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Author(s): Das, Doarka; Shaikh, Aijaz A.

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Evaluating the Key Factors Affecting Hedonic Motivations of Online Video Game Players

Doarka Das [1,*]
Aijaz A. Shaikh [2]

*Corresponding author
[1] Doctoral Researcher, University of Jyväskylä, Finland, doarka.d.das@student.jyu.fi
[2] Senior Lecturer, University of Jyväskylä, Finland, aijaz.a.shaikh@jyu.fi

ABSTRACT

Online gaming has established itself as the dominant force in entertainment and social engagement, attracting millions of online gamers worldwide. This study aimed to evaluate the key factors that determine online gamers' behavioral intention to play online video games. We also aimed to study the factors that stimulate online gamers' intentions to play online games and try to establish new possibilities to gain insight into the novel behaviors of adolescents and find out the novel themes. An inductive research approach with a focus group discussion technique was used to collect data from twenty-nine experienced online gamers between April and May 2023. The NVivo 13 application was used to analyze data. The present empirical study identified several themes: competition, socializing, teamwork, sexual harassment, social spaces, cyberbullying, and mental health. The primary conclusion from the research study highlights the significance of hedonic motivations, more specifically the continuous behavior to play online games is explained by the identified themes. This study reveals that the irresistible appeal of immersive virtual realms, exhilarating challenges, and the chance to connect with fellow gamers exert a profound influence on online gamers' engagements. It is worth highlighting that the significance of social interaction has undergone a remarkable expansion, with online gaming platforms now serving as virtual social heavens where players forge deep and meaningful relationships. The research study has significant managerial implications and offers a rich future research agenda.

Keywords: Hedonic motivation, online video gaming, continuous intention to play

INTRODUCTION

The first online game was developed in 1980 by Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle at the University of Essex and was called "MUD1 or multiuser dungeon" (Bartle, 2015). This starts the beginning of a new era in the entertainment industry with huge social-economic benefits. Playing a video game over the internet or using any virtual network is called an online video game (Lee et al., 2015). Online gamers connect to online gamers via a must-have internet connection to take part in thrilling multiplayer games. Most common platforms used for playing include PlayStation, Xbox, PC, Laptop, and smartphones. Each platform boasts its own unique online gaming experience providing endless opportunities for players to indulge in their favorite games. Almost eight out of ten people from the total internet population play online video games in some way (Newzoo, 2023). Recent changes in digital and communication technologies have gradually transformed the online gaming industry (Frank et al., 2021). The online gaming sector contributes significantly to leisure-time entertainment products and toys by attracting millions of gamers across the world (Teng et al., 2021). The popularity of online gaming is growing rapidly, and digital gamers are increasingly engaged in different modes of games, e.g., single-player and multi-player online games, under distinct genres such as puzzle, action, and adventure games (Abbasi et al., 2021). The gaming industry is now believed to be bigger than Hollywood and the music industry combined together, the US movie industry is worth $95.4 billion, whereas the music industry is worth $28.8 billion (Newzoo, 2021). The video game industry was valued at $178.4 billion in 2021. According to recent projections, the online video gaming business will be valued at $268.8 billion by 2023, and it is estimated that there are around 3.24 billion players worldwide (Newzoo, 2021). The online gaming industry's future seems to be convincingly profitable, and market growth will be remarkable in the future (Abbasi et al., 2019; Ari et al., 2020; Merhi. 2016). This industry has witnessed growth due to rapid technological advancements, lower costs, widespread internet use, and improvements in the technical capabilities of phones and tablets (Sharma et al., 2020).

Online gamers' behavior is highly influenced by the attitudes, expectations, and behaviors of others (Habib et al., 2021). In influencing teenagers' behavior, online gaming is a key factor, which impacts their behavior (Quwaider et al., 2019). Online gaming has become incredibly popular among teenagers globally (Teng et al., 2021). The factors influencing players` motivations to play online video games and the factors influencing their behaviors, as well as how such factors influence their motives and behaviors are significant and worth investigating (Ari et al., 2020). Thus, it is important to investigate young players` online gaming behavior, as their consumption patterns can be redefined as compared to previous generations (Priporas et al., 2017). Similarly, psychological, and medical research in the domain of online gaming has represented both positive and negative consequences. In the past, few researchers have conducted research on teenagers` behavior and their participation in online gaming (Jasrotia et al., 2022). No research has explored online gamers' teamwork and team participation experience (Liao et al.,

2020). Current literature has explained that video gaming behavior is studied with distinct outcomes including stress, anxiety, and achievements. However, a gap exists to investigate further (Jamak et al., 2018). From the perspective of user intention studies, online gaming behaviors are interesting areas to explore further (Hollebeek et al., 2022). Future research may be conducted to investigate playful-consumption experience (e.g., imaginal, emotional, and sensory) in determining players` online gaming engagement such as cognitive, affective, and behavioral engagement (Abbasi et al., 2019).

The current empirical study fills this gap and attempts to evaluate the key factors that determine online gamers' (including digital natives and adults) continuous intention to play online video games considering their hedonic values (i.e., perceived enjoyment). The research aims to deepen our understanding of online gamers' intentions to play online games, especially the factors that stimulate their intentions to play digital games. In this study, we focus on hedonic values since the study tries to establish new possibilities to gain insights into novel behaviors of adolescents as well as attempt to improve the pre-existing behaviors developed in the past. Regardless of the growing popularity of digital games, there is a need for rigorous research that how and why online gamers play such games regularly. The study aims to find out the new themes in the areas of online gamers' gaming usage behavior, hence, to achieve these objectives, the study proposes and addresses three research questions as follows.

RQ1. How do the hedonic-related specific motivational factors affect online gamers' continuous intention to play online video games?
RQ2. How does the continuous intention to play online video games affect the usage behavior of online gamers?
RQ3 What are the factors that motivate adults and teenagers to continuously play online video games?

The findings of this research article aim to support the industry`s efforts to improve the quality of online gaming while also boosting the digital games` capacity to positively affect the community in the form of healthy game concepts. The results will enable the high-tech industries to produce new technological innovations and creative end-user applications in the areas of online gaming. Further, the research outcomes will help the game developers understand players` preferences and behaviors by improving online gamers' engagement and experiences. The findings of this empirical research will help managers and researchers to improve their knowledge of online video gaming.

This article is organized as follows: We present the study's literature review, followed by the research methodologies. The study findings are then presented. Finally, the article discusses the study's significance, implications, and limitations, as well as future research directions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The global online gaming sector will exceed USD 300 billion in the next five years (Nigam, 2022). Playing and gaming have been considered essential elements of humans` daily lives (Durak et al., 2023; Hamari et al., 2015). Games have been considered an essential part of teenagers and adults since their childhood; however, it seems different for modern world generations who engage in virtual and digital games, where they play with known and unknown players (Alanko, 2023). Online video games are becoming the most famous sort of games played internationally (Özçetin et al., 2019; Ghețău, 2021; Thakur, 2021; Rudolf et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2019).

Playing online games is commonly perceived as addictive behavior of players, consequently, researchers are putting their efforts into understanding this phenomenon (Hew et al., 2023). Understanding online gamers' intentions to play online video games and their game-playing behavior have become essential topics for game developers, marketers, organizations, and gadget manufacturers (Ari et al., 2020). Ari et al., conducted a research study to understand the online gaming behavior of users in the light of social cognitive theory and U&G theory. Online video game designers, marketers, and other stakeholders must know the factors that stimulate the players' intentions and behaviors to play online video games.

The emergence of mobile multiplayer online battle area (MOBA) games has enabled players to experience cooperation and competition among players (Hew et al., 2023). Hedonic in games, relates to individuals' degree of pleasure, emotional satisfaction, and enjoyment derived from playing a video game (Hollebeek et al., 2022). The intentions of online gamers to continue playing online games have gained significant attention, as the key stakeholders in this industry drive substantial benefits from a better comprehension of underlying factors that drive such factors (Ramírez-Correa, 2019). Fulfillment of the hedonic needs of players can be achieved through a variety of game-related components, including game narrative, visual appeal, competitive play, intellectual stimulation, and socializing among others. Consequently, hedonic factors of games have a significant influence on players' motivation and decisions related to games (Sharma et al., 2020). In the last few years, online video gaming has transformed into a popular kind of entertainment and an intrinsic component of online gamers' everyday lives across the globe Nonetheless, research into the popularity of such online gaming is still in its early stages.

The focus of research on online video games has been on their adverse impacts, and such games are blamed for spreading violence and aggressive behavior (Mercier & Lubart, 2023). Previous research conducted on players has centered on in-game branding, advertising, and the propensity to purchase gaming products in the physical realm (Nigam, 2022). The advent of online features has rendered the gaming industry more attractive by enabling players from diverse geographical locations to play the same game together at the same time (Albatati, et al., 2023). The involvement of online gamers in video game playing is subject to various factors that can be examined from diverse viewpoints.

Despite higher costs associated with game developments, it has been noticed that market players in the gaming industry invest heavily to maintain profitability, and it is important to promote players' intention to continue playing online video games for revenue generation through several means such as advertising, subscription, and microtransactions (Liew et al., 2022). There are limited research studies in the literature that focus on the hedonic aspects of players. However, some of these studies have emphasized hedonic factors, including the contribution of perceived enjoyment to the formation of players' game-related motivations (Hamari et al., 2015; Abbasi et al., 2019; Ari et al., 2020).

While reviewing the literature, it is discovered that a lot of research has been done on online video gaming in the areas of stress, risk, addiction, mental illness, anxiety, and depression. Exposing a significant literature gap, however, it is unclear what are the novel factors that influence the continuous intentions of adults and teenagers to play online video games. Understanding why players play online video games is and will continue to remain critical to explore for researchers (Newzoo, 2023). Contemplating this research study fills the theoretical and methodological gap.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Designing a research methodology involved careful planning to ensure that we gather meaningful insights and achieve our desired research objectives. Qualitative research offers valuable insights that are challenging to obtain through quantitative measures, as it provides rich and comprehensive descriptions (Azungah, 2018). Respondents are allowed to express their point of view, according to the research objectives, without the investigator putting any preconceived perceptions, experiences, or views on them (Azungah, 2018). Congruently this qualitative research study follows an inductive approach by employing a focus group discussion technique. An inductive approach will help us to find novel themes from the desired FGDs. Such open-ended discussions are beneficial since they offer unique environments where participants can influence one another and impact others in a more authentic way (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

To identify and recruit both male and female participants of different age groups, a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques was adopted (Alharthi et al., 2021). Participants were recruited based on their gaming experiences, we set an initial condition that participants must have at least six months of online gaming experience. The sample is intended to represent teenagers and adults, aged between 18-26 years. Teenagers and adults were targeted because they frequently engage in the hobby of playing online video games (Abbasi et al., 2019). The participants were mostly students and had different education and qualifications. This study employed a network-based recruitment strategy, by utilizing professional relations with heads of educational institutes. The initial recruitment phase involved the selection of 7 participants for FGD. Subsequently, the author employed a snowball sampling technique, whereby recommendations from the initial three participants were used to recruit additional participants.

For FGDs we chose the perfect and conducive environment, they were conducted in quiet and free from distraction places so that our participants feel a sense of comfort and can contribute as much as possible. Over the period of two months, in total twenty-nine participants` data were collected through face-to-face interviews, which included why and how approach to infer online gamers' insights. Respondents were briefed about the objectives of the research, the admission criteria, their right to leave, and the privacy implications of the information gathered during open discussion. Audio conversations were tape-recorded and transcribed. Hence four successful focus group discussion sessions were conducted physically with experienced online video game players, in the presence of moderator and facilitator. Online video game players were free to speak in any regional languages i.e., Sindhi and English.

NVivo is extensively employed in qualitative research which improves the qualitative research process, quickly analyses queries, and broadens the analytical options. Congruently the well-known qualitative data analysis software NVivo 13 is employed for this empirical study (Alharthi et al., 2021). The coding process was managed by the corresponding author who conducted several queries.

FINDINGS

According to Hanafizadeh & Shaikh (2021), this research study also analyzed the manifest content of data, as we couldn't access latent content (such as silence, sighs, and laughter), due to the utilization of an open-ended questions approach during the data collection process. NVivo 13 application was utilized to identify themes from 29 participants' interview transcripts. A study of the demographic characteristics of the individuals who participated in the study (as shown in Table 1) reveals that most of the participants were female (55.17%), and (44.83%) of the respondents were male. Approximately 51% of the participants were between the ages of 18-20, with 44% between the ages of 21-23, and the remaining 3.45% were in the age bracket of 24-27. All respondents were students by profession. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the participants. While selecting respondents, one essential factor was their online gaming experience, which was set to a minimum of six months of playing experience. 11 out of 29 had 3 to 4 years of gaming experience (37.9% of total sample size), followed by 10, who had 5 to 6 years of gaming experience (34% of total sample size). While answering the question of their favorite game, most of the participants answered it as PUBG Battleground (formerly known as Player Unknown's Battleground) game, 41% of the participants responded that they play PUBG game, followed by Free Fire, GTA Vice City, and Call of Duty.

The most frequently used platform for online video game playing is smartphones. Since smartphone platforms are portable, easier, and more convenient. On average every participant briefed us that they play online video games daily and spend two to

three hours a day. In case they don't get time for games, they feel dissatisfied and try to find time for games. Sometimes their relations with siblings and relatives are negatively affected due to excessive game playing time.

The present empirical study identified several themes such as competition, socializing, teamwork, sexual harassment, social spaces, cyberbullying, escapism, and mental health. Female participants reported both general and sexual harassment in online video games. In some instances, female participants disguise their identity and gender, to avoid being recognized and harassed by male counterparts. Female participants further explained that; we are being harassed frequently while playing online games, especially in the multiplayer form of games such as PUBG and Free Fire.

Table 1

No.	Characteristics	N	Percentage %
1	*Gender*		
	Male	13	44.83
	Female	16	55.17
2	*Age*		
	18-20	15	51.72
	21-23	13	44.83
	24-27	1	3.45
	28-30	0	0.00
3	*Gaming Experience*		
	1 to 2 years	7	24.14
	3 to 4 years	11	37.93
	5 to 6 years	10	34.48
	7 to 8 years	1	3.45
4	*Favorite Game*		
	PUBG	12	41.3
	Free Fire	4	13.79
	GTA Vice City	3	10.34
	Call of duty	2	6.90

Table 1: Demographic profile of the study participants

The Social Side of Play

Players communicate and socialize with each other in several ways. Socializing allows the gamers to connect, collaborate, and help each other during challenging tasks and levels. It was found that most of the players play multi-player online games for the reason of connecting and expanding their friends' network so that they can have formal and informal discussions and gossip. Participants quoted that while they are playing with their friends' circle, they get more enjoyment and happiness. Congruently, the socializing factor is more rewarding and enjoyable in games. Players share text messages and have voice chats while playing online games, and they get a platform to connect with different cultures and countries people around the world. Here are some insights from the discussions:

If I talk about my favorite game, I play PUBG game. But I play Roblox and Free Fire also. I prefer the multiplayer type of game and I prefer smartphones because they are easy and convenient. I have been playing online games for 2 years and I play until I get tired. The reason why I play these games is that they provide me with a platform to connect with friends and I like to make new friends. I like to talk to fellow players during games (Female, 18-20, student)

When there are teammates, we put speakers and mic on and chat with each other. We sit late at night and enjoy ourselves. It is an amazing experience to talk about winning streaks and tips with fellow game players (Male, 18-20, student).

Online games enhance my friends' circle. After games we sit in restaurants and gossip with each other, we get a chance to meet in real life too (Male, 18-20, student).

In response to questions asked, related to helping and chatting during the game, we got insights that helping and chatting during gameplay is important. Because it gives them help and support to win several types of tournaments in games.

I want to quote an example, when my friend or teammate gets knocked out, then he gets into a suspicious mood, so from one angle if we cannot see enemies, then they guide us the way and suggest the team in the right direction. But when you are in a winning situation and your friends are speaking a lot then you forget to follow footsteps and hence your chance of losing increases, so it depends sometimes chatting during the game is meaningful and sometimes not (Male, 18-20, student).

I think it is important to make new friends. Sometimes we get united through online video games such as siblings and cousins in remote areas (Female, 21-23, student).

We get a chance to make new friends from other countries too. I am sharing an interesting example. When I started playing the game, initially, we were 5 friends, but gradually we grew to 10 and now we are 15 friends. Playing online games helps us to connect with people and increase our network. (Male, 18-20, Student).

Gaming In Fear

It is unfortunately common to know that almost all female players who participated in our research objectives have experienced both general and sexual harassment during game-playing in different ways. Female players frequently receive unwanted sexist messages and comments. During in-depth discussions with female participants, we came to know that male players send explicit messages to fellow female players and create a hostile environment. Here are some insights from the participants:

I feel stress-free when I play online games. But we girls feel insecure while playing games with strangers. I sometimes disguise my gender and name and play games. If I show that I am a female player, people start searching me on social media, send friend requests, and sometimes harass me while game playing (Female, 18-20, student)

I used to play online games a lot. I am sharing an incident with you; I was playing the multiplayer type of game PUBG a few months back. One day I received a friend request on my Facebook account from the boy, who was my classmate at university. He said that you are an expert in PUBG and thanked me for helping him in giving revive. And after a few days, he texted me on messenger saying that you are very beautiful, and he even wrote me those three magic words. I was very angry and blocked him immediately (Female, 21-23, student)

Some of the female participants reported such unwanted incidents in the game, but they think that no action is taken against such harassment cases.

From Passion to Paycheck

We got insights from the discussion that there are monetary incentives for qualifying rounds and winning certain tournaments in games. Participants reported that players earn recognition and significant income by playing online video games. Here are some views of participants:

Yes, I feel motivated when I win over my friends, and this also motivates me to play games. It is important for me to accumulate badges and ranks in the game. So that I can show them to my friends. We don't discuss personal issues, if we do then conversation becomes boring, so we do discuss general things such as battle passes, and about new characters (Female, 18-20, student).

You know for me games lower the stress level, and this motivates me to play more. For me, it is important to be well-known in the game because it boosts confidence among friends. More often I accept challenges and win games (Male, 21-23, student).

DISCUSSION

Digital technologies have revolutionized the way we access and utilize services, providing us with unparalleled convenience and flexibility. With the advent of portable and wearable devices such as smartphones and smartwatches, we can now access services anytime, anywhere, with ease and efficiency (Suyunchaliyeva et al., 2021). Similarly, digital technologies have a profound impact on the online video gaming industry. The online gaming industry stands out as remarkably diverse, compared to other entertainment sectors, boasting a multitude of segments that contribute to its overall growth. From traditional PC and console gaming to the immersive arcade experience, and the ever-thriving world of mobile gaming, this industry encompasses a wide range of avenues that fuel its continuous expansion.

This present study makes a valuable contribution to the existing body of knowledge on online video gaming, by identifying novel themes in the areas of online gamers' gaming usage behavior. Additionally, this study examines the hedonic-related motivational factors that motivate adults and teenagers to continuously play online video games. This study also investigates the potential impact of continuous intention to play online video games on the usage behavior of online gamers. Employing the inductive research approach with the help of NVivo 13 applications, some novel themes were identified.

Our study aims to address the research question RQ1. How do the hedonic-related specific motivational factors affect online gamers' continuous intention to play online video games? RQ2. How does the continuous intention to play online video games affect the usage behavior of online gamers? RQ3 What are the factors that motivate adults and teenagers to continuously play online video games?

Theoretical Implications

Hedonic-related motivational factors influence a player in several ways for playing online video games. For example, a participant in a focus group discussion revealed that making new friends is my motivation behind playing online games, it gives me happiness and enjoyment while increasing the existing number of friends. It is fun! And I have built lasting friendships with one of my USA friends.

Playing online video games most of the time makes life problematic with siblings, parents, and relatives, and badly impacts one's mental health and sleep time. Current study findings suggest that our identified themes such as harassment, and mental health demotivate some female players from playing online video games, hence they disguise and stop sharing their identity and gender with other male players while playing. Further, the analysis of existing literature suggests that research on continuous intention to play online video games is influenced by hedonic motivational factors. Those include enjoyment, happiness, competition, escapism, and socializing. We also found that our identified themes such as socializing, competition, and escapism are central and recurring themes. The main findings of this study are that enjoyment and happiness are fundamental aspects that stimulate players' intentions to play online video games. This is evaluated by another study Ramírez-Correa (2019) that describes enjoyment as an important factor behind playing online video games. Hence our results are consistent with those of the studies and investigation (Hamari et al., 2015; Abbasi et al., 2019; Sharma et al., 2020).

Managerial Implications
The industry has undergone remarkable growth and transformation in recent years, fueled by technological advancements and evolving online gamers' preferences. As a result, managers within this sector must be astute and strategic in their decision-making to navigate this landscape successfully. The research offers valuable insights to managers and marketers seeking to influence young and adult players to play online video games. The present study has significant managerial implications. Firstly, the findings underscore the significance of hedonic motivational factors with happiness, enjoyment, socializing escapism, and competition, which play key roles in playing online video games. Hence, in order to cater to the fast-changing needs and preferences of users, managers are required to adopt a user-centric approach. This entails placing utmost importance on enhancing user gaming experience and engagement by means of user-friendly interfaces, responsive customer support (especially harassment victims' users), and personalized gaming experience. Furthermore, managers must allocate resources towards the acquisition and analysis of data, as well as actively seek users' feedback, in order to consistently enhance the game design and content in a way so that players can enjoy and like games more. In addition to that managers must prioritize the top-notch captivating content to effectively attract and retain players. They need to stay ahead of the emerging gaming trends and craft that perfectly aligns with players' preferences.

This study has uncovered disturbing truths: participants' data is being leaked, their gaming accounts are being hacked, and their years of hard-earned ranks and history are being lost. To make matters worse, these accounts are being misused and never returned to their rightful original owners. Players use the report option in the game and complain about such incidents, but they revealed that no action is taken by relevant game regulators. So, keeping in view such concerns, game designers must confidently implement robust security measures to effectively protect user data from any potential breaches and cyberattacks. Similarly, it is imperative that managers confidently comply with data protection regulations to guarantee the utmost respect for player privacy. Managers must actively engage with players, attentively listen to their valuable feedback, and promptly address any concerns they may have. Moreover, they must proactively implement highly effective content moderation strategies to effectively combat toxic behavior and harassment within the gaming community.

Limitations And Future Research Directions
The essential strength of this research lies in its emphasis on the key factors that determine the online gamers' (teenagers` and adults`) continuous intention to play online video games considering hedonic values (i.e., perceived enjoyment). However, several research limitations need to be addressed in the future. Online gamers more often encounter challenges associated with toxicity, harassment, and online abuse. It is imperative for future research to undertake a comprehensive investigation into the underlying causes of these behaviors and to ascertain efficacious strategies for their mitigation. This research emphasizes qualitative data collected through FGDs; hence it is imperative to explore alternative research methodologies in the future to augment the outcomes of this study. Future research is recommended to understand the impact of several other demographic factors. In addition to identified themes, there is a need for future research on harassment, and cyberbullying themes. The results achieved through these themes open new avenues for future research in this direction.

CONCLUSION

The online video gaming industry has undeniably emerged as the most profitable industry surpassing all other entertainment industries over the last decade. Playing online video games is an increasingly popular type of leisure activity among young and adult users in comparison to TV, music, and other entertainment activities. Not only do online games provide a thrilling and enjoyable experience, but they also alleviate the stress and anxiety levels of players. The sheer joy and happiness derived from these digital games are unparalleled. Moreover, online video games provide a unique platform for social interaction, enabling individuals to connect and socialize with others regardless of their physical location. This aspect of gaming has revolutionized the way people socialize, fostering new friendships and connections that transcend geographical boundaries. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that excessive gaming habits can lead to the development of obsessive behavior, mental health issues, and strained relationships with siblings, parents, and relatives.

It is an obligation for game developers to prioritize the protection of female players. Females are particularly vulnerable to harassment and are often targeted by male players. Therefore, it is essential to implement measures that safeguard the rights and well-being of female gamers, ensuring they can enjoy their gaming experience without fear of harassment or mistreatment. It is

our collective responsibility to create a safe and inclusive gaming environment for all players, irrespective of their gender. By prioritizing the protection of female players and promoting a healthy gaming culture, we can ensure, that the online gaming experience remains enjoyable, fulfilling, and free from any form of harassment or discrimination.

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