International Journal of Economics, Management and Social Science

Vol 9 No 2 (2026)
E-ISSN: 2614-3828 | P-ISSN: 2614-3887
Open Access: https://journal.salewangang.net/ijemss/index

Toxic Gaming Culture and Brand Image in DOTA 2 Communities: A Qualitative Study from the Marketing Perspective

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Article Info :
Received:
23/03/2026
Revised:
26/04/2026
Accepted:
16/05/2026

ABSTRACT

Toxic gaming culture encompassing harassment, verbal abuse, deliberate game-throwing, and exclusionary behavior within online competitive communities has attracted growing scholarly attention, yet its implications from a marketing perspective remain significantly underexplored. This qualitative phenomenological study investigates how toxic behavior within the DOTA 2 community shapes brand perception of the game and its developer, how players collectively construct and evaluate the reputation of the DOTA 2 community, and how toxic culture influences player retention decisions. Grounded in brand image theory, online consumer behavior frameworks, and community management scholarship, the study draws on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 18 participants comprising active DOTA 2 players, lapsed players who reduced engagement due to toxicity, and content creators operating within the Indonesian DOTA 2 scene with particular reference to the Makassar esports ecosystem. Thematic analysis of the data yields four major findings: toxic behavior functions as a persistent negative signal that degrades brand image independently of product quality; the community's reputation is experienced as both a deterrent to new players and a source of identity ambivalence for committed players; toxic culture operates as a significant driver of churn through cumulative psychological cost; and community management practices including those by developers and local influencers mediate the severity of these effects. The study contributes a marketing-oriented analytical lens to the toxicity literature and offers practical implications for game publishers, esports organizations, and brand partners operating in competitive gaming contexts.

Keywords: Toxic Gaming Culture, Brand Image, DOTA 2, Online Consumer Behavior, Community Management.

INTRODUCTION

Online competitive gaming communities occupy a distinctive position within digital consumer culture: they are simultaneously product ecosystems, social environments, entertainment platforms, and identity communities. For millions of players worldwide, the game they play is not merely a product they consume but a community they inhabit and a brand they associate with, often publicly, through streaming, social media participation, and esports spectatorship. This entanglement of product, community, and identity means that the social climate of a gaming community carries branding implications that extend well beyond the conventional product-quality calculus of consumer satisfaction.

DOTA 2, developed and published by Valve Corporation, is among the most enduring and strategically complex competitive games in the world. It is also widely recognized by players, journalists, and researchers alike as hosting one of the most notoriously toxic communities in online gaming. Toxicity, in this context, refers to a cluster of harmful social

behaviors including verbal harassment and abuse, intentional feeding (deliberately failing to perform competitively to sabotage teammates), griefing (actions designed to cause frustration or loss for fellow players), discriminatory language, and systematic exclusion of players perceived as less skilled or as belonging to out-group social categories (Kwak et al., 2015; Blackburn & Kwak, 2014). These behaviors are not marginal to the DOTA 2 experience; according to a 2021 survey referenced in the Anti-Defamation League's gaming harassment report, a majority of multiplayer game players report having experienced or witnessed harassment in online gaming environments (ADL, 2021).

Despite substantial literature on the psychological antecedents and social dynamics of gaming toxicity, the marketing dimensions of this phenomenon remain strikingly understudied. Existing research has primarily addressed toxicity from the perspectives of behavioral psychology, game studies, and computer-mediated communication, asking questions about why toxic behavior occurs and what individual or situational factors predict it. Far less attention has been directed toward the downstream consequences of toxic culture for brand perception, community reputation, and the commercial sustainability of game titles and their ecosystems. This represents a significant gap given the scale of economic activity surrounding competitive games, including in-game purchases, esports sponsorships, peripheral endorsements, and the influencer marketing ecosystems that have developed around major titles.

The Indonesian esports context, and the Makassar DOTA 2 scene in particular, offers a productive empirical site for investigating these questions. The local ecosystem features a distinctive configuration of former professional players turned content creators, organized community structures, and active brand partnerships that make the intersection of toxic culture, community identity, and brand image especially visible. Research conducted within this scene has documented the mechanisms by which streamer credibility and parasocial relationships shape consumer behavior (see prior studies on Makassar DOTA 2 streamers), providing a theoretical and contextual foundation upon which the present study builds.

This study addresses three research questions: (1) How does toxic behavior influence players' perceptions of the DOTA 2 brand? (2) How do players evaluate and navigate the reputation of the DOTA 2 community? (3) How does toxic culture influence player retention and disengagement decisions? In pursuing these questions, the study contributes an explicitly marketing-oriented analytical framework to the toxicity literature and provides actionable insights for game publishers, esports organizations, local content creators, and brand partners operating within or around competitive gaming communities.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative phenomenological research design, chosen for its capacity to generate a rich, contextually embedded understanding of the subjective meanings participants associate with their experiences of toxic gaming culture and its effects on their perceptions of and relationship with the DOTA 2 brand (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The phenomenological approach is particularly appropriate given that the core constructs of interest, brand perception, community reputation, and retention decisions, are fundamentally experiential and interpretive phenomena that cannot be adequately captured through survey instruments alone. The guiding philosophical orientation is interpretivism: the study treats

brand image and community reputation not as fixed objects to be measured but as socially constructed meanings to be understood through participant accounts.

Participant Selection and Profile

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling designed to capture variation across three analytically relevant dimensions: current engagement level with DOTA 2 (active, reduced, or lapsed), involvement in the content creation and esports ecosystem (player only versus player-creator), and geographic location within the Indonesian DOTA 2 scene (with particular attention to the Makassar ecosystem as a case study site). A total of 18 participants were recruited, consistent with phenomenological saturation norms (Guest et al., 2006). Three participant subgroups were defined:

(a) Active Players (n = 8): individuals currently playing DOTA 2 regularly (defined as at least five matches per week) who remain engaged despite experiencing toxic interactions.

(b) Lapsed or Reduced-Engagement Players (n = 6): individuals who have significantly reduced or ceased their DOTA 2 play primarily or substantially as a result of toxic community experiences.

(c) Content Creators and Community Figures (n = 4): individuals who produce DOTA 2 content, moderate community spaces, or organize community events within the Makassar or broader Indonesian DOTA 2 ecosystem.

Table 1. Research Participants.

Participant Group	n	Engagement Level	Recruitment Criterion
Active Players	8	High (≥5 matches/week)	Currently playing; experienced toxicity but remain engaged
Lapsed / Reduced Players	6	Low or ceased	Reduced or quit primarily due to toxic culture
Content Creators / Community Figures	4	High (professional)	DOTA 2 streamers, event organizers, or Discord moderators in the Indonesian esports scene

Source: Authors' elaboration from fieldwork data.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted individually with each participant, lasting between 45 and 75 minutes. Interviews were conducted in a combination of Indonesian and English, depending on participant preference, and were audio-recorded with informed consent before verbatim transcription. The interview protocol was organized around four thematic domains: (1) participants' general experiences of toxic behavior in DOTA 2, including representative incidents and emotional responses; (2) the influence of these experiences on their perceptions of the DOTA 2 brand and of Valve as its developer; (3) how participants evaluated and communicated about the reputation of the DOTA 2 community, both internally (to themselves) and externally (to non-players or potential players); and (4) the role of toxic culture in their decisions about continued engagement, reduced play, or quitting.

Supplementary data were collected through non-participant digital observation of publicly accessible DOTA 2 community spaces, including Reddit communities (r/DotA2),

community Discord servers, and the comment sections of Indonesian DOTA 2 content on TikTok and YouTube. Observational notes documented community discourse patterns, instances of publicly visible toxic behavior, and audience responses to anti-toxicity initiatives or controversies. This observational data provided contextual grounding for interview findings and enabled triangulation of participant accounts.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the reflexive thematic analysis framework described by Braun and Clarke (2006), proceeding through six stages: familiarization with the data corpus through repeated reading; initial code generation through inductive open coding; thematic clustering and development; thematic review and refinement; thematic definition and naming; and interpretive write-up. Thematic analysis was conducted with sensitivity to both semantic content (what participants explicitly stated) and latent meaning (what their accounts implied about underlying values, assumptions, and frameworks). NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to facilitate systematic coding and thematic organization.

Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

All participants provided written informed consent before participation. Participant identities were anonymized in all reporting; content creators who are publicly identifiable are referred to by role description rather than name in order to protect their professional interests. Trustworthiness was established through triangulation of interview and observational data, member checking with six participants who reviewed and confirmed thematic summaries, and a reflexive audit trail documenting analytic decisions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that toxic behavior within the DOTA 2 community serves as a negative brand signal that significantly shapes players' perceptions of the game. Participants viewed community interactions as inseparable from the overall gaming experience, meaning that repeated exposure to toxic behavior directly contributes to unfavorable brand associations. Furthermore, the perceived lack of strong intervention by Valve reinforces the belief that toxicity is tolerated, further damaging the game's reputation.

The study also found that DOTA 2's widely recognized reputation for toxicity creates social and psychological costs for players. While many remain proud of the game's complexity and competitive depth, they often experience ambivalence by embracing the positive aspects of the community while distancing themselves from its toxic elements. This negative reputation additionally acts as a barrier to attracting new players.

Regarding player retention, toxicity operates through a gradual process of psychological erosion rather than isolated incidents. Repeated negative experiences reduce both enjoyment and motivation, particularly among new players and socially oriented gamers. However, positive community anchors, including trusted friends, moderated online communities, and supportive content creators, play a critical role in sustaining engagement and reducing player churn.

Overall, the study suggests that community health should be treated as a strategic brand management issue. Investments in anti-toxicity initiatives, transparent communication from

developers, and support for positive community leaders can strengthen brand image, improve player retention, and facilitate sustainable community growth.

Table 2. Summary of Research Findings

Theme	Key Findings	Implications
Toxic Behavior as a Brand Signal	Players perceive toxic behavior as an integral part of the DOTA 2 experience rather than a separate community issue.	Toxicity negatively influences the overall brand image of DOTA 2.
Community Experience Equals Brand Experience	Social interactions with teammates and opponents strongly shape perceptions of the game.	Negative social experiences reduce players' evaluation of the brand.
Developer Passivity	Players perceive Valve's anti-toxicity efforts as insufficient and inconsistent.	This creates a perception that the developer prioritizes competitive players over an inclusive community environment.
Community Reputation	DOTA 2 is widely recognized for having a toxic community.	The negative reputation damages brand attractiveness and public perception.
Player Identity Ambivalence	Players appreciate the game's complexity and competitiveness while distancing themselves from toxic community behaviors.	A conflict emerges between brand loyalty and community reputation.
Barrier to New Player Adoption	The community's toxic reputation discourages potential new players from joining.	Reduced player acquisition and slower community growth.
Player Retention Challenges	Toxicity gradually diminishes enjoyment and motivation rather than causing immediate disengagement.	Increased risk of player churn over time.
Segment Differences	New players and socially motivated players are more vulnerable to toxic experiences than experienced players.	Growth-oriented player segments are disproportionately affected.
Positive Community Anchors	Friend groups, moderated communities, and supportive content creators help sustain engagement.	Positive social environments improve player retention.
Role of Local Influencers	Streamers and content creators act as informal community managers and role models.	They contribute to brand image recovery and player retention.

Discussion

The findings indicate that toxic behavior significantly shapes the brand image of DOTA 2, as players perceive community interactions as inseparable from the gaming experience. This supports the concept of customer-based brand equity, which emphasizes that consumer experiences and associations play a central role in brand perception (Keller, 1993). Repeated exposure to toxic interactions generates negative emotional associations that are transferred to

the game itself, consistent with the argument that negative experiences have a stronger psychological impact than positive ones (Baumeister et al., 2001).

The study also found that DOTA 2's reputation for toxicity influences both player identity and new player acquisition. Many participants reported feeling the need to defend their choice of game, reflecting the social consequences of belonging to a brand community with a negative reputation. This finding aligns with Brand Community Theory, which highlights the importance of community reputation in shaping member identity and attachment (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Furthermore, the widespread perception of toxicity acts as negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), discouraging potential newcomers from joining the game (Cheung & Thadani, 2012).

Regarding retention, a toxic culture was found to gradually reduce players' motivation and enjoyment rather than causing immediate disengagement. This pattern supports Expectancy-Value Theory, which suggests that continued participation depends on both the perceived value of an activity and expectations of positive outcomes (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Consistent with previous studies on online gaming toxicity (Blackburn & Kwak, 2014; Kwak et al., 2015), repeated negative interactions increase the likelihood of player churn over time.

Despite these challenges, positive community relationships and local content creators emerged as important retention factors. Supportive social groups, moderated communities, and trusted streamers help create a more welcoming environment that offsets the negative effects of toxicity. This finding is consistent with research showing that influencers and streamers can strengthen community engagement through parasocial relationships and positive norm-setting behaviors (Sjöblom & Hamari, 2017; Teng et al., 2021). Therefore, community management and creator support should be considered essential components of brand-building and player retention strategies within online gaming ecosystems.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined toxic gaming culture in DOTA 2 from an explicitly marketing-oriented perspective, investigating its effects on brand perception, community reputation management, and player retention through qualitative phenomenological analysis of player and content creator accounts. The findings make several contributions to the existing literature. First, they establish empirically that community toxicity functions as a meaningful negative brand signal that shapes brand image through mechanisms including reverse halo effects, associative learning, and the attribution of developer passivity as implicit brand positioning. Second, they document the complex identity work that committed players perform in managing their relationship to a community with a toxic reputation, revealing the psychological costs of sustained membership in a stigmatized community. Third, they identify cumulative psychological erosion as the primary mechanism linking toxic culture to player churn, with differential severity across player motivation segments. Fourth, they illuminate the commercially significant but underrecognized brand maintenance work performed by local content creators and community builders.

From a theoretical perspective, the study advances the integration of brand image theory, community management scholarship, and toxicity research by demonstrating that the boundaries between these domains are more permeable than the existing literature suggests:

community culture is brand experience, community management is brand management, and the psychological costs of toxicity are commercial. From a practical perspective, the study provides game publishers, esports organizations, and brand partners with a reframing that positions community health investment as a brand strategy with measurable commercial returns.

Several limitations should be noted. The study's focus on the Indonesian context and the Makassar esports ecosystem, while offering valuable specificity, limits the generalizability of findings to other national markets. The qualitative design prioritizes depth of understanding over statistical generalizability; future research employing quantitative methods to measure the relationships between toxicity exposure, brand image metrics, and churn rates would provide valuable complementary evidence. Additionally, the study did not directly investigate developer perspectives on community management strategy, which would provide a more complete picture of the institutional dynamics shaping the toxicity landscape. Future research directions include longitudinal studies tracking the evolution of brand perception following anti-toxicity interventions, comparative studies examining toxicity dynamics across different game titles and community cultures, and investigations into the economic value of community builder activities for game publishers.

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