

## Video Game Stereotypes and their Impact on Language and Culture in Pakistan

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### Key Words

- Video games
- Pakistan
- Language stereotypes
- Culture

### Abstract

*The video game industry has become a significant aspect of the business and entertainment world, and has integrated into people's everyday lives. Considering the ubiquitous influence of video games in our lives, this research study has been conducted to find out their relationship with language, culture and stereotypes. Ten video games have been selected conveniently for this research study, and 25 interviews of Pakistani gamers have been analyzed exploiting Paul Gee's theory of unified discourse analysis (Gee, 2014). Three aspects, such as the gamers' language preference, culture and associated stereotypes have been analyzed qualitatively to answer the research questions. However, due to the negative stigma attached to the preferences of gamers regarding language, culture and typical stereotypes, it is concluded that Pakistani gamers and their families are becoming judgmental and need to change their point of view as a community about video games. They further need to lessen or remove typical stereotypes and prejudices about watching games to develop intercultural awareness, where it is also suggested that the game developers in Pakistan need to make video games that should promote their own culture and the Urdu language.*

## 1. Introduction

Video games have become an increasingly popular recreational activity for younger and older generations (Interactive et al. of Europe (ISFE), 2018). It is because they cover a wide variety of platforms such as arcades, home-based consoles, portable consoles, personal computers, and mobile equipment (Bernal-Merino, 2014). This sudden widespread aspect signifies that it has evolved from a mere pastime to something more significant, such as a platform for cultural exchange. However, despite this aspect, there are still many stereotypes that prevent the actual value of video games from being properly utilized and also highlight certain prejudices to perpetuate against video gamers (Deskins, 2013), which is especially true in the Pakistani culture, and this is what this paper intends to investigate.

Video games are so pervasive and widespread that by 2023, video games will be played by everyone, and the figures are predicted to rise from 1.8 billion video gamers to over 2.7 billion (Jiang et al., 2020). It has been recently seen that Pakistani game creators have re-entered the video game market (Wahl, 2003). In Pakistan, the Pakistani community has a love-hate relationship between video games and the acceptable roles a person has in society (Myers & Smith, 2012). Video gaming in Pakistan has a negative and problematic outlook in the country both for playing video games and stereotypes developed for the games and the gamers (Khan & Muqtaadir, 2014). Considering the negative stigma attached to video gaming in Pakistan, it has been essential to take the gamers' point of view for which the following research questions are formulated.

### 1.1. Research Questions

- i. What is the language preference of Pakistani video gamers while playing video games?
- ii. What kind of cultural stereotypes Pakistani video gamers in video games are exposed to?
- iii. How is culture in general and Pakistani culture in specific portrayed in video games selected for this research study?

## 2. Literature Review

Videogames might have once been something simple to pass the time, but, as Leonard (2004) asserts, they are now more of a sophisticated tool inhabiting and disseminating racial, gender, and cultural meaning. According to Esposito (2005), a video game can be something we play, like a game, through an audiovisual apparatus, which is usually based on a story. Some games are even shown to be able to affect the 'player profoundly', i.e., the person playing the game, signifying that some aspects of the game may affect the player's identity and culture (Greenfield, 2004). In this case, it means that cultures are becoming an exceedingly important aspect of gaming and the representation of various cultures in games (Daniel & Garry, 2018).

There are plenty of games, as Koster (2013) argues, that reveal the stereotypes of the game developers, which then influence the unconscious mind of the players. In video games, the

characters are categorized in a black-and-white framework in which the evil or the antagonist forces have been classified as black. This research offers an insightful new perspective that may be used to comprehend better and analyze a crucial element of video game design (Pradantyo et al., 2021). Gaming has become a business. Popular streamer like DanTDM makes about \$4.84 million per video, and another popular streamer (Gutelle, 2017), Vanoss, makes around \$15.5 million just through his gaming videos (YouTuberfacts, 2022).

Gamers can often be divided into 'Hardcore Players' and 'Casual Players', with the former dedicating vast amounts of time and resources to games. The latter usually treat it as something to pass the time with and may go for more easy-going genres (Hamari & Tuunanen, 2014).

Despite their popularity, more research still needs to be done on video games' effect and importance within society. Only a few people know that video games are used for medical purposes to help patients with various illnesses. Only a few know that games can improve students' learning outcomes (Shapiro, 2014).

Video games play a more profound role in our lives than we think, and the cultural aspect of video games is only growing. This research intends to investigate the benefits of using video games as a pathway to cultural integration in a relatively safe manner. Moreover, by giving examples of video games, we may understand that they have many psychological effects on the minds of gamers that may produce prejudices, racial differences, language preferences, and typical cultural stereotypes. Therefore, while producing or playing games, video gamers must be sensitized to their socio-cultural effects so that they should be mindful of them.

### **3. Research Methodology**

Unstructured interviews of 25 Pakistani gamers were taken face-to-face or through a video call, with the gender and age exploited randomly. However, the participants stayed below 20 or over 60 in their ages. Each interview ranged from 20-40 minutes, and the participants were a mix of Casual and Hardcore Gamers. The interviewers' language was English. The interviews were recorded first and then transcribed using the UK data service transcription template as cited in Van den Eynden (2011). Ten video games were also used as the basis for analysis by extracting images, gameplay, and voice-line extracts to be analyzed along with the interviews. Then, the interviews and the video games were analyzed, keeping in mind the thematic analysis procedures. All themes were coded and categorized by applying the framework of unified discourse analysis proposed by Gee (2014). The theory used for this research is Gee's theory of Unified Discourse Analysis (Gee, 2014), where Gee offers an eclectic approach to analyzing language, reality, the virtual world, and video games. We have employed his framework on our data for our research to follow a descriptive and exploratory paradigm. Following the theoretical framework used for this research, three themes through the coding process emerged: language preference, culture, and stereotypes of video games.

The data has been presented in tables and pie charts to show constant themes. At the same time, several lines from the interviews and posts have been extracted and presented in the data analysis to reveal the meaning within and around the research questions.

#### 4. Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using Gee's (2014) theory of unified discourse analysis, which guided us to study video games as a communication or communicational form, where video games can interact with gamers' language, culture and perception. Three themes were studied within the game images, subtitles and the gamers' interviews. The results are given under. Table 1 shows the preference for the language that gamers use while playing video games.

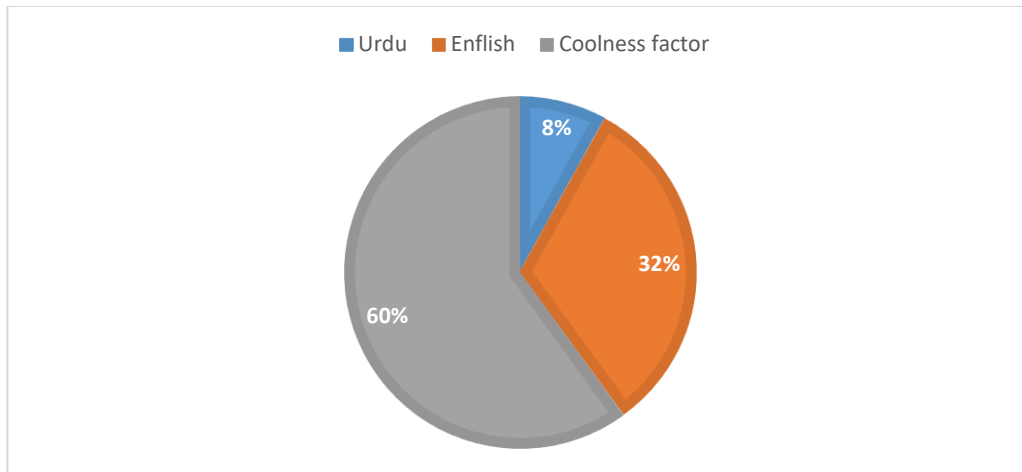
**Table 1**  
*Results showing language preference of Pakistani Gamers*

| No | Language                                | Preference of Gamers | Percentage |
|----|---|----------------------|------------|
| 1  | English                                 | 8                    | 32         |
| 2  | Urdu                                    | 2                    | 8          |
| 3  | The original language of the video game | 15                   | 60         |

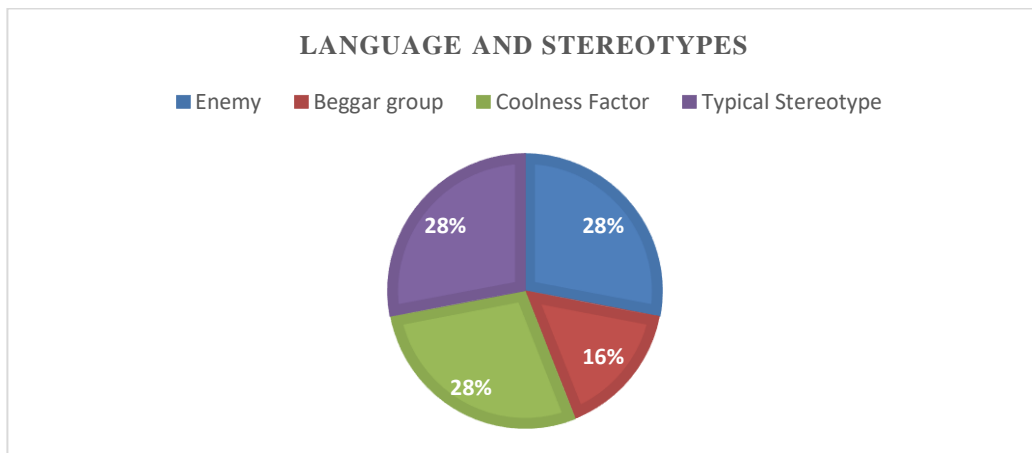
Table 2 refers to the results that show how different gamers are linked.

**Table 2**  
*Results showing the link between language, culture and stereotypes*

| No | Stereotypes        | No. of Gamers | Languages        |
|----|--------------------|---------------|------------------|
| 1  | Enemy              | 7             | Other languages  |
| 2  | Beggar Group       | 4             | Other languages  |
| 3  | Coolness Factor    | 7             | English/Japanese |
| 4  | Typical Stereotype | 7             | Other languages  |



**Figure 1:** Showing a preference for language by Pakistani gamers



**Figure 2:** Showing language and stereotypes

The two pie chart figures above are based on the results given in Tables 1 & 2. In addition to the stereotypes asked to gamers, some images were also taken to show cultural stereotypes that represent the ‘wild West’, ‘ancient Greek culture’, ‘Arabic culture’, ‘Muslim Terrorist culture’, ‘Black group of Gangsters’, ‘White Army as savior’ and ‘sexualizing women character’ in video games. Indeed, women and Muslims have always been the butt of Westerners’ criticism. They leave no stone unturned in presenting them stereotypically, making fun of them. Whether it is language, newspapers, movies, video games, etc. they look down upon them. Moreover, women have been presented hyper-sexually (Shahzad, Abdullah & Baig, 2021)



*Figure 3:* Representation of cultural stereotype of the ‘Wild West’ in video game



*Figure 4:* Representation of cultural stereotype of ‘ancient Greek’ in video game



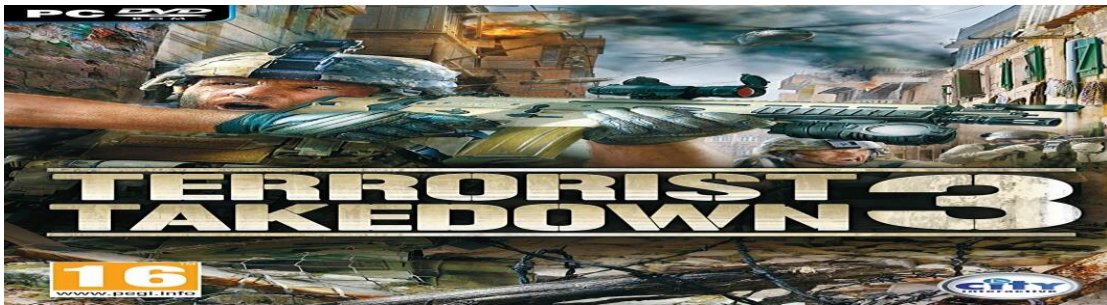
*Figure 5:* Representation of ‘Arabic culture’ in video games



*Figure 6:* Representation of cultural stereotype of Muslim ‘Terrorists’ in video games



*Figure 7:* Cultural stereotype of ‘Black Group of gangsters’ in video game



*Figure 8:* Representation of cultural stereotype of ‘White people as Army/Savior’ in video game



*Figure 9:* Cultural stereotype of ‘Sexualizing women characters in video game’

## 5. Results and Discussion

### 5.1. Preference of Language

Since video games are set to target a wide range of people with different languages and cultural backgrounds (Hutchinson, 2019), most people would think that gamers would prefer their mother tongue or a language they are competent in, but this is not always the case as shown in Table 1, displaying the results of the first research question, indicating that out of 25 video gamers, 15 people prefer the original language of the game. In contrast, eight people prefer English, and two respond that they prefer Urdu for games. Figure 1 also represents the same results cumulatively in terms of percentages.

The first reason for the preference for language in video games is that gamers learn the most popular languages to gain knowledge about the languages that they want to learn. It was explained in several of the interviews that ‘much like anime’, the games provided a way to learn the language ‘in a fun way’. It was because they could understand the words through the subtitles. As said by one of the gamers: “I’m getting the pronunciation from what the character is saying and of course, so many of the games you’ve talked to me about, need to be completed multiple times so I can almost say each phrase perfectly by the end of it since I’ve heard it so many times”.

The latter quote references *NeiR: Automata*, especially as the game has more than ten different endings requiring the player to play through each one. However, as we can see, through their language, the players are more eager to hear a new language and its culture rather than the languages they already know.

Another reason for the language preference is immersion. In the interviews, many of the players expressed how there was a certain level of ‘immersion’ that they enjoyed from the game and, to keep it, they would use the original language. Some of the respondents said,

“...No but I enjoy the game for the game and the change in translation is usually very apparent when the lines are being said- not to mention that the English voice actors often suck...”

“Japanese is a beautiful language anyway, and besides, it sounds more anime-y almost than when I switch to English”.

“I’ve never actually thought about trying any other language but English or Japanese for these games or any other game actually, Urdu was never an option...”

The extracts above are from the interviews to show why 15 players prefer the Japanese language. However, the last extract also reveals something many thought: Urdu was never an option. 23 out of 25 players agreed that Urdu was ‘weird’ to use or that they just preferred English if the game’s original language was different from their likes. But there was also one rather harsh comment: “If there is an Urdu language option for games, then I haven’t seen it”.

Indeed, it is sporadic for video games to have Urdu as an option for the language in both voice and subtitles, further showing how little Pakistani culture is seen in video games. There is also the fact that in games with English as the original language, many of the enemies can be seen speaking in another language, with the most popular being Russian, German, Spanish and Chinese, which has its own set of implications for gamers.



Next, we have results about the link between language and stereotypes in Table 1 and Fig 2 which reveal how language is mixed with stereotypes and other influences in games as per what was collectively coined by the various gamers who were interviewed:

## **5.2. Stereotypes about Language**

### **5.2.1. Enemy**

It shows that most of the other languages used in English games are often used by the enemy group as reported by seven people out of 25, especially in games depicting war, such as in the ‘Call of Duty’ and ‘Medal of Honour’ series. The vocal cues of such languages are often used to signal to the player that their enemy is near. Some of the respondents said,

“Oh yes, if the language is not English, then I’m pretty sure that that guy’s either going to die, either by my character or a team or whatever else the game can throw at him”.

“I do remember Arabic being used in a few games but it was always highly exaggerated and it made me kind of sad that the people who use it are either exiled from their country or terrorists but then again, the Muslim portrayal was often done in light of the Afghanistan war...”

### **5.2.2. Beggar Group**

The second listing where other languages are used is often for groups who have lost their homes, and are part of a lower caste, or the occasional pirate group that the player would encounter in the game. Only a few distinguished individuals can use English, but even that is more of a sign of prestige and competence, implying that the other languages are beneath the English language. Seven video gamers have reported this, but two examples are given here.

“It’s funny when you think about it because you have all these people who can’t say a single word in English and this chief dude or whatever comes around and is a perfectly competent professor -- why can’t you teach the others, English man? Why do you only teach this one kid who speaks with a heavy accent just so he can direct you to the nearest road or brother that’s been kidnapped...?”

“It becomes almost like a bazaar or something with all the chatter and yelling and that’s all it ever is! I’ve played Assassin’s Creed and all those guys are perfectly cordial and everything, but as soon as you leave English territory it’s like you’re back in the dark ages”.

Thus, from the above comments, it is evident that the English language depicts the prestige and superiority of English over other languages and cultures. These comments also indicate that the English language users are the civilized ones, and the others are uncivilized. One comment refers to the non-English speaking communities living in the ‘Dark Ages’.

### 5.2.3. Coolness Factor

The 'coolness factor' implies that the other languages are used as a staple for 'badass' characters or those who usually become the game's star for players. Most of the time, these characters employ the use of Russian or German, and typical people are extremely good at fighting while making themselves look cool while they do so. It alludes to how Russians and Germans are the 'crazy fighters' with great skill and strength. Seven people have reported the coolness factor as in these examples.

"It's like, as soon as you hear the accent you're like 'oh god, it's the boss'..."

"It's gotten pretty stereotypical, 'oh look I'm Russian, this is my great gun now go die and everything..."

"Badass English characters are the posh British types who scare you with a gentlemanly nature but then these other guys go full-on Russian or German and you're like 'oh boy, I'm gonna die a lot aren't I?'"

So, outside of games depicting war, people who speak Russian or German are characters seen as major bosses fighting against or with. It will not be seen in any other job, but one that requires fighting, and their character is often buff, brash and stubborn, which players then equate with real-world culture.

### 5.2.4. Typical stereotype

Finally, there comes the term coined 'typical stereotype' in games because most people who speak another language have some job or label associated with them. An example is Arabic speakers portrayed as terrorists, Italian speakers portrayed as mafia bosses, Spanish speakers as thugs, etc. Seven out of 25 interviewees in this way have identified this typical factor.

"No story is complete without a little clash between two cultures and their people. Sometimes you reconcile, most of the time you don't".

"I mean come on if aliens are out of the question for the game then who else are you going to fight? Even if they're the same group as your character there'll always be this one boss who comes with a different cultural background".

In some instances, these portrayals show the truth in certain cultures. However, this soon becomes a generalization to every character of that culture with rare exceptions, which we mean 'stereotypes'. These preconceived negative judgments and sensed discrimination among the game players lead to developing racial stereotype.

### 5.2.5. Cultural Stereotypes

Despite how popular video games are and how most are centered around the real world, only some are culturally accurate though they still need to try to tell even a little about the culture they aim at. For example, clothing has long been a contradiction for video games. There has been an ongoing argument between the players and the game developers on sexist clothing and character's sexuality as shown in Figure 9 (Miller & Summers, 2007).

However, when a game tries to become somewhat accurate to the culture, it provides a platform for great cultural exchange as the gamers have an interactive tour of the culture from their home.

Figure 3 is taken from the game 'Red Dead Redemption 2', a relatively accurate representation of the Wild West from clothing to horse riding and the various little farms and taverns the player would encounter. Some of the characters are even based on real people who keep to their 'code', which was only found in the Wild West in the past. One of the respondents said, "My only complaint will always be video game physics which sucks, but they do often have perfect representations of characters though sometimes I think the stereotypes are a little much".

Figure 4 is taken from the game Assassin's Creed Origins. The gameplay is set in ancient Greece and has some of the most historically accurate clothing and architecture in gaming, even though many of the myths are mixed into the game to create a fantasy element, and the lore itself is somewhat accurate. It means that the players can learn a great deal about the culture of Greece, their religion, and their gods, as well as how they used to live.

"Assassin's Creed has always had very realistic maps. I heard that the city of Venice they portrayed is also scaled to size and that many of the places are real. Of course, the people are real as well and it is fun to learn about them".

"Games have always taught me more about history than school if I'm honest, probably because I have to pay more attention since there's always a little detail which comes in handy in a later mission".

"It's interesting since the games I've played usually focus on Rome, Greece, Britain, or Japan and I've always learned a lot about the culture --well, I'm sure everyone has heard of Dango with Monster Hunter Rise coming out too-!"

There are also games like L. A. Noire and various games depicting WWI and WW2, which reveal historical facts and areas and allow players to learn a great deal about the history of the world. However, very little is portrayed about Pakistan in all these facts and figures. The games show India only, revealing a small mention of Pakistan, or pretending that the two are still the same countries and do not bother to make any distinctions.

Even the characters shown are often portrayed as 'Indian', whether by country or by the fact that they were there when the East India Trading Company was still active. Popular Indian Characters include Lakshmi Bai from The Order: 1886, Jayadeep Mir from Assassin's Creed Series, Symmetra from Overwatch and Chloe Frazer from Uncharted Series.

"Well, it's true, I know a lot about other cultures but

I'm kind of clueless about our own because it's usually Hindu myths and everything".

"Everything I know about Pakistan I learned in school but I've forgotten much of that so yes, you could say that I know more about the rest of the world than I know about Pakistan but then again, we're always told to go out of the country if we want a good job and life..."

"It is irritating when the people I play with always ask me about India or Sanskrit and I'm like 'no, it's Pakistan and it's Urdu, and they forget the very next day. Like -- they still think Pakistan and India are the same things".

So, we can see that the games can teach about the world's various cultures, but only if the portrayal is done correctly and without bias (Muriel & Crawford, 2018). For instance, the cultural stereotypes of depicting terrorism and extremism are attached to Muslim culture as displayed in Figure 6, exhibiting characters wearing veils and holding guns. Similarly, the Arabic culture of bravery and violence is depicted in Figure 5. Another cultural stereotype, 'black group of gangsters' in Figure 7, is associated with black people, while white people are identified as 'saviors' in figure 8. Unfortunately, Pakistan does not have a proper niche in the market for video games, and their positive portrayal is profoundly lacking in presence both for the other cultural players and Pakistani players themselves.

## 6. Conclusion

With how much effort is being put into console creation and with new consoles coming out with better graphics and components such as Virtual Reality as well as virtual identities (Przybylski et al., 2011), there is no doubt that video games will play an essential role in society as more than a simple way to pass the time. Culture and language are deeply rooted in games, whether it is tinged with realism or fantasy and, as more and more people start to play games, they are being used for various purposes; there is no doubt that misinformation, cultural exchange, and stereotypes will become prevalent (Soyoof, 2018).

Regarding language preference in video games, Pakistani gamers prefer either the original language or games in English, as English is their second language (Peake & Reynolds, 2020). They rejected the Urdu language, a stereotype that games do not sound good if they are in Urdu. The other reason can be the need for creation of video games in Urdu. With other typical aspects of language, we have seen that the warrior's language is mostly Greek (Clare, 2018). The extremists have spoken Arabic; the enemy and sexist women characters are said to be speaking Japanese. It is also seen that white people show superiority, civility, and act as a savior army speak the English language (Balela & Mundy, 2015).

Players enjoy a good story, a good boss fight, and a good pair of clothing or customizable options. Video games follow this by developing deep into the world's history, historically prominent figures, myths and legends of various cultures (Metzger & Paxton, 2016) and plain imagination. For this reason, any culture willing to gain attention will easily integrate itself by providing something new.

The Pakistani culture has lost much of its prestige in the eyes of both the people within and the people from other cultures (Šisler, 2013); they must take the chance to reveal themselves through games so that the negative image and miscommunication that others have of it would change slowly but surely. By actively creating new games in styles such as Role-Playing Games (RPG) and Open World, it has an excellent opportunity to reaffirm itself and cultivate interest in various groups of players (Shliakhovchuk & García, 2020).

However, the current attitude of older Pakistanis to video games is either disgusting or disapproval (Tahir, 2021). It signifies that there is a negative stigma attached to gamers making them either hide their hobby or view it as something which would be an issue later on even though many people make a living from playing games. Thus, for Pakistanis to take advantage of the opportunity that games provide as a pathway to cultural exchange and integration, the community's viewpoint must be changed first.

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