Research Article

Qualitative exploration on the prevalence of swear words in MLBB among Filipino online players

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ABSTRACT

Filipinos have become deeply engaged in the Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) scene, positioning the Philippines as a dominant force in the global esports arena. Its popularity, especially among younger Filipinos aged 19 to 22, has led to widespread participation, with many playing for entertainment, stress relief, or as a social activity. However, Filipino players contribute to the emergence of profanity within the MLBB community, with common use of swear words like "gago" and "bobo" as expressions of frustration and competition. This paper analyzed the linguistic patterns and effect of the proliferation of swear words in the platform. MLBB players (n=16) in Iloilo City were purposively sampled to be interviewed in this study. The findings revealed diverse linguistic behaviors among MLBB players, which involved frequent codeswitching between languages, often based on social context, and swearing as a form of humor, using profanity creatively to circumvent community guidelines. Swear words also served specific roles in gameplay, reflecting frustration and intensifying aggression, especially when players felt their team was underperforming. While some players viewed profanity as a motivational tool or emotional outlet, others identified it as a source of tension that negatively impacted communication, teamwork, and overall gaming experience. The impact of swearing on team dynamics remained mixed, with both positive and negative effects observed, suggesting a need for further exploration of its influence on team cohesion.
Keywords: emotional expression, MLBB, mobile gaming, swear words

1. Introduction

Gaming represents a significant cultural phenomenon that has captivated millions of individuals, both young and adult, globally. Advancements in communication technology have transformed gaming from a solo activity into an interactive social experience, enabling players to connect, compete, and engage with

others via personal computers, mobile phones, and other digital devices online[1]. To battle isolation and improve their mental health, people have turned to video games for emotional support during the pandemic[2]. This innovation facilitated the growth of multiplayer online games and led to the emergence of professional esports events. In contrast to solo gaming, multiplayer online games facilitate the experience of actual competition, offer opportunities for interactive teamwork, and enable connections among players across distances[1].

While the supposed advantages of online video games are well-documented, empirical evidence suggests that they can also pose risks to players, particularly among minority groups within the community. The anonymity provided by a screen and a username allows individuals to exhibit hostility towards others, a phenomenon commonly referred to within the community as toxic behaviors[2]. New players encountering toxic behaviors from the outset may find themselves dissuaded from persisting in the game. The competitive dynamics inherent in online gaming environments may give rise to instances of violence associated with online interactions[3,4].

This paper was particularly concerned about deconstructing the proliferation of swear words or profanity in online gaming. Profanity serves as a direct and often unrestrained manifestation of emotional states, as well as a deliberate affront directed towards an object, location, or individual[5]. Profanity constitutes an essential component of language and possesses a distinct grammatical system[6]. Individuals exhibiting lower levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness, alongside elevated extraversion, hostility, and antisocial personality characteristics, tend to use profanity more frequently than those who do not display these traits[7,8]. Online toxicity, described as the acts of sending, receiving, and witnessing abusive, vulgar, or invasive comments, has been widely reported on online gaming platforms as they become major mechanisms for cyberbullying[9]. As a result, offensive language in online gaming emerges as the most frequently reported cause of complaints and serves as a significant factor contributing to the decision of some players to stop playing games.

Online gaming, particularly in competitive games, frequently interacts with user toxicity. Motivated by the potential for victory, typically manifested as in-game rewards, players frequently engage in negative communicative behaviors when confronted with challenging situations or the threat of defeat, involving overtly blaming other players or verbally assaulting them out of sheer disdain[10]. The detrimental effects of toxic behavior within a team are significant, leading to severe psychological repercussions, such as anxiety[11], which may trigger some to abandon the game permanently[12,13]. However, although profanity is often considered a form of toxic gaming behavior, literature suggests that it may not always have a purely negative impact. Linguistically, Jumanto and Sulistyorini[14] suggest that swearing expressions can possess both literal and creative meanings. With the growing prevalence of internet communication among teenagers and young people, the use of profanity has intensified[15]. Nonetheless, Jay[16] noted that not all categories of swearwords are undesirable. Occasionally, profanity may not convey profound emotions in everyday communication, and some individuals may use it to conform to societal norms, particularly in the context of social media[17,18]. This what makes profanity in online gaming interesting to study, as its use can transcend beyond mere online aggression.

In a The Manila Times[19] report, 43 million gamers contributed to the remarkable growth of the gaming industry in the Philippines and throughout Southeast Asia. Notably, 74 percent of the online gaming demographic in the Philippines engaged in gaming using mobile devices, while 65 percent participated in personal computer gaming, and 45 percent utilized classic console games. In a recent data from Business World[20], as of November 2020, MLBB had surpassed one billion installs and had 100 million monthly

active users globally. In the Philippines alone, the game had 100 million registered users, with 25 million of them being monthly active users.

Studies also discovered the emergence of swear words in MLBB platform. For example, Alamo et al.[21] found that MLBB players often use swearing as a means of self-expression and communication with their teammates. Their use of it serves to assert dominance, convey frustration, underscore a point, or generally fabricate an illusion of power that they lack, despite the existence of a term for it—trashtalking. Finally, Alamo et al.[21] recommend expanding future studies into other linguistic areas and specializations, while also exploring diverse digital genres to thoroughly understand and advance wearing discourse. To address this, this paper sheds light on how profanity works in digital, multiplayer contexts by examining the language patterns and impact of swearing on this gaming platform. This study adds to the understanding of swearing discourse, particularly in the context of online gaming communities, and opens up new paths for research into the use of language in digital genres.

2. Literature review

2.1. Engagement of Filipinos in MLBB gaming

Philippines has cemented its legacy as one of the powerhouse countries in MLBB. Philippines has achieved the highest number of M-series (MLBB world championship) trophies throughout the years. Bren Esports won two M-series trophies, securing both M2 and M5 World Championships, Blacklist International won the M3 World Championship, and ECHO in M4 World Championship[22]. Apart from that, Sibol, Philippines' MLBB representative for Southeast Asian Games (SEA), triumphed their third consecutive gold medal after sweeping Malaysia, 3-0, in the finals[23]. Philippines also won several Mid Season Cup (MSC) titles including the awards received by Aether Main in MSC 2018, Execration in MSC 2021, and RSG PH in MSC 2022[24].

MLBB has gained significant popularity among Filipino players, especially the younger generations. Majority of Filipino MLBB players were from ages 19 to 22 years old[25], and on average, Filipino players spend 1 to 2 hours playing[26]. In the study of Delos Santos et al.[25], a significant 35.8% of students play online mobile games due to boredom while 21.6% citing stress relief as a primary motivation. However, the extensive MLBB gaming in the country also posed several implications to the community. For example, Rodica and Talania[27] analysis of 151 Senior High School students from Mount Carmel School of Maria Aurora found that online games negatively affect academic performance, leading to poor grades and physical distress. Most respondents reported difficulty focusing on studies, completing homework, and projects due to online gaming. Similarly, MLBB gaming can influence the academic performance of students and has negative impacts on their mental and physical health[26].

2.2. Profanity as communication tool

Profanity is capable of being employed for both positive and negative purposes[28]. Swearing naturally serves as a way to express deep emotional feelings, release stress, and mitigate pain or severe mental consequences[9]. Swear words such as "shit," "fuck," and "bullshit" can convey a range of emotional responses, that includes both positive and negative emotions[29]. Other swear words, such as "fucking brilliant," can be deemed acceptable and even polite in specific contexts[30]. The use of swear words may contribute to the strengthening of emotional and social connections, promoting a more positive atmosphere[31]. Furthermore, the use of profanity within a group can be interpreted as a marker of acceptance and inclusivity, contributing to the strengthening of interpersonal relationships by collectively challenging societal norms[32]. The purposes of profane language include promoting social bonding, the management of

emotional and physical discomfort, the facilitation of emotional release, the assertion of power and control, the creation of dominant-submissive dynamics, the challenge of authority figures, the categorization of individuals, the display of aggression, and the infliction of humiliation on others[33-36].

Profanity in online games also functions similar to traditional human interactions. In mobile games, a player uses profanity to express his anger because of the toxic inhibition, as individuals are less hesitant to express their frustration in an online setting[2,37]. Although previous understanding of profanity in communication can be applicable in online setting, there is subtle difference between the two which necessitates further understanding. In the context of cyberbullying, it is exceedingly frequent for a player to employ profanity to disparage another player in the game. To have a competitive advantage, it is common for competitors to launch verbal jabs at their opponents during a competition[38]. The linguistic aspect of toxic behavior, profanity, is an area that has not been thoroughly investigated, particularly in the context of online games that are specifically designed for mobile devices[38]. The objective of this investigation is to find out the use of swear words in online mobile games, particularly MLBB, ascertain the rationale behind players' profane usage, and investigate the way the game environment facilitates its emergence. It is important to note that the analysis likely leans toward the negative aspects of profanity or swear words in online gaming interactions.

2.3. Emergence of profanity in MLBB

The term "toxic behavior" has become a commonly used umbrella term to describe any detrimental behavior within the gaming community. While some of those behaviors may be more appropriately classified as deviant, disruptive, annoying cyberbullying, baiting, mischief, and more[39]. Profanity can be one example of toxic behavior in online games. The experience of losing in a game often results in feelings of disappointment and anger directed towards both fellow participants and oneself. A significant number of individuals exhibit their frustration through various behaviors, including vocal outbursts, physical aggression towards objects, and use of abrasive language directed at others[40].

The MLBB platform offers the opportunity for players to discuss their strategies through chats[40]. However, it also became a gateway for the proliferation of profanity and swear words on the platform. A study from Indonesia by Fandi and Mardijono[41] revealed that players used swear words such as bangsat (bastard), brengsek (asshole), cacat (defect), gaonok otak (brainless), goblok (dumbass), elek (sucks), bodoh (stupid) and jamput (damn). Mahbubah[42] also recorded some profanity words used in MLBB scene such as "sucks," "indogs" (Indonesian dogs), "fking," "noobs," "dammit," among other impolite words. Notably, the emergence of profanity in MLBB can be attributed to the player's rank with players from high ranks commonly engaging in the proliferation of swear words on the platform. MLBB has its own ranking system—warrior, elite, master, grandmaster, epic, legend, mythic, mythical honor, mythical glory, mythical immortal. For instance, in warrior to master, the use of such harsh language is infrequent. But within the mythic rank and mythic honor categories, the prevalence of harsh language remains notable, albeit less so than in the epic or legend ranks[40].

However, it was evident in the literature that limited studies was conducted in the use of swear words in MLBB within the Philippine setting. The use of profanity in MLBB platform of Filipino players is not well documented. Remarkably, Alamo et al.[21] made an initial contribution about this phenomenon. For them, the terms "gago" (stupid) and "bobo" (idiot) function as idiomatic expressions within the realm of swearing, as their meanings shift significantly when employed in isolation during conversational contexts. This indicates that the denotative meaning does not align with the speaker's intended message; rather, it reflects their desire to convey emotions stemming from their feelings. In the context of MLBB players, who represent the largest

demographic of mobile game enthusiasts and are prominent in the esports arena within the country, their use of profanity appears to be unaffected by the presence of opponents or teammates, instead, it emerges organically as a form of expression.

This is how far from the understanding of MLBB profanity has been. The subtleties of player perceptions and justifications for profanity usage remain underexplored, particularly regarding its potential role as a coping mechanism and the cultural or linguistic factors that influence its expression. Additional examination is required to explore the intricacies of profanity in MLBB, especially in terms of identifying the contextual triggers and the potential for both detrimental and adaptive roles within the gaming community.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. Social Identity Theory

Tajfel and Turner[43] examined prior studies on intergroup conflicts and determined that such conflict may be intrinsic to the group formation process. This theory posits many social methods that individuals in a group may consciously or unconsciously adopt to enhance their self-perceived status in society[44]. Studies have shown the influence of social identity theory and social norms on language usage. Calder[45] believes that individuals utilize language to "exhibit" their social identities. For example, Daniele et al.[46] discovered that gay speakers altered their vocal characteristics based on their public disclosure of sexual orientation and the perceived sexual orientation of their interlocutor. Similarly, individuals identifying as lesbian or gay occasionally altered their vocalizations to obscure their sexual orientation, thereby evading stigma associated with essentialist ideas[47]. This indicates that individuals select their linguistic expression of sexuality based on the social setting. Social environments are highly diverse and shaped by the social identities individuals may possess, which then perceptions of swearing in various contexts are influenced by their social identity[48]. Social identity theory posits that several facets of identity interact with the environment to elucidate swearing behaviors, indicating that a qualitative approach is most suitable for explaining this process.

3.2. Online disinhibition effect

The online disinhibition effect, as per Suler[49], elucidates how individuals exhibit greater self-expression online owing to diminished societal limitations, covering both constructive and detrimental actions. This phenomenon is shaped by six interrelated factors: (1) dissociative anonymity, facilitating the distinction between online and offline identities; (2) invisibility, which eliminates physical indicators; (3) asynchronicity, which precludes instantaneous responses; (4) solipsistic introjection, leading to the formation of fictitious identities; (5) dissociative imagination, perceiving online engagements as a separate fantasy domain; and (6) minimization of status and authority, diminishing dependence on offline social indicators. Studies associate the adverse effects of disinhibition with detrimental online behaviors, including cyberbullying[50,51], particularly on social media platforms[52]. There is a connection between online disinhibition and the norms of game culture that are conducive to negative behavior. This facilitates a scenario in which players may engage in negative conduct considering lacking enjoyment, value, or endorsement of such actions[53]. An examination of the empirical research indicates that toxic online disinhibition serves as a mediator in the committing an act of cyberbullying and cyberhate[54,55], particularly when hate components or contributing factors are present in online interactions[56].

3.3. Social cognitive theory

Social cognitive theory, in conjunction with its predecessor, social learning theory, provides a fundamental framework for understanding the impact of video games on behavior[57]. This theory posits that

individuals acquire knowledge not solely through personal experiences but also through vicarious learning, which occurs by observing others and the consequences of their actions[58-60]. This form of observational learning allows individuals to establish behavioral guidelines without direct experience, as demonstrated by Bandura's claim that a significant portion of behavior is acquired through modeling. Social cognitive theory highlights the concept of triadic reciprocal causation, illustrating how personal, behavioral, and environmental factors engage in a bidirectional interaction that influences behavior[61]. The influence of each factor may fluctuate based on the specific context and the individual involved, with one factor potentially superseding another. The theory emphasizes various human capacities, including the ability to symbolize and understand relationships, self-regulation through setting objectives and anticipation, reflective thinking on thoughts and actions, and experiential learning derived from observing the behaviors of others and their outcomes[58,61-64]. For example, individuals, like children and adolescents, have the capacity to acquire behaviors from video game characters, particularly when those characters are depicted as receiving rewards or possessing appealing traits[60].

4. Methods

4.1. Research design

This paper was an exploratory study that discussed the prevalence of swear words in MLBB gaming platform. Exploratory studies are expected to answer a question or understand a phenomenon[65-67] like the emergence of MLBB gaming among Filipinos and the prevalence of swear words in the platform. In social sciences, *exploration* follows rigorous and organized procedures that are strategically organized to enhance the recognition of primary patterns, which in turn facilitates the understanding and documentation of elements within social or psychological phenomena[68-70]. Because exploration gains insight about a phenomenon, it is sometimes expected to contribute to the formulation of hypotheses based on its findings[71]. While some may regard exploratory studies as lacking in scientific rigor, normative perspectives suggest that these studies hold significant value by enabling researchers to comprehend the problem and collect preliminary data efficiently[72,73]. This paper believed that exploring this phenomenon contributes to understanding of communication patterns within digital communities, potentially shedding light on the psychological and social implications of gaming interactions.

4.2. Participants and sampling

Exploratory studies commonly have small number of sample size[74]. In these types of studies, a focus is often placed on a more specific, smaller group to facilitate an in-depth investigation of the key variables and how they interact[75]. Exploratory designs generally prepare a flexible number of participants, primarily based on how these participants can help in addressing the research questions[65]. Marshall et al.[76] suggested that between 15 and 20 participants be included in single case-study designs, which concentrate on a detailed review of a single instance, incident, or situation. Given the exploratory nature of this study, which seeks to understand the experiences of MLBB players, a small number of participants is justifiable. There were 16 MLBB players from Iloilo City purposively sampled to be interviewed in this study. Purposive sampling is a non-probability method that allows deliberate selection of participants based on characteristics or attributes pertinent to the research inquiry[77-79]. The researcher identifies the necessary information and actively seeks individuals possessing relevant experience or knowledge[80-82]. Purposive sampling offers the flexibility necessary to meet the evolving characteristics of exploratory research, allowing researchers to adjust their sampling criteria in connection with emerging concepts while conducting the study[83,84]. In selecting the participants, a small-scale online survey using Google Forms was conducted to find MLBB players locally. This survey was designed to gather essential demographic and behavioral data from potential participants,

including their age, sex, and education level. It also collected information on their gaming habits, such as the number of hours they spend playing MLBB and their recent engagement in the use of swear words These criteria were chosen to ensure the sample size presented different backgrounds and playing experiences.

4.3. Research instrument

In a qualitative study, the key determinants influencing the quality and reliability are the designed approaches applied for data collection[85-87]. Interviews represent a more organic and less structured method of data collection, which can significantly deepen the awareness of the phenomena being investigation[88]. The individual interview has been planned to be adaptable and flexible, enabling participants to articulate their viewpoints, highlight concerns, and adapt the interview content as needed[89]. Although the preliminary answers might be surface-level, it is necessary to explore further in order to obtain an in-depth awareness of the respondents' values, perspectives, experiences, and related aspects[89-92]. To ensure a systematic interview process[89], a semi-structured interview guide was developed. An interview guide consists of straightforward questions, themes, and subjects that the investigator aims to examine throughout the interview process. It functions as a structured framework to make certain that all pertinent elements are addressed and that the required information is obtained from the participants[93]. This study adapted the process described by Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, and Kangasniemi[87] in developing interview guide questions (**Figure 1**).
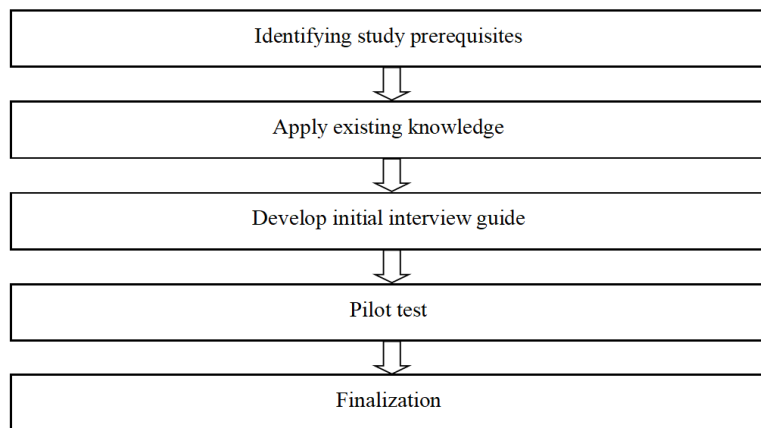
Figure 1. Interview guide development.

The researchers identified the potential participants to be interviewed, gathered initial data of their online gaming experience in MLBB, and determine their engagement in the use of swear words. An initial interview guide was designed and validated by a panel consist of researchers in the field of language education, psychology, and communication. Suggestions were sought from them after pilot testing the interview guide. Finally, the interview guide used in one-on-one interview is presented in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Interview guide questions.

Objectives	Interview Questions
To explore the linguistic patterns and variations in the use of swear words among MLBB players	a. Can you describe the types of swear words you frequently encounter or use while playing Mobile Legends? Are they in your native language, English, or a mix of both? b. Do you notice any differences in the way swear words are used by players from different regions or cultures in the game? Can you provide some examples? c. How do you think the choice of swear words changes depending on the intensity of the game or the actions of other players? d. Are there any unique or creative swear words or phrases you've heard in Mobile Legends that stand out to you? What makes them distinctive? e. Do you think the use of swear words varies depending on the player's role or character in the game? How so?

Objectives		Interview Questions
To assess the impact of swear word usage on player interactions and communication dynamics in MLBB	a.	How do you feel when you encounter, or use swear words in Mobile Legends? Do they affect your mood or gameplay experience?
	b.	Can you share a situation where the use of swear words significantly changed the interaction between players during a match?
	c.	Do you think the use of swear words influences the level of teamwork and cooperation among players? If so, how?
	d.	In your experience, how do other players typically respond to swear words during a match? Does it lead to more aggressive communication or other types of reactions?
	e.	How does the use of swear words in Mobile Legends compare to other online games you play? Does it impact the overall communication dynamics differently?

Table 1. (*Continued*)

4.4. Data gathering procedure

Narrative data from one-on-one interview was the primary data in this study. Interviews are a method of actively listening to and interpreting individuals' narratives. Narratives have functioned as a method for individuals to extract meaning from their experiences, providing a structure in knowing their behaviors[94,95]. Interviews serve as a prevalent method in phenomenological research to explore the real-life experiences of individual participants[96]. Qualitative interviewing can be characterized as an in-depth approach that employs semi-structured or loosely structured formats for conducting interviews[97]. In conducting interviews, studies followed same process of interviewing such as establishing their objectives, identify and select participants, discussion of the study purpose to participants, confidentiality, and data distribution, asking thematic questions during interviews, have follow-up questions, and making finalizing the interview[98]. Qualitative interviews should be carried out in a way that feels natural and informal, similar to casual conversations[97], while also maintaining a greater degree of organization and thorough planning[99].
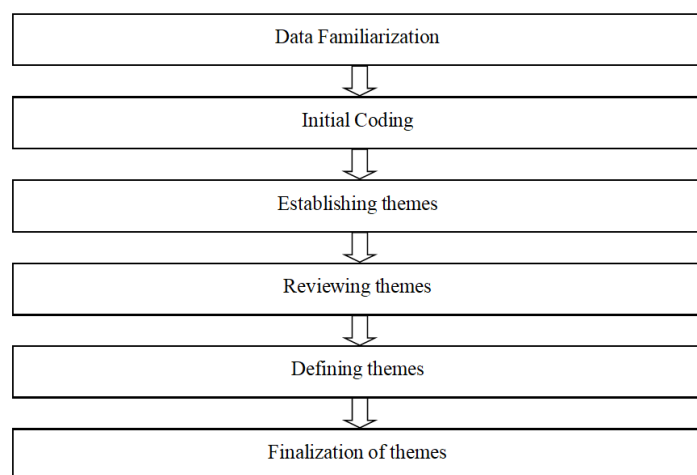
The interview process for this study followed standard qualitative procedures. First, the objectives were clearly established, and participants were carefully selected based on their relevance to the research focus. The purpose of the study was explained to participants, along with assurances regarding confidentiality and how the data would be used. During the interviews, thematic questions were asked to guide the conversation, followed by relevant follow-up questions to expand the topics being discussed. The language barrier posed a significant challenge during the interview process. To address this issue, participants were encouraged to speak in their preferred language or dialect, allowing them to express themselves more comfortably and naturally. With the permission from the participants, the entire interview process was recorded using phone recorder, and preliminary notes were taken using Microsoft Excel to help organize key points during the interviews.

4.5. Data analysis

Exploration demands an in-depth investigation of the relationships and contexts surrounding the ideas presented. Given the emphasis of flexibility in exploration, thematic analysis can be carried out to explore contents behind the narrative data. Thematic analysis allows for flexibility in identifying patterns within data related to the participants' personal experiences, opinions, standpoints, actions, and behaviors[100,101]. This approach is especially valuable for carrying out "experiential" research focused on understanding the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors of participants[102]. The goal of this study was to identify themes, and the accessibility of thematic analysis facilitated the researchers' engagement with the data; while the inherent flexibility of the method allowed for the evolution of their process of analysis as new themes and patterns surfaced.

Reflexive thematic analysis, through inductive method, was carried out to explore the experiences of MLBB players in online interactions. Reflexive thematic analysis is characterized by its emphasis on the researcher's influence in the final review of the findings[103], *i.e.,* the analysis is influenced by the subjectivity of the researcher, rather than being obstructed by it[104]. Reflexive thematic analysis, in contrast to other methodologies that seek to maintain an unbiased interpretation, involves the researcher engaging with the results in a manner that is guided by their specific research question. Given this, Terry and Hayfield[104] argued that due to the inherent flexibility of thematic analysis, this helps the researcher to establish their perspective on the data and its implications for the research. Nonetheless, this does not imply that reflexive thematic analysis is inherently 'biased,' as it also embodies a degree of subjectivity in the analytical process. An inductive approach was employed to minimize potential bias in data interpretation. An inductive approach to data processing involves starting out with specific observations and utilizing them to formulate broader conclusions. This approach is characterized by its foundation in the data, initiating the process from actual experiences rather than relying on pre-existing theories or hypotheses[105]. The codes and themes are generated based on the data itself, which ensures that the analysis is closely aligned with the data's substance, guiding the trajectory of an exploratory study, hence, reducing potential bias. Braun and Clarke[106] established guidelines for reflexive thematic analysis to ensure flexibility in analyzing qualitative data, and as shown in **Figure 2**, the process is iterative, allowing researchers to refine their ideas by revisiting previous phases.

Data Familiarization

Initial Coding

Establishing themes

Reviewing themes

Defining themes

Finalization of themes

Figure 2. Six phases of reflexive thematic analysis.

5. Results

Objective 1: To explore the linguistic patterns and variations in the use of swear words among MLBB players.

Theme 1: Code-switching

A recurring pattern is the use of swear words in multiple languages, depending on the player's native language or the international nature of the match. Players often switch between languages like Filipino, English, and regional dialects when expressing frustration, combining swear words to suit the intensity of the situation.

"Most I encountered if common terms include vulgarities related to frustration
or insults, like *idiot* or more explicit terms."

> "For me every player from different regions or cultures has their own unique ways of swearing. For example, Filipino players might use more regional languages, while foreign players might stick to English."

For example, *bobo* (idiot) from Filipino or *Anjing* (dog) from Indonesian may be used interchangeably with English swear words like *noob* to convey similar insults. MLBB players tend to use swear words in the language they are most accustomed to; however, they may switch to English swear words when they believe their opponents are from other countries.

> "Some might use phrases or words that are more culturally specific."

> "When players have opponents from other country, they use English swear words like *idiot* or *negro* to insult others."

> "For example, among Filipinos, for native language like reverse words *obob mo* means *bobo mo*."

> "Players from English-speaking regions might use terms like *noob*, while players from other regions might use equivalent terms in their languages, like *bobo* in Filipino which means *idiot*."

> "For the foreign language (like Indonesian) *Anjing* (dog), *goblok* (stupid). The language definitely varies depending on where people are from."

Theme 2: Swearing as Humor

Players often create unique or humorous variations of swear words to bypass language filters or add irony to their insults. Some reverse words or mix languages to avoid detection, creating a distinctive form of communication. Some MLBB players said that swearing is *fun* and often used in a *casual way*. Players do this to avoid being detected by the community guidelines of the platform. The humor in using swear words was described as *witty*, *unexpected*, and *original*, which also explains why swearing is prevalent in the platform.

> "Swear words are mostly used in a fun, casual way."

> "You might have come across some distinctive swear words or phrases that use humor with insult. These stand out because they break the norm or are particularly witty or unexpected."

> "Some creative or unique phrases might be used humorously or ironically, adding a distinctive touch to the communication. These can be memorable due to their originality or the context in which they are used."

Theme 3: Role-specific Swearing

MLBB players also explained that swear words escalate based on the roles of the players. Generally, players swear because of the intensity of the game and one of their teammates committed a mistake which gave their opponents a clear advantage. This phenomenon was linked to the inability of a player to perform their role in the team.

> "The intensity of the game and players' actions can influence the use of swear words. Players might use stronger language in high-stress situations or when frustrated by poor performance or perceived mistakes."

"…if we're losing or if someone makes a big mistake the language can get a lot
more heated."

For example, in early game, jungle (core or carry roles) should be able to secure the objectives to help their teammates gain extra gold. When the team jungle was not able to secure the *turtle*, they often being insulted and mocked.

"Sometimes the cores that did not tear the objectives will also be insulted by
your team."

"When I wasn't able to secure the turtle, my teammates insult me saying *you
need to practice more* or *slow retribution*."

Similarly, other roles like mage and tanks should be able to rotate across the map to help their teammates gain advantage against their lane opponents. In cases where they cannot perform their roles, their teammates will insult them saying *they don't know how to rotate*. Their role in early game is important to help their teammates gain gold.

"There are also mage and tanks who do not know how to rotate. So, it very
much depends on your role."

Others also mentioned being able to gather enough gold to be ready for the late game. Having an advantage in an early game is necessary to perform well in the late game. In that case, when the tank, mage, and jungle were able to perform their role in early game, they expect their side-laners to gain enough gold, otherwise, they insult them as *baog* or *obob*. It appears that swear words also escalate when others cannot perform their responsibility.

"If you are *baog* (unable to gather gold) in your right lane, you will be insulted
right away."

"Players in leadership roles might use language differently compared to those
in more passive roles, possibly reflecting their level of frustration or responsibility."

Others also mentioned how other roles were being insulted in the game. For example, when the late game came, it is the responsibility of the marksman to carry the team to victory. When their team marksman is not strong enough to take down enemies, players express their thoughts through swearing.

"Mostly, marksman users get harsh words because the late game depends on
them."

Objective 2: To assess the impact of swear word usage on player interactions and communication dynamics in MLBB.

Theme 1: Frustration

Most MLBB players feel frustrated when they encounter other players using swear words during gameplay. They explained that it affects their *mood* ang *gaming experience* which causes them to quit playing. MLBB players expressed their concerns about how they were able to express their feelings using swear words. This sometimes makes the platform *frustrating* and *toxic*.

"It affects my mood and my game experience it can be heated and make me
frustrated making it loose interest in gaming."

"For me encountering or using swear words can affect mood and gameplay
experience."

"You might find that encountering or using swear words can affect your mood by making you more frustrated."

"Sometimes when I am told hurtful words like *bobo mo quit kana* (idiot, just quit) I don't pay attention because when I pay attention, they become more aggressive with their actions but sometimes when it is too much it hurts."

"You might find that encountering or using swear words can affect your mood by making you more frustrated."

"Sometimes it gets personal with players due to the fact they don't know how to control their own tone and wording, I find it frustrating why these players do such actions in game."

The intensity of the game also influenced the emotions of the players. For them, it could be the game itself is what making the platform *harsh* and *toxic*. For example, players feel frustrated when other players underperform while they are doing their best to help their teammates.

"The choice of swear words often escalates with the intensity of the game. If the match is particularly frustrating or if another player is underperforming, harsher language might come out. The stress of the game can definitely influence the choice and frequency of swear words."

"In my experience, compared to Honor of Kings online games there is not much cursing or the swear words used, only in ML, there are many toxic players."

Theme 2: Aggressiveness

When swearing begins, it can escalate simple disagreements into heated arguments, as seen in players' experiences. This use of aggressive language not only amplifies frustration but also *disrupts team dynamics*, leading to a *breakdown in communication*, *focus*, and *cooperation*. The escalation of tension often results in a toxic environment that negatively affects morale and gameplay.

"There may have been situations were swearing significantly altered player interactions. For example, a heated exchange might escalate into a full-blown argument."

"It does indeed lead to a more aggressive communication and at the same time boosts the person's frustration."

"When the conflicts or affect team dynamics, such as leading to arguments or impacting team morale during a match."

"Yes, it can disrupt focus and teamwork, leading to a toxic environment."

Players note that this shift in tone, triggered by swearing, can lead to more aggressive behaviors, particularly in highly competitive matches. Thus, swearing is seen not just as a personal expression of frustration, but as a factor that influences the overall atmosphere and player relationships during the game.

"The overall tone of the game can shift depending on how players react to the initial outburst."

"…they often lead to more aggressive behavior."

"…in some games, the competitive nature might make swearing more common."

Theme 3: Teamwork

In the context of the influence of swear words to teamwork, there was divergence on the perceptions of the players. Swearing in *MLBB* gaming has a complex influence on both gameplay and teamwork.

> "Sometimes, it can even affect your gameplay, either distracting you or motivating you to perform better."

> "Whenever it gets personal, the game rises to the occasion which is quite beneficial for both sides but at the same time it's quite disturbing for some players who aren't comfortable with these situations."

For example, players perceive swearing as a positive aspect of human interaction in some contexts, where the use of strong language can serve as a motivational tool or emotional outlet. In competitive environments like MLBB, swearing can heighten the intensity of the game, pushing players to focus more and perform better under pressure.

> "…sometimes saying hurtful words is a strategy to help your teammates and win."

Swearing can be distracting, disrupting communication and cooperation, which can lead to a breakdown in teamwork and create a hostile environment. This hostile atmosphere can negatively affect team performance, as frequent use of hurtful language often causes players to disengage or become frustrated.

> "Swearing can definitely influence teamwork. If one player starts swearing, it might lead to a breakdown in communication and cooperation."

> "Frequent use of swear words might negatively influence teamwork and cooperation, creating a hostile environment that can detract from team cooperating."

6. Discussion

Objective 1: To explore the linguistic patterns and variations in the use of swear words among MLBB players.

Codeswitching

Codeswitching refers to the phenomenon where a speaker makes use of two or more different languages within a single interaction[107,108]. Codeswitching represents a dynamic phenomenon in linguistic behavior, characterized by the change of language use in response to contextual factors. This practice manifests not only between distinct languages but also among different variations within a single language[109]. In this paper, codeswitching was also evident in playing MLBB. Players frequently switched between languages, often seamlessly, during gameplay to adapt to different social and situational contexts, like using swear words. For example, players use their native language when communicating with teammates who share the same linguistic background, especially for casual or emotionally charged interactions like swearing. However, when interacting with international players or opponents, they often switched to English or another globally recognized language to ensure that their messages, including insults or frustrations, were understood across linguistic boundaries.

Kamwangamalu[110] also shared a similar interpretation of codeswitching in sociolinguistics. Apparently, when a speaker switches languages during a conversation, it can indicate shifts in formality, social relationships, or emotional intensity. This helps listeners understand the context or intention behind what is being said, even if it's not explicitly stated. Dewaele[11] and Pavlenko[112] believed that the first language is

frequently linked to feelings. Dewaele[113] found that individuals preferred communicating in their first language when using profanity, and that swear words in the first language carry greater emotional significance compared to those in the second language or the foreign language. Second language users substitute profanity words for their first language due to cultural and social factors[114]. This emotional disinhibition can lead to a greater propensity for swearing among gamers, particularly when their extensive socialization and regular language use foster a comfort level that encourages the use of profanity in group settings. As players engage in codeswitching, they not only navigate linguistic boundaries but also embrace a level of emotional openness that reflects the disinhibition effect, further enriching their gaming experience and communication dynamics. This can be ascribed to their extensive socialization and regular use of other languages, resulting in the usage of swear words for interacting with a certain group of interlocutors.

Swearing as Humor

It is definitely not a new phenomenon that swearing transcends into humor. Swear words are sometimes employed in "intentionally offensive artistic actions"—acts that are designed to provoke, shock, or entertain through the deliberate use of profanity[115]. These actions can be understood as a form of practical joke, where the offensiveness is not meant to cause harm but to play with social boundaries and norms[69]. The idea here is that these jokes or actions rely on basic, often instinctual, mental imagery to create an impact. In the context of MLBB gaming, the players also experience similar sociolinguistic phenomenon when encountering profanity in online interactions. One player said that there are "*...distinctive swear words or phrases that use humor with insult...they break the norm or are particularly witty or unexpected.*" Essentially, swear words, when used in these artistic or comedic contexts, tap into deeply ingrained cognitive associations to create a specific emotional or psychological reaction in the audience. Offensiveness becomes a tool for humor or artistic expression, drawing on universal human experiences or perceptions. This phenomenon aligns with the description and definition provided by Love[116], which characterizes swearing as predominantly offensive and rude, yet occasionally humorous and entertaining.

Humor was found to be one of the major functions of swearing in online platforms. For example, Hapsari and Pramana[117] conducted a study on using swear words in X (former Twitter). In their study, swear words (like ass) is repurposed as a comedic device, where its typical connotations are softened and shifted toward humor. In a post *"removed that large ass excel file,"* the word *ass* is used humorously, not as an expression of frustration or aggression but as a metaphor. The user is not directing the term toward anyone or anything specific but rather using it to exaggerate or emphasize the size of an Excel file. Similar phenomenon was observed in this study among MLBB players, but with subtle difference. Considering social cognitive theory, the adaptive use of language in response to community guidelines highlights the fluidity of communication. Players creatively manipulate swear words, employing euphemisms or playful alterations (like reversing letters) to circumvent moderation systems while maintaining the humorous intent behind their language. Players might use less explicit forms of swearing, reverse the order of letters (like obob) or representations (8080 for "bobo") in offensive words, or use regional slang that is less likely to be detected by automatic moderation systems. This paper posits that swear words are *inherently adaptive*, shaped by the context and environment in which they are expressed. Language is fluid, and the use of profanity often reflects the specific social, cultural, and situational dynamics of a given setting.

Role-specific Swearing

Swearing can serve a practical, goal-oriented function in certain contexts, particularly when the speaker intends to achieve specific task-focused objectives[31]. People use profanity intentionally within professional contexts, such as to capture focus, to emphasize the significance of specific tasks, and to expedite the

completion of objectives[118]. In their study, female participants demonstrated an understanding of the varying perceptions and usage of profanity between men and women. They also admitted to deliberately employing profanity, particularly in industries where men are the majority, to establish a more masculine image and exhibit resilience. Similarly, Khaat traders in marketplaces deliberately use profanity extensively to accomplish strategic objectives during negotiations about prices and to assert their identities as "authentic" traders and members of the market culture[119]. Swearing is predominantly observed in internal, informal interactions among close colleagues and is infrequently directed towards unfamiliar colleagues, unless it serves a particular strategic objective[31]. This paper supports the idea that profanity, when used purposefully and within context, can be used as tool for achieving specific goals (like winning online games and asserting authority. For example, one player said that *"...players in leadership roles might use [profane] language differently...possibly reflecting their level of frustration or responsibility."* In MLBB gaming, however, players were anonymous most of the time which makes the swearing more intense than that of organization and professional setting, where accountability and social norms typically moderate language use. It was evident that swear words generally emerged when their teammates committed a mistake that gave an advantage to their opponents. This study found that swear words did not typically appear randomly or without cause; rather, they were directly tied to the competitive and high-stakes nature of the game. In the study of Wilson and Wedlock[120], findings suggest that swearing in a rugby team is contextually appropriate, intensifying action and develops team solidarity, while rarely being used to insult. Just as the word *fucking* is used in rugby to emphasize control acts, encouragement, and team solidarity rather than simply to insult, MLBB players also employ profanity to express frustration, motivate teammates, or emphasize the significance of mistakes that affect the game's outcome.

Objective 2: To assess the impact of swear word usage on player interactions and communication dynamics in MLBB.

Frustration

Profanity and certain expressions elicit simultaneous physiological responses in the speaker, while also producing adverse psychological impacts on the recipient[121]. Galinato et al.[12] recent investigation revealed that a significant number of online insults consist of curse phrases or words, and they do have a notable emotional impact on human social interactions in the digital age. Research indicates that, over time, there has been a significant increase in the prevalence of negative emotions and the emotionally charged context of online messages that include swear words[123] which is then being correlated with heightened levels of toxicity in human behavior[121]. For example, X users who encounter toxic responses have an increased tendency to exhibit feelings of anger, sadness, and anxiety in contrast to those who do not experience such replies[124]. MLBB players also react similarly to this interaction when they observe the use of profanity in online gaming. For them, profanity *"affects mood and game experience...and make [players] frustrated making [them] loose interest in gaming."* Notably, players who are the direct targets of swear words tend to experience frustration and emotional distress compared to their teammates. This is likely due to the *personal nature* of the insults, which can escalate negative emotions and create hostile and uncomfortable gaming environment for the targeted individual. One player experienced being said *obob quit kana* (idiot, quit gaming), and *"when it is too much it hurts."* In X, users are less likely to feel personally attacked in larger toxic threads, but direct toxic replies to their main posts can cause more anxiety, as these are perceived as personal attacks[124]. Similar to this, MLBB players likely perceive direct, individual insults as more personal and emotionally impactful. When players are targeted with toxic language in a one-on-one context, it intensifies their emotional response, leading to greater anxiety and frustration compared to indirect, broader forms of swearing (like *obob nyo*).

Aggressiveness

In psychological research, the use of swear words emerges as a notable instance of verbal aggression, particularly in contexts involving verbal bullying[125,126]. Several studies noted the social impacts of swear words and its proliferation on human interactions. The consequences include damage to interpersonal connections, which may result in social isolation[127], increased conflict and tension during social contacts[126], and the impairment of effective communication[128]. Apparently, verbal aggression is a communication behavior that seeks to undermine an individual's self-perception in order to cause psychological distress and diminish their positive self-image[125;129]. Online aggression occurs when users, especially those with limited language competence, use verbal attacks, sarcasm, and insults to express themselves more forcefully[130]. In this paper, it was found that MLBB players frequently engage in the use of profanity, especially in moments when in-game tensions escalate. What often begins as casual or playful banter can quickly turn into heated exchanges, where players become more aggressive in their language. As emotions rise, the use of swear words intensifies, leading to full-blown arguments between players. Even though this behavior can escalate quickly in unregulated online spaces[131;132], aggressiveness remains common in MLBB gaming despite community guidelines against profanity. It turns out that community guidelines alone were insufficient to encourage players to consistently uphold responsible and respectful speech within the gaming environment. This phenomenon typically sparked from game-related frustrations—such as teammates making mistakes, poor performance, or perceived unfairness from opponents—which provoke an emotional response, manifesting through aggressive language. Over time, this pattern of profanity can create a toxic in-game environment, where players not only vent their frustrations but also contribute to an overall hostile atmosphere that impacts the team's cohesion and communication.

Teamwork

Fiore et al.[133] underscore the importance of effective communication in the development of strong interpersonal relationships, which are essential for successful team collaboration. In the review of Lee et al.[134], the disruptive behaviors observed, commonly because of frustration, were considered unacceptable or inappropriate, as they had the potential to hinder teamwork, impair communication, and undermine psychological safety. Studies on healthcare leadership argued that the negative emotions encountered by health professionals are primarily due to disruptive behavior within the workplace[135-137]. A diverging result was discovered in this study analyzing the perceptions of MLBB players in the proliferation of swear words in the gaming platform. For instance, while some players believed that the use of swear words was detrimental to the overall gaming experience—creating a hostile and toxic environment that undermined teamwork and sportsmanship—others viewed it as an integral part of the competitive atmosphere. These players argued that swearing often served as a tool for emotional release, helping to alleviate in-game frustration and, in certain cases, motivating players to perform better. This is not new perspective in sociolinguistic studies as profanity can be linked to leadership[138], solidarity[138], and honesty[139]. It is possible that swear words in MLBB gaming have positive impact on teamwork as profanity can help in making communication effective[9] and convincing[34].

In contrast, most players stressed the swear words are bad in teamwork as it disrupts the communication process[141] and induces negative emotional state[142]. While profanity might be useful in certain contexts, particularly for individuals who see it as a form of emotional release or to motivate their team, it is still unclear to what extent these potential benefits outweigh the negative consequences.

It remained ambiguous how frequently swearing contributes to positive teamwork outcomes in MLBB gaming, and further research is needed to explore when and how profanity either enhances or undermines

team dynamics. This ambivalence underscored the need to examine individual differences in how players perceive and react to swearing to understand its impact on team communication and performance.

7. Limitations

The study presented several limitations that should be acknowledged for future research endeavors. One significant limitation was the reliance on self-reported data, which may be subject to biases, including social desirability or selective memory. Players may underreport or misrepresent their use of swear words or the emotions associated with them, leading to inaccuracies in understanding the true dynamics of communication within MLBB. To mitigate this, future studies could incorporate a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative measures such as content analysis of in-game chat logs to obtain a more comprehensive view of language use. Moreover, the focus on a single gaming context—MLBB—may limit the generalizability of its findings to other online gaming environments or social interactions. Future research should explore swearing in a variety of gaming contexts to establish whether the identified patterns are consistent across different platforms or if they vary significantly based on the game's structure and culture. Furthermore, while the study discusses the emotional impact of swearing, it does not deeply investigate individual differences among players, such as their backgrounds, cultural contexts, or personal attitudes toward profanity. Future studies should consider these variables to enhance the understanding of how different player demographics influence the perception and impact of swear words. Lastly, the implications of community guidelines against swearing were mentioned but not thoroughly explored. Understanding how these regulations affect player behavior and communication dynamics could provide valuable insights for developers and educators seeking to develop healthier gaming environments. By addressing these limitations, future research can build an in-depth understanding of linguistic patterns and their implications within online gaming communities.

8. Conclusion

This study analyzed the linguistic patterns and impacts of swear words among MLBB players, revealing both positive and negative implications of profanity in gaming. Players often codeswitch between languages, using their native tongue or English to communicate emotions, including frustration or humor. Swearing also serves diverse functions, from expressing emotional release to enhancing humor and, in some cases, strengthening team solidarity. However, the proliferation of swear words in online gaming also had significant consequences. While it may uphold short-term teamwork or emotional relief, the majority of players in this study emphasized its disruptive effects on communication and the negative emotional impact it has on the gaming environment. The findings showed that profanity can both enhance and undermine team dynamics, with its influence being context-dependent.

The results of this study indicate the need for a more elaborate understanding of profanity present in online gaming settings. While community guidelines exist to discourage aggressive language, these measures are often insufficient in regulating player behavior. The study highlights the importance of educating players, especially younger ones, about responsible language use and digital etiquette. Furthermore, developers and community moderators might benefit from considering the context in which profanity occurs, creating more sophisticated tools to distinguish between playful banter and harmful aggression. Educators and sociolinguistic researchers can use this study to explore the role of language in shaping social interactions in digital spaces.

Several limitations need to be addressed. First, the study's sample is restricted to MLBB players, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other gaming platforms. Second, the analysis primarily relies

on self-reported perceptions, which may introduce bias or underreport the extent of negative impacts. Lastly, the complex relationship between swearing, teamwork, and emotional responses requires further investigation to identify the specific conditions under which profanity is beneficial or harmful. More empirical data is needed to better understand the long-term effects of swear words on team dynamics, player behavior, and overall gaming experience.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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