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ASSOCIATION BETWEEN GAMING HABITS AND DIGITAL WELLNESS AMONG YOUTH IN KOCHI

Sara Treasa Manaly [1*], **Dr. Lakshmy Ravindran** [2]
[1] MAJMC Student, Department of Visual Media and Communication, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, Kerala, India
[2] Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Media and Communication, School of Arts, Humanities and Commerce, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, Kerala, India

ABSTRACT

The quick growth of mobile phones in the 2010s increased screen time among adolescents and young adults (18–25), giving rise to the idea of Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD). Although this study finds the association between gaming habits and digital wellness among youth in Kochi, by applying a mixed-methods approach. Thus, a structured survey was directed to 384 college students and working individuals, supported by in-depth interviews with three practicing psychologists. Findings reveal a statistically significant moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.549$, $p < .001$) between problematic gaming habits and poorer digital wellness. On the contrary, individuals stated mobile-based gaming (76.6%), with peak usage in the evening (41.4%) and late night (34.4%). Whereas experts highlight that extreme online gaming — particularly late- night sessions — disturbs sleep cycles, affects cognitive functioning, and reduces real-world social involvement. The study concludes that balanced digital habits, parental guidance, and institutional awareness programs are essential to safeguarding the well-being of youth in rapidly urbanizing digital environments.

Keywords: Online Gaming, Digital Wellness, Internet Gaming Disorder, Gaming Addiction, Sleep Patterns, Social Interaction, Kochi Youth

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the digital world has become highly connected with the daily routines of adolescents and young adults around the world. Therefore, the availability of affordable smartphones, high- speed internet networks, and online gaming platforms has provided an area where online gaming is no longer an additional interest but a social and psychological activity Pew Research Center (2023). However, for many adolescents and young adults, online gaming platforms provide spaces for stress relief, identity expression, peer communication, and escapism Granic et al. (2014).

The history of gaming shows this increasing connection. Therefore, the early digital games of the 1970s and 1980s, through the home gaming systems of the 1990s, to the internet-active mode of multiplayer networks of the 2000s, each technological development developed gaming's reach and depth. Nowadays, the shift toward smartphones in the 2010s was particularly advanced, making online gaming accessible at any moment and from any location, and rapidly increasing daily screen time among adolescents and young adults Kuss and Griffiths (2012). It was during this period that the American Psychiatric Association (2013) proposed Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) as a condition requiring further study, and the World Health Organization (2019) formally classified Gaming Disorder in the ICD-11.

*Corresponding Author:
Email address: Sara Treasa Manaly

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The observed studies mainly identified the connection between online gaming habits and digital wellness in this sociocultural situation. Whereas digital wellness — defined as the ability to maintain a healthy, balanced relationship with digital equipment, including time management, sleep quality, mental health, and social engagement — is increasingly observed as a public health priority Ribble (2015).

Therefore, this study focuses on that gap by identifying how gaming habits among youth aged 18– 25 in Kochi relate to their digital wellness. Furthermore, it draws on Uses and Gratifications Theory Katz et al. (1974), Technological Determinism McLuhan (1964), and Social Cognitive Theory Bandura (1986) to frame gaming behaviour, and uses both quantitative survey data and qualitative expert opinion to build a comprehensive picture of the situation.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1) To examine the relationship between gaming habits and digital wellbeing.
2) To identify elements influencing digital wellness among youth in Kochi

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1. Is there a significant relationship between gaming habits and digital wellbeing among youth?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

THE GLOBAL RISE OF ONLINE GAMING

Meanwhile, online gaming has grown into one of the world's largest digital entertainment, engaging millions of individuals across all age groups Newzoo (2023). Although mobile gaming has been the key factor of this growth, and its low cost and greater availability compared to PCs have spread participation, enabling adolescents and young adults from various socioeconomic backgrounds Hamari and Sjoblom (2017), Kuss and Griffiths (2012). Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic increased this usage: lockdowns and social distancing measures made gaming a primary means of social talk and entertainment King et al. (2019).

PSYCHOLOGICAL MOTIVATIONS AND MOOD EFFECTS

However, the study repeatedly identifies escapism, social connection, achievement, and entertainment as key reasons for online gaming (Yee, 2006). Therefore, Uses and Gratifications Theory Katz et al. (1974) provides a stable format here, where individuals actively select media to satisfy psychological and social needs. The use of moderate gaming has been related to mood enhancement, relaxation, stress relief, and reward-based enjoyment Granic et al. (2014), Cole and Griffiths (2007). However, when online gaming transitions from a mood-regulation key to a primary coping mechanism for stress or emotional absence, the risk of problematic use increases Kuss and Griffiths (2012).

PROBLEMATIC GAMING AND INTERNET GAMING DISORDER

Meanwhile, Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) is characterized by a loss of control over gaming, setting priorities of online gaming over other activities, and continuation despite negative American Psychiatric Association (2013). Although studies have connected extreme online gaming to reduced sleep cycles, less physical activity, poor academic achievements, loneliness, and depression among adolescents and young adults Guerrero et al. (2019), Torres-Rodriguez et al. (2018). On the other hand, the WHO's 2019 involvement of Gaming Disorder in the ICD-11 structured these issues all over the world. In India specifically, the prevalence of IGD- related behaviours among adolescents has been documented, though region-specific data from Kerala remain limited Undavalli et al. (2020), Rizwana and Supriya (2025).

DIGITAL WELLNESS AND SCREEN TIME

In this study, digital wellness incorporates physical, psychological, and social aspects of technology use. Therefore, blue-light exposure from screens disrupts melatonin production, disturbing sleep cycles and contributing to fatigue and mood instability Cajochen et al. (2011). Nevertheless, extreme use of screen time has been related to increased psychological distress, reduced physical activity, and digital addiction Twenge (2019). Thus, adolescents and young adults who spend long hours on digital platforms report higher rates of depression and anxiety, and reduced attention spans Przybylski and Weinstein (2017).

ONLINE GAMING CULTURE AMONG INDIAN YOUTH

In Indian urban areas, multiplayer mobile titles such as PUBG Mobile, Free Fire, and Call of Duty Mobile have obtained wide popularity among adolescents and young adults Ajith et al. (2024). Although the live-streaming environment and e-sports have further included gaming into youth identity and aspiration Jenny et al. (2017).

RESEARCH GAP

Many studies identified problematic gaming in isolation without charting it onto the broader construct of digital wellness — including its cognitive, social, and physical measurements. Thus, this study aims to link these gaps by identifying the specific relation between gaming habits and digital wellness among adolescents and young adults in Kochi, contributing region-specific evidence.

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN AND APPROACH

This study applies a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative expert interviews to provide a broad understanding of the research problem. Therefore, the quantitative element addresses the statistical connection between gaming habits and digital wellness, while the qualitative element relates findings through the professional approach of clinical and counselling psychologists.

PARTICIPANTS AND SAMPLING

In this study, the target population consists of adolescents and young adults aged 18–25 studying or working located in Kochi. Therefore, it shows that a convenience sampling method was applied, and a structured online survey was provided between January 27 and February 2, 2026. Hence, a total of 384 valid responses were also collected. The age distribution was: 18–20 years (11.9%), 21–23 years (28.8%), and 24–25 years (61%). The study here shows gender representation was male (63.6%), female (35.3%), and prefer not to say (1.1%). Therefore, educational status included undergraduates (42.6%), postgraduates (41.0%), and others (16.5%). Thus, approximately 70.3% of individuals were staying in Kochi.

Moreover, the qualitative method involved in this study is semi-structured interviews with three psychologists based mainly in Kochi: a clinical psychologist, a counselling psychologist, and a counsellor/social worker. Although their identities were made anonymous. Furthermore, interviews analyzed psychological influence for online gaming, effects of gaming routines on mental health, device influence on usage level, and emotional and social consequences of online gaming.

INSTRUMENTS

The survey included two validated scales, each containing eight Likert-scale items (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree):

- Gaming Habits (GH) scale — modified from Pontes and Griffiths (2015), analyzing problematic gaming behaviours such as going beyond planned gaming time, difficulty in stopping, abandonment of responsibilities, and late-night gaming.
- Digital Wellbeing (DW) scale — modified from Pontes et al. (2019), assessing negative digital wellness measures including mental tiredness, reduced physical activity, affected focus, and real-life separation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Although the three theories support the study's analytical framework. The Uses and Gratifications Theory Katz et al. (1974) explain why adolescents choose gaming, which is to fulfil their social, emotional, and cognitive needs. Therefore, Technological Determinism McLuhan (1964), Chandler (1995) reports how the design and function of devices — especially smartphones — actively form gaming frequency and intensity. Meanwhile, Social Cognitive Theory Bandura (1986) shows how peer influence, observational learning, and reward systems included in online games encourage habitual gaming behaviour.

DATA ANALYSIS

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis (N = 384). Therefore, the correlation between GH_Mean and DW_Mean was measured to test the study's hypothesis. Whereas, Qualitative interview data were analyzed thematically, and organized around five key themes: psychological motivations, impact of gaming schedules, device influence, digital dependency, and emotional/social effects.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Descriptive statistics for the two primary constructs across 384 respondents are summarised below.

Table 1

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for Gaming Habits and Digital Wellbeing (N = 384)

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation
Gaming Habits (GH_Mean)	3.7135	0.311

Digital Wellbeing (DW_Mean)	3.7032	0.331

Here, it shows both constructs reported mean scores of approximately 3.7 on a 5-point scale, indicating that individuals agree with statements describing problematic gaming behaviours and negative digital wellness results. Meanwhile, the low standard deviations (< 0.35) show that individuals were closely arranged around the mean, representing a constant pattern across the sample. Moreover, this arrangement suggests that problematic gaming and its negative wellness effects are not limited to a small subgroup but are broadly experienced among youth in Kochi.

GAMING HABITS AND USAGE PATTERNS

However, 13.2% reported sessions above one hour — a figure connected with health risks when constant daily. Whereas smartphones were the preferred gaming device (76.6%), followed by laptops/PCs (19.0%) and tablets (4.4%). Evening (41.4%) and late night (34.4%) were the most common gaming periods, with only 8.1% gaming in the morning.

Table 2

Table 2 Gaming Usage Patterns Among Youth in Kochi (N = 384)

Category	Option	%
Session Duration	< 30 minutes	59.60%
	30–60 minutes	27.10%
	1–2 hours	7.00%
	> 2 hours	6.20%
Primary Device	Smartphone	76.60%
	Laptop/PC	19.00%
	Tablet	4.40%
Preferred Time	Evening	41.40%
	Late Night	34.4%
	Afternoon	16.1%
	Morning	8.1%

The late-night gaming pattern mainly has direct suggestions for sleep quality Cajochen et al. (2011) documented that blue-light exposure from screens generates melatonin production by up to 40%, disturbing circadian patterns and causing fatigue, reduced concentration, and mood imbalance. Thus, the high frequency of smartphone gaming increases this risk, since smartphones are used in bed, easily into sleep routines, and are harder to regulate than PC setups Exelmans and Van den Bulck (2015).

CORRELATION ANALYSIS: GAMING HABITS AND DIGITAL WELLNESS

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to test the hypothesis that gaming habits and digital wellness are significantly connected. The results are presented below.

Table 3

Table 3 Pearson Correlation — GH_Mean and DW_Mean. p < .01 (2-tailed)

	GH_Mean	DW_Mean
Pearson r	1	**0.549**
Sig. (2-tailed)	—	0
N	384	384

The Pearson correlation coefficient between Gaming Habits and Digital Wellbeing was r = 0.549, statistically significant at p < .001. This constitutes a moderate positive association: as problematic gaming habits increase, scores on the negative digital wellness scale also rise — indicating poorer digital wellness. The null hypothesis (H0: no significant relationship) is rejected; the alternative hypothesis (H1: significant negative relationship between gaming habits and digital wellbeing) is supported.

EXPERT INSIGHTS: PSYCHOLOGIST REVIEWS

Qualitative interviews with three Kochi-based psychologists increased the quantitative findings. Here, all three experts identified the need for attachment and connection as a primary approach to adolescent and young adults' gaming engagement, consistent with Uses and Gratifications Theory. Therefore, as one clinical psychologist observed, when emotional connection at home is limited, youth seek attachment in online gaming platforms that offer dopamine reward, a sense of control, and emotional release.

The most important element of late-night gaming, where all experts marked sleep disturbance as the most immediate effect. Whereas lack of sleep causes a downfall: morning fatigue, sensitivity, reduced emotional regulation, impaired cognitive functioning, and poor academic performance. Therefore, one individual linked late-night gaming specifically to melatonin suppression and mood disorders Cajochen et al. (2011).

In this study, a counsellor stated the dual pathway of online gaming motivations: boredom relief and achievement-seeking. Although for boredom-driven gamers, gaming serves as inactive escapism, for achievement-driven gamers, rankings, rewards, and competition activate a Technological Determinist dynamic wherein the game's design itself shapes the frequency and duration of engagement Chandler (1995), Bandura (1986) Discussion

The combination of quantitative and qualitative evidence presents a coherent picture: gaming habits and digital wellness are meaningfully and importantly linked among youth in Kochi. Moreover, the moderate correlation (r = 0.549) is consistent Kuss and Griffiths (2012) and Kiraly et al. (2018), similarly identifying moderate relations between problematic gaming and harmful well-being effects.

The key element of smartphones as the main gaming platform is important. Moreover, PC gaming and smartphone gaming are connected to the tiny moments of daily life, blurring the margins between gaming and other activities. Therefore, this fits with the Technological Determinism: the feature of mobile devices actively alters how, when, and how often adolescents and young adults play online games, independent of their mindful goals McLuhan (1964). Thus, the evening-to- late-night online gaming habit is especially relevant, as it directly conflicts with pre-sleep routines.

Additionally, Social Cognitive Theory Bandura (1986) helps explain the resolution of gaming habits. Whereas peer enhancement, observational learning from online streamers, and the powerful reward achievements are fixed in modern games (levels, achievements, leaderboards) collectively maintain a routine. Hence, this creates a feedback cycle that is difficult to disturb without thoughtful involvement.

CONCLUSION

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This study examined the association between gaming habits and digital wellness among 384 youth aged 18–25 in Kochi. The Key findings include:

- A statistically important moderate positive correlation (r = 0.549, p < .001) between problematic gaming habits and poorer digital wellness.
- Here, smartphone-based gaming controls (76.6%), with maximum usage concentrated in the evening and late night, are directly connected to sleep disturbance.
- Therefore, psychological motivations — including escapism, social connection, stress relief, and achievement bring gaming engagement, instantly with Uses and Gratifications Theory.
- Expert psychologists together identify late-night gaming, smartphone availability, and emotional loss at home as the primary pathways through which gaming negatively affects wellbeing.

IMPLICATIONS

Therefore, the studies have practical indication for multiple individuals. Meanwhile, educational authorities should combine digital wellness programs covering screen time management, sleep hygiene, and responsible technology use. Although parents should play a key role in observing gaming routines and providing emotional support that reduces the need for online connection. Hence, mental health experts should screen for gaming-related anxiety as part of standard adolescent reviews.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Here, the study's cross-sectional design limits causal findings, and longitudinal research is needed to establish a path in the gaming-wellness relationship. Convenience sampling from Kochi college students limits generalisability to rural populations or other age groups. Therefore, future research should explore gender-specific gaming patterns, the differential impact of game genres, and the moderating role of parental involvement. Thus, longitudinal and experimental designs would strengthen causal claims.

FINAL REMARKS

Online gaming has become a defining feature of young adult life in Kochi. Although moderate gaming offers valid psychological and social benefits, the evidence from this study — statistical and qualitative alike — supports that excessive, poorly timed, and emotionally-driven gaming is associated with meaningfully poorer digital wellness. Therefore, addressing this challenge requires not disciplinary responses but a supportive ecosystem of informed educators, engaged parents, and technologically literate adolescents capable of self-regulating their digital lives

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