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Multimodal Discourses of Power and Identity in Roblox User-Generated Worlds: A Critical Discourse Analysis

Intan Maulina[1], Jumino Suhadi[2], Devi Pratiwy[3]
[1,2,3]Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara, Indonesia
[1]Universitas Deli Sumatera, Indonesia
[1*]intanmaulina1509@gmail.com

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***Corresponding Author**

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ABSTRACT

Roblox has emerged as one of the most influential user-generated digital ecosystems, in which multimodal resources visual design, spatial organization, avatar customization, interface affordances, and linguistic interaction play a central role in the construction of identity and the negotiation of power. This study examines how power relations and identity positions are discursively produced across three highly popular Roblox user-generated worlds: *Brookhaven RP*, *Adopt Me*, and *Bloxburg*. Drawing on Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), informed by social semiotics and critical discourse theory, the study analyzes screenshots, spatial configurations, and in-game chat interactions to uncover ideological meanings embedded in these environments. The findings demonstrate that hierarchical relations are reproduced through spatial zoning, access restrictions, monetized affordances, and avatar aesthetics that index wealth, status, and social legitimacy. Linguistic interactions further reinforce symbolic domination through gatekeeping, commands, and exclusionary practices. Collectively, these multimodal resources construct narratives of consumerism, meritocracy, and social stratification that shape how young users understand agency, belonging, and value in digital spaces. This article contributes to English Studies by conceptualizing Roblox worlds as multimodal texts requiring critical literacy, and to Information Technology by foregrounding how platform affordances structure discourse production and social relations.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of user-generated digital platforms has fundamentally reshaped how discourse, identity, and social relations are produced, circulated, and interpreted. Platforms such as Roblox blur the boundaries between gaming, social networking, and creative production, positioning users simultaneously as players, designers, and performers of identity. With tens of millions of daily active users, predominantly children and adolescents, Roblox constitutes a powerful site for examining how social meanings are negotiated through multimodal resources rather than language alone (Kress, 2020; Bezemer & Jewitt, 2024).

Unlike traditional digital games, Roblox is structured around user-generated worlds in which environments, narratives, and rules are largely created by players themselves. These worlds are composed of visual imagery, spatial layouts, interactive objects, avatar designs, and chat-based communication, forming complex multimodal discourse systems. Recent research in digital discourse studies emphasizes that such environments should be approached as texts dynamic, interactive, and ideologically saturated rather than as neutral entertainment spaces (Burnett & Merchant, 2021; Jones, Chik, & Hafner, 2021).

Although existing scholarship has examined online games in relation to learning, gender, and participation, fewer studies have explicitly addressed how user-generated virtual worlds function as sites of power and ideology. Roblox is particularly significant in this respect because it embeds monetization systems, premium access, and algorithmic visibility within ostensibly playful environments, thereby naturalizing specific social hierarchies. This study addresses this gap by investigating how power and identity are co-constructed through multimodal resources in Roblox user-generated worlds.

Situated within English Studies, this article conceptualizes Roblox environments as multimodal texts that demand critical interpretive practices. At the same time, it contributes to Information Technology research by demonstrating how platform affordances and design constraints shape discourse production and social interaction. By integrating MCDA with social semiotics, the study offers a theoretically robust account of how ideology operates in youth-oriented digital spaces.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Multimodality and Social Semiotics

Multimodality refers to the principle that meaning-making is accomplished through the interaction of multiple semiotic modes, including language, image, space, movement, and sound (Kress, 2020). Social semiotic approaches emphasize that these modes are socially shaped and ideologically motivated rather than neutral representational choices. In digital environments, multimodality is intensified through interfaces that integrate visual design, interactivity, and spatial navigation (Jewitt, 2022).

Recent work highlights that digital multimodal texts are inseparable from the material and technological conditions of their production (Bezemer & Jewitt, 2024; Knox, 2023). Platform affordances delimit what can be designed, seen, and said, thereby shaping discourse at a structural level. From this perspective, Roblox worlds are socio-material constructs in which meaning emerges through the orchestration of design tools, economic systems, and user practices.

Critical Discourse Analysis in Digital Contexts

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) examines how discourse reproduces and legitimizes power relations and social inequalities (Fairclough, 2022). Contemporary CDA has increasingly extended beyond language to account for multimodal and digital forms of discourse (Machin & Mayr, 2023). In online environments, power is exercised not only through linguistic interaction but also through interface design, algorithmic governance, and access control (Potts, 2021; KhosraviNik & Esposito, 2024).

Games and virtual worlds constitute what scholars describe as semiotic ecologies, in which users are positioned differently in relation to authority, resources, and visibility (Apperley & Jayemanne, 2023). CDA provides a critical lens for uncovering how such positioning becomes normalized through everyday interaction and design conventions.

Identity Construction in Virtual Worlds

Virtual worlds offer unique opportunities for identity experimentation through role-play, avatar customization, and social interaction. Digital identity is not fixed but continuously negotiated through interaction and recognition by others (Nagy & Koles, 2022; Cover, 2023). Visual appearance, cosmetic items, gestures, and possessions function as symbolic markers of belonging and distinction.

In youth-oriented platforms, identity construction is closely tied to peer evaluation, aspiration, and performativity (Marsh, 2023; Leander & Boldt, 2024). Studies of online games show that economic capital, often translated into premium items or rare assets, becomes a key resource for achieving social legitimacy, reinforcing broader neoliberal ideologies (Taylor, 2022).

User-Generated Worlds, Ideology, and Platform Capitalism

User-generated platforms are frequently framed as participatory and empowering; however, critical scholarship cautions that they also reproduce dominant ideologies and economic logics (Van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2023). Roblox exemplifies platform capitalism by integrating user creativity with monetization, data extraction, and unequal access to resources.

Architectural design, spatial rules, and in-game economies encode values related to competition, consumerism, and meritocracy (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2022). Children's digital play, therefore, becomes a site where ideological meanings are rehearsed and normalized rather than suspended (Marsh, 2023).

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), integrating Van Leeuwen's (2021) social semiotics and Fairclough's (2022) Critical Discourse Analysis. MCDA is used to examine how meaning, power, and identity are constructed through the interaction of visual, spatial, linguistic, and economic modes in Roblox user-generated worlds.

To improve clarity and transparency, Table 1 visually summarizes the analytical framework, data sources, and analytical focus of the study.

Table 1. Multimodal Analytical Framework of the Study

Analytical Dimension	Mode Analyzed	Data Type	Analytical Focus	Theoretical Basis
Spatial Design	Space & Layout	Screenshots of maps, buildings, zones	Segregation, access restriction, hierarchy	Social Semiotics (Van Leeuwen, 2021)
Visual Representation	Image & Avatar Design	Screenshots of avatars and objects	Status markers, identity display, symbolism	Multimodality (Kress, 2020)
Linguistic Interaction	Language	In-game chat excerpts	Commands, gatekeeping, exclusion	CDA (Fairclough, 2022)

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Economic Affordances	Interface & Monetization	Field notes	Premium access, paid advantages	Platform Studies
Identity Performance	Multimodal Integration	Combined dataset	Power positioning, legitimacy	MCDA

Data Sources

Data were collected from three highly popular Roblox user-generated worlds:

1. Brookhaven RP role-play and residential hierarchy
2. Adopt Me trading systems and avatar-based value
3. Bloxburg monetized building and spatial privilege

The dataset consists of:

- 60 screenshots documenting spatial layouts, avatars, and interactive objects
- 45 excerpts of in-game chat interactions
- Field notes on platform affordances, access restrictions, and monetization features

Analytical Procedure

The analysis followed four systematic stages:

1. Multimodal transcription of visual, spatial, and linguistic elements
2. Identification of power markers, such as restricted zones, premium items, and role hierarchies
3. Critical linguistic analysis of chat discourse (commands, labeling, exclusion)
4. Interpretative synthesis, linking multimodal patterns to ideological meanings

This structured procedure ensures analytical rigor and replicability.

RESULT

The results are organized according to the multimodal attributes analyzed, as summarized in Table 2, followed by detailed explanations.

Table 2. Multimodal Attributes and Indicators of Power and Identity

Mode	Attribute Analyzed	Key Indicators	Discursive Function
Spatial	Zoning & Layout	Luxury vs. public spaces, gated areas	Class differentiation
Visual	Avatar Customization	Premium cosmetics, rare items	Status signaling
Linguistic	Chat Interaction	Commands, exclusion, labeling	Symbolic domination
Economic	Monetization	Paid access, game passes	Structural inequality
Multimodal	Combined Resources	Space + avatar + language	Legitimation of hierarchy

Spatialized Power Relations

Across all three worlds, spatial organization reproduces social hierarchies. In Brookhaven RP, luxury mansions are spatially segregated from public housing, visually encoding class distinctions. In Bloxburg, access to large plots and advanced tools is restricted to paid users, producing spatial privilege.

1. Spatial separation between luxury and public housing
2. Gated or restricted zones





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Figure 1. Gated or restricted zones

This screenshot illustrates spatial segregation in Brookhaven RP, where luxury residences are physically separated from public housing. Architectural scale and gated layouts visually encode class hierarchy and restricted access within the game environment.

Linguistic Gatekeeping and Symbolic Dominance

Chat discourse reveals recurring gatekeeping practices. Table 3 summarizes the dominant linguistic patterns identified.

Table 3. Linguistic Strategies of Power in Chat Interactions

Linguistic Strategy	Example Function	Power Effect
Commands	Directives to other players	Authority assertion
Exclusion	"You can't enter"	Boundary enforcement
Labeling	"Noob", "poor"	Identity marginalization

These interactions normalize dominance through everyday language use.



Figure 2. demonstrates gatekeeping practices in Roblox

The screenshot demonstrates gatekeeping practices in Roblox chat interactions, where commands and exclusionary expressions are used to regulate participation and reinforce symbolic dominance among players.

Avatar-Based Identity Performance

Avatar customization functions as a key marker of identity and legitimacy. Premium cosmetics, branded accessories, and rare pets signal economic capital and confer symbolic authority, particularly in trading and role-play contexts.

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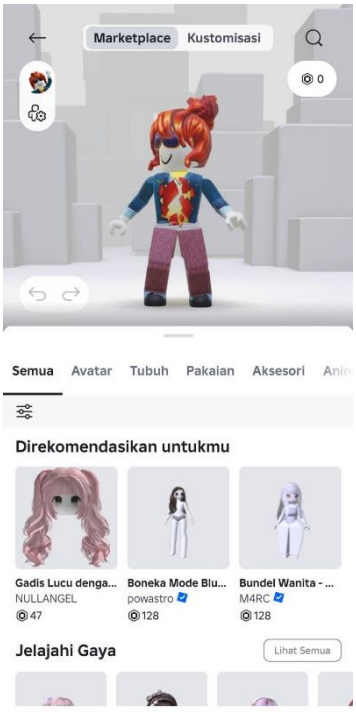


Figure 3. Avatar-Based Identity

This image shows how avatar customization functions as a visual marker of identity and status. Premium cosmetics and rare items signal economic capital and confer social legitimacy in role-play and trading contexts.

Ideologies of Consumerism and Meritocracy

Material accumulation large houses, rare items, exclusive access is consistently framed as success. This multimodal pattern naturalizes consumerism and meritocracy, presenting inequality as the result of individual effort rather than platform design.



Figure 4. Ideologies of Consumerism and Meritocracy

The screenshot highlights monetization features in Roblox, where premium access and paid items are associated with success and progression, reinforcing ideologies of consumerism and meritocracy.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that Roblox user-generated worlds operate as multimodal ideological spaces in which power is enacted through the orchestration of spatial, visual, and linguistic resources. Spatial segregation mirrors offline class structures, while chat discourse legitimizes authority through commands and exclusion. Identity emerges as a performative and relational construct, shaped by aesthetic and material markers embedded in platform economies.

For English Studies, these results underscore the importance of multimodal literacy in analyzing contemporary digital texts. For Information Technology, they highlight how design affordances and monetization systems structure discourse and social relations. Roblox, therefore, cannot be understood merely as entertainment but as a cultural text that participates in the reproduction of social ideologies.

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CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Roblox user-generated worlds are deeply ideological environments where multimodal resources co-construct power and identity. Through spatial design, avatar customization, and linguistic interaction, players reproduce and negotiate social hierarchies that reflect broader cultural logics of consumerism and meritocracy. The article calls for greater attention to critical digital literacy and future research into monetization, voice interaction, and cross-platform dynamics.

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