

Online Gaming Addiction as a Psychosocial Disorder in Children: Impact, Factors, and Management Strategies in Sidorame Timur Village, Medan, North Sumatra

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Abstract:

Rapid advances in digital technology have led to a significant increase in the intensity of online gaming among children, particularly at the elementary school level. This study aims to examine the psychological impact of online gaming addiction on children in Sidorame Timur Village, Medan Perjuangan District, North Sumatra Province, identify the contributing factors, and explore the response patterns exhibited by parents. This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design, involving in-depth interviews and direct observations of eight children aged 10–14 years who exhibit symptoms of online game addiction, along with their parents. Data analysis was conducted using a thematic approach. Findings indicate that online game addiction has negative effects on children's psychological well-being, such as learning concentration disorders, anxiety, sleep dysfunction, and reduced social interaction. Key factors contributing to addiction include poor communication between parents and children, the diversity of evolving game types, and peer social pressure. In response to this situation, some parents have begun to adopt open communication patterns, establish more structured schedules, conduct active supervision, and encourage their children to participate in social and physical activities. This study emphasizes the importance of strengthening digital parenting capacity at the family level as a preventive measure against online game addiction. These findings provide practical contributions to the development of digital literacy-based education policies and community-based intervention programs. The uniqueness of this study lies in its in-depth exploration of addictive behavior and parenting strategies in a local context, offering contextual insights into the study of child psychology and education in the digital age.

Keywords: Online Game Addiction, Psychological Impact, Digital Parenting, Child Behavior.

Abstrak:

Kemajuan teknologi digital yang pesat telah mendorong peningkatan signifikan dalam intensitas penggunaan game online di kalangan anak-anak, khususnya pada jenjang sekolah dasar. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji dampak psikologis kecanduan game online pada anak-anak di Kelurahan Sidorame Timur, Kecamatan Medan Perjuangan, Provinsi Sumatera Utara, mengidentifikasi faktor penyebabnya, serta mengeksplorasi pola respons yang dilakukan oleh orang tua. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain studi kasus, melalui wawancara mendalam dan observasi langsung terhadap delapan anak berusia 10–14 tahun yang menunjukkan gejala kecanduan game online, beserta orang tua mereka. Analisis data dilakukan dengan

pendekatan tematik. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kecanduan game online berdampak negatif terhadap kondisi psikologis anak, seperti gangguan konsentrasi belajar, kecemasan, disfungsi tidur, dan penurunan interaksi sosial. Faktor-faktor utama yang memicu kecanduan meliputi lemahnya komunikasi antara orang tua dan anak, keragaman jenis game yang terus berkembang, serta tekanan sosial dari teman sebaya. Dalam merespons kondisi ini, sebagian orang tua mulai menerapkan pola komunikasi terbuka, menyusun jadwal yang lebih terstruktur, melakukan pengawasan aktif, serta mendorong keterlibatan anak dalam aktivitas sosial dan fisik. Penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya penguatan kapasitas pengasuhan digital di tingkat keluarga sebagai langkah preventif terhadap kecanduan game online. Temuan ini memberikan kontribusi praktis bagi pengembangan kebijakan pendidikan berbasis literasi digital anak serta program intervensi berbasis komunitas. Keunikan penelitian ini terletak pada eksplorasi mendalam terhadap perilaku kecanduan dan strategi pengasuhan orang tua dalam konteks lokal, yang memberikan kontribusi kontekstual pada kajian psikologi dan pendidikan anak di era digital.

Kata Kunci: Kecanduan Game Online, Dampak Psikologis, Pengasuhan Digital, Perilaku Anak.

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology in the 21st century has brought about major transformations in the social, cultural, and psychological lives of society, especially among children and adolescents (Karjalainen et al., 2022; Kristiyani, 2019). On the one hand, these advancements have made daily activities easier, provided entertainment, and opened access to information; however, on the other hand, they have also posed serious challenges, including weakened social bonds, polarization of values, and increased dependence on the digital world (Nugroho & Khotimah, 2022). One of the most obvious and worrying impacts today is the phenomenon of online game addiction, especially among children and adolescents of primary and secondary school age. Based on national data, as many as 46.2% of children and adolescents aged 0–18 years in Indonesia are addicted to online games, indicating very intense involvement from an early age in the world of digital games (Sucipto, 2024). Data from WartaEQ even shows that 77.5% of male adolescents and 22.5% of female adolescents are indicated to be addicted to online games, reinforcing concerns that this condition has become a social epidemic among the younger generation.

Online games no longer function solely as a medium of entertainment, but have transformed into an alternative social space that shapes children's emotions, behavior, and relationships with their surroundings. Games are no longer just games but have become a parallel world offering interactive and addictive experiences. Children in elementary school are in a phase of dynamic cognitive and affective development, characterized by high curiosity, a tendency to play, and the formation of social identity (Lubis & Lubis, 2024). However, with the ease of internet access and the widespread availability of games such as Free Fire, Mobile Legends, and PUBG, children are increasingly immersed in the virtual world. Game addiction causes children to neglect important activities such as studying, resting, eating, and social interaction, as well as reducing academic performance (Hermawan & Kudus, 2021). Even the World Health Organization (WHO) has classified online gaming addiction as a mental disorder in the ICD-11. Children with gaming addiction exhibit two main characteristics: (1) a strong psychological urge, such as the desire to keep playing and a loss of self-control; and (2) destructive effects on behavioral and social aspects (Ritonga et al., 2021).

This phenomenon is not only found in general, but has also begun to emerge in concrete cases in various regions, including Medan, North Sumatra. The case involving two teenagers from Jalan Karantina Asrama TNI, Medan Timur, is a clear example of how online game addiction can lead to deviant social behavior. Gusti Nanda (16) and Wahyu Sihotang (18) resorted to stealing a pair of shoes belonging to their neighbor just to play online games at their favorite internet café (Sumut Pos, 2011). Due to a lack of money and an overwhelming urge to play, they chose theft as an instant solution. Their actions led to their arrest by local residents, and both were held accountable for their actions at the Medan Timur Police Station (October 6, 2022). This case highlights that online gaming addiction is not merely an internal psychological issue but also has the potential to lead to criminal behavior and social disorders, especially if not addressed early and systematically.

Previous studies have discussed the impact of online gaming on children, which can be categorized into three groups. First, studies on the psychological effects of online gaming addiction indicate that children who are addicted tend to experience concentration disorders, mood swings, anxiety, and neglect of spiritual and social values (Kurnada & Iskandar, 2021; Lusiana, 2023; Syifa, 2020). Second, studies highlighting the impact on children's social and moral development, such as decreased social interaction, aggressive behavior, and self-isolation (Irawan

& Siska, 2021; Paremeswara & Lestari, 2021). Third, literature discussing the causes of addiction notes that parenting patterns, lack of attention from parents, social pressure, game variety, and a permissive environment are dominant factors (Masya & Candra, 2016; Sapira N. & Suwanto, 2022).

However, most previous studies tend to be general in nature and have not specifically examined the psychological conditions of elementary school children who are addicted to online games in a measurable local context. Few studies have deeply described the psychological dynamics, gaming habits, and family responses in a specific environment such as Sidorame Timur Village, North Sumatra Province.

Therefore, there is a scientific gap that needs to be filled by presenting a contextual study that not only repeats general findings but also provides an in-depth understanding based on locality and actual experiences. This study aims to describe and analyze the psychological impact of online game addiction on elementary school children in Sidorame Timur Village, Medan Perjuangan District, North Sumatra Province.

In addition, this study also aims to identify the main factors causing addiction and explore the patterns of handling by parents. This study seeks to answer the lack of literature on the psychological and social aspects of game addicts in a local context. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the discourse on child development psychology and digital communication studies.

In practical terms, the results are expected to contribute to the development of digital parenting patterns, children's digital literacy policies, and community-based interventions. Based on empirical data and literature review, online game addiction has a direct impact on children's psychological stability, both cognitively, affectively, and socially. The main argument of this study is that game addiction is not solely the result of technological advances, but occurs due to weak parenting structures, a lack of digital literacy within families, and the absence of balanced social control in the era of digital globalization. In this context, parents and the social environment have a crucial role to play in determining the success of preventive measures and interventions. This study is based on the assumption that a community-based approach and digital parenting education can be the key to overcoming the negative effects of online game addiction on children, especially in the early stages of development, such as elementary school age.

METHOD

This study focuses on children and adolescents aged 10–14 years who show symptoms of online game addiction, particularly those residing in Sidorame Timur Village, Medan Perjuangan District, Medan City. The unit of analysis in this study was eight adolescents who were selected through a preliminary survey and met a number of indicators of online game addiction. Additionally, parents and guidance counselors (BK) of the participants were involved as triangulating informants to strengthen understanding of the observed addictive behavioral dynamics. The primary focus of this study is to describe in depth the psychological condition of children experiencing online game addiction and their interaction patterns with their surroundings.

The type of research used is qualitative descriptive, with a phenomenological approach (Lune & Berg, 2017; Rahim & Dilawati, 2022). This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore and understand the meaning of adolescents' subjective experiences in conditions of online game addiction in a deep and contextual manner (Creswell, 2016). Qualitative research is considered most appropriate for this study because it is exploratory and emphasizes the interpretation of the meaning of behavior, rather than merely measuring numbers. A descriptive design is used to describe the social reality experienced by informants as it is in their natural environment. Thus, the data obtained not only explains external symptoms but also reveals the psychological and social dynamics that shape addictive behavior.

The data sources in this study consist of two main categories: (1) primary data, namely eight children who have been identified as addicted to online games based on an initial survey and field observations, as well as in-depth interviews with the parents and guidance counselors of each child; and (2) secondary data, consisting of scientific literature, journal articles, and previous research findings discussing theories of online game addiction, child development psychology, and family digital literacy. Participants were selected using purposive sampling with the following inclusion criteria: (a) aged between 10 and 14 years, (b) actively playing online games for at least three hours a day, (c) exhibiting signs of behavioral, emotional, or social disturbances due to excessive gaming activities, and (d) receiving confirmation from parents and teachers regarding significant behavioral changes.

The primary data collection techniques in this study were participatory observation and in-depth interviews. Observations were conducted directly on the children's behavior while playing online games, both at home and in the internet cafes where they usually play. The researcher noted signs of addictive behavior, such as difficulty stopping playing, loss of time control, excessive emotional reactions when stopped, and neglect of other activities. In-depth interviews were conducted with eight children, their parents, and guidance counselors as triangulation sources. The interviews were semi-structured, guided by an interview guide covering the following themes: duration of play, emotions during play, social-academic impacts, and control strategies. Additionally, documentary data was collected in the form of field notes, initial survey results, and interview recordings.

To determine whether a child is addicted to online games, this study refers to indicators based on the DSM-5 and ICD-11, reinforced by Griffiths (2008), namely: first, Preoccupation: the child's thoughts are constantly focused on the game even when not playing. Second, Tolerance: the amount of time spent playing increases to achieve the same level of satisfaction. Third, Withdrawal: the emergence of negative emotions such as restlessness, anger, or stress when not playing. Fourth, Relapse: continuing to play despite attempts to stop or reduce playing. Fifth, Conflict: gaming causes conflict with parents, friends, or interferes with school. Sixth, Displacement: gaming displaces priorities in life such as studying, sleeping, or socializing. Children who meet at least four of these six indicators over the past three months were selected as main participants.

Data analysis was conducted using qualitative thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with the following steps: (1) transcription of data from interviews and observations, (2) initial coding based on emerging themes, (3) grouping of codes into main themes and subthemes, and (4) compilation of findings in a descriptive narrative. Data were managed manually and organized into tables and visual maps to facilitate interpretation. Data validity was ensured through triangulation of sources (children, parents, teachers) and member checking, which involved confirming initial interpretations with informants to ensure accuracy of meaning. This analysis process aimed to reveal in depth the psychological, social, and environmental patterns that shape online game addiction in children, as well as the responses that emerge from families and schools.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Psychological Impact of Online Game Addiction on Children

The results of observations and interviews indicate that online game addiction has a significant impact on the psychological condition of children in Sidorame Timur Village, Medan Perjuangan District. In this study, there were eight children who were the main participants, namely Muhammad Rizki Pratama (MRP, 12 years old), M. Paris (MP, 11 years old), Bima Maulana (BM, 12 years old), Auli (12 years old), Dian (11 years old), and three additional children, namely Reza (13 years old), Hafizh (12 years old), and Andika (13 years old). All children exhibited consistent symptoms such as playing games for 5–9 hours a day, difficulty stopping, and behavioral disturbances when interrupted from gaming activities. They reported enjoying online games because they offer adventures, challenges, and interesting variations, such as character features, missions, and online competitions.

The children describe their gaming experience as an activity that is *“fun, exciting, and makes you forget time.”* (Interview, January 12, 2025). MP stated, *“Once I start playing games, I can forget to eat. Sometimes I get angry if I’m interrupted.”* (Interview, January 12, 2025). Meanwhile, Auli admitted that she prefers spending time gaming rather than hanging out with friends or family, *“If someone invites me to play outside, I don’t want to; I’d rather level up with my online friends.”* (Interview, January 12, 2025). This condition is also confirmed by Dian, who mentioned that she prefers to play until late at night because at night *“it’s quieter and I’m not disturbed.”* (Interview, January 12, 2025).

In general, children experience sleep disturbances, decreased concentration in learning, and mild to moderate stress symptoms. Class teacher Prila Andini (24 years old) explained that some of her students, such as BM and Dian, often feel sleepy in class, lack focus, and are reluctant to participate in lessons. Guidance counselor Wulan Syafitri (24 years old) added that MRP and MP have shown signs of dependency: *“They become restless if they don’t play games. They have even skipped school because they stayed up late playing games until dawn.”* (Interview, January 15, 2025). This information was confirmed by parents, who revealed that their children had become more temperamental, easily angered when prohibited from playing, and refused to interact with other family members.

Some children even exhibited socially withdrawn behavior. Reza, for example, stated that he *“feels more comfortable chatting in game voice chat”* than talking directly with peers (Interview, January 12, 2025). Hafizh added

that *"In the real world, I often feel shy or confused when speaking. But in games, I can be free."* (Interview, January 12, 2025).

This reflects how the virtual world has become an escape from insecurity or social pressure in the real world. Overall, the eight children interviewed showed a strong tendency toward online game addiction. Gaming not only replaced their study and rest time, but also disrupted their emotional balance and daily social interactions. This situation raises concerns among teachers and parents who find it difficult to regulate and mediate their children's digital habits. Various quotes from children experiencing online game addiction clearly illustrate how digital games have taken over their daily lives, both emotionally and socially.

Muhammad Rizki Pratama (12) admitted, *"If I don't play games, I don't know what to do; it feels like something is missing"* (Interview, January 12, 2025), indicating a deep psychological dependence. A similar sentiment was expressed by M. Paris (11), who said, *"I can play until 2 a.m., and if I'm scolded, I just get angry back,"* (Interview, January 12, 2025), revealing emotional disturbances and disrupted sleep patterns. Bima Maulana (12) added that he has lost interest in physical activities: *"I used to play with friends at the field, but now I'd rather play Mobile Legends."* (Interview, January 12, 2025). This statement indicates a shift in social preferences and a tendency to withdraw from the real world. Another child, Auli (12), admitted that failure in games triggers intense emotional reactions: *"If I don't level up, I get really frustrated, sometimes even throwing my phone."* (Interview, January 12, 2025). Meanwhile, Dian (11) stated, *"Playing games is the best; it lets me forget everything, even sometimes forget to eat,"* indicating psychological escape and neglect of basic needs. Reza (13) added that he is often scolded by his parents for not helping with chores, but *"when I'm playing, it's hard to stop."* (Interview, January 12, 2025). Hafizh (12) said, *"In games, I have many friends, but at school, I'm often quiet,"* (Interview, January 12, 2025), indicating social isolation in the real world despite feeling accepted in the virtual world. Andika (13) also explained his emotional dynamics, *"Playing makes me calm, although sometimes it makes me nervous, especially when I lose,"* (Interview, January 12, 2025) indicating that online games serve as a source of emotional regulation, though they risk exacerbating mental tension during losses.

From an educational perspective, Prila Andini, a classroom teacher, stated that *"Bima and Dian often fall asleep in class even before lessons begin. When I ask them, they admit they played games until late at night,"* which serves as concrete evidence that gaming addiction disrupts children's academic performance (Interview, January 15, 2025). Meanwhile, Wulan Syafitri, a guidance counselor, shared that *"Rizki and Paris are hard to talk to. When asked to reflect, their answers always revolve around games. It's like an alternative reality for them,"* indicating that the gaming world has replaced the real world as the center of children's attention and emotions (Interview, January 15, 2025). Parents' experiences are similar, as shared by M. Paris's parent: *"If asked to stop playing, he can throw a tantrum, throw pillows, and slam the door."* (Interview, January 15, 2025). All these quotes reinforce the finding that online game addiction in children not only affects aspects of time and concentration but also disrupts emotional balance, social relationships, and the quality of children's interactions with family, school, and their surroundings.

Table 1. Psychological Impact of Online Game Addiction on Children

Child's Name	Age	Game Duration/day	Psychological Symptoms	Social Impairment	Physical/Sleep Impact
Muhammad Rizki P. (MRP)	12	6–7 hours	Anxiety, stress, explosive emotions	Refuses to play with others, isolates himself	Stays up late, difficulty waking up in morning
M. Paris (MP)	11	6 hours	Frustrated, cries when losing	Rarely talks to friends	Irregular sleep, fatigue
Bima Maulana (BM)	12	6 hours	Easily angered, throws phone	Avoids family mealtime	Drowsy during the day
Auli	12	5–6 hours	Unstable emotions, anxious when not playing	Unwilling to join social activities	Late sleep, reluctant to wake up
Dian	11	5 hours	Frequently gloomy, silent without game access	Unresponsive when engaged in conversation	Sleep disturbances, fatigue

Rizal	13	7–8 hours	High dependency, anxiety	Prefers virtual world	Mild insomnia, weakened stamina
Andi	12	6 hours	Sudden explosive anger,	No longer close with real-life playmates	Frequent daytime sleep due to staying up late
Arif	14	7 hours	Anxious when losing, high-level dependency	Lacks focus around family	Sleep deprivation, headaches

Source: Research Results, 2025.

From various quotes and observations, it can be concluded that online gaming addiction has had a serious impact on children's psychological aspects. Children experience symptoms of emotional disorders such as quick temper, frustration when failing in games, and aggressive behavior towards their surroundings. Cognitively, they show a decline in focus on learning, increased laziness, and a lack of interest in school activities. In terms of social relationships, children tend to withdraw from their environment, ignore family interactions, and choose the virtual world as their comfort zone. They also experience sleep disturbances due to excessive playing time, especially at night, which has an impact on their overall physical and mental health.

From the data analysis, at least four main patterns were found that represent the psychological impact of online game addiction on children. First, the emergence of significant emotional and behavioral disorders. Children show emotional dependence on digital games; when they are not allowed to play, they become irritable, anxious, and even display aggressive behavior such as throwing things or crying loudly. Their emotions seem to be determined by success or failure in the game, rather than by social dynamics in the real world. Second, a decline in cognitive and academic functioning is a common symptom observed by teachers and parents. Children have difficulty focusing during the learning process, are often sleepy due to staying up late playing games, and show a decline in school performance. Even their motivation to do homework or study independently is almost gone, replaced by the urge to continue playing.

Third, patterns of psychological and social dependence on the virtual world have become very noticeable. For children, games are not just entertainment, but their main social space where they feel valued and recognized. They are more comfortable talking to friends in games than interacting directly with peers or family members. The virtual world has become a new “reality” that is more enjoyable and free from social pressure. Fourth, this addiction causes disruption of biological rhythms, especially in sleep and eating patterns. Most children are accustomed to playing late into the night, which causes them to sleep less and feel tired during the day. It is also common for them to refuse to eat or forget to eat because they are engrossed in playing, which can potentially lead to health problems such as metabolic disorders or a weakened immune system. These four patterns show that online gaming addiction does not only have a temporary impact, but also risks disrupting children's physical, psychological, and social development in the long term.

These findings reinforce that online gaming addiction is not a minor symptom, but a form of complex psychosocial disorder in line with the WHO's classification of *Gaming Disorder* (ICD-11) (World Health Organization, 2024). Children not only experience disruptions in their daily routines, but also begin to undergo a reconstruction of their social and affective identities shaped by the logic of the virtual world. Their emotional involvement in games creates an alternative reality that is more appealing than the real world. Within the framework of developmental psychology theory, the need for recognition, achievement, and affection that is unfulfilled in the real world is fulfilled by the virtual world.

Furthermore, this addiction reflects dysfunction in parenting patterns, social control, and social relations among children in their families and school communities. Not only does it have an individual impact, but game addiction is also an indicator of disruption in values and social balance in the lives of children in the digital age. Therefore, its treatment requires a multidisciplinary approach: psychological, educational, social, and even spiritual to restore emotional balance, self-control, and healthy social connections.

Factors Influencing Online Game Addiction

Online game addiction in children does not occur in a vacuum. Based on in-depth interviews and participatory observations of eight child respondents and their parents, it was found that the main causes of addiction stem from

three interrelated aspects: permissive parenting and minimal communication, a social environment that supports gaming habits, and the intrinsic appeal of the games themselves.

For example, Muhammad Rizki Pratama (12) stated that he was rarely talked to by his parents due to their busy work schedules: *"No, my parents are busy working, so I'm often alone in my room, playing games."* (Interview, January 12, 2025). A similar situation was described by Andika (13), who lives with his grandmother because his parents work out of town: *"At home, it's just me and my grandmother; no one stops me from playing. Sometimes I play until morning."* (Interview, January 12, 2025). MP's parents even admitted: *"I work from morning until night; sometimes I don't even know what time my child stops playing. If I scold them, they just sulk and close the door."* (Interview, January 12, 2025).

This lack of intensive communication makes children feel unappreciated and lose their place to share their stories. Auli (12), a girl who was also a respondent, said: *"Playing games makes me happy. No one gets angry, unlike at home."* (Interview, January 12, 2025). This phenomenon shows that children see games as an emotional safe space, a place where they feel in control, valued, and can be "anyone."

This situation is exacerbated by a social environment that is very permissive toward online games. Around the respondents' homes, internet cafes are still widely operational, Wi-Fi access is available in almost every house, and most of their peers are also active online gamers. MP said: *"Most of my school friends play online games, which made me curious and eventually I joined in, and now I really love it."* (Interview, January 12, 2025). Hafizh (12) even revealed that playing games with his peers is the moment he looks forward to most every day: *"Usually in the afternoon, we all gather at the internet café to play. If I don't join, I'm afraid I won't be able to keep up at school the next day."* (Interview, January 12, 2025).

This dependence is reinforced by the diversity of game types and the continuous innovation in features. MRP explains: *"There are so many types of online games, so it never gets boring. There's always a new mission or character that keeps you curious."* Meanwhile, BM says that every time a game is updated, he feels the need to keep playing to avoid falling behind his friends. Dian (11) adds that she feels proud when she reaches a certain level and is noticed by her friends in the game: *"When I reach a high rank, my friends in the game often invite me to play together. It just feels cool."* (Interview, January 12, 2025).

Reza's (13) parents also expressed their concerns: *"My son is hard to talk to when he's playing games. Sometimes he says he's tired from school, but he keeps playing until late at night."* (Interview, January 15, 2025). Guidance counselor Wulan Syafitri explained that children like Paris and Hafizh tend to be withdrawn and more responsive when talking about games than about schoolwork or other class activities. *"They can talk at length about games, but when asked about school, they remain silent."* (Interview, January 15, 2025).

Table 2. Factors Contributing to Online Game Addiction in Children

Category	Subfactor	Quotes/Field Findings
Parenting Style	Lack of communication	<i>"My parents are busy working, so I'm often alone in my room playing games."</i> (MRP)
	Inadequate supervision	<i>"I work from morning to night, sometimes I don't even know how long my child plays."</i> (MP's parent)
	No time control	The child plays 5–9 hours per day without any limits
	Lack of emotional closeness	The child feels more comfortable in their room than spending time with family
Social Environment	Peers are also addicted to games	<i>"Most of my school friends play online games, so I just join in."</i> (MP)
	Easy access to internet and game cafés	Children play at nearby internet cafés or use home/neighbors' Wi-Fi
	Gamer community norms	<i>"If I don't join group matches, I can't connect with friends at school the next day."</i> (Hafizh)
Appeal of Online Games	Many genres and new features	<i>"The game is fun because there are many genres and new missions every week."</i> (BM)
	Reward systems, leveling, competition	<i>"If I don't level up, I get really mad—sometimes I even throw my phone."</i> (Auli)

More engaging virtual interactions “I have more friends in the game than at school.” (Hafizh)

Source: Research Results, 2025.

Online gaming addiction in children is not only triggered by the mere enjoyment of playing, but is rooted in fragile social and psychological relationships within their families and communities. The lack of communication and attention from parents makes children feel emotionally disconnected at home. In this void, games are not only a form of entertainment, but also an escape and a place for self-actualization.

A permissive social environment, including peers who are also active gamers, reinforces the pressure to participate. On the other hand, online games themselves offer a variety of content and reward systems that trap children in a cycle of competition, exploration, and virtual social recognition that is difficult to leave. From the analysis of the data obtained in this study, four dominant patterns emerged that explain why children experience online game addiction.

First, permissive parenting and a lack of communication between parents and children are the main triggers. Children are allowed to play without restrictions because their parents are too busy with work or personal matters, so they do not provide a warm and open space for dialogue. This condition creates an emotional gap in the family, making children feel unheard or unnoticed, and eventually seeking escape into the virtual world that provides a sense of connection and false comfort.

Second, peer influence and social pressure play a significant role in triggering and reinforcing addiction. Most respondents admitted they started playing because they were invited or inspired by friends who were already actively playing online games. In this context, games are not merely a form of entertainment but have transformed into an alternative social media platform where children build their identity, friendships, and seek recognition.

When they are not playing, they feel left out or even isolated from their social environment. Third, the variety and appeal of the games themselves are very strong internal factors. Children are attracted because online games offer many genres, dynamic storylines, tiered challenges, and reward systems such as level achievements and virtual prizes.

Constant content updates—such as new characters, new game modes, or additional missions—maintain their interest and make them want to keep coming back to play. In addition, competitive features such as rankings and player-versus-player matches create a competitive atmosphere that encourages children to play more intensely in pursuit of virtual achievements.

Finally, easy access to the internet and digital devices is also a major contributing factor. Wi-Fi availability in almost every home, along with children's ownership of personal devices, allows them to play anytime without significant supervision. Without time limits or usage rules, children spend hours each day in front of screens. This situation creates a difficult-to-break cycle of addiction, where games become a central part of children's daily lives, replacing productive activities and real-world social interactions.

Thus, these four patterns are interrelated and show that online game addiction in children is the result of the interaction between relational, social, structural, and technological factors. These findings indicate that online game addiction in children cannot be understood as an individual failure, but as the result of a complex interaction between internal and external factors.

From a developmental ecology perspective, as theorized by Bronfenbrenner, children's behavior is shaped by layered systems ranging from family, peers, to the digital media culture surrounding them. Structurally, the lack of communication within families and weak social control create space for online games to become “alternative digital caregivers.” Culturally, children are trapped in the logic of digital capitalism, where games become the primary source of self-validation, prestige, and social relationships. Within this framework, addiction is not merely deviant behavior but also an expression of social relationship crises and the fragility of the support systems for children's development.

Strategies for Parents and Teachers in Dealing with Addicted Children

The most common initial response of parents after realizing that their children are addicted to games is to set time limits for playing. Most parents admit that they did not previously establish strict rules because they believed their children were simply playing games for entertainment. However, when signs such as lack of interest in studying, staying up late at night, and temperamental behavior began to emerge, they realized there was a problem. The parents of Hafizh (12) stated, “I used to think it was just ordinary play, but it turned out he was playing until 2

a.m. every night. Now I'm strict—maximum two hours a day, and only after all chores are done." (Interview, January 15, 2025). A similar situation was shared by Andika's (13) parents: *"Now I set an alarm on his phone. If he goes past the playtime limit, I take the phone away. At first he was upset, but now he's getting used to it."* (Interview, January 15, 2025).

In addition to limiting playtime, some parents are trying to change their parenting style by increasing emotional involvement and daily dialogue. They realize that supervision alone is not enough; a more personal approach is needed so that children feel cared for. Reza's (13) parents explained, *"I now ask more often: 'How are you feeling today?' or 'Why do you love that game so much?' It turns out my child talks at length, and I now understand their world better."* (Interview, January 15, 2025). Children who feel heard are more likely to accept guidance. School counselor Wulan Syafitri also emphasizes the importance of this dialogue: *"If you just forbid them, they rebel. But if you talk to them calmly, they become more aware and willing to change."* (Interview, January 15, 2025).

Another strategy that parents are starting to implement is introducing substitute activities. In many cases, online games are the only enjoyable activity for children. Therefore, responsive parents are trying to find new activities that can replace that enjoyment. Auli's (12) parent said, *"I started encouraging him to join a drawing class because he used to love doodling when he was little. Now he goes to drawing lessons twice a week, and his gaming has gradually decreased."* (Interview, January 15, 2025). Some children are also being involved in family activities such as cooking, gardening, or cycling together. Prila Andini, a class teacher, mentioned: *"There's a child who was initially addicted, but now he's actively participating in the scouting club. We see this as good progress."* (Interview, January 15, 2025).

In some families, a spiritual approach is used to overcome game addiction. The parents of MP (11) said that they started involving their child in regular religious activities, such as attending religious lectures or praying in congregation at the mosque. *"He used to still be on his cell phone every evening. Now I take him to the mosque every day, alhamdulillah it's become a new routine that's helping him gradually break away from games"* (Interview, January 15, 2025). This shows that intervention isn't always technical or structural, but can also involve strengthening family values and rituals. The guidance counselor also noted that children who have a regular worship routine are more emotionally stable and easier to manage in terms of time.

Although strategies have been implemented, some parents admit to difficulties in consistently enforcing the rules. Some of these parents are stay-at-home mothers with infants or fathers who work out of town. The parents of Dian (11) said, *"Sometimes I'm so tired taking care of her younger sibling that I can't keep an eye on her all the time. So I just give her the phone to keep her occupied."* (Interview, January 15, 2025). There are also parents who feel they lack the technological knowledge to regulate game access, as expressed by Reza's (13) father: *"I'm not tech-savvy. I don't know how to block games or set timers. So, I can only scold them if they go overboard."* (Interview, January 15, 2025). This highlights the need for external support and parental education on digital literacy.

Schools are beginning to take a role in addressing gaming addiction, particularly through guidance counselors. Wulan Syafitri explained that she takes a counseling approach without directly blaming the children, but instead delves into the reasons behind their habits. *"Most of them say they're bored at home, or there's no one to talk to at home."* From there, we encourage them to join school activities. Classroom teachers also help monitor behavioral changes. *"I usually note down who often looks sleepy or unfocused in class, then I provide feedback to parents during regular meetings,"* said Prila Andini (Interview, January 15, 2025). Collaboration between teachers and parents is a key factor in the consistency of intervention.

Some children began showing behavioral changes after the strategy was implemented. Hafizh (12), who previously spent 6–7 hours a day playing, now only plays after finishing his schoolwork. *"Now I only play for 1 hour after studying. If not, my phone is taken by my father,"* he said (Interview, January 15, 2025). Andika's (13) parents also noticed positive effects from the dialogue-based approach: *"He now talks more often, even though he still plays, but not like before"* (Interview, January 15, 2025). Guidance counselor Wulan concluded that changes are slow, but children who feel emotionally supported and given alternative activities tend to recover faster.

The long-term hope is that this approach can become a model for other parents and schools facing similar problems. The efforts made by parents and schools show an approach that is beginning to transform from passive control to active and dialogic involvement. Parents are starting to implement time limits, build open communication, and create balanced daily routines.

Schools, through their guidance counselors and classroom teachers, have also begun to make game addiction a special focus in their teaching and extracurricular activities. At least four patterns of handling strategies can be identified: first, setting clear time limits for playing. Many parents have begun to impose a maximum limit on gaming time (e.g., 1–2 hours) and only after schoolwork is completed. Second, involvement in non-digital activities. Children are encouraged to participate in physical activities such as sports or other creative extracurricular activities that help reduce play time. Third, empathetic dialogue and open communication. Parents and guidance counselors create a safe space for discussion, build emotional connections, and provide guidance without coercion. Fourth, collaboration between parents and schools. Synergy in sharing information, monitoring changes in children's behavior, and providing appropriate interventions is carried out in a planned manner.

These findings indicate that strategies for treating online gaming addiction in children are more effective when implemented consistently and collaboratively between parents and schools. Conscious, empathetic, and participatory digital parenting has proven to yield positive results in the recovery process of children from addiction. Behavioral changes in children take time, but with a communicative approach and sufficient emotional support, recovery is not impossible. This strategy also highlights the importance of establishing a joint parenting system between home and school as the foundation for comprehensive digital addiction intervention.

DISCUSSION

This study has revealed three main findings related to online gaming addiction among children in Sidorame Timur Village, Medan Perjuangan District, namely: significant psychological impacts on children, interrelated factors contributing to addiction, and various intervention strategies implemented by parents and teachers. The children studied exhibited disturbances in emotional, cognitive, social, and biological aspects due to intensive gaming addiction. Additionally, permissive parenting, limited communication, peer influence, and unrestricted access to technology are the primary triggers for addiction. Despite the limited circumstances, some intervention efforts have begun, including time restrictions, empathetic communication, alternative activities, and support from schools through guidance counselors.

The relationship between these variables indicates that online gaming addiction is not the result of a single factor but rather the outcome of complex interactions between family, social, and technological environments. Addiction arises because children's needs for affection and self-actualization are not met in the real world, leading them to seek compensation in the virtual world, which offers social engagement, achievement, and escape from pressure. When children do not receive enough attention or validation from their parents and are in an environment that is permissive toward online gaming, digital games become a more comfortable and emotionally satisfying place. In this case, games are not merely entertainment but function as a "substitute home" that is more welcoming to the child's inner world. Additionally, with the ever-evolving features of games, children seem to have no opportunity to stop naturally.

The findings of this study reinforce the results of previous studies, such as those revealed by Yulinda (2017), Adiningtiyas (2017), and Ilhamsyah (2023), that online games impact learning concentration, emotional aggression, and neglect of responsibilities. However, this study introduces a novelty by emphasizing the local context, where social factors such as the dominance of internet cafes, minimal parental presence, and the absence of technological control at home are the primary determinants. Additionally, the study shows that the factors causing addiction reinforce each other and are not standalone. These findings expand our understanding that digital addiction among children in urban areas like Medan is not merely a matter of access and screen time, but also involves unmet emotional and social needs in their daily environment.

Interpretively, online gaming addiction can be understood as a symptom of a connectivity crisis within families and communities. This phenomenon reflects a shift in the way children and adolescents construct identity and seek meaning in their social relationships. The gaming world becomes an alternative arena where they can gain recognition, appreciation, and a sense of competence—things they may not experience in real life (Misra et al., 2020; Young, 2009). From a psychosocial perspective, this condition indicates a developmental disorientation, where the home and school no longer function as centers for value formation and identity growth. Instead, the virtual world is increasingly used as the primary reference point for constructing a sense of self.

Numerous studies have shown that online gaming addiction is closely linked to dysfunctional family relationships, such as poor communication, low family cohesion, and increased psychological stress within the household (Fahrizal & Aprilia, 2021; Hwang et al., 2020). Children and adolescents with Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) often experience a decline in the quality of family relationships, which in turn exacerbates the intensity and

duration of their gaming behavior (Özkan & Özkan, 2023). In this context, addiction should not merely be viewed as a behavioral disorder, but rather as a response to the absence of adequate emotional and social structures that should be present in parenting and community systems.

On the other hand, online gaming communities often provide a sense of connection and social participation that is lacking in offline environments. Some studies have shown that the need for online social interaction can mediate the relationship between interpersonal incompetence and gaming addiction, particularly among younger and non-normative gamers (Bhagat & Kim, 2018; Gandolfi et al., 2025). This helps explain why gaming becomes a form of escape and a substitute for broken or unavailable social bonds in the real world.

Furthermore, this situation also indicates a cultural unpreparedness in parenting when facing the digital era, in which the rapid advancement of technology is not matched by the emotional, educational, and relational readiness of parents and communities. In this regard, gaming addiction reflects a collective failure to provide a healthy environment for children's growth in an increasingly digitized world (Nursalam et al., 2023; Rosendo-Rios et al., 2022). Therefore, understanding gaming addiction as a symptom of a connectivity crisis opens up opportunities for more structural intervention approaches—ones that focus on restoring interpersonal relationships within families and strengthening social cohesion in communities.

A reflection on these findings reveals the ambiguous dual function of online games. On one hand, games can serve as a medium for relaxation, entertainment, and even positive social interaction when managed wisely. In certain contexts, games may even enhance cognitive skills such as mathematics and strategy (Hammadi et al., 2024; Posso, 2016). However, on the other hand, without adequate regulation and supervision, games can become a space of alienation—children withdraw from their families, academic performance declines, and biological balance is disrupted (Rahmawati et al., 2022; Rehim et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2020).

Research shows that excessive engagement with games has the potential to displace family bonding time, trigger conflict, and reduce the quality of communication between parents and children (Chai et al., 2011; Wen et al., 2011). Moreover, parents' emotional conditions—such as depression or intrusive parenting styles—can worsen the risk of gaming addiction among children (Li et al., 2025; Mun & Lee, 2023). Conversely, emotional warmth from parents and good time management have been shown to mitigate this risk (Chen et al., 2020).

From an academic standpoint, gaming addiction has a strong correlation with declining academic performance, particularly because gaming time tends to replace study time (Li & Zhu, 2023; Rehim et al., 2023). Although some studies highlight the educational potential of games in specific contexts, the prevailing consensus emphasizes that the negative effects on academic performance are more dominant due to their impact on focus, motivation to learn, and engagement in school activities (Posso, 2016).

Furthermore, children's biological and psychological balance is also disrupted. Several studies have documented increased cases of emotional disorders, hyperactivity, insomnia, and chronic stress among adolescents addicted to gaming (John et al., 2019; Smrithi et al., 2025). In addition, a decline in trust and interpersonal communication within the family has been noted, further intensifying social isolation (King & Delfabbro, 2017).

This research also uncovers broader dysfunctions within the social system, such as the lack of digital parenting education, low digital literacy among parents, and insufficient synergy between schools and families in monitoring children's development (Indrajaya et al., 2024). In the long term, the passive disengagement of parents from their children's digital lives may result in children growing up within a value system shaped not by the adults around them, but by game algorithms and virtual community dynamics (Ling et al., 2024). Therefore, structured interventions are needed—not only focusing on gaming behavior, but also on strengthening emotional bonds within families and enhancing collaboration among parents, schools, and communities.

Based on the findings of this study, intervention efforts must be implemented simultaneously at two key levels: the family and institutional levels. At the family level, the approach of digital parenting based on emotional awareness is especially critical. This approach emphasizes not only technological control but also emotional closeness between parents and children. Parents act as primary mediators who can guide their children through the challenges of the digital world by combining technological supervision, emotional understanding, and open, empathetic communication (Dias et al., 2016; Otterpohl et al., 2020). This approach is highly relevant in the digital era, where technology is not merely a tool but also a social space that shapes children's identity, values, and behavior.

Research shows that digital literacy among parents plays a key role in the effectiveness of digital parenting. Parents who understand the digital environment are better equipped to select appropriate educational apps and monitor the content accessed by their children (Ciboci & Labaš, 2019). Furthermore, active parental involvement in technology use has been found to enhance children's digital experiences, foster more positive social connections, and reduce dependency on entertainment-oriented content (Rodríguez, 2008; Svechinskaya et al., 2022). However, challenges such as technological access gaps and the low cognitive and emotional readiness of some parents continue to be significant obstacles (Adeyemon, 2009).

Equally important is empathetic communication, which has been shown to be foundational in building trust between parents and children in the context of internet use. Parents who employ empathy-based communication can create an open dialogue, understand their children's needs and anxieties, and be more responsive to risks such as exposure to inappropriate content or online predators (Ali et al., 2025; Ziker et al., 2025). Studies also show that online training programs specifically designed for parents—such as the “Tuning in to Kids” program—have proven effective in enhancing parental emotional interaction skills and reducing problematic behaviors in children (Havighurst et al., 2024; Otterpohl et al., 2020).

At the institutional level, structured and sustainable collaboration between schools and families is essential. School counselors and parents can work together to create a holistic monitoring system for children's academic, emotional, and digital development. Schools can also implement digital balance policies, such as providing consistent and engaging non-digital activities—sports, arts, or literacy clubs—so that children find meaning and identity not only in gaming, but also in real-world interactions (Yildirim et al., 2025). Research further emphasizes the importance of teachers in cultivating students' digital awareness through curriculum integration that includes digital ethics and social skills.

Furthermore, local governments play a critical role in fostering a supportive ecosystem. Community-based youth counseling services can be established at the neighborhood level as safe, welcoming spaces where children and parents can receive guidance. Family digital literacy campaigns, integrated with empathetic communication training for parents, can reinforce conscious technology parenting and prevent children from being fully shaped by algorithms and virtual community dynamics (Lippold et al., 2022).

In conclusion, this study affirms that online gaming addiction in children is a multidimensional issue that cannot be resolved merely through restrictions or access limitations. Emotionally aware parenting, improved digital literacy among parents, empathetic communication, and synergy between educational institutions and local communities are systemic strategies needed to raise psychologically, socially, and cognitively healthy technology users. The digital world is inevitable—but with a conscious parenting approach, children can be guided to become empowered individuals amid the rapid advancement of technology.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that online game addiction among children in Sidorame Timur Village is not only an individual behavioral problem, but a symptom of social vulnerability in the context of family, school, and digital society. Three key findings were identified: (1) gaming addiction has serious psychological impacts on children, including emotional disturbances, cognitive dysfunction, virtual social dependence, and biological disruption; (2) the causes of addiction stem from a combination of permissive parenting, lack of family communication, peer pressure, and the irresistible appeal and accessibility of games; and (3) efforts to address the issue by parents and teachers include limiting playtime, empathetic communication, involvement in non-digital activities, and support from schools, although not all of these measures are implemented consistently and comprehensively.

Scientifically, this study makes an important contribution to the literature on children's digital addiction by adding concrete local and social dimensions. Unlike previous studies that were more quantitative or general in nature, this study highlights in-depth qualitative aspects of children's experiences, family interactions, and the social conditions that surround them. The participatory observation and in-depth interview approach provides a holistic picture of the dynamics of online game addiction in everyday life, as well as introducing an empathy- and community-based approach to addressing this issue.

However, this study has several limitations. First, the limited number of informants and the local scope of the study mean that the findings cannot be generalized widely. Second, the study did not explore further the gender, economic, and religious value dimensions of digital addiction dynamics among children. Third, school involvement was limited to guidance counselors and classroom teachers, and did not include institutional-level policy

interventions. Therefore, further research is recommended to expand the scope of informants, add intersectional dimensions (gender, social class), and test the effectiveness of more structured and cross-sectoral intervention programs. With this further development, it is hoped that efforts to address online game addiction can be carried out in a more integrated and sustainable manner for the psychosocial health of Indonesian children.

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