

Understanding Online Gaming Habits and Attitudes among Youth: A FGD Study of Gaming Behaviours, Social Interactions, and Psychological Effects

LOH YOKE LING*

Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris

MUHAMAD S. IBRAHIM

Universiti Malaya

AHMAD SAUFFIYAN HASAN

Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris

JOSRY SAKIAN

Polis Diraja Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Asia has one of the highest incidences of online gaming, making it a favourite pastime among youth worldwide. However, research shows that excessive gaming can have detrimental effects on one's health, academic performance, and social development, and the economic relevance of the online gaming industry emphasizes the need to understand the attitudes and behaviours of youth towards online gaming. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the attitudes and habits of youth towards online gaming to develop strategies that promote healthy gaming behaviour. The study used a focus group discussion with three groups of youth, totalling 16 participants. The study found that the participants engaged in prolonged online gaming sessions, and individuals had different motivations for playing games, including relaxation, stress relief, escapism, and achievement. The findings demonstrated the varied ways in which gaming can impact socialization and psychological, both positively and negatively. While gaming can provide relaxation and social connection, it can also lead to negative impacts, such as distraction and addiction. Additionally, the data from the participants in this study reveal a range of potential psychological issues associated with online gaming, including anger management, the conflict between parents and children, addiction, risky behaviours, and compulsive behaviour. The findings of this study can help Malaysian politicians, educators, and parents create measures to encourage healthy gaming behaviours and lessen the harmful effects of excessive gaming.

Keywords: *Online gaming, gaming behaviours, social interactions, psychological effects, online gaming habits.*

INTRODUCTION

With the rise of the internet and digital technologies, online gaming has become a ubiquitous form of entertainment for youth around the world. About 26.14 billion US dollars in revenue would be created by the global online gaming industry in 2023, an increase of 9.8% from the year before (Clement, 2024). Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, which made many people stay at home and resort to digital outlets for amusement and new ways to connect with others, online gaming revenues witnessed a large increase in 2020. There are currently an estimated 1.1 billion online gamers globally, with China, South Korea, and Japan having the

*Corresponding author: lohyokeling@fbk.upsi.edu.my

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largest penetration rates for online gaming among the general public, even though the growth trend has normalised (Clement, 2023). Online gaming has become a cultural phenomenon in many Asian countries, with a large proportion of youth regularly engaging in this activity (Ong et al., 2023; Hamid & Suzianti, 2020). The popularity of online gaming in Asia can be attributed to various factors, including the high penetration rate of smartphones and mobile devices, Internet cafe accessibility, aggressive Internet cafe marketing, peer pressure, family influences and early gaming experiences, perceived parental approval, lack of parental monitoring, and bad family relationships (Wong & Lam, 2016).

Asia has emerged as one of the world's hotspots for online gaming, capturing the hearts of young people worldwide. In Asian countries, particularly in China and South Korea, there are substantial populations of avid gamers (Luo et al. 2022). For almost two decades, the Chinese online gaming market has been steadily growing (State Council, 2012; Luo et al. 2022). Online gaming has seamlessly integrated into the daily lives of people, becoming a significant form of digital entertainment. The global revenue from the digital gaming industry alone is in the billions of dollars. The PC Games market forecasts that by 2015, the gaming sector's revenue will continue to grow, reaching an estimated USD 25.5 billion (Hamid & Shiratuddin, 2016). China has one of the largest eSports markets globally, generating a revenue of USD 403.1 million in 2021 (Luo et al. 2022). Industry projections indicate that more than two billion individuals currently invest hundreds of billions of hours each year in playing video games (Zendle et al. 2022).

Price Waterhouse Cooper's (PwC), as cited in the Iskandar Malaysia Investment Guide, projected that the digital games market in Malaysia is on track to experience a compound annual growth rate of 6.8 per cent from 2011 to 2015. This reflects Malaysia's digital gaming market's rapid expansion. There are also signs that Malaysia's digital gaming industry may develop and mature along a similar path to South Korea's. Significantly, over the last seven years, there has been a marked increase in the count of digital game players in Malaysia (Jusoh & Noh, 2014). In 2015, Malaysia officially recognized eSports as a sport (Yusoff & Yunus, 2021).

The global spotlight has been focused on the growth of the online gaming industry in China, primarily due to the expansive and dynamic nature of the Chinese online gaming market, the surge in international collaborative efforts, and the increased prevalence of cross-border mergers and acquisitions (Li et al., 2024). Following extensive research endeavours, the online gaming industry experienced a significant transformation with the introduction of smartphones. Various companies and sectors are now actively engaged in intensive research to enhance technology and ensure convenient access to services for people. Besides, several factors have contributed to the expansion of online gaming, including an increase in players, the creation of new technology that offers more immersive gaming experiences, and the acceptance of gaming as a mainstream form of entertainment. The COVID-19 pandemic has also boosted the expansion of online gaming as individuals spend more time at home and look for new leisure options.

The potential positive effects of electronic gaming have been the subject of much research in recent years. Online gaming has evolved into a significant platform for virtual socialization, and the increasing popularity of games such as Minecraft, Fortnite, Fall Guys, and Animal Crossing demonstrates this shift. These games are notable for their incorporation of social engagement as a fundamental component of the gaming experience (Purnomo et al., 2019; Zhang & Liu, 2024). This social aspect of gaming goes beyond mere entertainment;

it allows individuals to form and maintain relationships, make new friends, and interact with people from around the world

However, concerns have been raised about the potential negative effects of excessive online gaming, particularly on mental health and academic performance. Excessive online gaming has been linked to various physical and psychological health problems, including obesity, musculoskeletal disorders, anxiety, and depression. Due to the accompanying dysfunction and potential harm, several countries and scholars have done research to formally classify Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) as a behavioural addiction (Kowalik et al., 2024; Kolas & von Mühlengen, 2024; Hammad & Al-Shahrani, 2024). In the International Classification of Diseases (WHO, 2018), the World Health Organisation defined Gaming Disorder (GD) as an addictive behaviour until 2019. In June 2019, Brunei had the highest Internet Penetration Rate (IPR) in Southeast Asia, with 94.9% of its total population using the Internet. Singapore followed closely with an IPR of 84.5%, and Thailand had an IPR of 82.2% (Doan, 2019). According to Liao et al. (2022), given that many prominent game developers, including Nintendo, Capcom, Konami, and Square Enix, originate from East Asian countries, it is logical to expect a higher occurrence of Gaming Disorder (GD) in this region.

The younger generation has witnessed a noticeable surge in this behaviour, which has been exacerbated by the ongoing global pandemic, leading to constraints on typical social interactions among children and young adults, including attending school and engaging in outdoor activities (Mohd Azul, Normah & Zul, 2023). Researchers like Lavoie et al. (2023) have delved into the factors contributing to the risk of problematic internet use, particularly concerning social media and video games. Their findings revealed that female adolescents displaying symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), low self-esteem, and experiencing frequent stressful events were more susceptible to problematic internet use associated with social media. In contrast, male adolescents exhibiting symptoms of social anxiety disorder (SAD), low self-esteem, and frequent stressful events were at a higher risk of problematic internet use linked to video games. The study also highlighted a positive correlation between GAD and problematic social media use, as well as a similar association between SAD and problematic video game use. Consequently, comprehending the attitudes and behaviours of young individuals toward online gaming is essential for formulating strategies aimed at promoting healthy gaming habits.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Online gaming has become a global phenomenon, with its popularity rapidly increasing in recent years (Luo et al. 2022). Malaysia, in particular, has seen a surge in the popularity of online games, with several games gaining massive followings in the country. These games include Mobile Legends: Bang Bang, PUBG Mobile, Free Fire, Dota 2, and Among Us. Mobile Legends: Bang Bang is a multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA - Multiplayer Online Battle Arena) game that has become one of the top mobile games in Malaysia. According to App Annie, a mobile app analytics company, Mobile Legends: Bang Bang was the top-grossing mobile game in Malaysia in 2020 (Data.ai, 2021). PUBG Mobile and Free Fire, both battle royale games, have also gained massive followings in Malaysia and have become popular games for esports competitions (Eilers & Krejci Gaming, 2021). Tournaments for Dota 2 are regularly held in Malaysia, with the game attracting a significant number of players and fans (Afandi, 2023). In 2019, the Malaysia Esports League (MEL) was launched, offering a platform for players and teams to compete in various games, including online games

(<https://esportsintegrated.com/2023/07/28/malaysia-esports-league-2022/>). Esports has experienced substantial expansion in Malaysia, with online games emerging as a significant component of the industry. Moreover, the government has shown its support in recent times by offering financial assistance for esports events and the development of related infrastructure.

According to Newzoo (2020), there were over 19 million active gamers in Malaysia in 2020 and the majority of gamers in Malaysia were between the ages of 10 and 35 years old, with a gaming revenue of over USD 673 million. Data from the well-known online gaming service Steam, run by Valve Corporation, showed that MABO as such DOTA 2 is one of the most played games. This game maintained a sizable player base from January to August 2019 with an average of 630,000 to 1.05 million daily active players (Steam Database, 2019). This pattern was seen globally. These statistics underscore the widespread engagement in online gaming, particularly among Malaysian youth, which has been steadily on the rise over the past decade.

While online gaming offers numerous benefits such as social interaction (Zhang & Liu, 2024), cognitive development (Mohammad Taufiq & Wan, 2023; Omar et al., 2020), and strategic thinking, it also poses several negative consequences, including physical and mental health issues, exposure to violent content, and academic under achievement (Hier, 2023; Hassan & Bushman, 2012; Rashid, Rahman, & Ahmad, 2020). Studies have found that excessive online gaming can lead to addiction, which negatively affects academic performance and disciplinary outcomes among adolescents (Muhaimin, Aziz & Ariffin, 2018). Similarly, Malaysian university students who spend excessive time playing online games tend to exhibit poorer academic performance compared to their non-gaming peers (Ayop & Lee, 2022).

While online gaming offers significant benefits to Malaysian youth, its excessive use can lead to addiction and various negative outcomes. Online gaming in Malaysia is not only a pastime but also reflects and interacts with broader social issues such as academic pressure, changes in social interaction, and the evolving digital landscape. Previous research has found that online gaming addiction is associated with various physical and mental health problems, including sleep disorders, violence behaviour, depression, and aggression (Heng & Rabbani, 2020; Ayop & Lee, 2022). Heng and Rabbani (2020) found that online games with violent content have the potential to significantly influence aggressive behaviour in players who are addicted to these games. Analysing the demographic data, it's evident that the majority of participants in the study are male, accounting for 91% of male game addicts, while females make up a smaller 9% of the total. Excessive gaming has been linked to mental health problems like anxiety, depression, and violence, according to research. Prolonged gaming sessions can often result in a sedentary lifestyle that can cause physical health issues such as obesity, bad posture, and sleep disturbances. Ayop and Lee's (2022) study reported experiencing negative effects such as academic problems, physical health problems, and emotional problems due to excessive online gaming.

In addition, the inclination towards virtual contacts in gaming groups as opposed to in-person socialisation prompts worries regarding the acquisition of critical social skills and the possibility of social isolation among young people (Volp et al., 2022). Prolonged gaming sessions can often result in a sedentary lifestyle that can cause physical health issues such as obesity, bad posture, and sleep disturbances. Furthermore, placing a higher value on games than on in-person contacts can strain social bonds and cause conflict and alienation among

classmates and families. These findings underscore the need for understanding online gaming habits and attitudes among Youth towards online gaming among Malaysian youth.

Understanding the attitudes and habits of youth towards online gaming is also important for economic reasons, as the online gaming industry is a significant driver of economic growth. According to a report by Newzoo (2023), the global player base is projected to expand to 3.38 billion, representing a yearly growth of +6.3%. Simultaneously, the global gaming market is expected to generate revenues of \$187.7 billion, demonstrating a year-on-year growth of +2.6%. (Newzoo, 2023). As such, a better understanding of the attitudes and habits of youth towards online gaming can inform decisions about investments in the industry and the development of policies to support its growth.

Research on the detrimental effects of excessive gaming on one's health, academic performance, and social development, as well as the economic relevance of the online gaming industry, emphasises the necessity of comprehending the attitudes and behaviours of youth towards online gaming. Thus, it is essential to understand the habits and attitudes of Malaysian youth towards online gaming as it plays a crucial role in formulating effective approaches to encourage responsible and healthy gaming behaviour. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to explore the current state of online gaming habits and attitudes among youth in Malaysia, considering factors such as playing frequency, reasons for playing, and the impact of online gaming on social and psychological aspects.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed focus group discussion as a means to investigate the current state of online gaming habits and attitudes among the youth in Malaysia. A total of 16 participants were recruited for the focus group discussion. The participants were categorized into three groups with age ranges from 15 to 24, encompassing secondary and university students. Each group consist of 5-6 participants and were randomly selected among encompassing secondary and university students. FGDs were held in the school dan university and were conducted in Malay language. Audio recordings of the FGDs were transcribed. Table 1 displays the demographic characteristics and labels of all participants in this study.

Table 1: The demographic characteristics and labels of FDG's participants

No	Group	Age	Gender	Label
1	A	16	Male	A1
2	A	16	Male	A2
3	A	16	Male	A3
4	A	16	Male	A4
5	A	16	Male	A5
6	B	22	Male	B1
7	B	22	Female	B2
8	B	22	Female	B3
9	B	22	Female	B4
10	B	23	Female	B5
11	C	20	Female	C1
12	C	24	Male	C2
13	C	20	Male	C3
14	C	20	Male	C4
15	C	21	Female	C5
16	C	23	Male	C6

RESULTS

The finding of this study focuses on the habits and attitudes of participants towards online gaming considering factors such as playing frequency, reasons for playing, and the impact of online gaming on social and psychological aspects.

Playing Frequency - Engaging in Prolonged Online Gaming Sessions

The data from this study shows that participants spent a significant amount of time playing online games. The participants shared that they used to spend over 10 hours, and even admitted to playing games from midnight until nine in the morning. Besides, Movement Control Order may have disrupted their regular sleep patterns and influenced their gaming behaviour. Participant A5 mentioned that he usually sleeps early, but during the Movement Control Order, they stay up until 3 a.m. playing an online game with his friend.

... I think I used to spend more than 10 hours in front of my laptop playing games. Now, I work on my mobile, but I didn't even realize that I had spent 10 hours playing until my eyes felt strained and I started to feel like something was wrong with me. (Participant A5)

...I play PUBG every day at 11 o'clock with my friend, who is also my classmate. (Participant B5)

I play games starting from midnight, and I continue playing until around nine o'clock in the morning. (Participant B1)

... I am someone who sleeps early. Sometimes, I go to bed at 9:30 pm. However, during PKP (Movement Control Order), when I play games, I stay up until 3 am playing Roblox with two of my friends. (Participant A5)

Reasons for Playing - Relaxation, Stress Relief, Escapism, and Achievement

The participants in this discussion shared their reasons for playing games. These findings suggest that individuals have different motivations for playing games, including relaxation, stress relief, escapism, and achievement. Participant B2 uses games as a way to take a break from their assignments. Participant A2 plays games to release stress, while Participant B5 uses games as a means of escaping reality and finding a space to share problems anonymously. Participant B1 plays a particular game every day and enjoys trying to improve their ranking in it.

...Sometimes, I realize that I forgot to play games today, and I will put my assignment aside to play my game. This is my way of taking a break. (Participant B2)

...I play games for myself, whenever I feel stressed out, I play them to release my stress. (Participant A2)

I feel like I need games to escape the real world because in games, nobody knows me and I can share my problems. I don't like going out and hanging out with friends that I know. (Participant B5)

There's a game that I play every day, and I enjoy chasing my ranking in it... (Participant B1)

Impact of Online Gaming on Social and Psychological Aspects

a. Socialization Impact

The finding of this research demonstrates the varied ways in which gaming can impact socialization, both positively and negatively such as relaxation and social connection, it can also lead to negative impacts, such as distraction and addiction. Participant B2's comments suggest that gaming can lead to a focus on the game at the expense of interpersonal communication. Participant B5 notes that gaming provides opportunities for socializing with strangers and friends through chat sessions.

...Sometimes when I'm playing games, people keep messaging me and it becomes a bit of a distraction. So, I get annoyed and think, 'Why are they disturbing me?' Also, when someone calls me while I'm gaming, I tend not to answer because I'm so focused on the game... (Participant B2)

There are chat sessions where you can connect with strangers from all over the world, as well as share with your friends. (Participant B5)

However, Participant B2 describes the immersive nature of gaming and how interruptions can be frustrating. Participant A2 shares how gaming can take priority over other activities, such as attending classes. Participant B3 mentions the use of profanity as a common practice during gaming, while Participant B5 highlights the social aspect of gaming and the ability to connect with others through chat sessions. Participant C3 shares a personal experience of how excessive gaming can have negative consequences, such as failing exams and missing deadlines.

I don't think being an avid gamer is a bad thing. However, when I'm in the middle of a game and someone tries to talk to me, I tend to ignore them because I'm fully immersed in the game. For example, if I'm playing a shooting game and I'm in the middle of shooting someone, I don't like to be disturbed. I'm shooting someone I'm shooting someone... (Participant B2)

Two years ago, during the MCO period, I didn't attend Google Meet classes and didn't leave my house. Instead, I spent most of my time playing games... (Participant A2)

Using profanity while playing games has become a normal routine for me. (Participant B3)

I once failed an exam during my studies because I was too engrossed in playing the game. The following day, I had a presentation to submit, but I was

late because of my addiction to the game, and as a result, I failed the submission as well. It was a valuable lesson for me, and I'm sure others have also experienced being caught up in a similar situation at some point in their lives. (Participant C3)

b. Psychological Impact

The data from the participants in this study reveal a range of potential psychological issues associated with online gaming including anger management, conflict between parents and children, addiction, risky behaviours, and compulsive behaviour. In addition to the psychological issues associated with gaming, the statements from the respondents also reveal individual experiences and behaviours related to gaming. Participant A4 reports difficulties controlling anger while gaming, especially when losing or experiencing setbacks. Participant B3 describes conflict with their mother over gaming habits, even though they do not engage in violent behaviour. Participant C1 reports feeling addicted to gaming and constantly needing to stay engaged to avoid feelings of boredom. Participant C2 reports engaging in risky behaviours, such as skipping school, to continue playing games or purchasing in-game items. Participant C5 reports feeling a strong urge to continue playing games despite negative consequences, such as lack of sleep or conflict with family members and using strategies to conceal their gaming behaviour.

I tend to get angry easily when playing games, and I find it difficult to control my anger, especially when I lose in the game or when my teammates cause us to lose. (Participant A4)

I don't think I engage in that type of violence. However, when I play games late at night, my mother sometimes yells at me and asks why I'm playing so much. Even though I don't play until nine in the morning, there are arguments between us because she thinks I spend too much time playing violent games. (Participant B3)

I think I'm addicted to gaming because when I don't have any entertainment, I feel empty until I log in to the Rise of Kingdoms chat. I have built up my army, and prepared everything, and I am constantly thinking about whether I have been attacked or not. This constant need to stay engaged and not feel bored is a sign of addiction. (Participant C1)

I have struggled with addiction to gaming in the past. For example, I used to skip school to play games and I even looked for a job at a young age so that I could buy items in games. (Participant C2)

I feel addicted because when I don't get to play for a day, I start feeling like I have to play. I even stay up all night despite my mother telling me to sleep and I cover the door with a towel to make the room look dark so I can keep playing. (Participant C5)

DISCUSSION

Engaging in prolonged online gaming sessions is a popular leisure activity, especially among adolescents and youth. Previous studies have reported that the average daily online gaming time among university students in Bangladesh (Sayeed et al., 2021) and Malaysia (Ting & Essau, 2021) is around 2-4 hours per day. However, this study found that some participants spent over 10 hours per day playing online games, highlighting the potential for excessive gaming behaviour. Notably, the Movement Control Order implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic may have influenced the participants' gaming behaviour and disrupted their regular sleep patterns, leading to more late-night gaming sessions. This is consistent with other research that has found increased gaming time and negative consequences related to gaming during periods of confinement or isolation (Kahar et al., 2023; Ciris et al., 2022). According to Kahar et al. (2023) moving from an active routine to a more inactive one due to the implementation of MCO can be disheartening, particularly for adolescents who are exploring their self-identity. During this time, they might explore different methods to maintain their sanity while at home, and online gaming might serve as a valuable outlet for them to temporarily escape the various challenges they face. Nonetheless, a majority of users initially engage in online gaming for relaxation and as a means to alleviate stress, often without the awareness that it has the potential to develop into an addiction. Similarly, young adults in the Turkey who experienced social isolation during the pandemic reported spending more time playing video games and experienced more negative outcomes related to gaming, such as higher levels of depression and anxiety (Ciris et al., 2022).

The research finding of the various reasons why individuals engage in online gaming, which are consistent with previous research. Specifically, the participants in the study cited relaxation, stress relief, escapism, and achievement as their motivations for playing games. This is in line with the findings of other studies that have identified similar motives for online gaming (e.g., Martucci et al., 2023; Rokicki et al., 2014). A systematic review encompassed 53 papers, and the results indicated that both nonaddicted and addicted players share similar motivations for engaging in gaming, which include social interaction, achievement, and competition. It was observed that male players tend to lean towards playing for competitive reasons, while female players tend to utilize games as a means of fostering relationships and social connections. The study also noted that the motivation for gaming tends to be more pronounced among younger individuals (Martucci et al., 2023). Martucci et al. (2023) reported that gamers spend a lot of time playing particular video games to satisfy their basic psychological needs. However, this involvement might develop into a negative habit. Businesses can use their knowledge of gaming motivation to build specialised monitoring techniques that will help to reduce negative effects of excessive screen time, such as attention deficit disorder or sleep difficulties. found that individuals who reported higher levels of escapism in their use of video games also tended to experience more negative outcomes, such as increased stress and decreased well-being. Overall, the present findings underscore the importance of understanding the diverse motivations underlying individuals' gaming behaviour and the potential consequences associated with certain patterns of gaming.

Besides, this study found that online gaming has both positive and negative impacts on socialization which this is consistent with previous research. Online gaming can provide opportunities for social connection and communication, as well as potential negative effects such as distraction and addiction. Participant B5's comment regarding socializing with strangers and friends through chat sessions is similar to the statement that online gaming has

developed into a social hobby with multiplayer modes and social features. Online games have developed into a very social hobby, with many games providing multiplayer modes and social features that enable users to communicate and work together. It has been demonstrated that this social component of online gaming has both beneficial and detrimental effects on young people's development. According to a study by Frederick and Zhang (2022), undergraduate students at a small private university in the south of the United States who played video games had considerably better online friendships than they did offline. On the other hand, research has also suggested that excessive online gaming and social media use can lead to feelings of social isolation and loneliness (Fong et al., 2024).

The drawbacks of online gaming are often discussed in the literature, and this study's participants also mentioned some negative impacts, such as negative effects on academic performance and social relationships. For instance, as per research conducted by Sun et al. (2023), the excessive addiction of Chinese college students to online games had a detrimental impact on their levels of behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement, all of which are integral components of learning engagement. Consequently, this decline in learning engagement negatively influenced their motivation to excel academically. Notably, the study highlighted the pivotal role of learning engagement as a mediating factor in the association between online game addiction and reduced motivation for academic achievement. Another study by Kim and Kim (2023) found that excessive online gaming was associated with lower life satisfaction, and this relationship was mediated by psychological needs frustration. Similarly, a study by Kowalik et al. (2024) found that problematic gaming was associated with increased levels of depression and anxiety among adolescents in Australia. Overall, these findings suggest that while online gaming can have some benefits, excessive gaming can have significant negative impacts on individuals' academic performance, social relationships, and mental health.

The findings from the current study reveal a range of psychological issues associated with online gaming, including anger management, conflict between parents and children, addiction, risky behaviours, and compulsive behaviour. These findings align with recent research, which has consistently demonstrated a link between excessive gaming and negative psychological outcomes. For example, a study by Sun et al. (2023) found that excessive gaming was associated with lower levels of self-control and poorer academic performance among college students in China. Other studies have linked excessive gaming to social isolation and poor interpersonal skills (Kahar et al., 2023) as well as an increased risk of developing depression and anxiety (Kolas & von Mühlennen, 2024; Ciris et al., 2022; Hammad & Al-Shahrani, 2024; Ayop & Lee, 2022). The individual experiences and behaviours reported by the participants in this study provide further insights into the potential negative consequences of online gaming. Participant A4's difficulties controlling anger while gaming aligns with prior research indicating that gaming can be a source of frustration and stress (Kolas & von Mühlennen, 2024; Ayop & Lee, 2022). Similarly, Participant C1's report of feeling addicted to gaming is in line with prior studies demonstrating the addictive nature of online gaming (Ciris et al., 2022). Participant C2's report of engaging in risky behaviours to continue gaming or purchase in-game items highlights the potential financial consequences associated with online gaming (Irie et al., 2023), while Participant C5's report of feeling a strong urge to continue gaming despite negative consequences is consistent with research on the reinforcing properties of gaming.

While the motivations for online gaming identified in this study—such as relaxation, stress relief, and escapism—are consistent with those found in earlier studies, this research provides a unique perspective by specifically examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on gaming behaviour in Malaysia. The study highlights how the Movement Control Order (MCO) and associated social isolation led to a significant increase in gaming time among participants, contributing to disrupted sleep patterns and potentially exacerbating excessive gaming behaviours. This temporal context of the pandemic distinguishes the findings from pre-pandemic research, providing a critical understanding of how external factors, like public health crises, can amplify existing trends in gaming behaviour.

This study provides new insights into the psychological effects of excessive gaming, especially during extended periods of social isolation. The specific examples of participants facing challenges such as anger management issues, addiction, and risky behaviours offer clear evidence that prolonged gaming during the pandemic may have exacerbated these negative outcomes. These findings deepen our understanding of how environmental stressors, like social isolation, interact with gaming behaviours, adding a valuable dimension to the existing literature.

Moreover, the study highlights the dual nature of online gaming—it offers social benefits, yet it also poses significant risks, including addiction, social isolation, and negative psychological impacts. This duality underscores the importance of media literacy, particularly in fostering critical thinking among gamers. Media literacy, combined with critical thinking (Ling, Ali & Mustafa, 2019), empowers gamers to recognize the signs of excessive gaming, critically evaluate the psychological triggers behind their habits, and make informed decisions to manage their gaming behaviour responsibly. By developing these skills, individuals can better navigate the complexities of online gaming, balancing its benefits while mitigating potential harms.

Overall, this study not only reinforces existing knowledge about the motivations and impacts of online gaming but also expands the understanding of how these behaviours are influenced by external factors like the pandemic. The insights gained here are crucial for developing effective communication strategies and interventions that address the challenges posed by excessive gaming, ultimately promoting healthier interactions in digital and real-world contexts.

CONCLUSION

The increasing popularity of online gaming among youth in Malaysia warrants a closer examination of their attitudes and behaviours towards this activity. The study of online gaming habits and attitudes among youth in Malaysia is important in identifying the potential risks and benefits associated with excessive gaming. Understanding the motivations behind their gaming behaviour, the frequency of play, and the impact on social and psychological well-being can assist in developing strategies to promote responsible gaming practices. Research has shown that excessive gaming can have detrimental effects on an individual's health, academic performance, and social development. These findings highlight the need for greater awareness, education, and support for youth struggling with problematic gaming habits. Parents and caregivers may benefit from increased monitoring and communication around gaming habits, while youth struggling with addiction or compulsive behaviour may require further assessment and intervention.

Ayop and Lee's (2022) with Muhaimin, Aziz and Ariffin's (2018) studies explored the role of parental mediation in mitigating the negative effects of online gaming on Malaysian adolescents' mental health. The study found that parental mediation, such as setting rules and limits on online gaming, monitoring usage, and engaging in open communication, was essential in preventing excessive use and addiction. The study highlighted the importance of parental support and involvement in helping children cope with negative effects. As the online gaming industry grows, it is crucial to ensure that youth engage in gaming safely and healthily.

Overall, this research highlights the importance of understanding the potential risks and benefits of gaming and developing strategies to promote healthy gaming habits. The findings from this study can inform policymakers, educators, and parents in Malaysia to develop strategies that promote healthy gaming habits and mitigate the negative impacts of excessive gaming. Ultimately, promoting responsible and healthy gaming behaviour can contribute to the well-being of youth in Malaysia and the sustainability of the online gaming industry. Future research should explore the efficacy of interventions aimed at promoting healthy gaming habits among youth in Malaysia. This paper emphasizes the importance of prioritizing the well-being of young people in the online gaming space and underscores the need for continued research in this area.

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BIODATA

Loh Yoke Ling (Ph.D.) is a Senior Lecturer at the Communication and Media Department, FBK, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris. Her area of specialization is documentary, media literacy and media aesthetics. Email: lohyokeling@fbk.upsi.edu.my

Muhamad Shamsul Ibrahim (Ph.d) is a senior lecturer in Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He teaches strategy in public relations, digital media in society and research methodology courses. His research interest is user behaviours in new media studies for health and marketing communication. Email: mshamsul@um.edu.my

Ahmad Sauffiyan Hasan is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Media and Communication, Faculty of Languages and Communication, Sultan Idris Education University. His research specializations include media and psychological operations, crisis media, and global issues. Email: sauffiyan@fbk.upsi.edu.my

Josry Sakian, a Sergeant in the Royal Malaysia Police, serves as a Police School Liaison Officer in the primary schools of Hulu Selangor District. With over two decades in law enforcement, he focuses on fostering trust and safety between the police and the community through educational outreach. His research examines the positive impacts of police presence in schools, highlighting improved student behaviour and stronger community ties. Email: Bpbksentosa_hsel@rmp.gov.my

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