Cross-Border Conflicts in Gaming: Indo-Pak Tensions in Competitive Multiplayer Spaces

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Keywords

Cross-border, conflict, contact, geopolitics, toxicity, competitive games

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

India and Pakistan share a deeply complex and tumultuous history stemming from their partition in 1947. This division was driven by religious and political differences and resulted in one of the largest migrations in human history, marked by widespread violence, displacement, and loss of life, leaving lasting scars on both nations. Since then, the relationship has been defined by wars (1947-1948, 1965, 1971, and 1999), territorial disputes, and frequent skirmishes and ceasefire violations, further solidifying the animosity between the two countries. These geopolitical tensions manifest not only in real-world interactions but also in digital spaces like social media and discussion forums, where negative interactions perpetuate animosity and reinforce stereotypes (Javaid & Sahrai, 2020; Nawaz et al., 2022). However, the nature of online interactions between Indian and Pakistani players in multiplayer video games remains largely unexplored, even though players from both countries frequently connect to the same servers due to geographical proximity and similar ping rates. This gap in research is particularly notable given that nationalism and national identity often manifest in cross-cultural multiplayer gaming spaces (Gavrilović, 2019; Lin & Sun, 2011).

This exploratory study aimed to examine how geopolitical tensions between India and Pakistan manifested in cross-border social interactions within multiplayer games. Specifically, games with competitive and PvP elements were chosen, given that they are widely popular among players from India and Pakistan and feature competitive structures where success depends on collaboration and communication. Examples include *Rust* (Facepunch Studios, 2018), *Valorant* (Riot Games, 2020), and *Counter-*

Proceedings of DiGRA 2025

Strike 2 (Valve, 2012). Purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants. Advertisements for the study were circulated on two widely used social media platforms, Instagram and Facebook. Additionally, the primary researcher joined both Pakistani and Indian game servers to engage with players, explain the study, and invite them to participate in semi-structured interviews. Between November 2024 and January 2025, 11 Indian and 12 Pakistani players (all male, aged 18–32 years, M_{age}=21.5 years) participated. They answered questions on in-game interactions, nature of interactions, role of communication and game dynamics, and their expectations from future interactions. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results showed the following broad themes: patriotism and stereotypes; game variables that affected degree of toxic interaction; player variables that affected degree of toxic interaction; external influences on in-game interaction (social media interaction, biased news coverage, and politics and propaganda); reaction to toxicity (managing and retaliation); interplay of multiple identities; and video-games as means to further cross-cultural understanding. Pakistani and Indian players often recognized each other's nationality through subtle cues in accent differences, word choice, ping disparities, and Steam profile details. Game-related variables like the team's state of winning or losing, stakes of the match (rank-up or rank-down), and matchmaking dynamics (team composition by nationality), together with player-related factors (age, maturity, cultural or social learning), strongly influenced the degree to which interactions would turn hostile. High-stakes games, especially when the team was losing, and younger players were more likely to result in targeted, toxic interactions. Teams with a majority of players from one nation and a minority from another also created an environment conducive to in-game bullying.

According to most participants, abusive and toxic behaviours were common and expected in competitive games. In these displays of in-game toxicity, targeting national and religious identities became the easiest and most effective strategy to provoke or hurt opponents, as it had the greatest emotional impact on the other player. Indeed, studies have shown that aggressive and toxic exchanges are considered acceptable in competitive games and can escalate to personal attacks (Beres et al., 2021; Kowert et al., 2024; Şengün et al., 2019). Most players from both countries believed that certain topics acted as catalysts for conflict, including conversations on politics, religion, and nation. More importantly, players knew that not all players from the other nation were toxic and abusive and that players of all types existed on both sides. Additionally, some players recognized how vicious cycles of passing on toxicity worked, wherein a previous negative interaction with a player of the other nation could lead to the initiation of future hostility, even when players from the other nation were now interacting without animosity. Such perpetuating cycles of toxicity, where victims become enablers, have been seen in previous research (Kim & Ortiz, 2024; Kordyaka et al., 2023).

Participants also highlighted how social interactions in the gaming context did not exist in isolation and were influenced by a myriad of factors such as media, social media, and politics. The interplay of identities such as religion, region, and language further complicated these interactions. For instance, Pakistani players who were Muslim and from the Punjab region often shared a positive rapport with Punjabi players from India due to their shared linguistic and cultural background. In contrast, interactions between these players and other Indian gamers tended to be far more negative. Players from other regions, such as Arabic-speaking countries, also

influenced the dynamics. They tended to show toxicity toward both Pakistani and Indian players, frequently grouping them under the label of 'Indian'.

Participants' views on the role played by video games as catalysts of positive change in Indo-Pak relations were mixed. Despite challenges, some players were optimistic that long-term interaction or continuous gameplay could help dissolve initial hostility and build rapport; communication through these games provided an alternate medium of contact between people from the two nations, reduced reliance on biased media narratives, and helped in the re-evaluation of preconceived notions and stereotypes.

Notably, the study included only male participants and focused exclusively on competitive multiplayer games. Players were not assessed for socioeconomic status, education level, or gaming experience. The interviews were conducted before the April 2025 Pahalgam terrorist attack, which briefly escalated India-Pakistan tensions online. Nonetheless, the study's findings highlight the dual potential of multiplayer games as both sites of conflict and avenues for fostering cross-cultural dialogue. Results emphasise the need for game developers to consider socio-political factors in games' matchmaking systems and community management to foster healthier in-game interactions across diverse player groups.

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