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Article:	Social Interaction Anxiety, Social Loneliness, and Mental Health of Online Gamers
Author(s):	Ahmed Bilal Lecturer, Department of Applied Psychology, University of Management & Technology
	Ayesha Jahan Lodhi Lecturer, School of Integrated Social Sciences, The University of Lahore
	Shama Kanwal Instructor, Nursing College Bahawalpur.
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Author(s) Note:	Ahmed Bilal is serving as Lecturer at Department of Applied Psychology, University of Management & Technology Correspondence Author’s Email: ahmed.bilal@umt.edu.pk
	Ayesha Jahan Lodhi is serving as a Lecturer at School of Integrated Social Sciences, The University of Lahore
	Shama Kanwal is serving as an Instructor at Nursing College Bahawalpur.

ABSTRACT

With the advent of fast internet young adults have begun to spend more time playing online games than before. This has changed the dynamics of communication between individuals from physical to virtual. It has also given rise to issues of peculiar nature which were scarce before. The current study examined social anxiety and social support among individuals who play online games and use online gaming as a primary means of making friends. The study employed 120 students from various academic institutes across Lahore who played a very popular online first-person shooter game i.e., PUBG. This nature of the study was correlational. Our results indicated a positive correlation between age and the number of hours playing online video game. We also found a positive correlation between playing video game and increase in the prevalence gaming disorder among young men. We did not find a significant relationship between social support and gaming disorder. This may help in alleviating some of the stigma surrounding online gaming that increased causes social support among young men. It may be so that the virtual community which the gamers create may offer a safe haven for likeminded individuals to communicate and bond.

Keywords: online-games, PUBG, social anxiety, social support, internet gaming addiction.

Introduction:

Internet gaming has been around for at least four decades now (Gao et al., 2022). With the passage of time the gaming experience has shifted from arcade-based gaming at dedicated gaming arenas at fixed geographic locations to home based and online gaming. Games today e.g., GTA-V have hyper realistic graphics, aided by extensive world maps which are immersive and engaging at the same time. However, the most important facet of games today are the online friendships, liaisons, team-ups and clans, which provide almost the same engagement and person to person interaction as physical hanging out. These games e.g., PUBG, Fortnite etc. are the new arenas of bonding and socializing for young adults. For some individuals online gaming is a benign activity, for others, it is a harmful activity which brings about mental health issues and decline in academic performance. There is a lot of research conducted on both aspects of the gaming experience. However, scarce research exists which takes both sides into account.

Especially the effect of violent first-person shooter games has received much slack from media and parents alike.

As video games have matured over the years, they are becoming more real, with real world interactions and tournaments which are backed by millions of active users who not only play games, but also have social identities, social interactions, and social liaisons based on the shared gaming meta verse (Atkinson & Parsay, 2021). Online gaming is now much more than it once was i.e., a solitary lonesome activity. The hierarchical ascendance within any online game is based on a economy which is unique to that game. It included barter, trade-ins, and sale and purchase of items. These are indicatives of a living and organic nature of the game. Millions of young individuals contest for top prizes with large financial rewards. Due to increase in online gaming during the pandemic, more research interest has been shifting towards the beneficial outcomes on better mental states of gamers. Recent research has shed light on the benefits of gaming on mood, positive cognitions, and attention (Halbrook et al., 2019; Kowal et al., 2021).

For the purpose of this study, the researchers opted to focus on one particular online game. Though there are multitude of other online games available as well e.g. FortNite, CS GO, etc., for this study PUBG was chosen. This type of game is inspired by the movie Hunger Games where the winner competes with everyone in the arena. There are millions of players of this game across the world. The game has more than 100 million downloads across android and IOS platforms. It is also available on laptops and mobiles. However, the bulk of players of this medium of games which are called massive multiplayer online games are found on mobile devices. Mobiles allow for mobility and ease of access to the devices, which are a superior option to desktops.

The game is played by a team of four individuals. Though it can be played in the solo mode wherein the individual is challenged against the entire hoard. The game requires coordination, communication, and liaison among its players so that they may stand a chance to win. There is an option for online chatting via texts and voice in real time. This intensifies not only the immediate gaming experience but also helps form long lasting alliances among players which may turn into friendships which extend the virtual world.

However, there is a growing contention that individuals who spend too much time liaising online have reduced real-world social interaction tendencies and capabilities. These

individuals are said to have social interaction anxiety and choose online gaming platforms as an excuse to avoid social interactions in the real-world and also use their online avatars as a means to fulfill their need to liaise with other individuals. Some contend that social interaction anxiety also fuels decreased social support which online gamers suffer.

Even in fun activities and playing games human need others individuals to play or to having some sort of fun. According to a study, social support assumes a crucial component in social interaction. It is imperative to teach youths about diverse social abilities. Social abilities and skills help in by and large development of teenagers and support them to make new companions and friends, as well as setting up compatibility with teachers and coexisting with everybody. Great social skills are important to effective working throughout everyday life (Hukkelberg, et al., 2019)

Youth today connect more with one another via the virtual fora. One may argue on the merits and demerits of the social interaction on the virtual for a, but despite the seemingly adverse outcomes of virtual interaction, it has bridged the gap of disconnect between humans by offering an alternative so that humans do still, to some degree, stay in touch with one another. These virtual fora provide for more than just a win-lose mindset, but also provide a collaborative approach to humans to interact with one another (Yin et al., 2020).

A huge market globally revolves around the online gaming industry. Adults and kids both are avid fans of such games. To rebut the claims by people who denounce online games by labelling the players as physically inactive and socially awkward, Cole and Griffiths recruited around 900 respondents. They opined that they would like to play with their kin. They also found that around 75 percent of men and slightly less women turned out to be amiable within the realm of the game (Cole & Griffiths, 2007).

Initially, it was believed that playing such games which had violence in them was linked to aggression in young boys. However, Ewoldsen et al. (2012) opine that the opposite is more likely true. That is, when such games i.e. violent games, are played with other players, especially in a team building atmosphere, then the perceived violence of the game evaporates and in its stead, a collaborative endeavor comes to the front in which the players work in tandem towards a common goal. That common goal is to win and to support one another in their collective endeavor. These individuals are showed to exhibit traits which are more giving in their nature as opposed to stingy behavior.

Online games are a good medium of entertainment for kids as well as adults. With a huge selection available, online games dominate the toy industry at present, from action to sports, puzzles to racing and strategy to adventure. Different researches revealed that frequent use of online gaming (e.g., PUBG) is a salient feature of developing social support and maintaining social interactions among adults. This research can create awareness about how online gaming is positively affecting social circle and relationship of an individual and how it may enhance social support of individuals.

The current study will examine the impact of online games on social support of young adults. This research will be the innovative step against those stereotype beliefs that online gaming has only negative role in youth lives. This research will establish awareness about how online gaming is directly affecting social circle and relationships of an individual, as well as its effect on their social skills. The current study is designed to examine some of the consequences and antecedents of online gaming behavior.

Objective

- To understand the relationship between social anxiety, online gaming addiction, and perceived social support.

Hypotheses

- There is likely to be a relationship between online gaming, social anxiety and perceived social support.
- Online gaming is likely to predict social anxiety and perceived social support.

Method

Sample and sampling strategy

For the current study the researchers employed purposive sampling technique. 250 undergraduate students were recruited from various academic universities.

Inclusion criteria

- Young adults who play PUBG.
- Individuals who are playing PUBG for last 6 months.

Table 1

Variable	<i>Descriptive Statistics (N = 240)</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender		
Women	80	66.7
Men	160	33.3
University		
Government	110	45.9
Private	130	54.1
Family System		
Joint	75	31.3
Nuclear	165	68.7

Assessment Measures

Demographic Questionnaire. The researchers constructed a brief questionnaire which inquired about the type of family i.e. nuclear/joint, the sex and the age of the participant along with the amount of time spend.

1. **The Gaming Addiction Scale (GAS)** was used to assess the degree of problematic gaming behavior. It has a total of 7 items in which low score means less addiction. It scoring is based on a 5-point scale.
2. **The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support** is Likert type scale which is made of twelve statements. It scores from 1-7. It has a high reliability. It examines one's own perception of the amount of social support one gets from individuals near him or her.
3. **Social Interaction and Anxiety Scale (SIAS).** SIAS is a self-report scale that measures distress when meeting and talking with others gauge emotional aspects of the anxiety response, and do not refer to social apprehensiveness or concern about others' opinions in a general sense. The scale consisted of 20 items. The participants rate how much each item relates to them on a 5- point scale.

Demographic information.

The demographic question was developed for the current study to asked general information, including age, gender, and education. The researchers also inquired about game specific information from the participants. This information included the amount of minutes the participants spent on PUBG.

Procedure

Researchers had obtained an institutional consent letter from department of Psychology to conduct this research. The researcher collected data from two private and two public sector universities in Lahore. Before gathering information, official authorization was taken from the Universities. This authority letter was presented to participants. The letter was confirmed the researcher's character and the subject under scrutiny. Data was collected using Purposive Sampling technique, participants who wanted to participate voluntarily were included and they were assured about the privacy and confidentiality. Average time to fill the questionnaires briefed to the participants. Answer to queries of participant was explained. After completion of questionnaire gratitude was shown to participants for their valuable time and participation.

Ethical Considerations

We endeavored to abide by all ethical considerations applicable to our study.

Results

The purpose of the study was to find the relationship of online gaming with social anxiety and social support. The English versions of the scale for social support and social anxiety were used. Initially reliability analysis was run which yielded good results. Then correlation analysis was conducted which was followed by a linear regression analysis.

Table 2

Cronbach's Alpha and Descriptive Statistics Reliability Analysis of Scales

Variables	<i>k</i>	M (SD)	α
The Gaming Addiction Scale (GAS)	7	12.16 (6.18)	.88
Social Interaction and Anxiety Scale (SIAS)	20	52.65 (176.84)	.75
The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MPSS)	12	27.31 (10.14)	.84

The first analysis was the reliability analysis which revealed good scores for all scales.

Table 3

Correlation Analyses

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age	—	.04	-.15	.07	-.49**	-.03	.11	.17	-.15	-.09
2. Gender	—	—	-.12	.38**	-.17	-.37**	.14	-.08	-.09	.15
3. University	—	—	—	-.08	.12	.11	-.19	.04	.13	.26
4. Family System	—	—	—	—	.22	-.14	.11	-.07*	-.06	.03
5. Average Time Playing Videogames (per day)	—	—	—	—	—	.53**	.14	.30*	.28**	.05
6. Average Time Playing Videogames (per week)	—	—	—	—	—	—	.09	.13	.25	-.17
7. Average Time Spent with	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	.03	-.24	-.01

Family (per day)											
8. GAS	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	.67**	-.21
9. SIAS	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	-.03
10. MPSS	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–

Note. ** $p < .01$

Correlation results were conducted to understand the relationship between all study variables. Results indicated that PUBG addiction was positively correlated with social anxiety. Perceived social support and social anxiety had no relationship. Age was found to be negatively correlated with amount of time playing online games.

A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to see if GAS scores could predict MPSS and SIAS scores. The results of the regression showed that GAS scores had no effect ($F(1,238) = 1.22, p > .05, R^2 = .01$) on MPSS scores, and could not predict MPSS scores ($b = .13, p > .05$). GAS scores did have a significant effect on SIAS scores ($F(1,238) = 58.20, p < .001, R^2 = .35$), and could predict SIAS scores ($b = 1.07, p < .001$).

Discussion

We found an insignificant relationship between the two variables. This means that playing online games, even for extend periods of time, do not suggest an automatic increase in social anxiety among the player. Perhaps there are other factors which contribute to those instances in which there is indeed a social interaction anxiety along with online gaming. However, merely playing games does not likely cause social interaction anxiety in isolation. Yee (2006) concurs with our results that there exists a social sphere beyond the bounds of online interaction. It does not mean that the same individuals do not form meaningful relationships online. It simply purports that there are other venues too.

Evidence from this research suggests that despite the common notion, social anxiety has nothing to do with playing games on the internet. It also has nothing to do with aggression or the nature of the game whatsoever. Recently, in a large study the researchers found that there appears to be little to no difference in the amount of social interaction or the anxiety when it comes to community building and connecting with other humans. The perceived social support plays a major role in this. From the results of around one thousand participants the researchers opined that even online games were a way to building social interactions with genuine human interaction and meaningfulness. The bygone notion that online gamers are a sort of hermits and live on the fringes of the society is no longer the prevalent norm. With the advent of EA sports etc. online gaming has become a common denominator in the social interaction of millions of youth. It allows almost conventional type friendships and time-tested friendships with the boomer generation lamented is going out of vogue. These type of online gaming also fosters teambuilding and collaborative interactions which help in real-life situations (Cole & Griffiths, 2007). Online gaming also provides a relief to those individuals who find the realities of interacting with people a daunting task. The screen provides with a safe place to operate from. This buffer helps the people to interact with the outside world at their own pace and at their own discretion. This does not mean that there is a deceit in play. Rather, the online fora helps allow for a measured approach where the individuals can gauge their steps and move forward in the online arena of life. Vicarious interactions are not to be frowned upon. They help social

phobic individuals interact with the outside world. They help with creation of a positive sense of self.

We also found that men tend to play more online game as compared to women and that family type. i.e., nuclear or joint has no bearing on the amount of time a game is played or on social anxiety. Men are more interested in group play as opposed to women. Men like building teams and interacting with one another towards a common goal i.e. to win. The collective winning potential helps feed the mutual endeavors, be it a winning in a game or winning something more substantial.

We found an interesting result in terms of age and playing online games. We found that as the age of our sample increased, there was a statistically significant decline in the amount of time spent playing online video games. Perhaps as the responsibilities of real-life dawn upon a human, the tendency to bury one's self in a virtual escape becomes ever difficult. It could also mean that adults, as they age, find meaning and purpose in the real world and their social anxiety diminishes somehow. This area is worthy of further exploration. We also found that among those who continued to play online games for extended periods of time, the prevalence of internet gaming addiction increased significantly. We understand that though social anxiety has little to do with the amount of game being played and similarly, social support is also less linked with online gaming, however, the more one plays online games in particular and spends time online in general, the more likely is it that the individual may qualify for a diagnosis of internet addiction. In this condition the person feel jittery and unwell if absent from the online world.

We can surmise that online gaming has various varied effects on the person. We should proceed with caution about this new avenue of human communication, interaction, and fulfillment which the young adults of today find very entertaining. It is important to look at the vista of online gaming with a fresh vantage point. Online interactions help to reduce anxiety and anxiousness of individuals and also aid in their development of self. The self which is hindered by the coarseness of the interactions of the physical world.

Limitations

Being cross sectional survey-based research in nature, it lacks the rigor of an experimental study. Also, sample was acquired from a single location which might not be readily generalizable to a large populace.

Suggestions

A larger sample which plays varied games of diverging genres across different age groups might help shine a better light on the social anxiety and support issues faced by young adults in the contemporary arena.

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