additionally, differing gameplay objectives—such as the desire to win and improve ranking versus the desire to play for enjoyment—serve as a major source of conflict. Fundamentally, when two players with different goals are brought together toward a shared objective without clear communication, disappointment is likely to arise from one party, ultimately leading to disagreement or tension.

Meanwhile, from Coser's conflict theory perspective, toxic behavior may also have a positive function when communication and mutual understanding between the perpetrator and the victim are successfully established. Such conflicts can foster learning, forgiveness, and improvement in future interactions. However, they become negatively functional when these processes fail to occur due to a lack of empathy or mutual understanding between the parties involved.

Suggestion

Based on the research findings, playing with one's own friends does not necessarily guarantee compatibility within the same team. Friends who are familiar in real life or from previously played games may not exhibit the same behavior or compatibility in a different gaming context. Therefore, it is reasonable to consider playing with other individuals who share similar goals and expectations when engaging in gameplay.

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