Online Gaming and Socio-moral Well-being: The Case of Nairobi City Teenagers

Authors:
Perpetua Omemo Oniala (ID)

Affiliation:
Department of Early Childhood & Special Needs Education, School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Kenyatta University, Nairobi Kenya.

Corresponding author:
Perpetua Omemo Oniala

E-mail:
poniala@rusinga.ac.ke

Abstract

In a changing world where parents are relatively absent, children have often found online gaming attractive. This is driven by technological advancements and the relatively low internet cost within Nairobi City County Kenya hence, leaving teenagers susceptible to the negative effects of online gaming. While online gaming can serve as a tool to enhance education as well as a form of entertainment, excessive and unsupervised engagement raises concern on its effects on teenagers' social, emotional and moral wellbeing. The study underscored the importance of parental involvement in mitigating the negative effects of online gaming. The study was guided by Digital Balance Theory. A descriptive research design was employed to gather qualitative data. Using stratified random sampling, the study was conducted in five secondary schools in Nairobi County, with the target population comprising of twenty (20) subject teachers and one hundred and eighty (180) secondary school learners. The findings revealed that a high percentage of teenagers spend at least three (3) hours engaged in online gaming. In addition, there was a significant increase in aggressive behaviour among teens within the school setting. Students addicted to online gaming exhibited symptoms of anxiety and exhaustion. The study ended by making recommendations.

Keywords: Online gaming, addiction, teenagers, academic performance, socio-moral well-being.

Introduction

Gaming has become a popular and fast-growing leisure activity with an estimate of around 2.7 billion gamers globally. This can be attributed to the fact that a big number of people in both urban and rural middle-class families can now access the internet. While technology offers incredible opportunities such as entertainment and education, concerns have emerged regarding disordered gaming behaviour, particularly among teenagers. The World Health Organisation recognised Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) as a mental disease and added it to the ICD-11 in 2018. It is identified with recurrent use of the internet to engage in games with other players leading to clinically significant distress or impairment.

This work became imperative as many games firstly appeal to teenagers as a form of entertainment and sometimes educational contents but in the long run end up impacting negatively on them. An instance is the popular video game "Fortnight." This game revolves around a main character, who goes around killing other contestants using both crude and lethal weapons such as machetes and machine guns. Upon successful overcoming all the obstacles/enemies, the character is rewarded with cash, jewellery and more powerful weapons. According to Micheni & Muketha (2019), the prevalence of internet gaming disorder among adolescents in Kenya was estimated to be 23.6%. Other findings posit that approximately 34% of high school and university students may be addicted to internet gaming. Therefore, this calls for action to safeguard the social moral well-being of our future generation.

In this context, this article becomes important. Its argument is that online gaming can be detrimental to the socio-moral well-being of teenagers in Nairobi County in which it focuses. It does this by arguing the various ways online gaming affects the socio-moral well-being of teenagers in Nairobi County. In order to effectively do this, discussion in the work is divided into five sections in addition to the introduction. The introduction is followed by the research methodology. After it comes, the study area which is followed by definition and history of online games. Socio-moral effects of online gaming on the teenagers of the Nairobi County are discussed, which is followed by a discussion on the role parents can play in mitigating the effects of online games on these teenagers. Thereafter, a recommendation and a conclusion are brought forth bringing the thoughts of the author to a close.

In China, Zhang et al. (2024) observe that 2.27% of adolescents in China play online games with a higher rate consumption of up to five times more among males than females. A recent study conducted in Africa showed the prevalence of Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) among adolescents aged between 10-22 years was at 14.3% with the male exhibiting higher tendency at13.5%. A study conducted by Munyeti & Ojuade (2022) in East Africa posit that 14.3% of young people aged between 10-22 years were addicted to internet gaming. It is more prevalent among males compared to females. In Kenya, Kimaru et al. (2020) observes that online gaming among the adolescents was significantly high with males exhibiting higher consumption at 42.9% as compared to females who are at 31.5%.

The prevalence of Internet Gaming Disorders (IGD) among teens within Nairobi City County is not well known due to the scarce information available. This brings us to the reality that online gaming is popular among teens and as a society there is need to take prudent measures to safeguard them from this menace. According to the research conducted across the five Secondary schools within Nairobi City County Kenya, some of the popular video Games used by the teenagers include: Fortnight, Roblox (Has over 1M games), Subway surfers (Endless), FIFA 25, Rocket league, Need for speed, Toca boca, Mario cards, FC mobile and Minecraft.

In this brief review of literature, it has shown how online gaming can be addictive and detrimental to teens well-being. Thus, the main focus of the studies was on the addictive nature of online games thereby leaving a gap in knowledge. The present article differs from the arguments of these studies by focusing on a particular aspect of the development of the teens: their socio-moral well-being. It is equally contextually placed within the Nairobi City County of Kenya to show how online games are affecting the socio-moral well-being of teenagers there. In this way, this study becomes significantly important empirically since it focuses its discussion on the Nairobi city county as a missing gap in knowledge in other reviewed literature.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research frame to explore the effect of online gaming on the socio-moral well-being of teenagers. Qualitative research was suitable for this topic as it will provide a comprehensive understanding on the subject experience, attitude and values of teenagers in relation to their gaming behaviour. This technique is particularly useful for exploring deeply how online gaming affect teens' social interactions, moral decision making and responsibility within their environment. The study relied on both primary and secondary source. Primary data was gathered through oral interviews from secondary school teachers in selected schools within Nairobi City County. Teachers' views were instrumental in providing insights into how online gaming influence behavioural change among teens negatively. Secondary data was gathered through the review of existing literature, including previous research studies on digital media and adolescent behaviour; journal articles and text books were highly focused on here. Data analysis was conducted using thematic and descriptive methods.

Study Area

Nairobi County is one of the many counties that make up the state of Kenya. It is one of the most cosmopolitan regions in Kenya. It is fully urbanised and hosts international expatriates and other Africans. It has a high population density ranging between 4.67 million and 4.83 million (KNBS). Out of this, the teens population is approximately 19.6% equivalent to 930, 000. Many of these teenagers are engaged in schooling. Some combine school with work to contribute to the economy of the country. According to the report by ICT Access and Usage by the Communications Authority of Kenya, nearly 70% of teenagers aged between 15-19 in urban areas have access to internet enabled phones (CAK 2022). Most secondary school students within Nairobi County have access to smartphones which they use for social networking, communication and video content such as TikTok and YouTube. Moreover, teens have made use of e-learning platforms such as Google Classroom to access educational materials, submit assignments and engage in virtual discussions with their teachers and peers. People of different economic backgrounds have different ways of getting PlayStation. The affluent families are able to purchase the PlayStation for their children while the middle class can access the play stations that are within their neighbourhood at a minimal fee

between 50-100 Kenyan Shillings for two hours. Due to high demand on the need to play online gaming by teenagers, businesspersons have created gaming lounges or play stations as a lucrative opportunity. The businesspersons within Nairobi County Kenya have made the play stations very attractive for teenagers by use of visual effects such as big screens with high resolution, very appealing advertisements that have catchy phrases to hook teenagers' attention and offers such as discounts based on the number of teenagers. The higher the number playing for a particular time, the lower the cost. This has gradually led to addiction among teens. The County has an efficient educational system which boasts of about 2,357 primary and secondary schools. School enrolment is high in the country owing to the immense support by the Kenyan government. The County also boasts of internet facilities which the youth make use of in various ways.

Definition of Video Games

Online gaming to a great extent come in form of video games which involves interaction with an input device that generates visual feedback. The input device can be a joystick, keyboard, controller or motion-sensing device. The feedback is then displayed on video display device such as a computer monitor, smartphone tablet, television set or a headset. The video games are augmented with audio feedback that is facilitated by the use of headphones or speakers.

According to Bater & Grusin (1999), Video games actively "remediate' older versions of media by making use of narrative techniques, camera framing and event direction from other media such as television and cinema. These Video games are "computational artifacts designed for entertainment that combine rule-based systems that have been set up by the designers of the game, player interaction, and digital art to create meaningful experiences" (Bogost 2008).

Video games have also been defined from the theoretical perspective. According to narratologists, videogames can be defined as having interactive stories or narratives suitable for Literature or films. According to Ludology, which is the second theoretical approach to gaming emphasises on video game as a form of entertainment. From the above definitions, we can deduce that video games are technological innovations that have integrated play, are interactive and have combined rule-based system to create meaningful experience to its users.

Historical Evolution of Video Gaming

The historical perspective of video gaming has evolved over time as the societal perspective on the use of video games has also changed.

First Generation (1972-1977)

The first electronic games to be developed was console. This period was characterised by the release of the Magnavox Odyssey. In addition, discovery of Atari and release of PONG was created.

Second Generation (1977-1983)

This period was also referred to as the 8-bit generation and was characterised by three consoles. The commencement of this generation was marked by Video Computer System (VCS) released by Atari 2600. In the year 1980, Intellivision was released by Mattel. Thereafter, Coleco vision was released in the year 1982. Both Intellivision and Atari 2600 were equipped with a CPU cycling at around 1MHz. Atari had 128 bytes while Intellivision had 1500 bytes of RAM. The most common technique used to display moving figures on the screen during this period was known as the sprite. Some of the notable iconic games that were released include: Pac-Man, Street Racer, Pitfall, NFL Football, Combat and development of colour graphics.

Third Generation (1983-1985)
This period was also known as The Magnificent Eighties. It was characterised by market oversaturation and the scrolling of graphics that was of superior quality than the previous technology. Furthermore, it was marked by the introduction of the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES). Floppy disks started becoming popular and in the year 1989, Game Boy became the first widely popular handheld gaming console.

The Fourth Generation (1980s- Early 1990s)
This period was also known as the 16-bit Era. It was characterised by Competition between Sega and Nintendo, Improved graphics and sound capabilities. The handheld gaming consoles gained new hardware. There was release of Atari Lynx and Sega Game Gear. The lynx introduced several new features such as a left-handed switch, black lit display and capacity to network with other 17 units by use of cable connectivity. Some of the bestselling titles for the mega drive include Super Mario World and Sonic.

Fifth Generation (From1900s-to present)
This period was characterised by Transition from 2D to 3D graphics such as Tomb Rider, Final Fantasy VII and Myst. In 1993, the 32- bit and 64- bit generation commenced and lived up to 2006. The most vital consoles during this period were the Nintendo 64 the PlayStation and the Saturn.CD-ROM gradually replaced the cartridges. Online games were introduced for the first time.

Sixth Generation(2000-Present)
This period began in the 21st century. Some of the major developments during this period include Online gaming and connectivity, Mobile gaming revolution, Virtual and Augmented Reality, Cloud gaming services and eSports emergence. Some of the key platforms during this period were Nintendo Game Cube, Sega Dreamcast and Sony PlayStation. The video output was the HD-DVD. The motion input was presented by Nintendo Wii the idea behind it was that the user generates inputs by means of body movements that are wirelessly detected by the console. The Bluray Disk which serves as a software support of motion input replaced DVD.

Effects of Online Games on Teenagers in Nairobi City
This study argues that since parents in the county are busy, they rarely check on what their children do online. As a result, the children end up indulging in gaming from the time they wake up, the whole day till late at night. Before they realise, addiction creeps in. Disordered gaming has been linked to several health-related outcomes and psychosocial detriment. Gupta et al (2024) posits that Internet Gaming results in addiction, health complications and social alienation. This segment of the study therefore discusses the socio-moral effect of online games on the teenagers of Nairobi City County in the following ways:

Social Interaction
Online gaming has adversely affected the social connection and interaction among teenagers within Nairobi County Kenya. In an oral interview, Clement Wambua (personal communication, July 4, 2025), observes, "Teens addicted to online gaming lose interest in connecting with their peers, they become socially isolated." Similarly, Henry Muchemi (personal communication, July 4, 2025), comments that "constant screen time by teenagers encourages one form of communication often limiting development of reciprocal language skills." According to a group of teens report "It is a real struggle to initiate and maintain healthy relationships as a result of too much involvement in online gaming." Marieta Nanjala (personal communication, July 4, 2025), explains that "gaming systems have been created using psychological algorithm, this has influenced how teens think and behave, disrupting their natural social environment.

Elizabeth Mwihaki(personal communication, July 4, 2025) notes that "instant gratification offered by online games has made teens to be demanding, impatient and less tolerant in real life relationships with their peers and adults."

Academic Impact
The rise in internet gaming among teenagers within Nairobi County Kenya, has raised a lot of concern among educators and parents regarding its impact on academic achievement. According to Stephen Otieno (personal communication, July 5, 2025), "internet gaming has significantly affected the teens academic life as they end up submitting incomplete assignment. They also display short attention span during lessons." Similarly, Francis Mogoa (personal communication, July 4, 2025) notes that "excessive online gaming by teens has made them to mismanage time meant for revision consequently, they have been registering low outcomes in their academics."

Socio-moral Well-being
The effect of online gaming on socio-moral wellbeing of teenagers within Nairobi County Kenya, has drawn increasing concern among the educators. According to Derrick Wesonga (personal communication, July 4, 2025), "teens who spend more than three hours on online gaming on a daily basis are predisposed to getting into wrong sites such pornographic materials that pop up while they are playing, this has distorted their understanding of relationships, body image and self-esteem leading to increased social isolation." In a similar way, Bennedict Ombote(personal communication, July 4, 2025), observes that "teens who are exposed to online gaming exhibit anti-social behaviour, they rely on gaming as a source of comfort rather than peer connection." Relatedly, Junet Abdul (personal communication, July 4, 2025) shares that "students who spend more than three hours on online gaming on a daily basis often show reduced face- to face communication skills and modified moral reasoning patterns. A point in case, one student from year 8 class mentioned that virtual worlds have become more 'real' to her than actual social interaction. This aligns with Daniel Kohe's (personal communication, July 4, 2025) observation that "teenagers who engage excessively in solo online gaming struggle with group tasks due to poor collaboration skills."

Furthermore, Suleiman Abdikadir (personal communication, July 4, 2025), believes that "many teenagers worship game characters who succeed through violence leading to aggressive behaviour towards their fellow peers." This relates to Rosa Akinyi, (personal communication, July 4, 2025), thought "teenagers immersed in online gaming often exhibit a reduced sense of empathy through community led initiatives and rarely volunteered for social tasks."

In the same vein, Erick Makori (personal communication, July 4, 2025), related that "in my 10 years of teaching high schoolers, I have observed teens addicted to online gaming develop poor work ethic, they lack self- control and easily become exhausted when assigned academic work leading to frustration, low self- esteem and depression." Following the same thought Priscilla Kaikai (personal communication, July 5, 2025) related how "there is a significant correlation between excessive online gaming and teenagers' emotional well-being. Students addicted to online gaming display a heightened anxiety level and develop mood swings and even depression when internet is taken away from them." As a matter of fact, gaming addiction leads to decreased emotional regulation among the teens.

Towards Ameliorating Online Gaming in Nairobi City: The Roles of Parents

In today's digital world many teens have been trapped in online gaming not knowing it's overall impact on their relationships and values. Below is an oral interview from different parents as they offer their advice on teens in Nairobi County, Kenya on negative effect of online gaming on their socio-moral well-being.

On this note, Carolyne Omutata (personal communication, July 4, 2025), believes that "I'm aware online gaming is fun. Right. Online games are designed to make you glued to the screen. The more you are addicted to it the less you engage in building real friendships. So be wise by setting limits. Following the same line of thought, Bennedict Ombote (personal communication, July 5 2025), shares how "some of the online games reward violence just to make you win. When you constantly play such games, you end up becoming aggressive and disrespectful towards your fellow peers and adults as well. Therefore, play online game with caution. Let it not corrupt your mind." Caesar Karanja's (personal communication, July 4, 2025), advice is that "teens, majority of you are not free with your parents discussing online gaming for fear of being punished. It's important for you to know that we deeply care about your well-being. If you come across something weird or you feel pressured to engage in online gaming against your wish. Come we talk. Initiate a candid conversation with your parent and you will get help." These are views that indicate how parents and teenagers could work towards the reduction of time spent in Nairobi County on online games.

Recommendations

In line with the discussion in the study, the following recommendations are given:

    i. Parents should educate their children on responsible internet use and dangers of online gaming.

    ii. Parents should make use of parental control software to monitor their children's devices.

    iii. Parents should reduce screen time and encourage outdoor activities.

    iv. Parents should encourage their children to keep their devices in a central safe place so that they only use them when needed.

    v. Parents should seek for professional guidance from counsellors, teachers and psychologists.

    vi. The school should integrate digital citizenship lessons into their curriculum focusing on responsible gaming habits.

    vii. The community and the society at large should be vigilant on the activities that take place around the gaming lounges to safeguard the teens from potential risks such as drug abuse.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while the internet is a valuable tool for learning, connection and entertainment, teens need to be guided on how to use it mindfully by encouraging digital discipline, offline engagement and emotional awareness to safeguard their overall well-being. Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) is a growing problem that has had a detrimental effect among the teens ranging from psychological to social problems, which is characterised by aggression, inattention, social isolation, and obsession. Furthermore, online gaming has heightened the level of emotional anxiety, increased depression rate, suicidal thoughts, poor eating and sleep patterns and has lowered life satisfaction amongst teens within Nairobi County. It has curtailed all the spheres of teens' life whether it is physical, cognitive, and social pathways. Therefore, parents need to be actively present in their children's life, be vigilant in supervisory roles and most importantly, become a friendly mentor to their children. This will ensure that teens don't just survive in the digital age but thrive in it. Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) is a condition that can be eradicated when all stakeholders, which include parents, teachers, churches and community at large collectively pull their resources to create awareness among the teens so that they navigate through digital platforms in a safe manner.

References

Adiele I, & Olatokun W. (2014). "Prevalence and determinants of internet addiction among adolescents." *Computers in Human Behavior* 31 100–110. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.10.028

Nyaga K, Munene A, & Bowen M. (2020). "Prevalence of pathological internet use among adolescents in secondary schools: A case of Ruthimitu Mixed and Dagoretti Mixed sub-county secondary schools in Nairobi County, Kenya." *African Journal of Clinical Psychology* 1(1): 1- 5.

Marfia G, Amoroso A, Roccetti M, Basile G, & Palazzi CE. (2011). "Video games at the library: A historical perspective." *2011 Proceedings of 20th International Conference on Computer Communications and Networks (ICCCN)*:1–6. https://doi.org/10.1109/icccn.2011.6005757

Müller KW, Janikian M, Dreier M, Wölfling K, Beutel ME, Tzavara C, Richardson C, & Tsitsika A. (2014). "Regular gaming behavior and internet gaming disorder in European adolescents: Results from a cross-national representative survey of prevalence, predictors, and psychopathological correlates." *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 24(5): 565–574. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-014-0611-2

Munyeti V, & Ojuade S. (2022). "Prevalence and associated factors of internet gaming disorder in Africa: A web-based cross-sectional survey." *Journal of Addiction and Psychiatric Mental Health*, 1(1): 2 – 7.

Perry TS, & Wallich P. (1983). "Microprocessors: Design case history: The Atari Video Computer System: By omitting lots of hardware, designers added flexibility and gave video-game programmers room to be creative." *IEEE Spectrum* 20 (3): 45–51. https://doi.org/10.1109/mspec.1983.6369841

Roccetti M, Marfia G, & Zanichelli M. (2010). "The art and craft of making the Tortellino." *Computers in Entertainment* 8(4): 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1145/1921141.1921148

Stevens MW, Dorstyn D, Delfabbro PH, King DL. (2020). "Global prevalence of gaming disorder: A systematic review and meta-analysis." *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 55(6):553-568. https://doi:10.1177/0004867420962851

Zhang L, Han J, Liu M, Yang C, & Liao Y. (2024). "The prevalence and possible risk factors of gaming disorder among

adolescents in China." *BMC Psychiatry* 24 (1): 2–11. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-024-05826-9

Appendix: List of Interviewed Teachers

The following teachers were interviewed orally as part of qualitative data collection.

Name	Occupation	Date of the interview	Key Themes from the Interview
Derrick Wesonga	teacher	July 4, 2025	Distortion of moral fabric and social isolation.
Bennedict Ombote	teacher	July 5, 2025	Teens exhibit anti-social behaviour.
Junet Abdul	teacher	July 4, 2025	Reduced face to face communication skills.
Daniel Kohe	teacher	July 4,2025	Discussed teenagers struggle with collaboration skills.
Suleiman Abdikadir	teacher	July 4, 2025	Reported aggressive behaviour.
Rosa Akinyi	teacher	July 4,2025	Exhibit reduced sense of empathy and responsibility towards community projects.
Erick Makori	teacher	July 4, 2025	Develop poor work ethic leading to frustration, low self-esteem and depression.
Priscilla Kaikai	teacher	July 5, 2025	Display heightened anxiety, mood swing and depression due to addiction.
Salim Khalim	teacher	July 4, 2025	Social isolation.
Elizabeth Mwihaki	teacher	July 4, 2025	Instant gratification makes teens intolerant, impatient and demanding.
Marieta Nanjala	teacher	July 4, 2025	Gaming has influenced how teens think and behave.
Henry Muchemi	teacher	July 4, 2025	Has resulted to limited development of reciprocal language skills.
Stephen Otieno	teacher	July 5, 2025	Submission of incomplete assignment and short attention span.
Clement Wambua	teacher	July 4, 2025	Teens lose connection with their peers.
Francis Mogoa	teacher	July 4, 2025	Mismanage time meant for revision leading to low academic outcome.

Author Biography

Perpetua Oniala is a distinguished educator with a strong commitment in promoting holistic well-being among teenagers in rapidly evolving digital world