Leveling the Playing Field: Online Gaming as a Communication Platform for Individuals with Disabilities

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ABSTRACT

Individuals with disabilities continue to face exclusion from the mainstream human rights agenda, hindering the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. This study analyzes online gaming as a communication platform that shapes and reproduces social realities of social inclusion among individuals with disabilities. This qualitative research explored the experiences of individuals with disabilities in the realm of inclusivity facilitated by gaming applications accessible through the internet. In-depth interviews were conducted with registered individuals with disabilities under the Persons with Disability Affairs Office (PDAO) in the Philippines, who engage in online gaming platforms such as Call of Duty, Valorant, and Mobile Legends. Drawing on the theoretical concept of social inclusion, this study delves into its dimensions to explore diverse viewpoints on disability and online gaming. The findings indicate that participation in online games is a multifaceted communication tool that facilitates the co-creation of social inclusion in individual and group social contexts. The findings highlight the need for communication scholars to explore how virtual spaces contribute to social exclusion and how they can expand the opportunities to foster social inclusion. The study's insights on how online gaming co-creates the social reality of social inclusion among individuals with disabilities can inform online game developers, healthcare professionals, and policymakers to foster more inclusive communities.

Keywords: Social inclusion; communication; individuals with disabilities; online gaming

INTRODUCTION

One in six people, or over a billion worldwide, live with a disability. Family, friends, and colleagues are affected by disability, but people with disabilities continue to be excluded from the mainstream human rights agenda. The UN's Disability and Development Report 2024 highlights that progress on 30% of Sustainable Development Goal targets is insufficient, 14% show missed or stalled progress, and 14% show reverse progress.

To achieve the SDGs by 2030, we must accelerate accessibility to physical and virtual environments, implement anti-discrimination laws, expand social safety nets, and ensure the security and well-being of all individuals with disabilities in crises.

Online games offer immersive virtual worlds for people with disabilities to interact and evolve as social beings. Making these virtual spaces accessible through research that supports transformative systems and practices can accelerate the realization of the SDGs by 2030. Studying this aspect can transform our perception of interactions, transcend physical boundaries, and foster inclusivity by providing equal access and participation for people with disabilities online.

Reviewed studies on online gaming revealed interesting insights. A quantitative study found that online games significantly affect the social interaction capability of adolescents with intellectual disability. Alkahtani's (2024) study emphasized the need to broaden the study of online games beyond social interaction, including cognitive variables and diverse populations, particularly those with intellectual disabilities and autism.

To address challenges posed by digital systems for people with disabilities, van Toorn's (2024) research discussed the role of participatory approaches, but noted their often-meaningless application, resulting in inaccessible systems. Lack of government support and resistance to power sharing are obstacles to successful disability initiatives in digital government, according to van Toorn (2024). However, the study highlighted the potential of technology to improve inclusion and the crucial role of people with disabilities in technology development. This observation underscores the need for continuous efforts to promote social inclusion of people with disabilities.

Putra and Misky (2024) asserted that the function of a game shifts from entertainment to "playing together" (multiplayer), creating a relationship between players' imagination and visual sensations. The internet forms "network communities" in game media, leading to structured engagement between players and strengthening the bond between network and self-identity in the social order. This change affects the action and response in online game experiences. Currently, games are accessible to all abilities, with individuals using different means to participate. Inclusivity boosts self-confidence for individuals with disabilities, which sparked interest in exploring how online game participation as a communication phenomenon leads to social inclusion.

Blackman (2024) explored the intersection of virtual reality and video games, arguing that immersion in a virtual world is performative. The present study investigates the assertion that virtual space is constituted through social, cultural, and material relations.

A recent study confirmed that while there are efforts to increase social accessibility of games for people with disabilities, these efforts must include technical accessibility and social inclusion. Baltazar, Hassan, and Turunen (2023) state that social accessibility in multiplayer games requires inclusive game design, in-game features, and social guidelines that promote inclusive social structures and multimodality in communications. The study found that social accessibility provides players with communication means, and multiple communication alternatives create accessibility. The observation prompted a need to explore how online gaming among individuals with disabilities is a communication tool that promotes social inclusion and equitable participation in society. The current study examines how online game participation facilitates and ensures individual interaction and engagement in virtual social activities to foster a sense of belonging and inclusion.

A systematic review by Raith et al. (2021) found a positive association between massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) and well-being. Future research should broaden well-being constructs and enhance methodologies. This study contributes to expanding the concept of well-being beyond traditional boundaries and incorporating social inclusion. Social inclusion encompasses social, cultural, and material aspects.

In a World Economic Forum (2024) article, experts explained that inclusion benefits the global economy. Excluding people with disabilities from the workforce and positions of power incurs substantial costs. Individuals with disabilities and their families collectively contribute 54% of the global economy, worth $13 trillion. Companies that leverage the virtual space for their benefit and the benefit of people with disabilities are imperative.

An editorial in the Social Inclusion Journal (2023) emphasizes the transformative approach needed for social inclusion among disabled individuals. It prioritizes the inherent worth of disabled people and challenges oppressive systems rather than merely integrating them into existing structures. This study focuses on the individual level but offers valuable insights into how organizations can optimize the benefits of social inclusion at both levels. Exploring social inclusion through the socio-cultural or critical tradition of communication theories could be a relevant approach.

This analysis of online gaming as a communication process that reproduces social realities of social inclusion among persons with disabilities is consistent with Robert T. Craig's (1999) mapping of communication traditions. Communication is viewed as a tool for conveying information that constructs norms and relationships among persons with disabilities. Their online interactions form a shared understanding of the world, producing and maintaining social inclusion. This research describes and explains how online game participation facilitates the construction of shared meanings and interpretations that form the concept of social

inclusion among persons with disabilities. Online game participation is viewed as a communication phenomenon that explains human interactions among persons with disabilities in the virtual space. This innovative study advances communication and social inclusion knowledge in the virtual space. It aimed to answer: How do individuals with disabilities experience participation in virtual online gaming? How do online games function as communication tools that facilitate social inclusion? How do socio-cultural dynamics within virtual gaming environments influence communication practices and identity construction of players with disabilities?

DESIGN AND METHODS

This qualitative research was conducted to elucidate how people with disabilities experience inclusivity through gaming applications accessed via the internet. The necessary data were gathered from participants who gave informed consent for the study's conduct through in-depth interviews. The researchers used a semi-structured interview guide during the interviews to ensure that the flow of the interview aligned with the research purpose.

In their article published in 2022, Bekele and Ago (2022) discussed the sample size required for interviews in qualitative research within the social sciences. They cited Creswell's (1988) recommendation, which suggests that a phenomenological study should ideally include between five and twenty-five interviews. Bekele and Ago (2022) further elaborated on this by referencing Bernard (2013), who indicated that Morse (1994) recommended a minimum of six participants to comprehensively explore and comprehend the central themes in any study of lived experiences. In this study, six (6) individuals registered with the Persons with Disability Affairs Office (PDAO) in the Philippines, who have disabilities and play online games such as Call of Duty, Valorant, etc., but mostly Mobile Legends, participated in this study. These individuals have been playing for at least one (1) year, two (2) to three (3) days per week, for at least three (3) hours a day. Four (4) of them have orthopedic disabilities, one (1) has a learning disability, and one (1) has a visual disability.

After each in-depth interview and discussion, transcriptions of the interviews—or the conversion of the audio and video recordings into readable text—were immediately carried out. Deductive coding, followed by segmenting, was conducted to serve as the core of the emerging themes. According to Saldaña (2021), a code in qualitative data analysis is a researcher-created concept that serves as a symbol, assigning interpreted meanings to each data point for subsequent purposes of pattern identification, categorization, theory development, and other analytical processes.

In this study, the codes were derived from raw transcript excerpts and then grouped into categories, wherein similar codes were clustered to identify patterns. For example, the codes related to the individual and group social contexts were used in responses that focused on the individual or involved engagement with others. Themes were then generated from these categories to answer the research questions. These themes captured the richness of experience among individuals with disabilities and helped explain online gaming as a communication phenomenon that facilitates social inclusion. The process was applied consistently across all transcript excerpts, guided by reflexive coding and the theoretical framework.

Using social inclusion as a theoretical concept, this study relied on its dimensions to discuss the perspectives on disability and online gaming. Related literature explains that social inclusion and social exclusion are closely related concepts (United Nations, 2016). Social exclusion, as a multidimensional phenomenon, goes beyond material deprivation. Social inclusion, on the other hand, involves more than improving access to economic resources. It is a process that deals with improving the terms of participation in society, specifically for those people who are disadvantaged, by enhancing opportunities, access to resources, voice, and respect for rights. As a core aspiration of the 2030 Agenda, improving data availability is a much-needed effort, and this study meaningfully contributes to it.

Playing online games among individuals with disabilities can facilitate social participation, fostering a sense of belonging and connection. As a dimension of social inclusion, social participation or building social networks in this study allows for creating and maintaining relationships within social, professional, and community circles that promote support and collaboration. Exploring this process was guided by a communication lens

with an end view of understanding how playing online games serves as an interaction device to reinforce mutual support and collaboration.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Online gaming is an activity among individuals with disabilities that involves engaging in interactive games using devices such as smartphones, tablets, personal computers, and the like. Players interacting with others through different styles can significantly influence their lives, particularly for individuals with disabilities. Although the experiences in online gaming differ, they impact their well-being. It is essential to recognize these impacts and understand how online gaming leads to social inclusion for individuals with disabilities.

As defined by the United Nations in 2016, social inclusion involves enhancing opportunities, access to resources, voice, and respect for rights to improve the participation of disadvantaged individuals in society. While it is a core aspiration of the 2030 Agenda, further conceptual and analytical work is needed to understand what constitutes inclusion, and efforts are required to increase data availability. The extensive discussion in this study provides valuable insights that can contribute to the necessary data.

When asked about the reasons for playing online games, two general reasons emerged: for entertainment and as a source of income. Online Gamer 1 (OG 1) said, "I play for entertainment. It's a stress reliever for me, but sometimes it's also the cause of stress. It's a way to pass the time." Online gaming has a dual role in providing entertainment and, at some point, stress, as narrated by OG 1. Her situation is unique because of an orthopedic condition limiting her ability to participate in outdoor activities or sports. Online gaming is essential for her to socialize and enjoy entertainment, which fills the gap caused by her limited access to outdoor activities. The situation, however, suggests the need to recognize that too much involvement in online gaming can cause harm to mental health, leading to increased psychological stress. In other words, if it dominates a person's schedule, it can interfere with their overall well-being.

The rest of the study participants agree that online game participation provides entertainment. For OG 3, who had a mild case of meningitis that caused him to stop studying, so he did not have much to do, he explained that playing ML has become a source of enjoyment and entertainment. Online gaming is a source of recreation and social interaction. Still, moderation is essential for a balanced lifestyle, particularly for individuals with physical disabilities who rely on it for leisure and connection.

As mentioned earlier, participating in online games has become a source of income. It has become a practical way of earning income, especially for those with challenges in conventional employment. Joining video game tournaments, selling high-level game characters, or just participating in other gaming-related activities gives individuals the opportunity to win or earn money. As OG 6 has stated, "Just play the right game and buy the equipment."

Exploring further how online gaming as a communication phenomenon leads to social inclusion, in-depth interviews with the participants gathered meaningful information. According to OG 1, "In online gaming, team building is strengthened. We create a sense of teamwork, even if we are not all in the same place. I learned to communicate with others even when we are not physically together." OG 1, however, noted that this is a process and does not happen in an instant. One limitation noted is that other players were indifferent to opening a space for communication. Some players become easily comfortable with others, while some do not, added OG 1.

Because online gaming requires thorough interaction and collaboration with other players, it becomes a facilitative tool for developing communication skills and working effectively as a team. As they coordinate and cooperate with others in online games, including those with orthopedic conditions, the players develop social skills, which are beneficial in various aspects of their lives. For a player with such a condition, this is not just entertaining but a channel for social interaction that fosters a sense of belonging and self-acceptance. OG 6 added that he became friends with other gamers even when offline. They communicate even outside the game and become friends on Facebook.

Furthermore, as part of a gaming squad, they actively participate in group chats that allow self-expression. They do this through online chats and in person, and share their co-players ' opinions and game strategies. This situation transcends the boundaries imposed by her condition, making online gaming a catalyst for an individual to embrace oneself and find social fulfillment.

The participants' experiences show that involvement in online games offers significant benefits, which parallels another study that recommends it for healthcare professionals. In a focus group interview with individuals with spinal cord injury, who are all experienced in using online video games as a method of socializing, they highlighted that playing video games helps them maintain social connections and expand their social network. However, Nilsen et. al (2024) further explained that they also faced challenges due to limited knowledge and negative attitudes from others regarding the use of videogames as a social arena. In this light, Nilsen et. al (2024) explained that healthcare professionals should consider videogames as a leisure activity and facilitate their use because of their potential to promote social interaction and enhance well-being.

Additionally, more meaningful responses emerged when asked how participating fully in the game helped them improve. "I don't feel pressured by my online gaming friends, and I don't feel pressured when it comes to the game either, since I have my strategy," said OG 2. The statement suggests how online gaming brings out the unique identities of the players. OG 2, despite her visual impairment, does not feel any pressure to conform to others' behavior or the game itself. A strong sense of autonomy and individuality is conveyed in this situation, which emphasizes the importance of self-acceptance and embracing one's strengths and strategies despite external pressures or constraints.

Players interact and think strategically when discussing which command or strategy to use during a game to win. OG 4 shared, "My opinions are valued; sometimes we even have strategies like, 'Come on, let's do this; it might work.'" The circumstance reflects that opinions are valued and contribute significantly to the collective strategy-building process. Playing online games is dynamic, necessitating collaboration that can lead to inclusivity and teamwork. The earlier cited statements exemplify the spirit of camaraderie, and how strategic thinking in virtual gaming is intertwined with social interaction is showcased. The process enhances the gaming experience and communicates a sense of belonging and empowerment for individuals facing physical challenges.

"Even if I am a PWD, I can still do much. Playing online games is open to everyone. It has helped increase our self-esteem," according to OG 4. Despite having a disability, he realizes that it has not only expanded accessibility but also contributed to fostering self-esteem. This creation of an inclusive space afforded individuals with disability the chance to participate and excel actively. Through interaction with other players, showcasing their skills simultaneously, finding a sense of belonging becomes possible, which leads to significant interaction and a positive self-image. OG 4 said, "I've made friends in different places," while OG 5 stated, "…I am no longer shy. It's like I gained more confidence now because of playing online games. Other players I have played with are normal; they also considered me normal."

They sometimes teach other players about specific strategies, saying, "Do this, and you'll become stronger." OG 5 stated, "Whether you're disabled or not, just keep going. Keep practicing so you can become even better at playing." The diversity of participants in online gaming shapes not just the gameplay but the essence of social interaction and strategic thinking. OG 5, while he has an orthopedic disability, shows resilience in overcoming physical barriers and the role of a mentor guiding his fellow gamers based on the above-cited statement, reflecting a connection between and among the players forged through shared experiences.

The findings show strong coherence with the earlier cited assertion of Blackman (2024) about virtual reality and video games, in which the immersion, presence, or sense of being in a virtual world is performative. Complex interactions of social, cultural, and material relations shape the players' perceptions, adoptions of meanings and notions about being a player and a co-player, and their interactions with the game. That is, their own social rules and shared practices eventually shaped their manner of engagement, and the norms and values they brought in affected how the players communicated with one another in the virtual space. The virtual spaces are actively shaped by the relationships between the users and the technologies that mediate their relationships. This realization underscores the non-neutral nature of virtual environments and the dynamic

nature of these relationships, so the realities within these spaces are not pre-determined, but co-created by the users. This process extends to social inclusion among individuals with disabilities in virtual settings. Thus, online gaming, viewed as a communication phenomenon, has played a significant role in enabling this co-creation of social inclusion, which advances the knowledge in the field of socio-cultural tradition of communication theory, particularly its application to the process of making social inclusion a reality for individuals with disabilities in the context of virtual gaming space.

Further sharing their observations, OG 1 mentioned that he had been watching someone with a disability on TikTok. Using his feet when playing, OG 1 shared that this person advocates for himself and others with disabilities. Watching the person empowers him, and seeing the person boosts his confidence, making him realize that being a differently abled person does not limit a person, elaborated OG 1. OG 4 has the same experience when he mentioned a female video streamer who inspires others regardless of disability. Representation in the gaming world impacts one's self-perception. Seeing someone similar to his situation advocating for himself and others with disabilities reflects the transformative power of visibility and empowerment. In a broader perspective, it resonates with inclusivity and acceptance. Online gaming has practically enabled sharing noteworthy narratives of empowerment and resilience.

This discussion supports the earlier presented findings based on the current literature. The present study offered insights in consonance with the assertions of van Toorn (2024) and Putra and Misky (2024) about the technology's potential to enhance inclusion and the essential role of people with disabilities in the development and improvement of technology. From a communication scholar's perspective, the study confirms that online gaming, viewed as a communication phenomenon, catalyzes improving the "ability, opportunity, and dignity of people" (World Bank, 2013). Further reflection on the discussions reveal that online gaming as a communication phenomenon has led to the acquisition of the necessary opportunities and resources that are needed to participate in social and cultural life and "enjoy a standard of living that is considered normal in the society in which they live" (World Bank, 2013).

CONCLUSIONS

Individuals with disabilities find interactive games using various devices enjoyable and an income source. The games foster communication and teamwork, even among physically separated players. Engagement in online games offers physical, psychological, cognitive, and emotional benefits, but the players are aware that excessive gaming can lead to stress and negative impacts on well-being.

Viewing online games participation as a communication tool that leads to social inclusion, this study drew from the socio-cultural tradition of communication theory to explore how involvement in online games facilitates the construction of shared meanings and understandings that lead to social inclusion. These shared meanings and understandings enhance the ability, opportunity, and dignity of individuals with disabilities, enabling them to participate fully in social and cultural life and enjoy a quality of living considered normal in their society.

In both individual and group social contexts, this study confirms that engagement in online gaming functioned as a communication tool facilitating social inclusion and co-creation. Taking part in online gaming provides a platform for self-expression and acceptance, which enables individuals to transcend the limitations imposed by their conditions. Not only that, players can express their unique identities and strategies, which promote self-acceptance and individuality. The representation of individuals with disabilities in the gaming world has a significant impact on players' self-perception and fosters a sense of empowerment and acceptance. It enhances their self-esteem and provides opportunities for social interaction and skill development.

In the group social context, the social skills developed and the sense of belonging created among the players enable the individuals to connect and interact with others effectively. Participation in online games also enhances communication and teamwork, allowing players to collaborate and coordinate effectively. Also, online gaming helps maintain social connections, expand networks, and promote social interaction, providing a platform for mentorship, highlighting the importance of shared experiences and guidance within the gaming community.

Therefore, the perceptions, interactions, and engagement, or communication, among the players are shaped by social, cultural, and material relations, emphasizing the performative nature of virtual reality and video games. Notably, gaming within the virtual space among individuals with disabilities in the Philippines has demonstrated its efficacy as a communication tool for promoting social inclusion.

The findings highlight the need for communication scholars to explore how virtual spaces contribute to social exclusion and how they can expand the opportunities to foster social inclusion. The study's insights on how it co-creates the social reality of social inclusion among individuals with disabilities can inform online game developers, healthcare professionals, and policymakers to foster more inclusive communities.

The theoretical framework used in this study does not account for alternative viewpoints that could impact the interpretation of its findings. The contextual limitations of the study, particularly its location-specificity and sample-specificity, such as its conduct in a particular locality in the Philippines among individuals with disabilities who engage in online games, are acknowledged. Nevertheless, the study provides valuable explanations and recommendations despite these limitations. From this, the recommendations are offered for various sectors. Game developers can draw insights from this study, particularly on the value of players' collaboration and strategic thinking in game design. The discussion shows that communicating social inclusion is crucial in the group social context. Healthcare professionals may recognize videogames as a leisure activity and encourage their regulated use because of their potential to promote social interaction and enhance well-being, which aligns with the individual context of social inclusion. Future researchers may conduct a similar study on a larger scale or employ mixed methods to assess the qualitative findings across diverse contexts quantitatively. Future studies should emphasize disability inclusion vis-à-vis gender inclusion and the political dimension of social inclusion, since they remain an uncovered area. Finally, the challenge rests among the development planners and policymakers to continue formulating and implementing policies, programs, and projects that make virtual spaces accessible and responsive to individual and group social inclusion contexts for individuals with disabilities.

Ethical Considerations

This study conformed to established ethical guidelines in conducting research involving human subjects. Before participation, the researchers obtained informed consent from all the key informants, informing them of the voluntary nature of their involvement. Participants were informed about the study's objectives, procedures, their right to withdraw without incurring any penalties, and the measures implemented to safeguard confidentiality and anonymity.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this research. No financial, personal, or professional relationships have influenced this study's conduct, analysis, or reporting. All affiliations and funding sources (if any) have been appropriately disclosed.

Data Availability

The supporting data for this study's findings are accessible upon reasonable request from the corresponding author. However, due to confidentiality agreements with the participants, specific data has been anonymized to safeguard their identities.

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