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Virtual Activism and Multimodal Meaning-Making: Investigating Protest Representation in Roblox through Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Digital environments increasingly function as spaces where sociopolitical expression is performed through interactive media. This study explores how protest discourse and power relations are represented within a virtual protest simulation on the Roblox platform. The research applies Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) by integrating Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995) with multimodal social semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, 2021). Data were obtained from five scenes collected through close-playing observation of a Roblox protest simulation associated with the "Free Palestine" movement. The analysis focuses on the interaction of linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial, and auditory semiotic resources embedded within the virtual environment. The findings reveal that protest representation in the simulation emerges through the coordinated use of symbolic imagery, avatar interaction, spatial positioning, and textual expressions. These multimodal configurations communicate meanings related to solidarity, institutional authority, embodied resistance, and humanitarian advocacy. The study demonstrates that gaming platforms such as Roblox can function as discursive arenas where ideological positions and political narratives are negotiated through interactive communication. By extending Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis into participatory gaming environments, this research contributes to the understanding of digital protest discourse in contemporary media cultures.

Keywords: digital activism; multimodal discourse; protest representation; Roblox; multimodal critical discourse analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

Power and resistance are closely connected within social discourse. Rather than being held exclusively by institutions, power circulates through social relationships and discursive practices that shape how authority and opposition are perceived (Foucault, 1980; Fairclough, 2015). Within this perspective, protest represents a form of collective action through which individuals and groups challenge dominant structures and negotiate alternative forms of authority (Blondé et al., 2021).

Technological development has significantly transformed the environments in which such expressions occur. Digital communication platforms have expanded opportunities for political participation, enabling individuals to mobilize support and disseminate political messages

across geographical boundaries (Lobera & Portos, 2020; Moreno-Almeida, 2021). Research on online activism shows that digital engagement often complements offline protest by facilitating awareness, coordination, and collective identity formation (Greijdanus et al., 2025).

In addition to social media platforms, interactive digital environments such as video games have increasingly been recognized as cultural spaces where social and political narratives can be represented and experienced (Bogost, 2007; Hawreliak, 2018). Video games allow players to engage with ideological themes through narrative structures, visual symbolism, and gameplay mechanics (Hao, 2021; Shliakhovchuk, 2024). Unlike social media activism, where communication is primarily textual or visual, game-based environments enable embodied participation through avatars and spatial interaction.

One platform that illustrates this phenomenon is Roblox, a user-generated gaming ecosystem where players can design and share interactive virtual environments (Yaden, 2020; Robertson, 2021). Because Roblox allows users to create customized scenarios, the platform has been used to simulate social events, including demonstrations and protest gatherings. Within these virtual spaces, participants communicate political messages through visual symbols, protest slogans, avatar gestures, and spatial arrangements.

Despite the growing relevance of digital activism in gaming environments, most discourse studies continue to focus on traditional media or social media communication. Meanwhile, studies on video games often examine narrative representation or gender identity rather than protest discourse within player-generated environments (Wildfeuer & Stamenković, 2022; Lin & Sun, 2022). As a result, limited attention has been given to how political meanings are constructed through multimodal interaction in virtual gaming spaces.

To address this gap, the present study investigates how meanings of protest and authority are constructed within a Roblox protest simulation. Using Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, the research examines how linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial, and auditory resources interact to produce sociopolitical meanings within the digital environment.

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2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design using Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis. The analytical framework integrates Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995) with Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021).

The research setting is the Roblox online gaming platform, specifically a user-generated protest simulation associated with the Free Palestine movement. Roblox provides a participatory environment where players collaboratively create interactive spaces and symbolic representations (Singh, 2025).

Data collection was conducted through close-playing observation, a method that involves repeated engagement with the gaming environment in order to identify meaningful communicative events (Chang, 2010). During gameplay observation, screenshots were captured to document scenes containing multimodal expressions of protest.

Five representative scenes were selected as the primary dataset. Each scene was analyzed based on five semiotic modes: linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial, and auditory resources.

The analysis followed several stages. First, the researcher conducted data familiarization by reviewing screenshots and field notes. Second, multimodal elements were identified and categorized according to their communicative functions. Third, the interaction among these modes was interpreted to determine how meanings of protest and authority were

constructed. Finally, the findings were interpreted within a critical discourse framework to explain how power relations are represented within the virtual protest environment.

3. RESULT

The analysis of the Roblox protest simulation identified five multimodal semiotic modes that contribute to the construction of protest discourse in the virtual environment. These modes include linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial, and auditory resources. The data consist of five representative scenes collected through close-playing observation of the protest simulation.

Linguistic Resources

Linguistic resources appear in the form of written texts displayed within the virtual environment. These include protest slogans, informational messages, and username labels associated with avatars. One of the most prominent linguistic elements observed in the simulation is the slogan “SAVE GAZA”, which appears on a protest sign held by an avatar. The slogan communicates a direct humanitarian appeal and functions as a central textual message in the protest environment.

Additional linguistic elements include donation-related information presented on signboards within the simulation. These texts provide explanatory information about humanitarian assistance and advocacy efforts. Through these written messages, the protest environment conveys explicit political and humanitarian meanings to participants.

Visual Resources

Visual elements represent the most prominent semiotic mode in the simulation. Several scenes display Palestinian national flags placed along roadsides and within protest gathering areas. The repeated appearance of these symbols visually reinforces collective identity among protest participants.

In contrast, the presence of a soldier avatar accompanied by the Israeli national flag represents an opposing symbolic presence within the environment. The combination of military attire, weapon imagery, and national symbols visually establishes a representation of institutional authority.

Gestural Resources

Gestural resources are expressed through avatar movements and body posture. In some scenes, avatars are shown standing while holding protest signs, indicating participation in the protest activity. In another scene, a protest avatar performs a throwing gesture directed toward the soldier avatar.

These avatar actions demonstrate how player-controlled gestures contribute to the communication of protest within the virtual environment. The gestures represent participation, confrontation, and collective engagement in the protest scenario.

Spatial Resources

Spatial resources refer to the arrangement of avatars and symbolic objects within the virtual environment. The positioning of protest avatars facing the soldier avatar creates a visual representation of confrontation between protesters and authority figures.

Other spatial configurations include the placement of protest signs, flags, and informational boards along the road environment. The central positioning of podiums and stages in some scenes also indicates the presence of a public speaking space within the protest setting.

Auditory Resources

Auditory elements in the simulation consist of instrumental background music that accompanies the protest environment. Although the music does not contain lyrics, its rhythmic and dramatic tone contributes to the emotional atmosphere of the simulation.

The background music appears consistently across scenes, creating a sense of continuity and emotional intensity within the virtual protest environment.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that protest discourse within the Roblox simulation is constructed through the interaction of multiple multimodal semiotic resources. The coordinated use of linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial, and auditory modes illustrates how digital gaming environments function as complex multimodal communication spaces.

Symbolic Construction of Collective Identity

The repeated appearance of Palestinian flags and protest slogans illustrates how symbolic elements reinforce collective identity within protest discourse. Visual symbols such as national flags have long been recognized as markers of political identity and ideological alignment within social movements. Research on political communication shows that symbolic repetition can strengthen solidarity and group cohesion within protest contexts (Bang, 2025; Huber, 2022).

Within the Roblox simulation, these symbols are distributed throughout the virtual environment rather than appearing within a single static frame. As players navigate the environment, they encounter multiple visual markers of protest identity. This spatial distribution transforms symbolic repetition into an immersive experience of collective solidarity.

Representation of Institutional Authority

The presence of the soldier avatar accompanied by the Israeli national flag represents institutional authority within the simulation. Visual elements such as military uniforms, weapons, and national symbols are commonly used to signify legitimacy and authority in political imagery (Schneider, 2021).

In the Roblox environment, authority is visually positioned in direct opposition to protest avatars. This spatial arrangement reflects the relational nature of power, where authority and resistance are constructed through interaction between opposing actors. Such representations align with theoretical perspectives that view power as a dynamic relationship rather than a fixed possession (Foucault, 1980; Fairclough, 2015).

Embodied Protest in Interactive Environments

One of the most distinctive aspects of the simulation is the role of avatar gestures in representing protest actions. The throwing gesture directed toward the soldier avatar illustrates how player-controlled movements can function as expressions of resistance.

In interactive digital environments, player actions often serve as meaningful semiotic resources within the narrative structure of the game (Hawreliak & Lemieux, 2020). The gesture observed in the simulation transforms protest from symbolic representation into embodied performance, allowing participants to enact forms of resistance within the virtual space.

Discursive and Humanitarian Framing

The presence of informational boards, donation messages, and podium structures indicates that protest discourse in the simulation extends beyond confrontation toward forms of public communication and humanitarian advocacy.

Studies of multimodal political communication suggest that staged speech events and informational framing contribute to the legitimacy of political discourse (Koivunen & Vuorelma, 2022). In the Roblox simulation, these elements replicate structures of public discourse commonly found in real-world protest environments.

Multimodal Meaning Construction in Digital Protest Spaces

Overall, the findings demonstrate that meanings of protest and authority in the Roblox simulation emerge from the interaction of multiple semiotic modes rather than from isolated elements. Visual symbols, textual messages, avatar gestures, spatial organization, and auditory atmosphere collectively contribute to the construction of protest discourse.

These results support the argument that digital gaming platforms can function as multimodal environments where sociopolitical meanings are constructed through interactive participation. By allowing users to move, interact, and perform actions within the environment, platforms such as Roblox transform protest representation into an immersive communicative experience.

5. CONCLUSION

This study investigated how meanings of protest and power are constructed within a Roblox protest simulation using Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis. The findings reveal that protest discourse in the virtual environment is communicated through the interaction of

multiple semiotic resources, including linguistic, visual, gestural, spatial, and auditory modes. Each mode contributes to the construction of meaning, but their significance becomes more evident when they operate together as a coordinated multimodal ensemble.

The analysis shows that linguistic resources such as protest slogans and informational texts function as explicit messages that frame the protest as a humanitarian and political expression. Visual elements, particularly the repeated display of national flags and symbolic imagery, reinforce collective identity and ideological alignment among participants. Gestural resources represented through avatar movements demonstrate how protest actions can be embodied within interactive environments. Meanwhile, spatial arrangements within the virtual environment create representations of confrontation and solidarity by positioning protesters and authority figures in particular configurations. Auditory elements in the form of background music contribute to the emotional atmosphere of the protest simulation.

These multimodal interactions construct several representations of protest, including symbolic solidarity, institutional confrontation, embodied resistance, and humanitarian advocacy. The presence of authority figures represented through soldier avatars and national symbols illustrates how institutional power is visually constructed within the simulation. At the same time, protest avatars challenge this authority through spatial positioning and gestural actions, reflecting the relational nature of power in digital environments.

The findings highlight that platforms such as Roblox can function not only as entertainment media but also as discursive spaces where sociopolitical meanings are negotiated. Through immersive interaction and multimodal communication, users can perform forms of collective expression and ideological positioning within virtual environments. By applying Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis to a participatory gaming platform, this study extends the application of multimodal discourse research into interactive digital contexts.

However, the study is limited by the small number of scenes analyzed and by its focus on a single protest simulation. Future research could expand the dataset by examining multiple virtual protest environments or by comparing different gaming platforms to explore how multimodal protest discourse varies across digital contexts. Further studies may also investigate how player participation and community interaction influence the construction of political meaning within virtual environments.

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