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SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES
DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES

IMAGINING PREJUDICE PREDICTION MODELS FOR SOCIAL MEDIA RESEARCH BY EXAMINING THE CASE OF VENEZUELAN GOLD FARMERS THROUGH A NEO-TRIBAL PERSPECTIVE ON REDDIT

DORUK DOĞAN

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR. ÖZEN BAŞ

MASTER'S DEGREE

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This study, titled **Imagining Prejudice Prediction Models for Social Media Research by Examining The Case of Venezuelan Gold Farmers Through a Neo-Tribal Perspective on Reddit**, prepared by **DORUK DOĞAN**, was deemed successful with the **UNANIMOUS** as a result of the thesis defense examination held on the **29 JULY 2021** and approved as a **MASTER'S DEGREE THESIS** by our jury.

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_____

PROFESSOR DOCTOR MEHMET TIMUR AYDEMIR

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Imagining Prejudice Prediction Models for Social Media Research by Examining the Case of Venezuelan Gold Farmers Through a Neo-Tribal Perspective on Reddit

ABSTRACT

Reddit is an online social media website with an emphasis on link sharing where users organize themselves according to their interests into online communities. The upvote/downvote mechanism of Reddit allows its users to rank the submissions they see. Subreddits contain the most recent topic the community discusses as well as the shared experiences of the community. One such community is r/2007scape, a gaming subreddit for Old School Runescape (OSRS). Venezuela has been amid a deep economic crisis since 2015. High inflation rate has rendered the domestic currency Bolivar valueless, and Venezuelans have turned to ventures where they can earn foreign currency to survive. This study examines the virtual 'service economy' of OSRS where Venezuelans earn foreign currencies by selling in-game wealth to other players from the perspective of Reddit users. Thematic analysis guides this research to make sense of disorganized sentiments to derive meaning from them. This method of analysis has been chosen not only for its analytical versatility, but also due to the versatility in the Reddit dataset. By analysing the comments in the 15 most popular Reddit posts within a 5-year period since the start of the Venezuelan economic crisis, this research examines the formation and the sustainment of the anti-Venezuelan sentiments within the community. The analysis suggests that the sentiments toward Venezuelan players are formed by identifying gameplay behavior(s) of Venezuelan players and attributing the sources of the concerns the players have about the game to the behaviors of the Venezuelan players, effectively making them scapegoats and easy targets of scrutiny. However, the overall sentiments of the users toward Venezuelans are positive as evidenced by the scores of the comments. Then, whether the findings of this research can be useful in creating a prejudice prediction model for social media research is discussed.

Keywords: Social Media, Digital Communities, Reddit, Video Games, Social Domination Ordinance, Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Prejudice

Reddit'te Venezuelalı Altın Çiftçileri Hakkındaki Söylemlerin Neo-Kabile Bakış Açısıyla İncelenmesiyle Sosyal Medya Araştırmalarında Kullanılabilecek Bir Önyargı Öngörü Modeli Tasarımı

ÖZET

Reddit kullanıcıların kendi çevrimiçi topluluklarını oluşturup topluluklara katılabilecekleri bir websitesidir. Kullanıcıların ilgi alanlarından oluşan bu topluluklar kendi içlerinde tartışmalar yapabilir ve bağlantılar paylaşabilirler. Reddit'in upvote/downvote mekanizması kullanıcılarına paylaşımları değerlendirip sıralama imkanı sunar, böylelikle bir subreddit'in anasayfasına bakmak kişiye en güncel konuları ve paylaşılan deneyimleri görme imkanı sağlar. Bu çevrimiçi topluluklardan biri de r/2007scape, popular bir video oyununun subreddit'i. Venezuela 2015'ten beri derin bir ekonomik kriz halinde. Yüksek enflasyon oranı yerli para Bolivar'I değersiz kıldı, bu nedenle Venezuelalılar hayatta kalabilmek için yabancı para kazanabilecekleri fırsat arayışına girdiler. Bu çalışma Venezuelalıların yabancı para kazandıkları OSRS'in dijital "hizmet ekonomisi"'ni Reddit kullanıcılarının bakış açısından inceler. Bu çalışma düzensiz yaklaşımlara anlam verebilmek için tematik analiz yöntemini kullanır. Bu analiz yöntemi hem analitik açıdan çok yönlü olması nedeniyle hem de Reddit verisinin çok yönlü olması nedeniyle seçilmiştir. Bu çalışma Venezuela'daki ekonomik krizin başlamasından sonraki 5 yıllık süre dilimi içinde konuyla ilgili en çok puan almış 15 gönderinin yorumlarını analiz ederek bu toplulukta ortaya çıkıp yer edinmiş Venezuelalı karşıtı tavırları inceler. Bulgular Venezuelalı oyuncuların belli davranışlarla bağdaştırılması sonucu topluluk içinde suçlanması kolay hedefler haline geldiğini gösterir. Buna ragmen, yorumların puanları ve yaklaşımlarından da görülebileceği üzere bu topluluğun Venezuelalı oyuncular karşı duruşu pozitiftir. Son olarak bu çalışma bulgularının iki önyargı tahmin modelinden hangisine daha çok uyduğu tartışılır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyal Medya, Dijital Topluluklar, Reddit, Video Oyunları, Social Domination Ordinance, Right-Wing Authoritarianism, Önyargı

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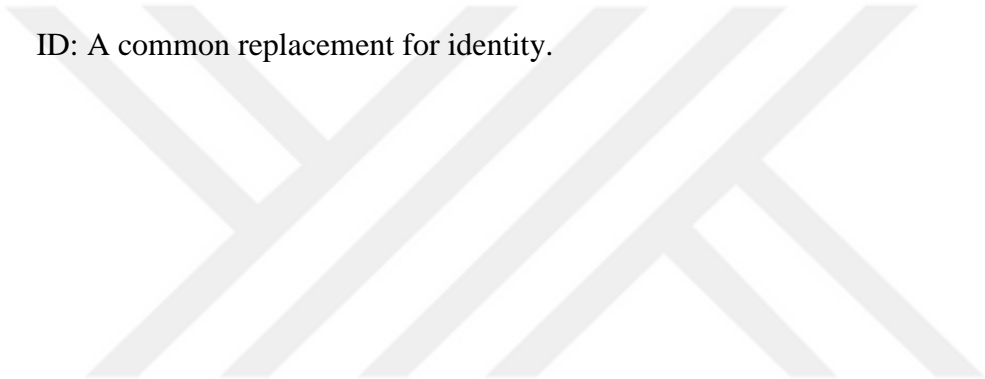# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

OSRS: Old-School Runescape

RWT: Real World Trading

ToS: Terms of Service

Bots: These refer to automated programs used to automate tasks in order to simulate playing the game on an avatar.

QoL: Quality of Life

ID: A common replacement for identity.

1.INTRODUCTION

Video gaming communities can be said to be one of the more passionate and devoted types of communities that can be found in digital communities. Often, members of the community that take the time to contribute to the discussion, whether it be through criticisms, fanarts or suggestions are those that have consumed the medium to such an extent that their consumption of the media becomes an important part of their identities. These consumers are considered to be a part of the fandom of a video game, not much different than the fandoms of other types of media such as movies like Star Wars, tabletop games like Dungeons and Dragons, and trading card games like Magic the Gathering. Conventions are held for fandoms by organizers, either independently of the creators of the fandom product or by the creators as a community event. One such example is the New York Comic Con, where in 2018 an estimated 250,000 people attended the event to get together with fellow fans and express their enjoyment of the media they consume. (Anime News Network 2019) The video game fandom studied in this research also holds conventions (Jagex 2019) and has a large fandom it has built up over the 20 years the game has been available.

This type of media consumption is most visible in Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game (MMORPG)s because this genre often does not have an ending or have multiple types of ending. It is safe to say that the victory conditions most often associated with video games like saving a prominent political figure, defeating a fierce beast or becoming the most profitable business in town can be expected to be accomplished by the player many times during the gameplay of an MMORPG. This genre of game is supposed to keep the player playing the game indefinitely, and it profits from doing so by selling the player subscription-based playtime, cosmetic additions for their avatars or Quality of Life (QoL) perks.

Creating and maintaining an avatar in these games can be seen not only as a fun activity but also an investment. The avatars have quantitative properties that are tracked by the game. These properties can be improved by undertaking quests, fighting enemies and doing daily tasks. It can be said that playing these types of games is a matter of devotion as well as entertainment. The online space shared by the players facilitate

communication between people who have a similar devotion. The players of MMORPGs are protective because the sense of ownership of the avatar within the game is remarkably higher than any other genre of video games. Not only are the avatars of the players often richer, more powerful, more influential and are more important to the game's world overall, but most importantly, they are unique. The look of avatars are customized by the players when they first start the game, and as players progress through the game, their options for customizing their avatars increase.

In a typical Roleplaying Game (RPG), the player may control the main character as designated by the writers of the game. For example, in the Witcher series, a popular video game series by CD Projekt Red that has adopts Andrzej Sapkowski's books by the same name, the player controls Geralt, the white haired witcher that has a set background and personality in accordance to the story written by the author. Geralt as an avatar can also be a powerful, influential, and rich character during playtime, but when talking about Geralt there is only one character with a personality most people can agree on. While the story being predetermined can award the player with a well-written literary experience, MMORPGs allow the player to write their own backstories and personalities to their characters. So, the avatars in MMORPGs while being unique within the story of the games they reside in are also completely the creative work of the players that control them.

The case for this research was selected due to the researcher's prior interest in the community to be examined and the issue that created the discourse within that community. The tensions between Venezuela and the US have been in the news for decades now. In 2015, as a result of the sanctions against Venezuela by the Obama administration, one video game started facing a fascinating new phenomenon. The increase of Venezuelan gold farmers in Old School RuneScape (OSRS) has a direct chronological link to these sanctions of Venezuela. As inflation skyrocketed and the economy destabilized, people started playing OSRS to sell in-game currency for dollars as a means to earn a living. This phenomenon has been observed by video games media and its effects on the player base of the game has been chronicled on the official forums of the game as well as social media platforms. One such platform is Reddit, where the player-controlled subreddit r/2007scape discussed this issue in various posts that reached the front page of the subreddit numerous times.

This study is one of the many studies that aim to understand online harassment and virtual violence. When talking about video game studies literature, and especially about the social aspect of gaming communities, the #GamerGate scandal is a recent memory that sparked the fires of inclusion in video games. The scandal itself is summarized well in Todd (2015) who emphasizes the gender inequality in video games industry by discussing the reasons behind the scandal as well as how the events unfolded. During this scandal, video games journalists, scholars and developers got harassed and their personal information was made public. Büyüköztürk, Gaulden and Dowd-Arrow (2018) is a study that examines how the structure of Reddit affects the formation of movements by examining the #GamerGate scandal on Reddit. Reducing toxicity has been a point of contention since the first online games and every year online video game companies release new technologies and methods to reduce toxicity in their games. A prime example of the efforts to tame toxicity is with chat filters, but players find their ways around chat filters by substituting characters for numbers, symbols and other creative ways they can come up with. Such filters are also in place in OSRS. Over time, as voice chat in games became more popular, companies were reluctant to add it as a feature that connected strangers to each other. One of the reasons for this reluctance is toxicity between players. One recent solution to this problem is a new software that censors voice chat in online games. (Durkee 2021) Corporate research about toxicity has also been taking place. For instance, Riot Games is the producer and developer of one of the most popular online video games, League of Legends. They are known to share their data with researchers and are actively looking for ways to reduce toxicity by understanding what causes toxicity (Maher 2016). They found that only 1% of players were toxic, but that these players produced 5% of all toxicity. Furthermore, it was revealed that the most important factor for people to behave toxic was how well the opposing team performed. Similar toxicity caused by competitiveness is also observed in this study. Riot Games implements tips and warnings against harassment between players and measures how effective different methods for taming toxicity are.

A *Polygon* article written by Mat Ombler in 2020 presents valuable insights and anecdotes by Venezuelan people about this case. Ombler elaborates on the personal experiences of several Venezuelan people who have benefited from playing OSRS in a professional capacity (Ombler 2020). Notable points from the article are that people use

the money they earn from playing OSRS to make careers for themselves because the money they earn from the more conventional jobs is not enough to survive. The article also emphasizes how widely established the gold-farming and gold buying markets are within the game. As quoted in the article, "…40-50% of the game's active player base in any given month was buying gold from gold farmers" (Ombler 2020), a considerably large portion of the over 116 thousand players total, and over 75 thousand players for the version of the game discussed in this research. (OldSchool Runescape 2020) The article also sheds light on an aspect of the issue that is discussed in this research as well. When looking at online community discussions, especially in gaming communities, it isn't hard to come across inflammatory language, name calling or finger pointing. The existence of these behaviors, and their observation by the researcher is one of the reasons for this study. The relevant aspect mentioned in the article is that the Venezuelan players that farm gold in game also act as agents that stimulate the in-game economy and make the prices of high demand items cheaper.

First used academically by Castronova (2005), gold farming is the practice of accumulating wealth for an in-game avatar for the purposes of selling it to other avatars. It is explained by Nakamura (2009, 129) as "selling in-game currency to players for real money, usually through resellers such as IGE or EBay." The practices of gold farmers have improved since Nakamura defined it, and nowadays it is possible to find individual sites that sell in-game gold for multiple games. It would not be far-fetched to consider this phenomenon a new kind of e-commerce venture. Dyer-Witheford in his 2009 book reports that in 2005 the amount of people in China whose everyday work is farming MMO currencies. (Dyer-Witheford 2009). In 2009, it was estimated that virtual services and goods produced in online games were worth $2 Billion annually. (Ryan 2009). Along with the growth of the global video games industry, as video games got more popular and started reaching a wider audience, the figure for gold farming has only grown. It is a virtual black market that co-exists with online video games that capitalizes on the parts of games that players find to be menial.

This study is one of many studies about how online communities form on social media. A similar study (Massanari 2017) observes the development and sustainment of two toxic technocultures through the exploitation of the platform design of Reddit. The exploitation in this case refers to the platform design and how it allows certain

comments to be more visible, such as the comments that are more in line with the subreddit culture and subreddit meta. This study narrows the scope of the research and observes how the users utilize the type of interaction the platform affords in order to form discussions. As a case study, this research gives insight into a specific issue, but it is the hope of this researcher that the insights from this study can help the broader media studies academia in understanding the fleeting formations of communities. Even though social media platforms may have similar goals, business structures and affordances to their users, they differ enough to merit specialized examinations. While examining the case, this study pays special attention to the context of messages and considers the medium of the messages as a part of the communication. It hopes to add to the literature by showing that it is possible to modify and apply survey-based models to social media research where the data is anonymous, and the data gathering is not guided by questions.

The theoretical framework to understand how the anonymous identities of the users of r/2007scape converse in posts, this study takes Erwing Goffman's dramaturgy theory as a starting point. The dramaturgy approach suggests that people take on different masks depending on the part they are expected to play within a social environment. Goffman's theory focuses mainly on interpersonal relationships, so adapting it completely to a community setting is needed. On this front, the theory of Michel Maffesioli on what he calls "neo-tribes" is relevant. Maffesioli goes beyond the personal masks and considers small groups and temporary groupings which people are members of at different times. Maffesioli's work is appropriate for this study because Reddit accounts, by merit of their subscriptions to different subreddits according to the interests of their owners, participate in temporary groupings. This study examines a glimpse of the temporary membership of Reddit users in a neo-tribe and investigates how they form a discourse. The discourse formation is considered to be the associations made between variables of different categories. The strengths of variables suggest relationships between the variables and offer a general perspective about how comments and their sentiments connect to each other as part of the communication between users. Through the coding of individual comments as parts of discussion trees, this study looks at the themes of comments, the identifiable behaviors of Venezuelan players mentioned by the users, the concerns of the users regarding Venezuelan gold farmers and finally the solutions if

they are offered. During coding, the comments that cannot be coded for a variable within a category are coded as "other" and their data is coded separately for the missing category. After relevant associations between variables are found, this study then asks if any of the strong associations fit either of the outgroup prejudice predictor models Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) or Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA). This study does not suggest that the comments that fit either predictor models were written by people that fit those models because the models were made for survey research. These associations could help in the formation of similar models for future social media research. Finally, this paper discusses the formation of authoritarian groups online by drawing comparisons between this study and the literature about the #GamerGate movement.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 GOFFMAN AND BOUNDARY PROTECTION

Looking at online identities, the theoretical framework of this study begins with Erwing Goffman's 1949 work on Dramaturgy theory, more specifically group behavior. Goffman exemplifies and demonstrates how people form masks appropriate to the group they are in. The relevance of Goffman's work is in his examination of regions and regional behavior. This research argues that the exclusionary behavior presented by the players of OSRS closely resemble that of a public space where an in-group knows the "manners" of the environment they share. The dataset presents several behaviors that both Venezuelan players and the other players do that are against the rules of the game, yet the dataset presents scrutiny only against Venezuelan players for those behaviors. The first behavior is the purchase of gold by players, which is what keeps the economy of gold farmers alive, making gold farming a profitable endeavor. The second is the use of automated programs to create and use accounts for the accumulation of gold for sale. The third behavior is Player versus Player (PvP) areas of the game, which allows groups of players to forcefully overwhelm other players by killing their avatars for financial gain. The fourth is the use of native languages, Spanish for Venezuelan players. This behavior, although common in any form of online video game, is scrutinized when done by Venezuelan players. This is evident in the way the posts are made and the frequency at which they are made. In this virtual economy, none of the parties, the ones that accumulate wealth in their avatars with the intention to sell, the ones that provide services for others' avatars in turn for money, the website owners that provide platforms from which the suppliers can sell in-game wealth or services and those that buy in-game wealth or services are all performers. The time period this study examines presents what Goffman might call an "inopportune" intrusion" of this performance (Goffman 1949, 209). The performers in this study explicitly mention embarrassment over the responses of the group, something that Goffman would describe as a faux pas. This is a point of internal conflict, leading to different sentiments about the topic of Venezuelan gold farmers.

2.2 MAFFESIOLI AND NEO-TRIBES

Brady Robards' (2018) study about neo-tribalism in Reddit provides valuable insights into the communities on Reddit. Robards' explanation of Reddit as a website and how the communities within Reddit are categorized help understand the Old School Runescape (OSRS) subreddit r/2007scape. Like r/WoW in Robards' study, r/2007scape falls into the gaming subreddit category. At the time of Robards' case study in 2015, within the subreddits he analysed, r/WoW had 403,839 subscribers, this number, at the time of writing this research has reached over 2 million. In comparison, at the time of writing this research r/2007scape has 557,977 subscribers.

To understand how the r/2007scape subreddit comes together to form a "community", the analysis of Reddit in Robards (2018) considers the subreddits on Reddit "neo-tribes", a new kind of social grouping behavior that presents itself more each day. The idea of neo-tribes was introduced by Maffesioli in his 1988 book *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society,* later translated to English in 1996. In the fourth chapter, Maffesioli sets out to "trace the outline of what could be a logic of identification." (Maffesioli, 1996, p.73). He tries to understand what a community is and what the basis of it are. He suggests that "experiencing the other is the basis of the community, even if it leads to conflict." (Maffesioli, 1996, p.73). Maffesioli suggests his idea of neo-tribes after his obeservations on an increasing number of "lamentations of politicians, church officials and journalists over growing disindividualization" (Maffesioli, 1996, p.75). Referring to research done on youth groups, affinity associations and small-scale industrial enterprises, Maffesioli says that the reason for disindividualization, and the formation of "syntonic relationships" is a decrease in a desire to identify with a group. Instead of identifying with groups, now people belong to several groups between which they can move. Maffesioli calls for research on how telecommunications networks affect the formation of such fluidity between groups. Maffesioli states that "fluidity, occasional gathering and dispersal" are the main characteristics of neo-tribalism. (Maffesioli, 1996, p.76) The fluidity at the centre of neo-tribalism enables the necessary conformity feeling. It is due to conformities to many groups that Maffesioli suggests the existence of "affectual nebula"s where people derive their personal opinions from the opinions of the groups

they identify with. The fluidity of neo-tribes plays a role here as a provider of mobility between different and often competing groups.

This type of group formation and sustainment can be observed in today's social media platforms. Popular social media sites allow their users to form spaces where other users can join in order to discuss certain topics and organize events. Reddit is a social media site that emphasizes its features that allow its users to form communities, called subreddits. Robards (2018) analyses four such communities and finds that communities on Reddit fit the definition of Maffesioli's neo-tribes. This research observes a part of the "affectual nebula" of the users of r/2007scape to find out what their identifying connections are to the group that they belong to from a specific topic that the group discusses. As a hot topic within r/2007scape, there are conflicting perspectives on the selected case. These conflicting perspectives present themselves at first glance in the post titles, then at the highest rated comments. Referring to Maffesioli's goal in his chapter, this research aims to figure out what the logic of identification for the users of r/2007scape is like through their comments. In doing so, a central part of the identifications of the users with either side is motivated by their concerns about this case. So this study asks these research questions:

RQ1: Which concerns do Reddit users in the subreddit of the game Old School Runescape mention they have about Venezuelan gold farmers? Which concerns are the most prominent? Which other concerns are present in the comments that do not fit any of the coded concerns?

RQ2: In which ways do Reddit users form associations between their concerns about the issue of Venezuelan gold farmers and themes of comments about the issue of Venezuelan gold farmers when they comment on posts relevant to Venezuelan gold farmers?

RQ3: In which ways do Reddit users form associations between the behaviors of Venezuelan OSRS players as defined by Reddit users and their concerns about the issue of Venezuelan gold farmers when they comment on posts relevant to Venezuelan gold farmers?

2.3 SOCIAL DOMINANCE ORIENTATION AND RIGHT-WING AUTHORITARIANISM

The theoretical framework that explains the categorical associations between the variables of this case study is supplemented by John Duckitt's 2006 inquiry into two approaches for the causes of prejudice and intergroup hostility. The two models Duckitt compares are Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO) models, both of which offer different causes for intergroup hostility. Both of these models offer scales that can be used to measure prejudices in a survey type research. Since this isn't a survey-type research, the scales of these models are not used in this study.

The SDO model was conceptualized in Sidanus and Pratto (1994) and is useful as a measure of attitudinal orientation that inquires whether a subject considers intergroup relations to be equal or hierarchical. It also measures "the extent to which the subject desires their ingroup to dominate and be superior to outgroups." (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle 1994). This model suggests that the personality that acts prejudiced according to this model does so due to a feeling of tough-mindedness, ruthlessness and considering themselves to be superior to others overall.

The RWA model was developed by Robert Anthony Altemeyer in 1981 as a refinement of Theodor Adorno's F scale. It is a model that explains intergroup prejudices as a result of a subject's tendency to conventionalism and an overall submission to authoritarianism as well as an adaptation of authoritarian aggression. "RWA expresses threat-driven motivation to establish and maintain social or group security in the form of social control, order, cohesion and stability." (Duckitt 2006).

The research of Duckitt tests these models for their attitudes toward different outgroups. Where RWA predicts a tendency for prejudice caused by perceived threat towards the ingroup, SDO predicts the tendency for prejudice out of competitiveness over scarce resources and power dynamics. Duckitt's research focused on reducing the ambiguities for overlaps in researches that use these models. Duckitt considers threat and subordination to be the two dependent variables that he tests for in his research. He finds that the effect of RWA on negative outgroup attitudes is mediated by perceived

threat from outgroups. He also finds that the effect of SDO on negative outgroup attitudes is mediated by competitiveness over relative dominance and superiority.

In this study, these findings are used to categorize associations between variables instead of attitudinal orientations. The activities of Venezuelan gold farmers as accumulators of wealth, and the space they occupy within OSRS as they do so can be considered a competition over resources between them and Western players, thus creating prejudice in line with the SDO model. Venezuelan players breaking the rules of the game and earning money by playing the game can be considered a threat to the sanctity of the game that Western players hold dear, thus creating prejudice in line with the RWA model. Going from these models, this study asks the question of

RQ4: Taking the RWA and SDO models as predictors of prejudice against outgroups distinguishable by the threat or subordination of said outgroup, which associations with concerns can be said to fit either prejudice prediction models?

2.4 HOW REDDIT WORKS

Like many other social media platforms, Reddit has a scoring system with which the users can rate the content they see on the site. Unlike social sites that emphasize inter-personal relationships where the content is usually an acquaintance that one follows, Reddit is a platform where the users can vote on "link posts" or "text posts." Link posts are submissions that host hyperlinks to an internal or external web page. These webpages can be hosted elsewhere, or by reddit itself, in the case of images or videos. Text posts are submissions that are hosted by Reddit and contain text content that the user wants to share. Text posts may contain any and all kinds of hyperlinks within themselves, but link posts redirect the user to one defined destination. Text posts are usually utilized by users who aim to start discussions, explain something at length or when multiple links should be submitted to properly convey the subject matter. These posts can be upvoted (give a positive "+1" vote) or downvoted (give a negative "-1" vote) depending on their relevance, quality or the overall liking of the post by the users. The score of a post represents the ratio of upvotes to downvotes. However, the formula

behind the score calculation of posts is unknown except for speculation by users, so the score is not a simple representation of upvotes minus downvotes.

The users may also comment on posts, criticising, discussing and having fun with the topic. The comments that are made directly to the post itself are called parent-level comments. These parent-level comments usually act as discussion starting points, whether the discussion is serious or for fun. Users may reply to these parent-level comments too, making their comment the children of the parent comment. Every comment can be commented upon, and a typical Reddit post contains multiple "discussion trees", which are contained in a "discussion forest." This is a metaphor used by the platform as well as the users to refer to the comments under posts, where comments may branch out like the branches of a tree because the parent-level comments may spawn multiple discussions themselves. The entirety of the comments under a post then becomes a forest containing many branching discussions and subjects. The site ranks the comments by their scores as well, putting highly rated comments above lower rated comments. If a comment has a score under 0, that comment gets automatically hidden at which point a user reading the comment tree must manually collapse the poorly rated comment.

So, research examining reddit comment data must take into consideration that each comment has a context, whether they directly respond to the post or another comment. In order to form associations, the first variable category that is coded is themes of the comment, relevant to three of the research questions:

RQ5: To which themes do the comments in the posts that talk about Venezuelan gold farmers in the OSRS subreddit belong to? Which themes are the most prominent among the themes? Which other themes are present in the comments that do not fit any of the coded themes?

RQ6: In which ways do Reddit users form associations between the behaviors of Venezuelan OSRS players as defined by Reddit users and themes of comments when they comment on posts relevant to Venezuelan gold farmers?

This property of Reddit data is useful because it allows the researcher to accurately derive the intended meaning of the units of data. However, this also means that the

comments of a post do not always respond to the post topic, because a discussion tree may have started a discussion about something remotely relevant to the topic of the post. This research takes the context of the comments into consideration, and codes discussion trees themselves holistically instead of individual comments. The identification and selection of the comment trees is made in a digital snowball sampling-like method, where the comments lead to more to data relevant to the research. First, the comment that has been engaged with significantly, represented by its score is identified. Then, if this comment is in response to another comment, then that comment is also taken into consideration along with the high-engagement comment in terms of context. This is to make sure the sentiments from the high-engagement comment are accurately represented. In the coding however, only the high-engagement comment is coded so that the sample of the research, that being comments over the threshold, do not change.

This approach differs from the many computer science researches that have been done about Reddit where a sentiment analysis code helps researchers understand millions of comments or posts at once. Where sentiment analysis researchers present findings from a vastly greater amount of data, this study aims to understand its case on a micro-level. To add to this, gaming communities often have jargons of their own, formed from the type of media the people that engage with these communities have formed and adapted over the years. The jargon of the OSRS community also carries valuable data that sentiment analysis might miss. It was apparent after the preliminary research of the data that people often communicate their experiences through commonly known phenomena in game. An example of this is the mention of "Green Dragons" in the comments. While the mention of these in-game monsters refer to just the monster at first sight, one must also know the context and the jargon to understand that this mention refers to a popular money-making activity. Such knowledge of in-game jargon allows this study to properly code the behaviors of Venezuelan gold famers as reported by the comments to ask these research questions:

RQ7: Which distinguishable playing behaviors that separate them from what the users of the online community of the game Old School RuneScape consider to be the norm do Venezuelan players project according to the community of the game on Reddit? Which

behaviors are the most prominent? Which other behaviors are present in the comments that do not fit any of the coded behaviors?

It can also be argued that gamers are among the first groups of people that have adapted to online communication, so the way people within the community interact is open to misinterpretation. Studies have shown that the "gamer" identity is a distinguishable mask that has properties of its own (Braithwaite 2016). This identity comes with a sense of belonging as well as social cues and distinct ways of communication. An example of this distinct communication that can also be observed in non-gaming social media is "F/F in chat/press F to pay respects". Any of these three "F related" phrases convey the meaning of paying respects, for the dead, for someone that got rejected, for someone that failed something etc. The use of this phrase is flexible, and the letter F originates from a screenshot from a game, where the player was expected to pay respects to a dead soldier. F is a common keyboard shortcut for actions in video games. So, the phrase itself is nonsensical, but when one knows its context, it conveys a meaning that sentiment analysis cannot understand.

Büyüköztürk, Gaulden and Dowd-Arrow (2018) examine the GamerGate scandal as a movement and found that while Reddit made communication and participation accessible, this did not result in cooperation among users. (Büyüköztürk, Gaulden and Dowd-Arrow 2018, 15) Their findings show that participation in this movement on Reddit was fluid, thus the users did not form a collective identity. This finding is in line with Maffesioli's concept of neo-tribes, as will be discussed below. The #GamerGate scandal is an example of an exclusionary movement within the video games environment as a whole. It affected every part of the industry and informed how video games should be made and marketed for future games. It started from a conflict of gender inequality in representation and carried sentiments of toxic masculinity. (Todd 2015; Braithwaite 2016).

Although the discourse of the Venezuelan gold farmers is not nearly as toxic as the discourse that was observed during the #GamerGate discourse, it carries similarities. The first similarity is an appeal to ethics, or the moral high ground. Gamergaters based their campaign on the premise that the problem lay primarily with ethics in video game journalism, but over time it became apparent that the harassment of women, and

gatekeeping them away from the "gamer" community bore more importance. The discourse around the Venezuelan gold farmers also presents itself as an issue of upholding the rules of the game, and the premise that people should not play video games to make a living. The second similarity is that the group that is being talked about, has a minority status within the overall population. At the time of #GamerGate, the involvement of women in video games, and in geek culture overall was a hot topic, especially with who popular high-budget games were marketed to. On the marketing point of view, the works of Anita Sarkeesian and her organization Feminist Frequency, who also became famous around the time of #GamerGate, made it obvious that video games were made and marketed with men in mind. This lead the #GamerGate people to believe that video games and media around video games *belonged* to them, and that it was something they needed to "protect". Likewise, the sentiment of ownership can be observed from the users of r/2007scape, who feel that OSRS belongs to them, and that they should protect it. The literature on the #GamerGate scandal informs this study by suggesting the question of where exclusionary sentiments come from within video game communities. The research questions of this study are aimed at finding out where the conflict within a community begins and how it is sustained. So far, the gender inequality dimension of gatekeeping has been given attention by video games scholars (Braithwhite 2016& Massanari 2017), however, inter-group gatekeeping based on geography is yet not a well-researched area.

2.5 GOLD FARMING

The first mention of "gold farming" in the context of digital labour and digital wealth accumulation is found in Castronova (2005) where he draws parallels between the markets in synthetic worlds and outside markets. He argues that online markets for virtual items and services are legitimate markets that work like an "instantly globalized labor market". He elaborates his point by giving an example almost identical to the case of this study. When "new unskilled laborers from the third world begin farming loot and selling it, they drive down the wages of those who had been in the world before." (Castronova 2005) The economic environment that is at the centre of this study is having a similar conflict between gold providers to meet the demands. On the one hand,

there are Venezuelan gold farmers and on the other there are automated programs(bots) that have existed within OSRS since before the base game Runescape separated into two games. Due to the relatively high know-how required to create such programs and the clients on which those programs originating from Europe and the US, it is a widely held assumption in the OSRS player base that bots are owned and operated by people playing in the US or Europe. These bots also accumulate wealth on avatars and sell that wealth for profit, making Venezuelan gold farmers their competitors.

Playing video games as labour has been a topic that's been discussed extensively in the academic literature. Nakamura's (2009) work about Chinese gold farmers in the popular online video game World of Warcraft, is the main motivation for the scholarly inquiry of this study. In her study, Nakamura finds that the Western players liken the Chinese gold farmers to "virtual 'service workers" mimicking "illegal immigrants and other low-end workers in service economies in the global South." This sort of research can be considered part of a larger category of research into gold farming practices in online games which has attracted attention in various academic disciplines, such as computer science (Ahmad, Keegan, Srivastava, Williams, and Contractor 2009) in the form of possible methods to detect automated gold farming programs; humanities (Euteneuer 2018) as a look into how video games apply postcolonial systems of expansion and resource exploitation, and literature (Musgrave 2016) in the form of a graphic novel about gender and economic disparities within the gaming industry.

Nakamura's work explains how gold farmers are discriminated against within the communities of their games by looking at Chinese gold farmers (2009). She finds that these players are subjected to racial slurs and are seen as less than human due to the automated nature with which they play the game. This is because the aim of a gold farmer is to earn as much gold as they can during their playtime rather than the intended way to play the game.

This study identifies three main behaviors that Venezuelan gold farmers are said to be doing according to the Reddit users. These behaviors are money making as a broad category of repetitive actions that result in efficient in-game wealth accumulation, player killing of avatars and powerleveling of a customer's avatar for a fee. These common behaviors have been a point of concern due to various reasons throughout the

shared experiences of the community even before the Venezuelan economic crisis. For example, the behavior categorized as money-making, which includes tens of different activities that are available in-game comes up as a point of discussion with regards to the activities it pertains to. A popular in-game mining place for a valuable ore might be crowded with bots, or multiple avatars of one player, resulting in unfair acquisition of said resource. Posts that aim to scrutinize this activity might be made, these draw attention to the activity so the developers take action against automated resource acquisition, or to seek advice to acquire the resource some other way. This is the performance of the OSRS player, that is taken for granted and is a part of the shared experience of the community. There are rulebreakers, and a constant struggle on the part of the developer as well as the players to hinder the behaviors of the rulebreakers.

2.6 THE r/2007scape SUBREDDIT

Following Robards' (2018) lead in analyzing a subreddit, this research first looks at the "front page" elements of r/2007scape. The sidebar description of the subreddit reads "The community for Old School RuneScape discussion on Reddit. Join us for game discussions, weekly events, and skilling competitions! OSRS is the official legacy version of RuneScape, the largest free-to-play MMORPG" (Reddit, 2021). The header image of the subreddit shows images from the game that are not instantly recognizable to be of the avatars of any famous players. The avatars in the images could be any of the users of the subreddit. The images are organized in a film-reel look and they are representative of the menial tasks of improving one's avatar as well as the highlights for an avatar.("Subreddit Header" Reddit, 2021) The subreddit logo is a modified version of the official OSRS logo, shortened to only the letters "RS", as is the common acronym of Runescape.("Subreddit Logo" Reddit, 2021) The subreddit mascot is the recognizable Reddit mascot called Snoo dressed in the iconic "Runite armor set" from OSRS. ("Subreddit Mascot" Reddit, 2021) The rules of the subreddit include, aside from the Reddit site-wide rules ("Content Policy - Reddit" Redditinc, 2021) include rules against self-promotions, begging for in-game items, memes made with image macros such as "Advice Animals", accusing players of wrongdoing, flaming/trolling other users, macroing ban appeals and to keep submissions related to OSRS. The rules relevant to

this research are the rules about accusing players of wrongdoing and flaming/trolling other users. These rules will be discussed later in this study in the context of the findings. r/2007scape has a wide "wiki" section that answers the frequently asked questions from users ("faq" Reddit, 2021). The moderator team of r/2007scape explicitly state that they are not affiliated with Jagex, the developer, producer and distributor of OSRS, so they state that they can only help the users with problems regarding the subreddit itself. The moderation of r/2007scape is worthy of mention in the broader context of gaming subreddits. r/2007scape is old compared to many subreddits of newer games because it was formed on Feb 13, 2013. Nowadays, it is common for social media departments of video game producers to create and moderate the subreddits of games that will come out. Ownership of the subreddit allows the moderators that work for the companies to potentially control the discourse. This topic is too broad to discuss in this study, but it is worth mentioning that r/2007scape moderators declare no conflict of interest in how they moderate this public space.

2.7 TERMS OF SERVICE OF OLD SCHOOL RUNESCAPE

As an online game that offers an online public space, OSRS has rules that all players who play the game are expected to accept. These rules are commonly called Terms of Service (ToS) in online video games. Players that violate the ToS can be punished by the administrators of the game according to the rules. The punishments can range from suspension to being banned from the service, with various degrees of severity. Lesser offenses, such as "spamming" the chat, where a player repeatedly types the same or similar phrase to the point of disturbance can be chat-muted or suspended for a short time. Serious offenses, such as harassment, hate speech, macroing or Real-World Trading (RWT) can lead to the account being permanently disabled and in the most severe cases, the IP address the offending account connects from can be blacklisted from playing the game on other accounts or creating new accounts. The offenses that are relevant to this research are harassment, hate speech, macroing and RWT; all serious offenses that are discussed in the comments that are analyzed. RWT is the act of converting in-game currency into real currency, usually dollars. The Gold Farming that is investigated in Nakamura (2009) is ultimately about the RWT. Making RWT illegal

is a common practice in video games where there is in-game wealth to be converted to real-world wealth. There are several reasons for RWT being against the rules from the perspective of video game publishers, such as but not limited to: the legal boundaries and affordances of the video game, the preservation of the feel of the game and keeping a stable in-game economy. It is in the interests of the video game publishers to never openly accept RWT as part of their game environment.

In OSRS, the upholding of the ToS is another topic that the players often bring up in Reddit discussions. A common joke among the users is that r/2007scape acts as a customer service for the players because they find the official customer service methods unresponsive. The official customer service is commonly contrasted with posts that get enough scores in the subreddit that it becomes visible to a large portion of the players, thus creating pressure on Jagex to offer faster customer support to the player that posted the issue. This perception of a lack of attention from Jagex to the problems players bring up on Reddit is also coded as a theme for this study, because this issue of customer support is also brought up in the posts that discuss Venezuelan gold farmers.

It should also be noted that while it should be enough for a game environment to have rules of which actions are permissible and which are not, the players have methods of dealing with rulebreakers themselves. These methods can widely be referred to as "bot busting" and are commonly done against automated avatars because of their predictable patterns that can be intercepted by other avatars, or simply killing those avatars. So the final research question this study asks is:

RQ8: Which solutions do Reddit users in the subreddit of the game Old School Runescape mention should be made about Venezuelan gold farmers? Which solutions are the most prominent? Which other solutions are mentioned in the comments that do not fit any of the coded solutions?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

This research utilizes Thematic Analysis as explained in Braun and Clarke (2006) because of its wide range of applications and independence from using a specific theory. "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke 2006, 79). There are six phases of Thematic Analysis. In phase 1, the researcher is expected to make themselves familiar with the data to know the "depth and breadth of the content" (Braun and Clarke 2006, 87). In phase 2, the researcher generates initial codes to be used in the analysis of the data after familiarizing themselves with the content. In phase 3, the researcher is expected to search for themes within the coded data to see if there are any overarching themes. In phase 4, the researcher is expected to review the themes they have uncovered in phase 3 to make sure that their findings are indeed overarching themes that have enough data to support them. In phase 5, the researcher is expected to precisely define their themes and to name them in order to draw clear distinctions in their analysis. Finally in phase 6i the researcher is expected to produce the report.

This method has been used in other studies such as Caplan and Purser (2019) to uncover what the lived experience of poverty is in a data set of over 21000 comments. In Caplan and Purser's research, the researchers note that Reddit discussions tend to deviate from the original topic of the post. Their solution to this sampling problem was to manually identify and exclude comments that got off topic from their dataset (Caplan and Purser 2019, 424). A similar research was done by Maxwell and his colleagues (2020) in order to understand the shared experiences who self-identify as incels. Their research uncovered two tropes within the incel community, which made it easier to understand the issue as well as to understand their dataset. In both cases, thematic analysis helped make sense of disorganized sentiments in order to derive meaning from them. This method of analysis has been chosen not only for its analytical versatility, but also due to the versatility in the Reddit dataset. As mentioned before, Reddit comments can branch out into different discussions easily, this property makes it challenging for the researcher to pre-determine and measure for variables in their dataset. Thematic analysis

allows the researcher freedom to derive codes as they appear in a pattern. It invites the researcher to go through their dataset before doing any analysis, so the researcher has a good idea about what sort of codes are possibly present in the data, thus making it possible to identify patterns and argue for the presence of themes. This method of analysis is appropriate for social media research because social media data is often unorganized and do not always respond directly to what the researcher is trying to uncover.

3.2 DATA COLLECTION AND SAMPLE

The data for this study is collected using a Python script that utilizes the Reddit API as well as a wrapper made for Reddit API called Pushshift (Stuck_In_The_Matrix 2017) created for easier data collection by researchers. This method of data collection is usually used in the field of computer science (Medvedev 2019; Gaudette, Scrivens, Davies and Delvenne 2020). However, social sciences researchers have also started using APIs to collect data (Tannebaum 2018) due to its increasing availability and the massive amount of data that can be gathered this way.

The data collected in this study has been gathered from the top 15 highest rated Reddit posts in terms of user votes that include the keyword "Venezuela" as presented by the search function of Reddit on the subreddit of the online video game, Old School Runescape (OSRS), r/2007scape. The data collection was made using a Python script, ran on the program PyCharm, the relevant Python modules that were used for this study are PushshiftAPI and PRAW. PushshiftAPI was used to search for the relevant posts within the specified time frame, PRAW was used to collect live and accurate data from Reddit servers. The use of PRAW was due to API related problems with parsing comment data using PushshiftAPI. The collected data were exported to text documents, then the ID's of the comments were used in the coding process, which was done in Microsoft Excel.

The data is collected from threads created between 1 March 2015 until 1 March 2020. These dates were selected because 9 March is the date when U.S. President Barack

Obama issued and signed an executive order that declares Venezuela a national security threat to the US (Mason and Rampton 2015). It is the assumption of this research that this move can be considered as the starting point of the Venezuelan humanitarian crisis, which has resulted in Venezuelan people starting to play the game to earn USD. This search has resulted in 2738 comments being collected. The sample consists of 451 comments in total, 433 of these comments are valid, meaning that they were not deleted at the time of coding them. 451 is the total number of comments over the score of 15 as an output of the API script. This sample size is over the minimum size a study must have in order for the data to statistically analysed by using phi correlation coefficient (Atilgan 2013).

Then, these comments were sorted by the absolute values of their scores to identify comments that have been highly agreed with or disagreed with. The comments with less than 15 absolute value scores were eliminated. This was made to ensure that the data represents the talking points with the most engagement from the users that participated in the thread with their votes. The number 15 was selected after the preliminary analysis of the data, as part of the phase 1 of Thematic Analysis as suggested in Braun and Clarke (2006). The initial observation of the data suggested that comments with 15 points in either inclination presented statements that incited an adequately engaged sentiment from the users. This type of points-based comment inclusion/exclusion is also observed in other similar studies (see Caplan and Purser 2019). The inclusion of comments with negative points was also a point of consideration. It was decided that the comments that were scored negatively also represent valuable data points about what the community did not agree with. This made it possible for the researcher to analyse data from a higher number of posts which allowed for a wider scope of themes to be represented. From the initial list of all comments that have over 15 absolute value scores, 50 comments were randomly selected with a Python script. From these 50 comments and the comment trees that they belonged to, a preliminary coding attempt was made to identify themes and variables that can be investigated. This is an inductive coding method where the variables that are coded are derived from a pilot study of the data.

3.3 CODED VARIABLES

The formation of the final codebook was a result of coding iterations where the goal of the coding was to reduce the number of elements that were coded as "other" (See the codebook in Appendix B.2).

The first variables that are coded are descriptive information about the comment, the *score* of a comment is the total number of upvotes or downvotes a comment has on Reddit. When referring to scores, there are discrepancies between the scores displayed on the live version of Reddit and the ones registered to the PushshiftAPI database. This is because the PuhshiftAPI checks and saves the data it gathers from Reddit in different intervals independent of the data on Reddit's live API. While this ensures that PushshiftAPI may keep comment information of comments that got deleted later, it also doesn't have the same information as the live version of Reddit. It is in the interest of this research to include as many comments as possible into the sample, so the score values from the API version are used in this research.

After scores, the overall *sentiment* of the comment is coded, with "-1" meaning a negative approach, "0" meaning that the comment is irrelevant or conveys no opinion about the issue and "1" meaning a positive approach. Then, whether the comment talks about *in-game or out-game* things and if a comment is a *conversation starter* was coded. Lastly, it was coded whether the comment is *sarcastic* or not because in the preliminary research it was found that comments would contain sarcastic remarks that are context dependent.

Every discussion tree that the sampled comments belong to have certain dominant *themes*. These themes are considered first because it is within these themes that the other categories are coded. Sometimes, a highly upvoted comment may just be a funny remark that the community would engage in at large, like an inside joke or a commonly repeated phrase that applies to multiple issues about the game. These phrases or sentiments are used repeatedly because they can be considered an easy way to gain "karma" by the user. Like repeating a joke with good timing. For example, it is another hot topic within the OSRS subreddit that the customer support of the game is unresponsive and slow. It is common to see posts about the low quality of customer support on the front page of the subreddit, bashing the producers of the game. Since the

RWT problem also has to do with the support the players get, whether it be for their reports of gold farmers or about the unjust enforcement of rules, comments about customer support also appear in the sample with considerable upvotes. These comments are irrelevant to this study, and the theme of these comments are coded under "Other". The coding behaviors for the themes are identified as: *Terms of Service*, *Economy*, *Politics*, *Ethics* and Other.

Due to this being a study with a thematic analysis, the theme of the comment is the one category that must exist for every comment. So, while other categories may lack behaviors, concerns or solutions about the issue, every comment was tagged with a theme. For the comments that fell under the "other" category, an appropriate categoric tag was created in hopes that the tag wasn't unique to certain comments. When coding the Terms of Service theme, the comments about Jagex customer service, a topic within the community for many years now, are also included because it conveys the frustration of players towards Jagex's inactivity on enforcing its ToS. The economy theme is a broad theme that applies to the majority of the comments because the issue in game as well as out game relies on economic struggles. The politics theme is coded in comments where there is a direct discussion about the politics of Venezuela from domestic and foreign perspectives. Comments about Venezuela as a state, whether about its condition due to its high inflation or the supposed living conditions of its populace are also coded here. Another thing that is included with politics is the ownership of Jagex. This is a topic that occasionally pops up within the community and is represented in this dataset because from 2016 to 2020 Jagex was owned by Shanghai Hongtou Network (Quested 2021) a Chinese company. The ownership of the publisher gave rise to a separate discourse within the community as a point of distrust. The theme of ethics is coded for direct references to the human crisis aspect of the issue. References to the living conditions of Venezuelan people, their ability to feed themselves as well as terminology like innocence and guilt are included in this category.

It is within these themes that the *behaviors* of the players are discussed. On this point, a crucial limitation of this study is made apparent, not every comment discusses player behavior. This is a limitation of the social media way of public sphere discourses that is caused by the participants in the discourse not needing to establish context for their contributions because it is expected that people share similar experiences about the issue

at hand. The comments that are analysed here reflect opinions, and thus most of the time the behaviors that users express their opinions on can only be found in the greater discussion tree or even the title of the thread itself. In the cases where the post is an image, the context is what is in the image. So in this study, when player behavior that is being talked about is absent from the sample itself, the coding was made according to the closest relevant data that is tied to the comment being coded is considered and coded. The operationalizations for the behaviors are only for in-game behaviors because what Venezuelan players do with their gold is already given, they sell it for real money. The coding instruments for behaviors were identified as: *Money-making Tasks*, *Player Killing* and *Powerleveling*.

When coding the *behaviors*, the activity that is coded is expected to be present in the comment visibly. Implications of a vague activity are not coded to stay consistent in the definitions. The "*Money-Making*" coding instrument is used as a vague instrument that resembles the many non-PvP activities that Venezuelan players do to increase their in-game wealth. These activities are too numerous to list here, so this instrument can be understood as activities where the Venezuelan players do not directly infringe the ToS with their actions and also do not affect the characters of any other players negatively. The second instrument, "Player Killing" refers to actions that do not infringe the ToS but affects the characters of other players by killing them for their items. A popular location where lots of PvP takes place is called "Rev caves" by the community. Mentions of this place are also included in this instrument because the in-game location implies the coded activity. Player-killing is an offensive activity where one party prevails over the other. The mentions of Player-killing where Venezuelan players are targeted by other players are not included here. In the instances where Venezuelan players are targeted, the Venezuelan players run away to safety while being chased. "Powerleveling" refers to any activity that directly improves the stats of the customer's account. This can range from training a skill or obtaining an untradeable item. In this activity, a Venezuelan plays the game on a customer's account, so this breaks the account sharing rules in the ToS but does not affect the characters of other players negatively.

By figuring out the behaviors that the users find to be identifying properties of the in-group, this study aims to understand what the users that participated in the Venezuelan

gold farming discourse consider to be the normative way of playing the game is. Their basis for their claims to normativity are also questioned, as it was observed in the pilot study that the users appeal to different ways to identify norms, such as In-Game Economy, Rules, Enjoyment, Real-Life Ramifications and Other.

When coding the *concerns* within the comments, explicit references to the coding instruments are used. The references to the in-game economy are identified in comments where there is a mention of the item price changes as well as highly demanded items. The concern for rules is closely related to the theme of Terms of Service, however when coding rules as a point of concern, the comment has to carry a protective sentiment toward the upholding or the existence of the rules of the game. Appeals to talking points such as the integrity of the game and consistency from Jagex are included. The concern for enjoyment is coded in the cases where the comment explicitly mentions that Venezuelan gold farmers are a negative part of the game experience for the player. The concern for the real-life ramifications of Venezuelan gold farmers and their activities in game is closely tied to the theme of ethics. While the theme of ethics is a broad instrument that also contains the ethical arguments for the upholding of rules, the coding of the real-life ramifications concern look for explicit mentions of real-life consequences of in-game phenomenon. The comparisons of in-game phenomenon to real life are also included in this instrument.

Finally, the *solutions* that the users suggest for the issue are also coded. The popular solutions identified from the preliminary look at the data are stricter automated anti-RWT systems and various changes to popular money-making methods in the game. Stricter anti-RWT solutions are automated methods are a widely used tool by game developers to fight against violations of the ToS. These methods are usually specialized functions embedded to the game that the player does not interact with unless they try to do something they are not supposed to do. These solutions usually check the behavior of the avatar of players for irregularities, such as in-human clicking patterns and inter-avatar interactions involving wealth transfer between strangers. Coded under "Gameplay", changes to the game also include solutions where the Reddit users found ways to fight back against the Venezuelan players such as killing them in game. Gameplay solutions are solutions where the game world that the players have access to is affected by the players or the developers.

A solution that is under-represented in the preliminary data examination but is relevant to the case is the banning of gold or service buyers as well. Since breaking the rules of the game by engaging in RWT goes both ways, a likely solution that can be expected from the community is to be against the demand side of the RWT as well. This solution is coded as well to see how often it appears in the discourse. Buying and selling gold or services puts the Venezuelan players that sell these products in the same economy. The relationship between these two parties is similar to how Goffman 1949describes the workplace and the supervisors' relationship with the workers. Much like the attendants in a hospital ward, the attendants saved work for when a supervisor might be around to see it, otherwise they would do no-work. Everyone in the group looks like they are doing their part for the whole. In this case, it is expected of the Reddit users to be on the legal side of the ToS.

As an example of how the comments are coded, this is a comment that contains several variables, the pseudonym of the user has been made-up to protect their anonymity:

> So, the guy who cussed at me in Spanish after I killed him for his blowpipe at green dragons was actually trying to make money irl to survive the harsh economic situation his country is going through? I feel kinda bad now. (Candace 2017).

This comment has the themes of economy and ethics, talks about the behavior of money-making (mention of "green dragon" implies a popular money making method), shows concern for real-life ramifications, and presents an anecdotal gameplay solution (killing the avatar) utilized by the players.

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

The table of all coded variables can be seen in Appendix B.2.1. The first two variables that are coded, *Score* and *Sentiment* are non-binary variables and so no associations between them and the other variables are formed. They are instead used for descriptive statistics. When analysing the data, the statistical tests that are applied to the nominal data are Pearson Chi-Square test of significance and Phi Correlation Coefficient(PCC). The phi correlation coefficient is a measure of association between two binary variables.

This study codes its variables as binary (yes/no) values to this test is appropriate. The Phi Coefficient is chosen as a measure of association because it is a symmetrical statistic that can be applied to nominal values which also has a range between -1 to 1, enabling the observation of negative associations as well as positive associations.

4. RESULTS

The sample is composed of 421 comments collected from 15 posts. 18 posts are deleted by their authors or by the subreddit moderators, so their contents were inaccessible except for their scores. A theme is coded for every comment, and relevant alternative themes and categoric descriptors are coded under "Other" and explained with the data of the comment. The descriptive statistics are summarized in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 Descriptive Statistics of all variables

	N	Mean		Std. Deviation
	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic
Score	451	55.5787	4.75802	101.04485
Approach	433	.0602	.03811	.79212
In-Game	433	.3857	.02342	.48732
Discussion Starter	440	.3341	.02251	.47221
Sarcasm	433	.2032	.01936	.40287
Terms of Service	433	.1709	.01811	.37686
Economy	433	.4850	.02405	.50035
Politics	433	.2702	.02137	.44458
Ethics	433	.3718	.02325	.48385
Other Theme	433	.2148	.01976	.41115
Money Making	433	.3233	.02250	.46829
Player Killing	433	.0554	.01101	.22908
Powerleveling	433	.0346	.00880	.18308
Other Behavior	433	.0092	.00460	.09578
In-Game Economy	433	.1917	.01894	.39408
Rules	432	.1667	.01795	.37311
Enjoyment	433	.2517	.02088	.43451
Real-Life Ramifications	433	.3187	.02242	.46651
Other Concern	433	.0092	.00460	.09578

Banning Buyers	433	.0115	.00514	.10696
Automated Banning	433	.0531	.01079	.22453
Gameplay	433	.1386	.01662	.34589
Other Solution	431	.0302	.00825	.17123

4.1 FREQUENCIES OF CONCERNS

Research question 1 asks: What are the most prominent concerns do Reddit users in the subreddit of the game Old School Runescape mention they have about Venezuelan gold farmers?

The frequencies of concerns are summarized in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Frequencies of concerns

Concerns	Frequency	Percent
In-game Economy	83	18,4
Rules	72	16,0
Enjoyment	103	22,8
Real-life Ramifications	138	30,6

The preliminary research identified four concerns, In-game Economy (18,4%), Rules (16%), Enjoyment (22,8%) and Real-life Ramifications (30,6%). The concern for the real-life ramifications of gold farming was mentioned the most. There is also a strong and significant association between sentiment and real-life ramifications $\Phi = .400$, $p < .01$. This means that comments that mentioned a concern for real-life ramifications of gold farming are also likely to have a positive sentiment about Venezuelans gold farming.

The frequencies of concerns are summarized in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3: Frequencies of concerns that are coded as other

Chinese ownership	2

In the timeframe that the data is collected, the producer of OSRS, Jagex was owned by a Chinese company. This was seen as a property of greed and carelessness on the part of Jagex. This point was usually brought up in posts that discuss a lack of satisfaction from the game either in terms of content, rules, mechanics and most notably, customer support. The other concern is that there are also Chinese gold sellers. This concern is coded as other because it does not refer to Venezuelan gold farmers. The two pairs of comments appeared in different discussion trees.

4.2 THEME-CONCERN ASSOCIATIONS

Research question 2 asks: In which ways do Reddit users form associations between their concerns about the issue of Venezuelan gold farmers and themes of comments about the issue of Venezuelan gold farmers when they comment on posts relevant to Venezuelan gold farmers?

Table 4.4 summarizes the association between themes and concerns voiced by the users and the levels of significance of these associations.

Table 4.4: Associations and Significances between the themes and concerns.

		Terms of Service	Economy	Politics	Ethics
In-Game Economy	Phi Coefficient	-0,018	0,431**	-0,111*	-0,047
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,701	0,000	0,021	0,329
	N	433	433	433	433
Rules	Phi Coefficient	0,786**	0,039	-0,005	0,043
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,000	0,413	0,923	0,373
	N	432	433	433	433
Enjoyment	Phi Coefficient	0,164**	0,087	-0,120*	0,210**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,001	0,069	0,012	0,000
	N	433	433	433	433

Real-Life Ramifications	Phi Coefficient	-0,008		0,358**	0,041	0,397**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,873		0,000	0,389	0,000
	N	433		433	433	433

* p < .05

** p < .01

The first significant and very strong association between themes and concerns is between Terms of Service and Rules (Φ = .786, p <.01). This is an expected outcome because the comments that argue about the enforcement or composure of the ToS are expected to convey a concern about them as well. The second significant but negligible association in the ToS theme is with Enjoyment (Φ = .164, p <.01). This association implies that the infringement of the ToS associated with Venezuelan players affects the enjoyment of the commenters. This strong association shows that the theme of ToS, which includes references to the structural state of the game, gameplay, rules, or the developer company is connected to concerns about rule breaking behavior. This shows that there is a definite perception of threat towards the integrity of the game from the Venezuelan players, which the western players consider to be the outgroup. As an answer to RQ4, this association makes this sort of prejudice fitting to the RWA model.

The theme of economy is strongly and significantly associated with the concern of the in-game economy (Φ = .431, p <.01). This is an expected concern of the players and represents the comments that discuss the place Venezuelan players occupy in the in-game economy. As accumulators and sellers of in-game wealth, Venezuelan players are responsible for providing a wide variety of items that are usually demanded in high numbers. In one of the posts about the power blackout in Venezuela, one commentator whose name has been made-up to protect their anonymity stated this:

> Also look at volcanic ash and especially eclectic imps. The volumes have gone from ~1.5M to 400k.

> If it's all Venezuela, crazy that gold farmers make up 70% of the market for those items. (Ferb 2019)

Likewise, the other concern that is significantly and moderately associated with economy is the real-life ramifications (Φ = .368, p <.01) of the gold farming in Venezuela. This concern is coded in comments that explicitly mention the living conditions of Venezuelan people. In this regard, Venezuelan players are often portrayed as people playing for basic necessities as can be seen from the comment below, the username of the user has been made-up to protect their anonymity:

> Imagine the rage one must feel when you're just trying to earn money for dinner and some spastic starts attacking you saying "nice bowlcut" (Heinz 2017)

This concern is also represented in the sentiment a comment displays. There is a positive and strong association between the sentiment of a comment being positive and that comment showing concern about the real-life ramifications (Φ = .400, p <.01).

The theme of politics is significantly, but negligibly and negatively associated with both the concerns for in-game economy (Φ = -.111, p <.05) and enjoyment (Φ = -.120, p <.05). As can be seen above, the theme of politics is not discussed with in-game behaviors in mind, so the comments that talk about politics rarely mention any in-game concern, so this can be the reason for these negative associations.

Ethics theme is weakly significantly associated with the concerns for enjoyment (Φ = .210, p <.01) and strongly for real-life ramifications (Φ = .397, p <.01). The enjoyment aspect of this association is an interesting connection, because the coding on enjoyment relies on the comment mentioning a sentimental connection with playing the game. The weak association between sentiment and enjoyment is (Φ = .261, p <.01). This result implies that it is important for people that talk about the ethics of the situation in a positive way to share the online space with Venezuelan players in order to enjoy the game more. It reflects a concern for the representation of the group. One excerpt from a comment best describes this connection:

"…And just to be clear, I'm not defending what these gold farmers are doing. I know that they're in the wrong, but I believe the amount of genuine racism and hate I've seen in this thread is much worse. I don't like having to be ashamed to tell people I play this game because you fucks make us look absolutely horrible." (Perry on Reddit, 2017)

There is a clear negotiation of group identification within this comment. On the one hand, this user wants to identify as a member of the OSRS player group, but on the other hand, they dislike the sub-groups within the OSRS player-base. Maffesioli calls such relationships "interlocking objects" where "the large object-mass conceals smaller object-groups which are diffracted to infinity" (Maffesioli, 1996, p.75) In this case, the identity of the large object-mass, what others understand when someone says OSRS is tainted by the smaller groups that project hate and racism.

4.3 BEHAVIOR-CONCERN ASSOCIATIONS

RQ3: In which ways do Reddit users form associations between the behaviors of Venezuelan OSRS players as defined by Reddit users and their concerns about the issue of Venezuelan gold farmers when they comment on posts relevant to Venezuelan gold farmers? Table 4.5 summarizes the associations between behaviors and concerns.

Table 4.5: Associations and Significances between the behaviors and concerns.

		Money Making	Player Killing	Powerleveling
In-Game Economy	Phi Coefficient	0,491**	0,036	-0,060
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,000	0,455	0,211
	N	433	433	433
Rules	Phi Coefficient	0,237**	-0,054	0,187**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,000	0,260	0,000
	N	433	433	433
Enjoyment	Phi Coefficient	0,147**	0,301**	0,102*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,002	0,000	0,034
	N	433	433	433
Real-Life Ramifications	Phi Coefficient	0,280**	0,094	-0,048
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,000	0,050	0,315
	N	433	433	433

* p < .05

** p < .01

There is only one significant association between behaviors and concerns. A possible reason for this is that when forming their arguments about the themes of Politics and Ethics, people did not feel the need to mention in-game behaviors. This is represented in the insignificant associations between comments that discuss Ethics or Politics and the in-game variable.

The behavior of money making has significant associations with every concern that is coded. The strong significant association between money making and in-game economy (Φ = .491, p <.01) is an expected association. This trend had been visible in the previous categories where wealth was discussed. The weak association with rules (Φ = .237, p <.01) show that the comments where money making was discussed, it was also likely that the illegality of the activity was also mentioned. Likewise, money making has a weak association with real-life ramifications (Φ = .280, p <.01) meaning that mentions of money-making activities were followed by concerns for the well-being of Venezuelan players. The association with enjoyment (Φ = .147, p <.01) is a negligible one, by the standards of the Phi coefficient.

This association between money-making and in-game economy shows that the in-game wealth accumulation activities of Venezuelan players is a point of concern for the avatars of the Reddit users. This association, combined with the strong association that is found between the theme of economy and money-making behavior shows that comments that discuss economics are not only likely to mention money-making behavior, but also that money-making behavior is concerning. This concern implies a competitive mindset for the limited resources in the game. As SDO is a predictor that is based more on competition over resources, the associations formed from the economy theme imply prejudiced behavior that originates from competition between outgroups.

The behavior of player killing has a moderate significant association with enjoyment of the game (Φ = .173, p <.01). This moderate association implies that those that mention Venezuelan players kill other avatars for their loot, have had their enjoyment affected.

The effect on the enjoyment of players may be related to the fact that when avatars die in OSRS, they lose the majority of items they have on themselves. So, an avatar dying also comes with a loss of wealth.

The association between player killing and concern for enjoyment helps answer RQ4. This association shows that player killing, an activity that threatens the avatar of other players results in concerns of enjoyment. This threat can be said to be an element of prejudice prediction from the perspective of the RWA model because the activities of a perceived outgroup directly affects the in-group.

Preliminary research of the data set suggested that mentions of powerleveling would be higher due to the repetitive nature of empowering one's avatar in OSRS. However, the sample does not match this expectation and powerleveling is mentioned in only 15 comments (3%). There is a significant but negligible association between powerleveling and rules ($\Phi = .187$, $p < .01$). There is a negligible association between powerleveling and enjoyment ($\Phi = .102$, $p < .05$). These negligible associations and the low representation of the powerleveling behavior may suggest a reluctancy for people to mention this behavior.

4.4 FREQUENCIES OF THEMES

Research question 5 asks: What are the most prominent themes of the comments in the posts that talk about Venezuelan gold farmers in the OSRS subreddit? The frequencies of themes are summarized in Table 4.6.

Table 4.6 Frequencies of themes

Themes	Frequency	Percent
Terms of Service	74	16,4
Economy	210	46,6
Politics	117	25,9
Ethics	161	35,7
Other	93	20,6

Spawning from an issue of economic crisis, the most mentioned theme is Economics, and in second place the ethics of the issue, also expected because it is a point of humanitarian crisis where aid to Venezuela is also discussed. Politics with 25% comes in third as people also discuss the reasons for the crisis. ToS being mentioned the lowest implies that either people did not mention the game integrity side of the issue, or that it is such an obvious point (that gold farming is illegal) that they did not feel the need to mention it.

The frequencies of themes that are coded as other are summarized in Table 4.7.

Table 4.7 Frequencies of themes that are coded as other

Humor	37
Banter	17
Strictly about the post	21
Strictly in-game	14
Advice	5

Humor appeared the most out of the other coded themes. These comments make jokes about the post, about the comments of other users and make humorous remarks about Venezuelan gold farmers. The second theme that appeared the most is banter. These comments always refer to other comments or to the post itself. They appear most in discussion trees where there are conflicting opinions, and these comments attack the user rather than the argument of a user. The third theme is the comments that refer strictly to the post, whether it be its structure, timing relevance or something else that does not have anything to do with this study. The fourth theme is the comments that are strictly about the game, more specifically the gameplay. These comments offer no opinions regarding this topic and usually refer to other comments asking for information about the game. This theme is distinguishable from advice in the sense that these are answers to irrelevant questions about the game and not a suggestion to do something.

4.5 THEME-BEHAVIOR ASSOCIATIONS

Research question 6 asks: In which ways do Reddit users form associations between the behaviors of Venezuelan OSRS players as defined by Reddit users and themes of comments posted which are relevant to Venezuelan gold farmers? Table 4.8 summarizes the associations between the themes and behaviors with statistical significance levels.

Table 4.8: Associations and Significances between the themes and behaviors.

		Terms of Service	Economy	Politics	Ethics
Money Making	Phi Coefficient	0,145**	0,485**	0,015	0,081
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,003	0,000	0,754	0,091
	N	433	433	433	433
Player Killing	Phi Coefficient	-0,056	-0,033	-0,080	0,064
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,241	0,491	0,098	0,181
	N	433	433	433	433
Powerleveling	Phi Coefficient	.149**	0,044	-0,059	-0,067
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0,002	0,364	0,223	0,161
	N	433	433	433	433

* p < .05

** p < .01

The first significant theme-behavior association is between Terms of Service and Money-Making (Φ = .145, p <.01). This weak association shows that in comments where users talk about the ToS, whether its existence, its effects on the Venezuelan gold farmers or its overall lax enforcement, they mention the money-making activities. As opposed to the association between Economy-Money Making, these comments primarily focus on the RWT side of the gold farming discussion because the real-world wealth gaining aspect is the part that is explicitly against the rules.

Another weak significant association is between Terms of Service and Powerleveling (Φ = .149, p <.01). As mentioned in the methodology section, Powerleveling is against

the ruleset widely referred to as "account sharing rules" where playing on another person's account is forbidden. This association combines the infringement of two different types of rules and thus was expected based on the preliminary analysis.

Terms of Service and Player killing does not have a significant association. This can be due to the nature of the player killing behavior and its affects as they are felt by the other players. This behavior is not against the rules so comments that talked about the ToS did not mention it.

The strong significant association between Economy and Money Making ($\Phi = .485$, p <.01) was expected based on the preliminary analysis. This association explains that when the theme of a comment is economic, it refers to the in-game money making practices of Venezuelan players. Due to how the behavior of money making is coded, this also implies a lack of participation on the part of Venezuelan players in what other players would describe as playing the game in its entirety. The gold farming methods in an online game are often repetitive and consistent. As opposed to the other behaviors that are coded, the variable of Money Making implies a simple task that does not require much on the part of planning on strategizing. From the data, it was apparent that the most popular activity for money making in game is killing Green Dragons in the wilderness for their valuable Dragon Bones. This method is widely known to the players of the game and undertaking such a task is considered easy to do with relatively low requirement of preparation. However, this method is also risky because it is done in areas where players can attack each other's avatars. An example comment from a user whose name was made-up to protect their anonymity states:

> Killing green dragons 10 hours a day nonstop and giving all the items you get to your boss in exchance for a ~~$10~~ $4 paycheck
>
> the dream (Phineas 2017)

The expected solution for this behavior would be a gameplay solution, either in the form of action from Jagex, or from the players. However, a comment that talks about economy and money making does not significantly tie to the presence of a Gameplay-based solution ($\Phi = .066$, p <.171).

The association between the theme of Economy and the behavior of money-making suggests that the comments that mention economy in any way, be it in-game or out-game, have a high likelihood of mentioning Venezuelan players engaging in money-making activities. The existence of the strong association helps answer RQ4 by showing that the theme of economy, while it can be linked to the overall economic situation in Venezuela, is heavily tied to in-game behaviors of Venezuelan players. This association does not directly answer RQ4 towards either option, but it highlights the severity of the money-making behavior.

The themes of Politics and Ethics do not present any significant associations between any of the behaviors that are coded. A possible reason for this could be a discrepancy in what is coded. Since the coding of behaviors in itself represents a comment discussing in-game matters, a lack of behavioral association could imply a lack of in-game discussion. Such a moderately negative association is found between Politics and in-game discussion ($\Phi = -.236$, $p < .01$), meaning that comments that discuss the theme of politics are significantly unlikely to discuss in-game activities. However, the same cannot be said for the theme of ethics, where there is a negligible insignificant negative association ($\Phi = -.50$, $p < .298$). The reason for the negative association with politics can be because the comments that discuss politics usually refer to Venezuela as a country, mentioning its ideology and relationship with other countries, namely the US.

4.6 FREQUENCIES OF BEHAVIORS

Research question 7 asks: What are the most prominent distinguishable playing behaviors that separate them from what the users of the online community of the game Old School RuneScape consider to be the norm do Venezuelan players project according to the community of the game on Reddit? Table 4.9 summarizes the frequencies of behaviors.

Table 4.9 Frequencies of behaviors

Behavior	Frequency	Percent
Money-making	140	31,0
Player Killing	24	5,3

Powerleveling	15	3,3

The mention of money-making is expected because it's the behavior that is at the centre of this discussion. The other behaviors are connected to Venezuelan players earning money from the game as well, but money-making as a mention is central. The frequencies of behaviors that are coded as other are summarized in Table 4.10.

Table 4.10 Frequencies of behaviors that are coded as other

Bug abuse	2
"Walk and dress like bots"	1
Having low total-level	1

The behavior of bug abusing, the use of game errors to gain a gameplay advantage was mentioned in two comments. It is not specified what type of bug abuse Venezuelan players do, but it is said to be about in-game wealth transfer between avatars, between gold buyers and sellers. Comparisons of Venezuelan players to automated programs are coded, but this comment did not specify in which way the comparison is made, so it was not coded for any other variable. The one comment mentioning that Venezuelan players having low total level is an example of how OSRS players identify avatars that they consider to only exist for wealth accumulation. This behavior is not limited to Venezuelan players because having multiple avatars categorized for use for different in-game activities is a common practice among players. However, for this comment, an avatar having just enough levels to undertake specific tasks is a predictor of being a gold farmer.

4.7 FREQUENCIES OF SOLUTIONS

Research question 8 asks: What are the most prominent solutions mentioned by Reddit users in the subreddit of the game Old School Runescape about the problem of Venezuelan gold farmers? Table 4.11 summarizes the frequencies of solutions mentioned in the comments.

Table 4.11: Frequencies of solutions.

Solutions	Frequency	Percent
Banning Buyers	5	1,1
Automated Banning	23	5,1
Gameplay	60	13,3

The gameplay solutions refer to either changes to game balance, item prices, changes to how easily items are obtained, methods to avoid Venezuelan players or ways to kill them for their loot. The automated banning option is mentioned in forms of filter suggestions that identify avatars of certain types. The filtering in these comments have a wide range, it can be a geographic filter blocking access from South America to North American servers or looking for play patterns to identify avatars that only farm gold.

One of the main solutions that was coded, "banning of gold buyers" was included after the pilot study of the random sample where one user suggested this, and it appeared to be such an apparent solution. It is apparent that there is a disparity of desire for the rules against real world trading to be enforced to both the buying and selling parties. The solutions offered by the community imply a symbiotic relationship between the gold farmers and the other players. Unlike the other types of solutions to the gold farming problem, the banning buyers solution affects the Western players that are the customers of Venezuelans. This solution is disproportionately under-represented in the sample, with only 5 comments mentioning this out of the whole sample (see Table 4.11 for the frequencies of mentioned solutions coded as other).

The frequencies of solutions that are coded as other are summarized in Table 4.2.

Table 4.12: Frequencies of solutions that are coded as other.

"Disturbing the infrastructure of Venezuela so they cannot play"	4
"Paying Venezuelan people to become the customer support for Jagex"	2
"Stream themselves starving on twitch"	1
"They should learn how to raid to make money"	1
"Get a Job"	1

"Stop being Venezuelan"	1
"Ask Jagex to do a fundraiser to help Venezuelans"	1
"Take down the corrupt government"	1

The top solution coded as other of disrupting infrastructure appeared in posts that talked about the power shortage in Venezuela that disrupted the in-game markets. These comments mentioned this solution as a way to gain an edge for their avatars while the Venezuelans cannot play. The second most mentioned solution is about the ToS of OSRS and pokes fun at the unavailability of customer support as felt by players. The rest of the coded solutions are simplistic remarks of various natures.

4.8 ANALYSIS OF SCORES

This section is about the meta-analysis of the scores of the comments. The descriptive statistics of *sentiment* and *score* are summarized in Table 4.13.

Table 4.13: Descriptive Statistics of Sentiment and Scores

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
-1	123	46,6	110,1	-52	954
0	160	52,2	52,9	-39	288
1	149	62,6	97,6	-24	820
Total	432	54,2	88,2	-52	954

Table 4.13 shows that comments that display positive sentiments towards Venezuelan players have a higher average score compared to comments that have a negative sentiment toward Venezuelan players. The highest score of a comment with a positive sentiment is 820 and the lowest score is -24. The lowest score of a comment with a negative sentiment is 954, and the lowest score is -52. The greatest number of comments according to their sentiments are the comments that do not convey a sentiment, coded as neutral comments. The maximum score of a neutral comment is 288, and the lowest score is -39. It appears that the comments that display sentiments

toward either side have higher standard deviation compared to neutral comments. This deviation difference suggests that comments that weigh heavily to a side are more vehemently agreed or disagreed with. Despite the highest scored comment being that of a negative sentiment, it appears on average comments with positive sentiments toward Venezuelan players have higher scores.

5. CONCLUSION

The results of this study help identify where a discussion tree starts and develops to in an online setting from the perspective of themes. It takes the work of Maffesioli (1996) as a starting point to examine how group identities form in modern times and contributes to Maffesioli's question of how his view of neo-tribes present themselves in the telecommunications era. Robards' study of Reddit, where the subreddits are found to be fitting to the neo-tribes model of Maffesioli paves the way for this research by examining Reddit as a whole and looking at several subreddits and comparing them to each other. This research takes an even closer look at how neo-tribes form within neo-tribes. Since Maffesioli's concept of affectual nebula determines no end to how specific of a group identification one can make, the different discussions that take place within the comment trees of Reddit present multiple distinguishable neo-tribe identities that discuss how to approach the influx of Venezuelan players in a time of crisis.

Buying and selling gold puts the Venezuelan players that sell gold in the same economy. The relationship between these two parties is like how Goffman describes the workplace and the supervisors' relationship with the workers. Much like the attendants in a hospital ward, the attendants saved work for when a supervisor might be around to see it, otherwise they would do no-work. Similarly, the Western customers of Venezuelan gold-farmers appear opposed to the Venezuelan gold farmers but present no opposition to the idea of buying gold themselves. The problem is often framed in a way where the gold that Venezuelan players obtain magically is transformed into dollars. In comments that talk about the prices of in-game items, especially in the posts about the power blackout in Venezuela where Venezuelan players lost access to OSRS for half a day, the emphasis is put on the increasing item prices and the market-share of Venezuelan gold farmers. This emphasis is followed by remarks of how the lack of items commonly sold by Venezuelan players have been profitable for some and fiscally damaging for others.

In the analysis of scores, it was revealed that the scores of comments that have neutral sentiments have lower deviation from their minimums and maximums while comments that have negative or positive sentiments have very high maximum scores and low

minimum scores. This can be caused by the scoring mechanism of Reddit which promotes comments that score well by making them more visible, displaying them first to someone that enters a comments section. It should be noted that both comments with the highest scores for negative or positive sentiments are discussion starters, top comments. They are both one sentence long and they both reference the post itself while presenting their sentiments. So, it appears the mechanism of Reddit rewards short comments that are relevant to the post since they are more easily read and voted-on my other users, especially during the 12-hour period where comment scores are hidden.

The percentages of player behavior as represented by the comments in the thread is also an interesting finding of this study. The total percentage of comments that mention an in-game behavior is 39,6%, meaning that more than half of the comments did not mention any behaviors. This shows that the discussions within more than half of the comments in all comments talk about the themes they mention without feeling the need to specifically emphasize a behavior. This can be because the users of the subreddit are expected to know what behaviors someone could be talking about in these discussions through sheer exposure. This total is lower than the total of any other category of variables, which leads me to think that the behaviors of Venezuelan gold farmers are treated as part of the shared experience of the users.

The results show that comments that mentioned a concern for real-life ramifications of gold farming are also likely to have a positive sentiment about Venezuelan players gold farming. This suggests that comments that care to include references to the real-life crisis are likely to empathize with the hardships Venezuelan players go through. This also suggests that the comments that do not mention the real-life situation, only approaching the subject from an in-game effects standpoint are not likely to have a positive sentiment about Venezuelan players. Building on this, I think that this is an example showing that news exposing people to the suffering of others can have an empathy inducing effect on the viewers when said viewers enter an environment where that can interact with those that are suffering.

The associations between ToS-Rules and Player Killing-Enjoyment suggest a concern due to feeling threatened. The ToS and rules association implies an attack on the social order and cohesion through infringement of the rules of the land where the avatars of

the players exist in. The player killing and enjoyment association implies a threat on the safety of avatars of the players, thus attacking the group safety. These associations fit the RWA model well. These associations ring true with the sentiments of the governments the west considers be leaning towards authoritarianism. The governments of China (Sudworth 2021), Russia (Sherr 2021) and Turkey (BBC 2021) are among the countries that news outlets are not hesitant to state having authoritarian values at the time of writing this paper. These countries have no shortage of mentions of homeland security, the issue of Crimea with Russia, South China Sea with China and the southeastern border states with Turkey, in their agendas. These countries are also known for their use of police forces to crack down on protestors and dissidents. The display of RWA-oriented discourse in the r/2007scape can be considered as an emblematic display of why authoritarian values gain prominence in some countries. A central promise of authoritarianism is stability and safety, and the RWA-oriented sentiments displayed in this study mimic the desire for stability and safety. This stability and safety is expected by the players on account of the terms of services of OSRS. However, the inconsistency on part of the developer company Jagex in enforcing the rules makes the players feel threatened, thus leading to authoritarian sentiments.

The associations between economy and in-game economy, as well as money-making and in-game economy suggest a concern for a competition over the resources inside the game world. These associations can be said to fit the SDO model as a competitive aspect within the discourse because it is the Western players that are the dominant majority within OSRS. In this association, although Venezuelan players are not trying to dominate the OSRS environment, they are also resisting domination.

From these findings, this study suggests that a possible prejudice predictor model for social media research about video game communities should take in-game resources into account when analyzing group behaviors. Similar to real-life prejudice between groups, the perceived well-being of members plays an important role in video game communities as well. When it comes to deriving possible models for predicting prejudice from social media comments, this study presents two angles from which a possible prejudice prediction model can be formed. In the context of video game studies, a model predicting SDO behavior must be concerned with the competition over in-game resources. The advantage of video game community research helps in this

regard because online marketplaces usually offer information through official or third-party resources so competitive interests are considerably transparent.

The associations made with real-life ramifications and a concern do not fit a prejudice prediction model. This is because there is a strong positive association between comment sentiments and the concern for real-life ramifications. This concern reflects the portion of comments that care about the well-being of Venezuelan players as opposed to having prejudices against them. It should also be noted that r/2007scape is one of the places that users may browse even if they do not play OSRS. As part of the social media sphere of the game it represents a side of the game that if purely produced by the players, so a potential new player might have an opinion about the player base by looking at the subreddit. The comment that is highlighted at the end of section 4.2 of this study reveals an insecurity about the image of the game. The comment suggests that it is important for the players of an online game to be associated with an online community that has as little negative connotations as possible. So, posts and comments that are racist, sexist and overall bigoted do not reflect well on the players on an individual level as well.

The stickied mod-post regarding the guide to hunt Venezuelan players is also an example comment showing the concern for how the community looks to the observer. The mod-post also mentions a previous in-game LGBT event that wasn't well received by the community. It makes a point to say that being intolerant toward out-groups (LGBT community and Venezuelan players in these comments) is not how the community wants to be viewed. Evidently, not everyone in the community shares that sentiment. These sentiments suggest that Goffman's way of looking at the actors of interactions as performers, audience and outsiders is applicable. The performers being those that comment and post in the subreddit, the audience would be the lurkers of the platform, who may vote on the content but don't add anything themselves, finally the outsiders would be anyone that stumbles upon the community, whether as a prospective new player or someone who visits the subreddit when a highly popular post on the front page of the subreddit make it to the front page of Reddit due to its popularity. From this approach, we can say that there are points where the performers disagree on, such as the punishment for the offending behaviors, the ethics of the crisis and whether the Venezuelan players are welcome in the game. Aside from offering a view on the

discourse, this data also presents the negotiations among a group in terms of how it will be viewed and what the priorities of the group should be.

The discourse of this study is newer than the discourse of the #GamerGate scandal. The positive sentiments toward Venezuelan players can be expected to include sentiments that are cautious due to the negative backlash gamergaters received during and after the scandal. The players do not want to endanger the game's public image but the gatekeeping sentiment throughout the subreddit is self-evident. Despite all the posts created around this subject, the players seem to be frustrated about the lack of action taken around this issue on part of the developer. In the comments sections of all posts, and especially under one very popular post, one may find people trying to organize against the Venezuelan players in different discussion trees. These organization attempts a reminiscent of Büyüköztürk, Gaulden and Dowd-Arrow's (2018) study where they examined the subreddit where gamergaters tried to organize themselves. In-line with Büyüköztürk, Gaulden and Dowd-Arrow's study, the organization attempts in the r/2007scape subreddit also did not lead to any meaningful change.

The reluctancy for people to mention powerleveling may be because of an anxiety to be branded an outsider to the act of playing the game. While a similar anxiety may exist for the act of buying gold it is certainly a more widely committed infringement by Western players, to the point where people openly discuss gold prices, the same cannot be said for powerleveling prices or services. This anxiety can be caused by the repetitive nature of the game even without focusing on gold farming activities. So the users may see the act of buying currency as more acceptable compared to getting ahead in avatar progression without putting in the work.

Video games offer a unique set of data for research, where every behavior of the players can be observed and examined. This data is usually collected and analyzed to increase in-game quality of life by increasing ease of access, but in the case of Riot Games, it is also used to reduce player toxicity. If more companies share their data with researchers, data-based research about communities would benefit greatly.

It seems that Venezuelan gold farms fill a gap that is created by the in-game economy design of OSRS. While the economy of items for the game is a stimulating factor to get people to play the game, sometimes with multiple accounts to have different

experiences with different avatars, it is apparent that people value their time more than they fear losing their accounts for buying services with real money. The reluctance to punish gold buyers for whatever reason creates an environment where Venezuelan people can trust that there will be people buying their labour more than they can trust the Venezuelan economy for their labour to be worth their efforts. I believe that if Jagex chooses to put an end to the virtual gold market through strict automatic filters that affect only the sellers, it would be an incomplete solution that would only decrease their player numbers because it would inconvenience a large portion of its players.

This study adds to the video game studies literature by examining exclusionary sentiments within a video game community. It suggests that similar studies for other communities for different communities can be made and highlights how similar studies should be made. Thematic Analysis is a useful and versatile tool that facilitates social media research. The subject of Venezuelan gold farmers is also not limited to the sphere of video games, and it has seen attention from mainstream media outlets due to its fringe nature as well as ideological implications. The sentiments from US-centric political pundits regarding Nicolas Maduro's presidency in Venezuela are echoed in the comments section of this video game community. This displays that video game public spheres are affected by real-life events, similar to the #GamerGate scandal and women's employment in the video games industry overall. The discriminatory sentiments and what they are based on is a valuable addition to video game studies where discrimination against groups is always a hot topic among communities. With these in mind, it is apparent that a model to reliably measure and analyze discriminatory statements on social media would be significantly beneficial to social media studies overall.

Until the economic state of Venezuela gets better, Western players will get more used to seeing Spanish in the game chat and running into Venezuelan players in popular areas where obtaining in game wealth is easy. From the findings of this study, I am hopeful that over time those that can be sympathetic to the plight of Venezuelans will accept them, and those that would not accept them under any circumstance will get tired of speaking about them.

5.1 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The first limitation of this study is the deleted comments in the posts. Information about these comments is only available in the form that the PushshiftAPI catalogued them in, and the only data left from these comments is their score. So they could not be used in the coding table and are left out of the sample. The API has stored their points data so it is shown that the comments that got deleted from the posts are predominantly comments that got heavily downvoted.

Another inherent limitation of the study is in regards to the quality of the data that can be collected from Reddit. Reddit's scoring system hides the scores of comments for 12 hours after they are posted, so if a comment is getting a lot of upvotes or downvotes, it won't be known to the other users until 12 housr passes. This is made to ensure people don't pile on and manipulate the scores of comments just because the comments have too high or too low of a score. However, Reddit also has an inherent function that automatically hides comments that have negative scores. So, 12 hours after a comment is posted, if it got too many downvotes in that period, it gets hidden. This makes it harder for users that look at the comments at a later point to see the most downvoted comments. While the upvote/downvote system of Reddit is said to be a system designed to reward the quality of a comment rather than the sentiment a comment has, users may still vote based on their personal views about a comment rather than how well-written it is. This property of Reddit results in comments sections looking like echo chambers if the comments section is not thoroughly examined. This is a problem that is most visible when browsing Reddit on a browser, where the selection of comments to be shown may have already be filtered out by the score hiding mechanism. This study tried to circumvent this representation problem by collecting all comments from posts with the use of the API, however, the problem of representation of different opinions is not helped by the data collection method.

5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Video game communities are some of the most represented communities on the internet and the discussions that revolve around video games are not strictly limited to the games

they discuss. This case study represents only a small fraction of the type of discussion that is about prejudice and outgroup perspectives when one takes the greater video game social media environment. So, it is apparent that discourses within video game discussions can be a relevant and valuable source of data.

In a similar study in the future, the pseudonyms of the users should also be taken into consideration to check if certain types of comments are pushed by smaller groups of users rather than being representative of a wider variety of users. This type of pseudonym tracking could also feed into research about who actually creates content on the internet. A similar study could also look into who the discussion starters, the discussion participants and lurkers are and how a discussion shapes in relation to these types of internet users. For example, Reddit highlights the pseudonym of the user that posted the thread in the comments section if they comment. Naturally, the highlighted name, reserved only for admins, moderators and thread posters carries a leadership position within the discussion and it may change how they conduct themselves.

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    https://www.redditinc.com/policies/content-policy

"faq" Reddit, March 7, 2021. https://www.reddit.com/r/2007scape/wiki/faq

OldSchool Runescape Homepage https://www.oldschool.runescape.com

Stuck In the Matrix: Dataset is available on the following webpage.

https://files.pushshift.io/reddit/

Perry's comment
https://www.reddit.com/r/2007scape/comments/6xnfso/killing_venezuelans_at_east_drags_guide/dmhxfol/

Ferb's comment
https://www.reddit.com/r/2007scape/comments/ayyji8/power_outage_in_venezuela_has_plummeted_the/ei4paqk/

Candace's comment
https://www.reddit.com/r/2007scape/comments/6tw0o5/south_american_gold_farmers/dloe7wv/

Phineas's Comment
https://www.reddit.com/r/2007scape/comments/6tw0o5/south_american_gold_farmers/dlo7lsc/

Heinz's Comment
https://www.reddit.com/r/2007scape/comments/6tw0o5/south_american_gold_farmers/dloa4y1/

APPENDIX A

A.1 REDDIT POSTS

https://www.reddit.com/r/2007scape/comments/6xnfso/killing_venezuelans_at_east_drags_guide/

https://www.reddit.com/r/2007scape/comments/bhfiqa/i_will_be_going_to_venezuela_for_two_weeks_i_plan/

https://www.reddit.com/r/2007scape/comments/9azxjr/skeleton_attacked_me_while_killing_venezuela/

https://www.reddit.com/r/2007scape/comments/94a0ba/can_someone_tell_me_whyy/

https://www.reddit.com/r/2007scape/comments/8qo5it/petition_to_move_the_grand_exchange_to_venezuela/

https://www.reddit.com/r/2007scape/comments/b5psz2/if_you_are_wondering_why_there_is_so_few_bots/

https://www.reddit.com/r/2007scape/comments/ayyji8/power_outage_in_venezuela_has_plummeted_the/

https://www.reddit.com/r/2007scape/comments/6tw0o5/south_american_gold_farmers/?st=J6F01UD5&sh=50acb6f5

https://www.reddit.com/r/2007scape/comments/azkgz7/loot_from_1_week_of_venezuela_power_outage/

https://www.reddit.com/r/2007scape/comments/91dmdf/how_1_looks_like_in_venezuela/

https://www.reddit.com/r/2007scape/comments/b96u5o/venezuela_at_the_moment_shit_post/

https://www.reddit.com/r/2007scape/comments/8imd7b/when_you_log_in_from_venezuela/

https://www.reddit.com/r/2007scape/comments/8y9n8f/osrs_down_venezuela_bankrupt_region_destabilized/

https://www.reddit.com/r/2007scape/comments/cgvj62/rip_venezuela/

https://www.reddit.com/r/2007scape/comments/bhtdr2/add_voice_chat_to_osrs_so_i_can_blast_music_and/

https://www.reddit.com/r/2007scape/comments/b00t2w/i_know_we_joke_about_this_but_i_talked_to_a/

A2. REDDIT POST IMAGES

Image for the post "Skeleton attacked me while killing Venezuela Runecrafters. Lmao"

xfavoor
To ████: Dile a tu familia que enviamos nuestro amor y apoyo
From ████: Amennn ten quio
From ████: Luegoo conectarme hermanoo
To ████: Si necesita dinero para los alimentos hasame saber
From ████: Friieennn mi hermanoo mil graciaaas y bendiciones q se t multiplique
To ████: Mi amor mi hermano
From ████: Yo luegoo escribirt hermano q esta lloviendo y voy ala casa hermanoo t

Image for the post "I know we joke about this but I talked to a Venezuelan today and it about broke my heart."

Image for the post "RIP VENEZUELA"

Image for the post "Venezuela At The Moment (Shit Post)"

Image from the post "How $1 looks like in Venezuela"
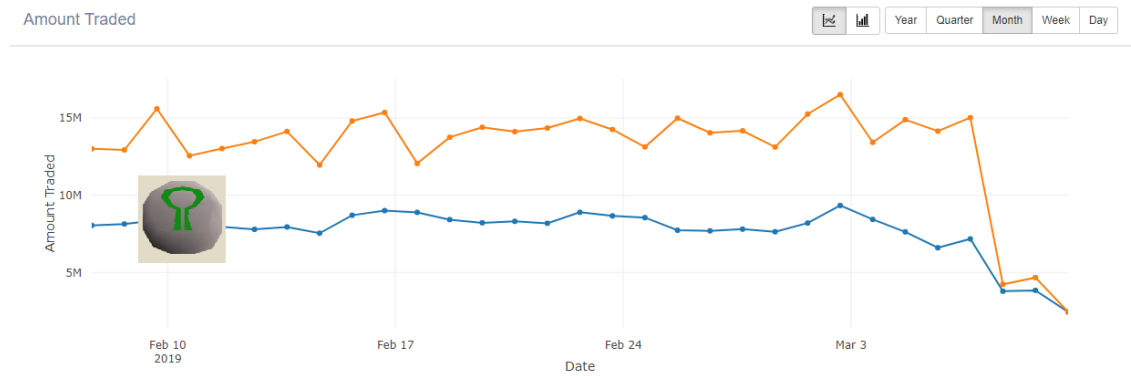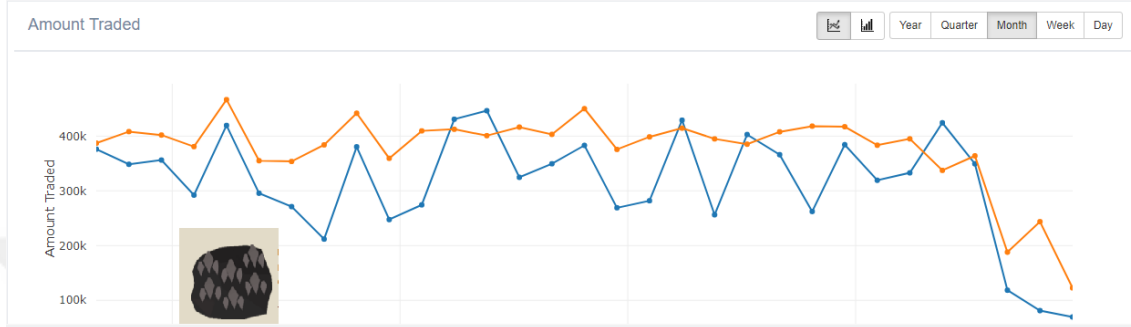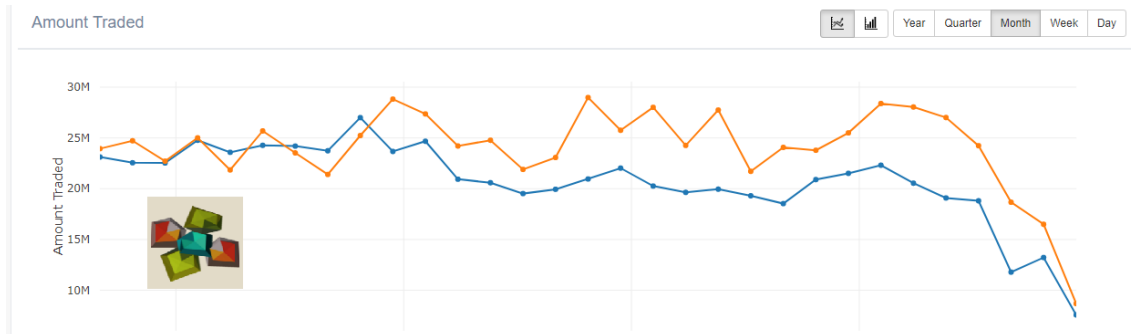
Image from the post "Loot from 1 week of Venezuela Power Outage"
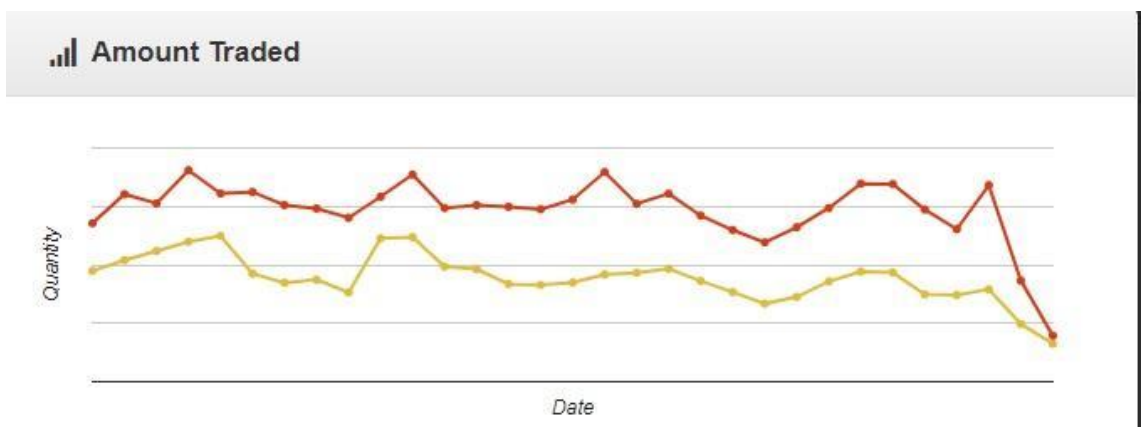
Image from the post "Power outage in Venezuela has plummeted the amount of dragon bones sold"

NEWS / LATIN AMERICA

Venezuela suffers second blackout within a month

Maduro government blames opposition for power outage that affected half of Venezuela, including Caracas.

6 hours ago   f   🐦

Passengers are seen during a blackout at Simon Bolivar International airport in Caracas [Carlos Jasso/Reuters]

Venezuela has been hit by yet another electricity blackout, including much of the capital, Caracas, sowing alarm two weeks after a nationwide outage that paralysed the country.

MORE ON VENEZUELA

Venezuela in crisis: All the latest updates

today

Image from the post "If you are wondering why there is so few bots today, Venezuela suffers second blackout within a month"

64

Image from the post "Petition to Move the Grand Exchange to Venezuela"

APPENDIX B

B.1 FREQUENCY TABLES

1

Approach

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	-1.00	123	27.3	28.5	28.5
	.00	160	35.5	37.0	65.5
	1.00	149	33.0	34.5	100.0
	Total	432	95.8	100.0	
Missing	System	19	4.2		
Total		451	100.0		

2

In Game

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	266	59.0	61.4	61.4
	1.00	167	37.0	38.6	100.0
	Total	433	96.0	100.0	
Missing	System	18	4.0		
Total		451	100.0		

3

Discussion Starter

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	293	65.0	66.6	66.6
	1.00	147	32.6	33.4	100.0
	Total	440	97.6	100.0	
Missing	System	11	2.4		
Total		451	100.0		

4

Sarcasm

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	345	76.5	79.7	79.7
	1.00	88	19.5	20.3	100.0
	Total	433	96.0	100.0	
Missing	System	18	4.0		
Total		451	100.0		

5

Terms of Service

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	359	79.6	82.9	82.9
	1.00	74	16.4	17.1	100.0
	Total	433	96.0	100.0	
Missing	System	18	4.0		
Total		451	100.0		

6

Economy

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	223	49.4	51.5	51.5
	1.00	210	46.6	48.5	100.0
	Total	433	96.0	100.0	
Missing	System	18	4.0		
Total		451	100.0		

7

Politics

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	316	70.1	73.0	73.0
	1.00	117	25.9	27.0	100.0
	Total	433	96.0	100.0	
Missing	System	18	4.0		
Total		451	100.0		

8

Ethics

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	272	60.3	62.8	62.8
	1.00	161	35.7	37.2	100.0
	Total	433	96.0	100.0	
Missing	System	18	4.0		
Total		451	100.0		

9

Other Theme

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	340	75.4	78.5	78.5
	1.00	93	20.6	21.5	100.0
	Total	433	96.0	100.0	
Missing	System	18	4.0		
Total		451	100.0		

10

Money Making

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	293	65.0	67.7	67.7
	1.00	140	31.0	32.3	100.0
	Total	433	96.0	100.0	
Missing	System	18	4.0		
Total		451	100.0		

11

Player Killing

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	409	90.7	94.5	94.5
	1.00	24	5.3	5.5	100.0
	Total	433	96.0	100.0	
Missing	System	18	4.0		
Total		451	100.0		

12

Powerleveling

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	418	92.7	96.5	96.5
	1.00	15	3.3	3.5	100.0
	Total	433	96.0	100.0	
Missing	System	18	4.0		
Total		451	100.0		

13

In-Game Economy

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	350	77.6	80.8	80.8
	1.00	83	18.4	19.2	100.0
	Total	433	96.0	100.0	
Missing	System	18	4.0		
Total		451	100.0		

14

Rules

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	360	79.8	83.3	83.3
	1.00	72	16.0	16.7	100.0
	Total	432	95.8	100.0	
Missing	System	19	4.2		
Total		451	100.0		

15

Enjoyment

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	330	73.2	76.2	76.2
	1.00	103	22.8	23.8	100.0
	Total	433	96.0	100.0	
Missing	System	18	4.0		
Total		451	100.0		

16

Real Life Ramifications

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	295	65.4	68.1	68.1
	1.00	138	30.6	31.9	100.0
	Total	433	96.0	100.0	
Missing	System	18	4.0		
Total		451	100.0		

17

Banning Buyers

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	428	94.9	98.8	98.8
	1.00	5	1.1	1.2	100.0
	Total	433	96.0	100.0	
Missing	System	18	4.0		
Total		451	100.0		

18

Automated Banning

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	410	90.9	94.7	94.7
	1.00	23	5.1	5.3	100.0
	Total	433	96.0	100.0	
Missing	System	18	4.0		
Total		451	100.0		

19

Gameplay

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	373	82.7	86.1	86.1
	1.00	60	13.3	13.9	100.0
	Total	433	96.0	100.0	
Missing	System	18	4.0		
Total		451	100.0		

Appendix B.2: Table of all coded variables

		Type				Themes				Behavior			
ID	Score	Sentiment	In-Game	Discussion Starter	Sarcastic	Economy	Politics	Ethics	Other	Mone-Making	Player Killing	Powerleveling	Other

Concerns					Solutions			
In-Game Economy	Rules	Enjoyment	Real-Life Ramifications	Other	Banning Buyers	Auto Ban	Gameplay	Other

ÖZGEÇMİŞ

Kişisel Bilgiler

Adı Soyadı   : Doruk Doğan

Doğum Yeri ve Tarihi   :

Eğitim Durumu

Lisans Öğrenimi   : Koç Üniversitesi

Yüksek Lisans Öğrenimi   : Kadir Has Üniversitesi

Bildiği Yabancı Diller   : İngilizce, Almanca

İş Deneyimi

Çalıştığı Kurumlar ve Tarihleri:

İletişim

Telefon   :

E-posta Adresi   :