

Social Media and Online Gaming with Friends: Implications for Children's Academic, Social, and Emotional Experiences in Third- through Sixth-Grade Students

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Abstract

This hypothesis-generating research study provided insight into the impact that social media and online gaming with friends play in the lives of students in third-through sixth-grade during the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially this study began in February 2020 before the pandemic impacted school closures in New York the following month. However, the study was put on hold until late July, four weeks before children were to return to school in person. Researchers sought to understand the role that social media and online gaming with friends now played during the pandemic, when individuals were quarantined and advised to avoid social interactions. Thirteen parents and eight students participated in this mixed methods study. Data were collected in the form of a student survey and parent/guardian survey; responses were both multiple choice and anecdotal. Concerns pertaining to student behaviors, emotions, academics, and parent-child communication emerged from data analysis. Findings suggest work is needed to help children transition from the online to offline experience, to help parents better understand how literacy is enacted in social media and online gaming, and to increase parent-child communications about expectations and safety in these online spaces.

Introduction

The purpose of this hypothesis generating research study was to determine how social media and on-line gaming with friends impact academic, social, and emotional experiences of children in third- through sixth-grades. The study sought to help teachers and parents/guardians further understand how early adolescents' behaviors, academics, and interests are shaped by these on-line platforms. With the intent of adding to the quality of educational practices and student learning, this study provides further insight into the role that social media and online gaming play in children's lives. As educators, we hope findings shed light on pedagogical approaches, foster parent, teacher, and child connections, and help early adolescents navigate digital citizenship and multimodal literacy.

Research Questions

The following questions served as catalysts for research:

1. How might the use of social media and video games impact children's academic, social and behavioral and emotional experiences?
2. In what ways might social media and online gaming with friends highlight student sense of identity and interest?
3. In what ways might teachers' pedagogical approaches be impacted from an understanding of student sense of identity and interest using social media and online gaming with friends?
4. In what ways might parents/guardians benefit from further understanding of a child's sense of identity and interest surrounding social media and online gaming with friends?

Theoretical Framework

Researchers have continuously recognized that language and literacy are not simple acts. There are cognitive, social, cultural, and experiential influences that impact the acquisition of language and literacy (Tracey & Morrow, 2017). When youngsters participate in online gaming and social media platforms, language and literacy are mediated by their online experiences. While meaning and understanding come from print on the screen, players also interact with multimodal literacies such as images, videos, conversation, and movements (Gee, 1996; Gee, 2003). Likewise, players participate in interpersonal interactions requiring language specific to the domain of those online forums (Selfe et al., 2007). Researchers have observed the implications of bridging the practice of home gaming and pedagogy that implement multimodal literacy instruction and assessment (Clark et al., 2018; Fjortoft, 2020; Strømman, 2021; Walsh, 2010). The technological skills that students exercise outside of the classroom are deemed transferable skills for twenty-first century communication (Arduini, 2018; Gee 2007; Selfe et al., 2007).

Much research has examined the causal relationships between violent digital games and youth aggression (Anderson et al., 2010; Ferguson, 2015; Kühn et al., 2019; Lemmens et al., 2011; Prescott et al., 2018; Verheijen et al., 2021; Verheijen et al., 2018), interpersonal relationships and online experiences (Nesi et al., 2018; Verheijen et al., 2019), and cognitive self-regulation and time spent gaming (Gabbadini & Greitemeyer, 2017; Walker et al., 2018). As youngsters navigate interpersonal relationships during gaming and social media interaction, friendships are being formed, negotiated, and regulated. It is important to consider not only student and parent perceptions about these platforms but also ways in which youngsters might be supported when learning to navigate on-line experiences.

Method

Participants

Participants included students and parents/guardians of these individuals in the third-, fourth-, fifth-, and sixth grades at a small independent school located outside of New York City. All students and parents/guardians were invited to participate in this voluntary study. A total of eight-students and thirteen-parents/guardians participated.

The first student survey was administered in school at the end of February 2020. The parent/guardian survey was scheduled to be given mid-March. This study began before the COVID-19 pandemic presented itself as a concern on Long Island. However, on Monday, March 16, 2020, schools in New York state moved to remote, online learning until the end of the school year. Since families were grappling with implementing and learning remote instruction at home, we put our study on pause until mid-July 2020. Falling on the heels of the pandemic, students maintained connections with family members and friends via online gaming and social media. The timing of our study and interest in such topics seemed serendipitous. Therefore, surveys were restructured to include questions specific to the pandemic and administered again in mid-July.

Limitations

Due to the small sample size, findings may not be generalizable to the larger population. However, focus on this data set has the potential to generate areas for future research and conversations with parents and educators. Implications may apply to the general population as current research indicates issues pertaining to social media, on-line gaming with friends, as well as academic, social and emotional development while engaged in these on-line platforms are present in society and, therefore, also in the classroom.

Data Sources

The research design for this mixed methods study was hypothesis generating. Data included a student survey

and a parent/guardian survey. The parent survey consisted of 22 multiple choice questions and 10 questions allowing open ended answers. For the student survey, 18 questions were multiple choice and six provided opportunity for anecdotal responses. Data were coded based on emerging themes.

Evidence and Analysis

Behavioral and Emotional Concerns

Social connectedness is a benefit of social media and online gaming, particularly during a pandemic. First, it must be noted that a majority of parents and students reported that their experience with online gaming specifically during the pandemic was mostly positive: 75% of students and 61.5% of parents. During the spring 2020 lockdown in the greater New York area, this became a primary way for children to stay socially connected safely. Outside of the pandemic, however, more generally speaking, it is notable that 70% of parents reported that social media use and online gaming have a negative overall impact on their child. Wolf (2018) expressed her concern about the "cognitive-developmental trajectories of children who are so constantly stimulated and virtually entertained that they rarely want to go off (screen) to discover their own ability to entertain themselves ..." (p. 111). Echoing a similar sentiment, a parent respondent commented, "I feel video games and social media have distracted them from the enjoyment of reading or just being able to sit and relax." One parent specifically noted that the pandemic, "... forced me to be more lenient about my previously very strict rules about online gaming with friends." An additional parent commented, "... my child now has so much access to online gaming he is reluctant to play/ read do much." Finally, a parent participant highlights both the negative and positive sentiment during the pandemic stating, "I valued the connection my children were able to have with others during COVID, though now I'd like to dial it back a bit!"

Peer interaction issues that exist in real life tend to get replicated in online environments, or if we consider the transformation framework, essentially such interactions alter peer experiences of adolescents (Nesi et al., 2018). While both parents and students cited social connectedness as the most valued benefit of social media and online gaming, we can see that students also acknowledge behavioral complexity in online realms. For example, when students were asked what they enjoy most about social media or playing video games, 87.5% specifically identified connection with friends in their responses, with one student respondent indicating a willingness to play any game (not a personally preferred one) just to stay in touch with friends. Asked what they dislike about social media or online gaming, 37.5% respondents specifically indicated concern about friends getting mad or "rage quitting."

Parents much more directly expressed concerns about the behavioral impacts of social media and online gaming on their children-most notably as a result of the shift

Table 1
<i>Participant Responses Regarding Child Behavioral Changes</i>
My children are genuinely happy and show excitement when I say they can play games with friends. I hear them yelling and laughing with multiple friends at a time. However, I've also seen my children become agitated, argumentative, and easily irritated once they get off their games. There have been moments of tears when I've said no to purchasing new skins for games.
Sometimes I feel like my children need to decompress and make a conscious effort to calm their body and behavior after playing games.
They just want more.
Negative behavior when it comes time to log off video games; when they get frustrated in the game it carries over into real life (hard for them to separate this out).
He becomes annoying.
Negative: too much in one day leads to negative emotions, temper flares, inability to focus on other things.
Too much time on a screen — in any context, educational or recreational - makes our child feel depressed.
Lacks incentive to do educational review for next grade
It becomes harder to get him to do other things.
If they spend too much time with devices them become irritable.

from the online to offline experience. Asked whether social media or online gaming use results in change in their child's behavior, whether positive or negative, 76.9% of respondents indicated yes. Further responses reveal, however, that the behavioral changes are not positive ones.

Ten respondents reporting behavioral changes in their child chose to share at least one brief example; nearly all indicate a concern regarding the online to offline transition. **Table 1** includes parent responses regarding behavioral changes.

Parental word choice raises powerful concerns: agitated, argumentative, easily irritated, frustrated, annoying, negative emotions, temper flares, inability to focus, depressed, irritable, lacks incentive, harder to do other things. These reports of the difficulty in transitioning, such as in getting their children to "focus on self-play or outdoor activities" or do something other than "get back on with his friends," raise concerns about how parents can help their children better manage the complex emotions that arise when transitioning from online experiences involving social media or online gaming to their regular offline experiences.

Academic Concerns

As educators, we are deeply concerned about literacy. This survey suggests that parents and students' perceptions are not closely aligned regarding children's enjoyment of reading in general, that is, reading that does not involve social media or online gaming. Seventy-five percent of student participants report their enjoyment of reading—either independently or being read to—as very much. In contrast, only 38.5% of the parents said their children enjoy reading very much, 15.4% indicated quite a lot, and 30.8% said their children have a moderate enjoyment of reading.

This is a marked difference, and we notice a similar parent-student gap in the reporting of how literacy skills of reading and writing are enacted in social media and online gaming. The parents and children are aligned with regard to the literacy skills of listening and speaking, with approximately 75% of both groups acknowledging that those skills are utilized in social media and online gaming. For reading, however, 75% of

Table 2	
<i>Parental Internet Safety and Security Concerns</i>	
On-line concern	Percentage
Exposure to sexually inappropriate content/contact	84.6%
Exposure to hateful, sexist, racist messages or activities	69.2%
Social isolation due to technology use	69.2%
Damage to their reputation now or in the future	46.2%
Access to content that encourages them to engage in self-harm	46.2%
Access to content that makes them feel bad about themselves	76.9%
Exposure to scammers/fraudsters	76.9%
None of the above	7.7%

students said they utilize those skills but only 53.8% of parents believe their children are using reading skills during social media use or online gaming. Similarly, 50% of students believe they use writing skills but only 30.8% of parents believe their children use this skill while engaged in these platforms. Such discrepancies indicate the need for increased parental awareness about what children are actually doing in these online spaces and ways in which multimodal literacy presents itself and impacts others.

Parent-Child Communication Concerns

There are several points of discrepancy between parent and student perceptions regarding the impacts of social media and online gaming on the students. Specific to the pandemic, there seems to be a disagreement between parents and children with regard to the online nature of remote learning that took place from mid-March to June 2020. Student participants seem to strongly prefer in-person schooling; 50% reported they enjoyed remote learning just a little, 37.5% said moderately, and only one learner said enjoyed remote learning very much. Parents, on the other hand, perceived their children as enjoying the remote experience more than reported by students. A little more than half of the parents (53.8%) reported their children's enjoyment of remote learning as moderate to very much, in contrast to half of the students indicating they enjoyed it "just a little."

An important point on which parents and children seem relatively aligned is on internet safety. Parents expressed notable concerns about their children's safety with regard to social media use and online gaming. We surmise that parents have been actively communicating such concerns to their children, as the students' reported parental rules closely echoing the parent-reported rules. Two students wrote "my parents don't want me spending too much time playing video games," and another two mentioned a time limit of, "no more than two hours at a time" and "only two hours a day." Two students indicated they were only allowed to play with friends, and an additional two students commented on a similar parental safety rule, "don't give out any personal information" and "don't tell anyone my name or where I live or my age."

One student reported in a comment that if they see something inappropriate talk to an adult, which implies that parents have addressed the concept of inappropriate content online. Although we cannot tell how closely that may have been defined for the student, we see that such conversations have begun at this age. Since 63.6% of parents expressed concern about internet safety and security, it appears evident that further parent-child communication might be worthwhile. **Table 2** demonstrates areas of internet safety and security concerns with five of the eight items on the list having received a majority of parents indicating a concern.

Findings and Hypotheses Generated

The following three hypotheses were generated from the aforementioned data and analysis:

1. At times, children tend to struggle with behavioral issues pertaining to aggression, frustration, and agitation when transitioning from on-line to off-line experiences.
2. Parents need to better understand how multimodal literacy is enacted in social media and on-line gaming.
3. Increased parent and child communication regarding activity within on-line spaces may further clarify parental expectations and safety concerns.

Discussion and Implications

Most parents in our survey contend that social media and online gaming with friends negatively impacts children's behavior and interest in alternate activities, although they concede that social media and online gaming with friends provide positive social outlets especially when quarantining and social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, given the significant concerns expressed by parents regarding safety and security in online environments—as well as a few points of divergence between parent and child perceptions—it seems evident that further communication between parents and children pertaining to internet safety and expectations is pivotal to helping early adolescents navigate social media and online gaming with friends. These findings are applicable to the home-life and also school occurrences, as peer discourse pertaining to on-line platforms and discussions carry over into the school day. Moreover, 21st century literacy skills are evolving to include more than the traditional form of written text. Understanding how multimodal literacy impacts children and students may provide pivotal insight into the mindset of digital natives and 21st century learners.

We conclude with the following implications:

1. Regarding behavior and emotional concerns: Further work is needed to help children with the on-line to off-line experience.
2. Regarding academic concerns: Parents, children, and teachers need to further understand literacy in the 21st century and ways in which multimodal literacy impacts and influences others.
3. Regarding parent-child communication concerns: Increased parent-child communications regarding activity within on-line spaces may further clarify parental expectations and safety concerns as well as address the gap in parent vs. child perceptions regarding both behavioral and academic issues.

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