
SOCIALISATION AND FORMATION OF SOCIAL SKILLS ON REGULAR ONLINE GAMERS: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC INVESTIGATION ON SELECTED TEENAGE STUDENTS IN THIRUVANANTHAPURAM CITY

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Abstract: The paper attempts to distinguish the impacts of physical games from that of online games among teenage children. Participating in games is considered as one of the essential factors in the formation of social skills. However, the development and popularity of online games not just redefined the scope of the games altogether but even changed the space of social skills among individuals. The influence and impact of online mobile video games on the formation of social skills are very relevant, considering the fast growth in online social activity through massive multiplayer online games (MMOG). The participatory observation was conducted in order to collect data on the objective. The study found adverse negative social skill formations in those children who regularly play online games.

Keywords: Social Skills, Social Development, Physical Games, Video Games, Mobile Games.

Introduction: As a social being, every individual is expected to acquire and reproduce social skills in his public life. An individual is expected to develop specific social skills by the time of adolescence. The living atmosphere and those activities in the childhood to teenage of an individual, help him learn the majority of the social skills in life. So, a child's social neighbourhood is very critical in forming social skills (Blazevic, 2016). As children are expected to be mobile around and mingle with same-aged individuals, the formation of, either constructive or destructive, social skills were ensured somehow. However, the popularity of online or offline digital games changed that social landscape. The replacement of physical games with digital resulted in significant changes in teenagers' social interactions and relationships.

Social skills are those abilities enabling an individual to, either verbally or non-verbally, interact with another individual or group for particular requirements or without anything particular. People are acquiring social skills through different kinds of socialisation. Through a long socialisation process, an individual is expected to acquire social development, which is a stage where one is competent enough to use suitable social skills in any ordinary situation to make maximum positive outcomes. It is the shared experience of an individual from childhood days to teenage that provides most of a person's social development. Considering the age, it is games and other physical activities that bring him in contact with other around-the-same-age children. But the gradual spread of video games (particularly online ones) discourages such children from participating in such physical games and activities. This is leading to several sociological and cultural issues in all societies in the contemporary world.

Background of the Study: In the 1990s, television culture spread in Kerala, first with increasing Gulf migration and later with the liberalization policies. The changes in the domestic economy created a thriving middle-income group in Kerala too. As part of their rise in economic status, the presence of television in their houses became a norm. The various television programmes gradually reduced the socialization of elders mainly. Even though children too started to stay away from playgrounds and other activities outside houses due to the same reason, it was still not noticeable. The later spread of 'cable-TV culture' and mobile phones in the 2000s and reducing open playing areas due to numerous constructions in urban regions stopped children from going out. But it was the gradual growth in access

to laptops and advanced mobiles, along with the spread of internet connectivity since the end of the first decade of the new millennium, that substantially reduced the scope of physical games, among children of middle income and above, in Kerala. As a result, the lifestyle diseases and clinics to treat them, lifestyle institutions like gymnasiums, massage centres, and others were flourishing in Kerala. Wealthy people even created gymnasiums and swimming pools in their residences themselves. The flat community too made such facilities exclusively for their people — all these efforts to increase the living status of the rich guaranteed only limited socialization to younger ones. The increasing chat and digital games culture moved children of the urban middle class and above completely away from conventional social circles and games.

As electronic in nature, video games use electronic gadgets like mobile phones or computers with their complex machinery to construct visual, audio or both images shared by multiple individuals or a single user with or without the support of internet connectivity. So that, video games are both online and offline. Online games include both computer and mobile games. After the experimental computer games in the sixties, it was in the 1970s, video games were created for public use. For the rest of the century, these games were primarily programmed for computer use. It was in the 2000s, along with the growth of the mobile phone industry, the video games became so popular. The case of India was not different. As personal keeping of mobile phones became one of the increased requirements of employment and status, such video games became a fashion among teenagers. At present, India is one of the top ten markets of mobile gaming markets in the world. As the most prominent consumer state in the country, Kerala became one of the most favoured destinations of such games.

As video games do not demand much physical exertions or body movements, it has an extensive impact on the health of individuals. Similarly, as these games do not require any physical meeting of people, even if it is a multiple player game, the communication created is highly restricted to game-related matters only. Single-player games do not require even any minimum communication too. As these games are highly engaging and time-consuming, those playing them hardly feel about moving out of them to any physical games. Hence both kinds of gamers receive hardly any support for the creation or development of social skills. On the other side, what observed was that those advantages of playing such games are not essentially any alternatives to social skills. An individual with less social skills is somewhat a threat to society than a burden. In this background, the researcher addresses the nature of use and related issues of video games in the context of the State of Kerala. By video games, the researcher is referring to mobile games in the paper.

Statement of the Problem: Children and teenagers are not intelligent enough to understand the applications and consequences of anything they consume. It is the aesthetic beauty and fancies related to a product or service that attract them to consume it. Even if they were advised about possible risks, it would be not easy to overcome such attractions. That is why people in such age require special attention and care from elders. Regular use, along with favourable circumstances, even make them addicts of such products. Video games are generally played by children and teenagers only. However, as social skills are becoming a part of character by teenage itself, the risk of the non-socialising effects of video games is very catastrophic. It is worth mentioning that an obsessed or habituated online gamer is in the category of 'problematic internet user' (Caplan, Williams, & Yee, 2009; Morahan-Martin, 2008). The present paper attempts to review all these observations based on a limited period observation at the close vicinity of a residential neighbourhood.

Objectives and Research Questions: Mobile games are technically based on the internet, and multiuser domains, the addiction on them can be labelled as internet addiction. The influence and impact of online mobile video games on the formation of social skills are very relevant considering the fast-growing in online social activity through massive multiplayer online games (Caplan, Williams, & Yee, 2009). The paper attempts to understand the circumstances that led to the growth of popularity of video games at the cost of physical games and the possible impact of playing them among teenage children within the socio-economic and politico-cultural background of the State of Kerala. Here video

games mainly refer to online games, which is mainly played on mobile phones. The research questions of the paper are the following,

1. What are the gender and class characteristics of teenagers and the nature of their use of online games in general?
2. What are the reasons for the increasing popularity of online games?
3. How are online gamers socially benefitting?

The paper hypothesized that playing online games will result in the low acquisition of social skills irrespective of gender or class distinctions.

Literature Review: The relationship between machines and human beings and how the first one shaped the latter was always discussed in academics. Along with developing information technology and online gadgets, the scholars focused on their impact on society and individuals. As the growth of video games, including online and offline games, predicted and proved considerable differences in socialization and the resultant formation of social skills, the scholars examined them too. The social benefits of online games or general internet use compared to traditional physical games were addressed already. However, there were several attempts to define personal and social development in terms of different viewpoints and characteristics. The earlier scholars created a diversity of terms to describe it like psychosocial competence (World Health Organization, 1997), pro-social behaviour (Hodge & Lonsdale, 2011; Weinstein & Ryan, 2010), social competence (Petitpas & Champagne, 2000), personal and social responsibility (Hellison, 2011; Hellison, 1995), and character development (Doty, 2006).

Even in those days of high degree online use among households in advanced industrial nations, studies highlighted the importance of physical games and their social relevance (Parker & Stiehl, 2015; Bailey, et al., 2009; Goudas & Giannoudis, 2008; Martinek & Hellison, 1997; Miller, Bredemeier, & Shields, 1997). More than that, physical educationists rightly developed several physical sports programmes to decisively train such skills in children like 'Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility' (Hellison, 2011), Cooperative Learning in Physical Education (Grineski, 1996) and Sport Education (Siedentop, Hastie, & Mars, 2011).

The influence of online devices like computers (Moisescu, 2014; Stetina, Kothgassner, Lehenbauer-Baum, & Kryspin-Exner, 2011) and the degree of addiction with them were traced since the nineties (Moody, 2001; Young, 1996). The general nature of video games was analysed significantly earlier (NG & Wiemer-Hastings, 2005). The characteristics of socialisation created with online games (Caplan, Williams, & Yee, 2009; Williams, Caplan, & Xiong, 2007; NG & Wiemer-Hastings, 2005; Griffiths, 1997) and their possible individual and social consequences were also addressed (Lo, Wang, & Fang, 2005).

There were attempts to develop questionnaires for the detailed data collection on online gamers. Pratarelli and others developed a questionnaire to collect information on the behaviour of the internet users like online gamers (Pratarelli, Browne, & Johnson, 1999), which was later modified by Brain in 2005. There were attempts to develop suitable questionnaires to find out the reasons for playing online games like 'Motives for Online Gaming Questionnaire' (Demetrovics, et al., 2011). Similarly, there were few studies on the presence of 'Problematic Internet Users' among 'Massive Multiplayer Online' gamers (Yee, 2006; Yee, 2006; NG & Wiemer-Hastings, 2005). Contrary to general claims, some studies believe that such online games are socially interactive and create opportunities for emotional bonds and friendships with many others (Cole & Griffiths, 2007).

Nature of Data and Methodology: Considering the nature of respondents, the researcher adopted participatory observation as the research tool to collect data on the topic. Even though the interview method was considered as an option, in the beginning, the respondents were not cooperating with that. It was challenging to make them interested in answering questions or were reluctant to answer all questions; hence decided to collect data from the same group without a questionnaire. But as the researcher cannot become a complete subjective participant among the respondents considering the age difference, the research tool was not technically a full-proof participatory observation but a kind of that. The researcher became very close to respondents and successfully created a friendly atmosphere where

respondents felt comfortable to speak genuinely. The location of data collection was the neighbourhoods of the researcher's residence itself. Malayalam, the local communicative language of the region, was used to interact with respondents.

The present data were collected during the Christmas vacation of December 2017. There were a total of twelve respondents. Among them, seven were males, and five were females. All of them were physically healthy and were secondary school going students of nearby schools. Even though the respondents had known the researcher for a long time, the participatory observation was entirely objective. Most of the conversations were recorded in secret. The remaining were noted down without the notice of respondents. Both one to one and group conversations were conducted. Most of the conversations were conducted at the residence of the researcher itself. The researcher maintained a checklist of topics to ensure the objectivity of the research. Along with that, all personnel observations were also written down. What those realised as missing was collected later during the stage of data analysis. In order to analyse the data, all those recorded and wrote down conversations were documented. They were organised according to different concepts based on research questions. Organised data was analysed objectively and interpreted diversely. The final reporting of the data is given in the following.

Interpretation of Data: The emergence of the knowledge economy made expertise in those devices using or associating with the internet as a necessity of the younger population. Computers and mobile phones are already becoming the channelling forces of several high-tech and managerial jobs. Along with higher education institutions, both schools and parents are motivating children to use the computer for learning (Stetina, Kothgassner, Lehenbauer-Baum, & Kryspin-Exner, 2011). Apart from educational requirements, computers and other such devices are now influencing all aspects of children's life (Moisescu, 2014). On the other side, there is a class character for online gamers. The players are from the upper-middle class. Considering the high cost of computers and mobile phones, it will be difficult for the poor or lower middle class to afford it.

As the researcher shared her internet-WIFI with respondents, they all willingly joined her residence to play games. It gave sufficient time for the researcher to conduct ethnographic observation on the selected respondents, and it revealed many exciting information about the nature and trends of their online gaming. Considering the close relationship, neighbourhood proximity and vacation break, parents were permitting their children to stay at the researcher's home even at odd hours. Among them, all males are enthusiastic about playing online games, but only four are playing on mobile phones regularly. Others are not playing because of their non-affordability to access such comparatively expensive mobile phones. That does not mean they are poor, but their parents did not provide such expensive gadgets only. Even one, among those four children, uses the better quality mobile phone of his father for playing games. As using other's better quality phone for playing games is a usual affair in households, there are fights for the same too. The three children, who are not playing mobile phones, play online computer games at their homes. However, among the five females, none of them is keen to play mobile games regularly. Four of them play such games once in a while, whereas one female who is interested in reading books never played them at all. However other four females use mobile phones for regular chats. They are more active in social media too. But parents of both groups complain that their children are always on mobile phones or computers. During the observation period, males spent around eleven to thirteen hours on mobile games on average. Even those three males who do not have a personal mobile phone managed parent's or present researcher's phone for playing. Their play even went up to fourteen hours in a day for the highest. Most of the time, they played by keeping the phone on charge. There is no particular slot of time for playing. Until they are tired to sleep, they played continuously. All of them slept for only five to six hours maximum on a day. Even their food consumption was not sound due to the spirit of play. Instead of regular food, they preferred snacks and soft drinks during this period. They play mobile games for fun primarily. As all of them were normal children from early childhood, it is impossible to argue that they were playing due to any behavioural defects like escapism, introversion and others. But there is a possibility of them becoming socially non-committed or introverts in the future if gaming going at the same pace and spirit.

All respondents took unusual breaks once in a while, depending on the game's length of a typical session. Sometimes a session will continue to the second day. But gradually, they had the understanding to finish a game within a day itself. The respondents were behaving like hardcore devotees of such games. They behaved like that it is the only matter relevant in those times. Even though all these children were together, very rarely they speak to each other. If they speak, it was about the game only. They all were in a separate world of games even though in a building physically. It does not mean that they did not speak to each other, but they were speaking to their fellow player only. They had more interactions and fun with in-game friends than people they knew outside. It was easier for them to interact with each other through games as they all were in a guild or clan of the multiplayer game.

By the end of the observation period, the gradual destruction of the respondent's health was visible. They all lost weight and became comparatively lean. Most of their eyes became red, and some of them complained about itching on their eyes. All of them developed back pain issues. Dehydration, muscle cramps and sleeping disorders were observable. On the behavioural side, they all started to speak fastly and loudly. Impatience in their talks and dealings were visible. All of them were irritated and demanding. Sometimes, in the height of spirit, they used 'foul' words to the fellow gamers who are physically present around. Any pleasant or positive attitudes were not visible among them. Even after the playing time, they were accusing and arguing with each other in the game spirit. Compared to physical games, the creation or growth of any social skills was absent during the observation period.

Discussion on Findings and Hypothesis: The present ethnographic observation on teenagers in a tiny neighbourhood on their approaches and attitudes towards mobile gaming revealed many facts. More than that, these outcomes are very much in agreement with the findings of previous scholars on the topic. Compared to females, it is males becoming more addicted to mobile games. An earlier study found that male introverts have more chances of becoming computer addicts (Shotton, 1991). Similar studies identified male domination in playing mobile games (Penttinen, Rossi, & Tuunainen, 2010). But later studies found the possibility of the female also becoming addicts of such mechanism of games (NG & Wiemer-Hastings, 2005) (Young, 1996). When observing, the scholar noticed the tendency of females to do chats for a prolonged time and talk over the phone. Like games, scholars consider longtime chatting also as an addiction (Young, 1996). So that, a more reliable conclusion is the possibility that anyone with good internet access and a better quality computer or any such device will have an addiction tendency (O'Reilly, 1996).

The researcher noticed that members of the upper-middle class only do online mobile games considering the cost incurred on high-quality mobile and internet. As a phone ranged above Rs 20,000 is required for playing a thrilling game for male teenagers in general considering processor and storage facilities. If not only games like candy crush are possible to play on ordinary phones. But such an expense on the phone is not feasible for an ordinary family. Hence mobile games definitely have a class character.

The majority of mobile gamers are in the age between 11 to 25 years, and among them, the 16-20 band contributes the highest (Penttinen, Rossi, & Tuunainen, 2010). The consumers of mobile games applications are not only concerned about the utilitarian aspects, but it is more about their hedonic and emotional value (Pihlstrom, 2007). It is more relevant when consumers or users are adolescents in age. The motives for playing mobile games here are not in agreement with several studies. Those who studied about the addiction created by online chatting in the nineties predicted about the possibility of high-level addictive applications in the future (Young, 1996). However, the present kind of Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) or its later advanced version Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) were only getting formed in laboratories then. It is through friends and cousins, the new gamers were introduced to the world of the game. The participants believed that old games were repetitive and boring. Related literature presents several reasons for attraction towards online games. Like internet use, continuous video gaming using the internet reflects emotional loneliness (Moody, 2001). In role-playing games, which is entirely fancy in nature, players are playing in anonymity. This secrecy encourages them to create imaginary social identities. So that those with emotional

loneliness, or low self-confidence or those introverts can efficiently use the virtual world for making their desired and exaggerated persona (Griffiths, 1997), hence such games create an alternative social landscape in virtual reality for the gamer. Massive Multiplayer Online Games addiction creates and results in social anxiety and adverse interpersonal outcomes (Lo, Wang, & Fang, 2005). Based on motive, online gamers were divided into killers, achievers, socialisers and explorers (Bartle, 1996). So that consumers with similar characters will play suitable games. The features of multiplayer games also motivate teenagers to play them. When earlier video games had pre-declared ends, the later ones (since MMORPGs) were endless (NG & Wiemer-Hastings, 2005).

The development of multiuser domain games, where 'text-based persistent worlds' were the core feature, attracted and kept the gamers more engaged to the voice transferring technology of present online games. (Caplan, Williams, & Yee, 2009). In multiplayer games, uninterrupted contacts with other players are required; if not, it will be difficult to move further. Finally, they have to join a team called guilds or clans (NG & Wiemer-Hastings, 2005). Within them, players speak to each other continuously. They maintain relationships and create new ones because they need each other to move further levels of the game; this interface is carried out through person to person messages early and later over one to one or group voice calls (Williams, Caplan, & Xiong, 2007). The massive multiplayer games require the cooperation of small and large groups of other players; hence the interpersonal communication between them are unavoidable (Caplan, Williams, & Yee, 2009)

Considering the growth of hostile attitudes among respondents, conventional physical games effectively form and grow personal and social skills due to their collective spirit. They are efficient to ensure personal and social responsibility, cooperation, and other such pro-social skills (Parker & Stiehl, 2015; Martinek & Hellison, 1997; Miller, Bredemeier, & Shields, 1997). Physical sports are an appropriate environment to absorb social skills (Bailey, et al., 2009; Goudas & Giannoudis, 2008). So that, considering the interpretation of data and discussion, the hypothesis of the present paper that playing online games will result in the low acquisition of social skills irrespective of gender or class distinctions is accepted by excluding the reference of class and gender features. As the study did not take sufficient observation on online gaming tendencies of females or economically diverse populations, it is better not to make any conclusive comments on them. The absence of both female gamers and economically weaker sections here is a limitation of the study too.

Conclusion: The nature of video games is continuously and consistently getting changed along with the increasing rate of their popularity. From instruction based simple games, the industry now creates advanced versions of stimulation games. The earlier puzzle games lost their relevance when Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) and later Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) games entered the picture. They all kept spirited teenagers busy in digital gaming. But compared to conventional physical games, online or offline video games are not creating any positive social values. It will be better if parents and general society try to develop ways to bring teenagers from online games and chats to conventional physical games, which will equip them with productive social skills.

Acknowledgements: The author is thankful to Nihal. N, of Sarvodaya Vidyalaya – Nalanchira, who is a popular online gamer from Thiruvananthapuram, for providing valuable suggestions in the preparation of this paper.

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