Psychology Behind Aggressive Language Used in Honor of Kings

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Abstract: Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) on mobile phones is one of the most popular gaming styles in recent years. One of the representative games is Honor of Kings. People search for entertainment and emotional release in the game. This creates the problem of aggressive language use in Honor of Kings. This paper investigates the phenomenon of aggressive language in Honor of Kings and the psychology and reasons behind it. Analysis of existing literature and research on similar topics were used in this paper to examine the psychology and reasons. Factors like anonymity, competitiveness, and sexism were identified and analyzed in this paper as potential influencers of abusive language use in Honor of Kings. Based on this result, this paper provided several suggestions to help improve the gaming environment, including strengthening the reporting mechanism, strengthening the audit of the abusive language and increasing education and awareness of the use of abusive language.

Keywords: Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA), Honor of Kings, aggressive language, anonymity, psychology of gaming

1.   Introduction

As the media entertainment industry continues to rise in recent years, online mobile group games also prosper under the influence of the media industry. As more and more people search for diverse platforms to relax and entertain themselves, online mobile group games stand out because of their sociality, convenience, and recreation. While these mobile gaming platforms provide users with chances to relax and have fun, they also give users channels to vent their negative emotions on the games. Sometimes even worse, these venting tend to become innocent-people-targeted verbal abuse. In one of the existing researches, of the 186 respondents, 146 (78.5%) claimed to have encountered verbal abuse while playing online group games, and an even higher percentage, 168 (90.3%) claimed to have seen verbal abuse being used against other users [1]. This phenomenon continues to escalate as mobile group games grow. However, not a lot of existing research has studied psychology and the reasons behind these abusive languages. Meanwhile, existing research mostly targets general mobile group games. There aren't many studies that focus on a specific mobile game. Even though these games are all categorized as mobile group games, the gaming mechanisms in these games can still have huge differences. Thus, the psychology and reasons behind language abuse in each mobile game can be different. To fill this gap, this research paper aims to study the psychology behind gamers' abusive language use based on a specific mobile group gaming platform — Honor of Kings.

This paper will first introduce the gaming platform Honor of Kings and its main players' group. Then the paper will introduce different types of abusive language used in Honor of Kings. Lastly, the paper will analyze the psychology and reasons behind these languages and provide suggestions to raise awareness of this issue and help improve the gaming environment.

2. Honor of Kings

Honor of Kings was developed by TiMi Studio Group under Tencent Games in 2015 in China. With more than one hundred million active players per day in 2020, Hornor of Kings is the most famous mobile game in China [2]. The general mode of Honor of Kings' gameplay is known as Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA). It is similar to the world-famous MOBA game League of Legends, developed by Riot Games in 2009. All games are battles between two teams of five. The two teams are divided into the red team and the blue team. Each team has its own territory of a fifty-fifty split of the Kings' Valley, which is where the battle takes place. The five players' roles or heroes of their choices range from Tank, Warrior, Assassin, Mage, Marksman, and Support. The players are divided into mainly four routes on the map. Mage goes to the Mid Lane; Marksman goes to the Farm Lane; Support role goes roaming; and Warrior; Tank, Warriors, and Assassins might go to the Jungler or the Clash Lane, depending on the heroes. The game's winning condition is one team tears down the enemy's crystal.

The major gamers and age group of Honor of Kings could range from elementary school students to middle-aged working people. The majority of the active players are students and young people aged between 18-30. For players below eighteen years old, Honor of Kings sets a boundary for their gaming time for two hours of gameplay per day.

As a team-working type of game, Honor of Kings also provides players with multiple ways to communicate with each other both in battle and after the battle is finished. The first channel to communicate in games is all kinds of direct systematic signals. There are sets of convenient communication signals, such as "Withdraw," "Nice Job," "Sorry," "Thank you," and more. These signals can be sent directly when the players choose the signal to send from a list in the game. After choosing the signals to send, these signals will be broadcasted to every other teammate. Another kind of direct signal can be sent by clicking on some tabs in the game. For example, if a player clicks into the K/D/A tab and clicks on the players, signals like time to revival or amount of gold will also be broadcasted to the teammates.

The second channel to communicate with your teammates is emojis. There is a tab in the game where players can personalize the choices of emojis they want to send. Once a player chooses the emoji to send, the emoji will pop up on the player's hero's head. Only players adjacent will be able to see the emoji.

The third channel to communicate is typing or voice chat. Players can talk directly to other players on the same team by opening their microphones. Other players will only be able to hear it if they open their sound receivers. Players can also communicate with their teammates by typing. They can also talk to their enemies if they choose to send it to all players after typing the message. Honor of Kings designs a function in typing where some word combinations suspicious of scolding and humiliation will be omitted.

The last channel to communicate is the world-chat channel. In this channel, players can communicate with every online player. People usually send out messages searching for teammates on this channel.

With all these channels to assist the players in communicating with other players both in the game and outside the game, Honor of Kings maintains a reporting system when players encounter aggressive language use and toxic behaviors. Players can report real-time in-game aggressive language use. They could also report those behaviors after the battle is finished. Most of the

punishments are automatically made by robots. If players who file reports aren't satisfied with the punishment, they could appeal and have real customer service review the issue again. Punishments usually include credit deduction, account lockdown, and communication banning.

3.   Types of Aggressive Language Used in Honor of Kings

As mentioned in the second part, Honor of Kings provides numerous platforms for players to communicate with each other conveniently and efficiently. However, these platforms also provide players the channel to communicate in an unfriendly and aggressive way. Aggressive communication is one of the most prevalent problems among all other toxic behaviors in Honor of Kings. It has significantly influenced players' gaming experiences and mental well-being during and after the games. Five major types of language aggression have been identified in Honor of Kings, including swearing without profanity, sarcasm or insinuation, proverb or two-part allegorical saying style of cursing, sexism and homophobia, and family member cursing.

3.1.   Swearing Without Profanity

This type of communicative aggression can be considered the most civilized. The language is usually directly targeted toward the players' gaming skills and decisions instead of the players themselves. When a player makes a poor decision or a bad gaming action, some players on the same team might choose to complain about the player's actions. For example, if a player gets killed too many times by enemies, which gives the enemies a greater advantage, teammates with discontent might click on the player's K/D/A tab and send out messages like "Stop getting killed again," "What else can you do but keep getting yourself killed?" When a player demonstrates rusty gaming techniques and other teammates see them, the teammates might comment, "What kind of hilarious gameplay is this?"

   Generally, the language used in this kind of aggressive communication is relatively mild. It's directed toward the flawed action and gaming technique some players make during the game without attacking those players.

3.2.   Sarcasm or Irony

This type of aggressive language is a step up from the previous type. Some players will use sarcastic language to show their dissatisfaction and anger when encountering situations where some teammates make bad plays or display inferior gameplay skills. For example, in the same situation mentioned in the previous part, where a teammate gets killed too many times, a teammate might complain in sentences like "You're very good at giving yourself in," "You're an expert in getting killed, huh?" When some players show poor gaming skills, dissatisfied teammates might comment ironically like "Well done!" "Well played!"

   The general pattern of this kind of language is when criticizing other teammates, players usually say one thing, and they really mean another. They usually criticize teammates who make bad moves by complimenting them because they're aware of the fact that those teammates are also aware of their flawed techniques.

3.3.   Proverb or Two-Part Allegorical Saying Style

The profound history of the Chinese language gives the players many artistic and literate ways to express their discontent with other players. Proverbs and two-part allegorical sayings are used in daily life. These languages are usually very positive and humorous. Most of them are derived from ancient myths, allegories, and folktales. One example of a two-part allegorical saying is "Plain white tofu with scallions — one green and two white (completely innocent)." This saying has the meaning of

innocence because it uses a homophone. Scallions are green and white. The tofu is white. This forms the color combination of "one green and two white." Because of the homophone, it then becomes a Chinese idiom meaning completely innocent. There are many more two-part allegorical sayings. Young people on the internet also started creating modern two-part allegorical sayings, and some of them have been used in aggressive communication in Honor of Kings.

3.4. Female Sexism and Homophobia

As mentioned in the second part, real-time voice chat is also a way for the players to communicate. Being the fastest way to communicate, voice chat also exposes the players' voices, potentially exposing their gender. When female players open their microphones to communicate with others, some male players tend to show discrimination and taunting towards those female players. For example, when a female player opens the microphone and asks one teammate to make certain gaming actions, a male teammate might comment like, "Oh, you're a woman, then why would I listen to you?" after hearing and identifying the voice as female.

Male players attack other male players who have a more feminine voice as well. Those male players usually comment on their voices as sissy and gay, even though they have no evidence to say so.

3.5. Family Member Cursing

This type of language might be considered the most abominable. Players usually attack their teammates using abbreviations and language like "nmsl (meaning 'did your mom just die?')." "Your family must be full of idiots since you're one as well." There are many more malicious languages used in this kind of swearing. Cursing family members triggers the players who get attacked to fight back, eventually creating a ripple effect that spreads among all players in the same battle, significantly influencing other players' gaming experiences and the general gaming environment in Honor of Kings.

4. The Psychology Behind Aggressive Language and Behaviors

Players use aggressive language to attack their teammates because they are frustrated with certain situations in the game mentioned in the previous section. A general way to explain this behavior is personal needs and desires. Research has shown that two underlying factors — physiological and social of the 16 basic desires have been accounted for in explaining aggressive language and other behaviors in MOBA games like Honor of Kings [3]. Players use verbal abuse in Honor of Kings to vent their anger generated by frustrating situations in the game. Overall, people's need to blame others for failing is where the majority of documented abusive language comes from [4]. This can be seen as an action to fulfill their needs. Meanwhile, depending on different situations, there are potentially deeper layer reasons behind aggressive language use in Honor of Kings. The four primary reasons are competitiveness, imitation, anonymity, and sexism.

4.1. Competitiveness

Honor of Kings is a MOBA mobile game. Its nature has determined that the general gaming experience could be highly competitive. The term "competitiveness" describes the ferocious competition that is intrinsic to the context of team-based competitive gaming [5]. Competitiveness fosters in-game verbal aggression because of some players' eagerness to win. The first factor that fosters competitiveness is the ranking system. In Honor of Kings, the rank mode gives players ranks from Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum, Diamond, Master, King of Top, King of Honor, and King of

Legend. The ranking system breeds competitiveness because it is deeply connected with players' egos and vanity. Because of that, when playing the ranking mode, most players take the game very seriously, leading to an easier trigger of language aggression.

The ranking system almost works as a social class and status in the game. Players in higher ranks despise lower-rank players [5]. When encountering players in the same ranking, if those players distribute poor skills, other players might call them "lower-rank junk." Players with higher ranks also use this advantage to attack those players who are in lower ranks or with poorer skills. Higher-ranked players have more influence over how a hero should be used and played and what things to purchase [6]. In real life, ranking is also a part of social interaction topics. Higher rankings in Honor of Kings have become something to show off and even help build friendships and romantic relationships.

4.2. Anonymity

Even though Honor of Kings requests each player to upload their identifications, players' real names will not be revealed in the game. Players can come up with their unique player ID in Honor of Kings. Therefore, communications in Honor of Kings are anonymous. While being anonymous protects players' privacy and gives them space to create their player IDs, it also breeds aggressive communications. Research showed that aggressive players were typically strangers to their victims and that anonymity on gaming platforms encouraged aggressive behavior [7]. Being in the same battle in ranking mode, players can only see their teammates' IDs. In another kind of gaming mode called Peak Challenge, which only opens every day from 12 pm to 12 am, players' IDs are even omitted as Challenger 1 and so on. This total anonymity further facilitates aggressive language use in in-game communications. The online disinhibition theory can explain this action. The theory states that people feel less constrained to say or do things in private online settings than they would normally say or do in a real-world face-to-face setting [8]. Players believe that the negative effects of their toxic behavior in gaming contexts are less extreme than those in non-anonymous settings [9]. Being anonymous in a virtual world decreases players' sense of responsibility and the consequences of behaviors. In the game Honor of Kings, players basically can attack other players without handling any severe consequences. The punishment mentioned in the second section doesn't act like threats to players anymore because they're all minor and remediable. For the players of Honor of Kings, these punishments don't pose any real threat both in the game and in real life.

4.3. Female Sexism & Different Gaming Incentives

4.3.1. Sexism

Sexism is a long-term problem in Honor of Kings and all other kinds of online video games. Despite the fact that there are many female players, video games have historically been seen as a male domain, a pastime designed by and for males. In the previous old versions of Honor of Kings, plenty of female heroes were represented in stereotypical ways that pleased male players with features like big breasts [10].

Female players are not minorities in Honor of Kings. However, they are constantly being discriminated against and attacked. In the ranking mode of Honor of Kings, players can choose to display three heroes they want to play prior to entering the game. After entering the game, teammates can see their preferred heroes. Certain heroes are stereotypically believed to be favored and most played by female players. When seeing those hero preferences, male players often enter the state of mind of perceived loss. Perceives loss is a condition in a game where players believe they will fail or have a higher possibility of losing [5]. In the game Honor of Kings, perceived loss happens when some male players encounter female players. Most male players hold the stereotype that female players are not as skilled as male players, despite the fact that they are only on the same team because

they are in the same rank, which means they have similar gaming skills. Due to this preconception, some male players show their hesitation to play games together when engaging with female gamers. Even when female gamers excel at games, other players might not acknowledge their abilities and may instead assume they are using cheats and other kinds of shortcuts [11].

When being on the same team with female players, though some male players might now show discontent, they will still ask the female players to play support roles instead of ADCs (Attack Damage Carry). In most situations, male players just order the female players to play some non-essential roles, and male players will lead the game. In most games, female players rarely lead and get the speaking right [11]. It is more typical in Honor of Kings for women gamers to be regarded as less competent in leading.

4.3.2. Different Incentives for Playing Honor of Kings

Another factor causing female players to be the target of verbal aggression is their incentives for playing Honor of Kings and the actions behind the incentives. Unlike male players, who primarily chase the thrill and challenge of the game as well as the feeling of immersion and participation in the game process, female players primarily seek the fun of the gaming process and consumption of skins and other game properties [12]. Therefore, there are differences in the motivation for gaming between different genders. These differences become the reason for male players to attack those female players who spend a lot of money on purchasing. Some male players accuse female players of spending so much money just to show off and earn this money or the rank they're currently at through pleasing skilled and powerful male players. However, this kind of sexist aggression also leads to a vicious loop. Some female players try to earn their place and respect in the game through extensive consumption [12]. Some other female players try to get into higher ranks by appealing to the top players in Honor of Kings, who usually don't have much consumption ability and are attracted by those female players' appearances.

5. Suggestions

Being one of the most famous mobile games in China and having incremental players every day, Honor of Kings also faces the dilemma of losing old players because of the negative environment caused by the excessive occurrence of verbal aggression during the game. The spread of verbal aggression within the game affects innocent players' feelings, and as a result, these players will vent their anger in a new round of the game to seek revenge. This creates a vicious cycle that hinders the development of a positive social atmosphere within the game. A bad gaming experience can make players lose interest in playing. This further interferes with the future development of Honor of Kings and is one of the reasons why Honor of Kings is questioned in China [2]. Suggestions are given as follows.

First, Honor of Kings should strengthen the reporting mechanisms. There are two major problems with the current report mechanisms. The first one is it can't detect certain insults and verbal aggression. For example, the swearing without profanity type of verbal aggression and the two-part allegorical saying type mentioned in the third section often escape the mechanism's detection. The aggressive language that doesn't contain sensitive words tends to slip away from the reporting mechanisms, which gives players who are attacked headaches. Players who frequently attack players using aggressive language are aware of this breach in the reporting system and constantly use it to avoid punishments. The second problem with the current reporting system is that it doesn't give severe enough punishments. The punishments relating to verbal abuse are non-threatening. It's simply credit reduction. The number of credits deducted depends on the aggressiveness of the language used. Players who have a credit below 100 out of 100 will be banned from the Peak Challenge. If the credits

fall below 90, players will be banned from the ranking mode. However, the credits deducted can be made up through customer service and playing certain modes in Honor of Kings. Not many players think about the consequence of their language because of these nonessential punishments. Therefore, it would significantly help improve the gaming environment if Honor of Kings could improve the algorithms in the report system to make it more sensitive to all kinds of aggressive language, insults, and toxic gaming behaviors.

Second, education on verbal abuse and actions to stop it should be enhanced both in Honor of Kings and outside of it. A problem with people's cognition of aggressive language used in mobile games is that they don't take it too seriously. Individuals do not view verbal abuse as cyberbullying or as an abhorrent behavior, which lowers the likelihood that such behavior will be reported and increases the likelihood that such behavior will be repeated [7]. This is also deeply related to the strengths of the reporting system in Honor of Kings. Players are disappointed with the reporting system. Sometimes players choose to stay silent even when attacked because they know the low possibility of actually getting the abusive players punished and learn the consequences. A study has suggested that non-responsibility, aversion to participation, and individual reluctance to use the reporting feature all contribute to reporting behaviors in online games. Some reluctance to report may be attributed to the bystander effect [13].

An example of education is that Honor of Kings could create a video that plays when new players enter the game. The video teaches players what kind of actions and language can be counted as abusive and toxic. Then, the video should also teach players ways to report these behaviors and encourage them to do so when seeing abusive language use.

At the same time, video content showing abusive language use in Honor of Kings on other media platforms like TikTok should be audited and deceased in amount by the platform to lower the chances of imitation and bad guidance.

6.   Conclusion

In conclusion, this study identified four potential reasons behind abusive language use in the famous MOBA game Honor of Kings. First, players tend to use more abusive language due to the competitive nature of the game. Players have more eager to win the game and thus more likely to use aggressive language when encountering players who are not so skilled in the game. Second, anonymity in Honor of Kings also fosters the likelihood of aggressive language used. Players are more likely to attack other players using abusive language just out of the thinking that "After all, others don't know who I am." Third, sexism is also a huge factor influencing abusive language. Even though Honor of Kings has a lot of female players, they are often being the target of language abuse because they're seen as not skilled and more likely to cause the team to lose. Female players' different incentives for playing the game also become the reasons behind these abusive language attacks. Most female players play Honor of Kings for entertainment and to purchase gaming props. Other players might attack female players who spend a lot of money for the reason that they're showing off.

The limitations of this study most surround the lack of primary data and sources. Since this study builds upon existing literature and research, no primary data has been collected. If sophisticated reasons and psychological analysis were to be found behind language abuse in Honor of Kings, a comprehensive study including interviews, data analysis, and more needs to be conducted.

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