

The Negative Effects of Anonymity and Excessive Participation in Online Gaming Communities

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Abstract

This paper explores characteristics of the online gaming community and the associated negative consequences to users. Participation in these communities is generally anonymous due to the nature of the games that usually require avatars or characters that fit into the alternate world, rather than personal, offline identities. While researching many different articles, it was found that anonymity, that is, a person's identity being unknown, encourages both bullying and cheating within these communities, and also encourages other deviant behaviour. Excessive participation in online gaming has long been a cause for worry, and it has been proven to lead to serious mental health issues as well as affecting physical and social aspects of life.

Key words: Gaming, cyber-bulling, identity, cheating, mental health, online gaming community

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Millions of people world-wide are involved in online gaming communities, which appeal to a range of people of all nationalities and ages for different reasons, including enjoyment, flow experience [factors of the game that heighten engagement], Internet addiction and escapism (Chiou & Hsiao, 2012, p. 76). The online gaming community poses a few dangers and obstacles for users due to the nature of the activity. When referring to the online gaming community, it does not necessarily mean one particular game or community but many. Anonymity and excessive participation in online gaming communities can have negative impacts on users' mental health and general game play, with problems such as cyber-bullying, cheating and health issues arising, which should attempt to be avoided through modifications to the communities and further public awareness, promotion and legislation. Firstly, I will discuss how anonymity in gaming communities leads to problematic scenarios such as cyber-bullying and cheating that could be controlled and limited through modifications. I will then show how gaming addiction and related mental health issues can be caused by excessive participation in these communities and require intervention from appropriate government organisations in order to assist in prevention and improvement.

The online gaming community can be a supportive place that provides people with an opportunity to anonymously communicate about issues that may not be easily discussed in face-to-face contact (Chapelle, Cole, Davies, Griffiths, Grusser, Hussain & Thalemann, 2011, p.26) and can result in "significant friendships and personal empowerment" (Chapelle et al, 2011, p. 21); however this can also lead to cyber-bullying that often has no solution (McInroy & Mishna, 2017, p. 604). People online tend to feel less restrained and are able to do or say things they would not normally do in offline scenarios; this is called the disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004, p. 321). This can be positive in the way that embarrassment can be avoided and people can be more open with each other, but it also causes people to act out with "rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred [and] even threats" (Suler, 2004, p. 322). The vulnerability of these people is protected by anonymity and therefore may encourage negative actions, with users being able to disassociate their online persona from their offline personality and identity in order to avoid taking responsibility (Suler, 2004, p. 322).

In McInroy and Mishna's 2017 study, it was shown that the majority of cyber-bullying and aggressive behaviour was conducted by anonymous users. This damaging aspect of online gaming communities was nominated as the most severe in terms of negative effects compared to "traditional" face-to-face or other sorts of cyber-bullying in which the perpetrator's identity is known. (McInroy & Mishna, 2017, p. 604). This shows that anonymity in online gaming communities is dangerous and creates an environment that could have otherwise been avoided. In these cases, the victim is powerless to stop it or ensure that the perpetrator is appropriately punished as their identity is completely protected (McInroy & Mishna, 2017, p. 604). The victim is therefore affected more than necessary, and there is no solution apart from avoiding participation completely, unless these communities change and the ability to be anonymous is removed.

In Cotler and Fryling's 2016 study, they found that when asked the question "Why do you think cyber-bullying behaviour within multi-player games occurs?", 86% of participants (surveyed through an online gaming forum) nominated anonymity (p. 3), showing the awareness of the online gaming community of the negative aspect of this feature and how many people are affected in one form or another. Anonymity can cause frustration, insecurity and anxiety in victims (Sticca & Perren, 2012, p. 9) and contributes to a feeling of helplessness which surpasses that of normal bullying, or other types of cyber-bullying (McInroy, 2017, p.604-605). Bullies are generally more experienced game users who feel entitled to intimidate new players and make themselves feel superior (Cotler & Fryling, 2016, p. 6), which is made very easy and consequence free when their name remains private and they have the freedom to conduct their tormenting and aggressive behaviour out in the (cyber) open. Anonymity is a privilege that should be removed from online gaming communities in order to help ease issues such as bullying, which generally rely on certain privacy factors that allow users to feel safe enough to conduct behaviour that they would not normally do in situations where their identity and reputation are at risk.

This is also true for cheating in online gaming communities, where the ability to limit social cues and identity in online gaming has increased the level of cheating. Cheating can be defined as conducting improper behaviour in order to gain an advantage above other users, although each user can have a different view of what cheating is (Chen & Ong, 2018, p. 274). As mentioned above, anonymity may encourage deviant behaviour such as cyber-bullying, and cheating is also encouraged by the same characteristics (Chen & Wu, 2015, p. 659). Therefore, if the ability to hide identity was removed, much deviant behaviour may improve or become non-existent. Online gaming communities can be similar environments to those of fraternity houses, in which peer pressure is rampant and the need to adopt similar behaviour in order to feel included seems necessary to users (Chen, 2015, p. 659). Cheating can be defined as a group norm, where it is the common behaviour within an anonymous group or community and therefore can be copied without fear of negative consequences (Chen, 2015, p. 659). In fact, there are only positive reinforcements for cheating (getting further within the game), meaning users are able to not only participate in activity which is usually seen as morally wrong, but they are able to benefit from it easily, which is in stark contrast to the offline world. Coupled with the general peer pressure of playing within a group of cheaters, the mere ability to see the rewards of cheating in action can change users' thoughts and expectations, motivating them to join in (Chen & Wu, 2013, p. 2564).

This idea shows how some groups within the online gaming community have a separate set of morals that are generally not accepted outside these groups and would not be accepted offline. The wider online gaming community still shames cheaters through labelling their profiles as cheater users, and rapidly losing friends as a direct outcome of this (Blackburn, Kourtellis & Skvoretz, 2014, p. 10 - 11). The anonymity of users has a very important role in determining if a player will cheat as the private identity used in online gaming communities provides the protection that

cannot be afforded in face-to-face scenarios, and helps to form greater group relationships (Chen, 2015, p. 660). In Chen and Wu's 2015 study, they found that anonymity in online gaming communities increases the likelihood of cheating. The depersonalisation of individual users due to anonymity encourages less individual identities and more group identity where each individual will follow group and social cues. This means if identities were made public this effect would not occur and cheating would become a less likely behaviour, therefore improving the user experience for other participants and putting everyone on a level playing field again.

The anonymity factor is so closely linked with group identification that it suggests that anonymous players who are participating in a community that does not cheat or encourage others to cheat will be less likely to cheat despite having their identity protected. This is shown in Chen and Wu's 2015 study, where there was a 11% increase of variance on game cheating when group identification was added as a predictor, with anonymity alone being 7%. Although anonymity is a big part of cheating, it does not necessarily work alone in influencing users to cheat, however this would not apply to all users. Cheating in online gaming communities is encouraged by anonymity combined with other factors that negatively influence game play and affect other users. This could be avoided and improve online gaming communities with simple changes, along with mental health issues caused by excessive participation.

The escapism nature of online gaming communities is one of the main attractions of game play, which can lead to many social and mental issues. In an online survey conducted by Chappell et al in 2011, it was found that 50% of participants felt "absorbed into a different virtual environment" when playing online, which was described by them as a positive thing that could help them cope with personal issues outside of the game, or escape from them. Delving into online gaming communities in order to avoid day-to-day life issues is perhaps a contributor to eventual excessive participation and potential addiction, which could potentially be avoided through closer monitoring of the gaming communities and perhaps specifically the time each user spends playing.

In Frostling-Henningsson's 2009 study, fifteen people were observed and interviewed in order to discover what the motivators of playing online games are. In the list was escapism, where gaming provided them a break from their everyday problems. One interviewee described his purposeful choice to not play World of Warcraft because he had heard about the type of totally immersive and fascinating world it is and knew he would enjoy it to an extreme he wasn't prepared to deal with. This choice to avoid the game was made as he saw the potential for unhealthy addictive behaviour in himself due to the nature of the game (Frostling-Henningsson, 2009, p. 560 – 561), whereas others are not so aware of the risks these games pose. Public promotion of possible risks of excessive participation is required in order to ensure users are informed before participating and therefore possibly prevent the start of gaming addiction and further mental health issues.

The characteristics of Internet Gaming Disorder are defined by researchers as “excessive or poorly controlled behaviours, preoccupations and urges” for online gaming that can cause mental health issues (Bagwell, Dengah, Lacy, Lende, Snodgrass and van Oostenburg, 2017, p. 291). Internet Gaming Disorder was added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) in 2013, with the intent to conduct more research on the disorder, proving how serious the effects of online gaming and their communities can have on people (Hafekost, Lawrence, Ridders & Zubrick, 2016, p. 1). It is also set to be included in the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) 11th edition of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) in 2018, making the condition recognised globally (Boen, 2018, p. 1), again showing the severity of the problem, especially considering there is no age limit and young children and adolescents are being affected with addiction and associated mental health problems (Hakefost, 2016, p. 1). College students have also been found to develop compulsions to play continuously, causing their academic grades to decrease, along with a deterioration in sleep patterns and social interaction (Chappell et al, 2011, p. 21).

In a study conducted by Chen, Hsiao, Ko, Lin, Liu, Yang, Yen and Yen in 2009, it was shown that the cue-induced brain activation pattern seen in online gaming addiction is very similar to that of substance addiction. The neurobiological mechanisms of both addictive disorders are the same (Chen, 2009, p. 747), which shows how serious online gaming addiction is and how it should be treated with the same level of intervention as substance abuse, with the help of professionals and potentially even rehabilitation centres. Before Internet Gaming Disorder was added to the ICD, many researchers queried this link between the disorders and did not consider online gaming to be on the same level, but rather more of an “obsessive” rather than addictive habit (Schoenmakers et al, 2010, p. 51).

Indeed, similar characteristics of addiction are present in both online gaming and gambling. These characteristics can include rewards for correct behaviour, the need for total concentration and peer attention and approval, as well as the time-consuming factor of online games which can be even more addictive than offline games, such as face-to-face gambling (Schoenmakers, van de Eijnden, van de Mheen & van Rooij, 2010, p. 52). This suggests that certain laws should be introduced around time periods for advertisements to be aired, and even age restrictions on participation in online gaming communities. Online gaming has also been shown to be the most addictive Internet application compared with others, such as blogging, downloading, casual games and even social networking. Although social networking has come in second as the main application associated with Compulsive Internet Use, online gaming is at the top of the list due in part to the time consuming nature of online gaming and the fact that it is difficult to multi-task when playing (Schoenmakers et al, 2010, p. 55).

Along with Compulsive Internet Use, online gaming has been associated with depression, Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder and suicidal behaviour, among other things. (Hakefost, 2016, p. 1). It has been suggested that those who

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socialise in online gaming communities and use them as a way to relieve their symptoms will potentially increase their chance of further problems or exacerbate current issues (Hakefost, 2016, p. 1). High levels of participation in gaming not only causes mental health issues, but physical issues such as muscle pain and unhealthy sleeping and eating patterns (McInroy, 2017, p. 598). Excessive participation within online gaming communities has been shown in many studies to lead to serious mental health issues and can have harmful effects on social lives and general health and hygiene, which proves the seriousness of the risks and suggests the need for further promotion and laws to protect users, particularly those underage.

Millions of people identify as being a member of the online gaming community, which presents a social alternate world that can have potentially harmful consequences on users. These online gaming communities are powerless to protect people from the negative actions of other users and from the risks of the gaming environment unless they employ recommended changes. Some users can show deviant behaviour such as cyber-bullying and aggressiveness, or cheating in order to move through the games faster and feel part of a social group. The likelihood of these actions are emphasised due to the anonymous factor of online gaming. Excessive participation in these communities is both a cause and sign of addictive qualities that lead to various and extensive mental health problems. The impact of these issues is significant and requires immediate action and change to modify the online gaming community features, and to produce legislation and promotional content to restrict users' ability to play and inform them of the risks.

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