

“Pixels to Peril: The Hidden Suicide Risks of Online Gaming”

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Abstract:

The rapid expansion of virtual technologies has fundamentally transformed how youth interact, socialize, and construct identities. Among these technologies, online gaming has emerged as a dominant form of entertainment, creating immersive virtual realms where adolescents spend increasing amounts of time. While these platforms may offer cognitive stimulation and social interaction, growing evidence highlights significant risks, including addictive behaviors, exposure to harmful content, and associations with self-harm and suicidal behavior. Notable cases, such as the Blue Whale Challenge, illustrate the severe consequences of certain gaming-related activities.

This study critically examines the relationship between online gaming and suicidal behavior among youth, framed through a social work perspective. It emphasizes the need to address behavioral, psychological, and social dimensions in developing evidence-based preventive strategies. Employing a documentary-analytical approach, the research draws on primary insights from doctoral work that sparked this investigation, alongside secondary sources such as peer-reviewed studies, media reports, and global statistical data. This methodology enables the systematic identification of suicide-related risk factors and vulnerabilities emerging within the virtual realm.

Findings highlight the urgent need for preventive interventions that integrate social work principles across family, school, and community contexts. By prioritizing holistic well-being, shared responsibility, and sustainable strategies, social work offers a critical framework for safeguarding adolescents in increasingly complex virtual environments. The study concludes with actionable recommendations, including awareness campaigns, protective legislation, and multi-sectoral collaboration, aimed at reducing risks while fostering safer forms of digital engagement.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of research on digital risks by identifying online gaming as a significant factor in youth suicidal behavior and advancing actionable pathways for prevention and intervention within virtual environments.

Keywords: Youth; Online gaming; Virtual realm; Suicide risk; Social work perspective; Preventive measures.

Introduction:

The rapid expansion of virtual technologies has transformed how children and adolescents—collectively referred to as youth—interact, socialize, and engage with their environment (Al-Eifa, 2014). Smartphones, the Internet, and online gaming have become pervasive, creating highly interactive virtual spaces where youth spend significant portions of their daily lives. While these platforms can foster entertainment and cognitive development, mounting evidence highlights their potential risks to mental, emotional, and social well-being (Al-Shafeerhab, 2017).

Electronic games, ranking among the most popular forms of youth entertainment globally, integrate social interaction and user-generated content, amplifying their influence (Al-Shafeerhab, 2017). In Arab countries, these games increasingly penetrate family life, sometimes leading to addictive patterns and exposure to harmful content, including challenges that promote self-harm or suicidal behavior (Al-Hassan, 2014; Al-Suwailemi, 2014). Factors contributing to extensive engagement include easy access via smartphones and the use of games by parents as entertainment or rewards (Shari, 2014; Abdelhamid, 2019).

Tragically, certain games have been linked to severe consequences. The “Blue Whale Challenge,” for example, reportedly contributed to over 100 youth suicides worldwide between 2015 and 2016, with cases documented in Algeria, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia (Ghanmi, 2018; Shari, 2018). These patterns underscore the urgent need to understand how online gaming may intersect with vulnerabilities leading to suicidal behavior. Globally, suicide remains a leading cause of death among youth aged 10–29, further emphasizing the importance of preventive strategies (World Health Organization [WHO], 2014).

Particular attention is given to the role of online gaming in constructing a virtual realm, a space where youth increasingly socialize, shape their identities, and become exposed to significant risks and vulnerabilities. Importantly, insights from my doctoral thesis sparked the motivation to investigate this phenomenon further, particularly the ways in which online gaming may serve as a contributing factor in suicidal behavior among youth.

This paper critically examines the relationship between online gaming and suicidal behavior among youth, drawing on global research findings and contextual evidence. Framed within a social work perspective, it emphasizes holistic well-being, family engagement, community collaboration, and evidence-based preventive measures. By systematically exploring risk factors, early warning signs, and preventive strategies—including family, school, and community-based interventions—this research seeks to provide actionable insights for safeguarding vulnerable adolescents in virtual environments.

To systematically investigate the complex behavioral, psychological, and social consequences of online gaming among youth, this study adopts a rigorous research framework designed, from a social work perspective, to generate evidence-based insights and inform targeted preventive interventions.

Methodology and Research Framework

This section presents the study's rationale, objectives, and methodological approach, providing a clear framework for understanding the phenomenon under investigation.

Importance of the Study

The present research focuses on the potential harms of online electronic games, highlighting their growing association with behavioral disturbances, including addiction and elevated suicide risk. Growing evidence suggests that excessive involvement in these games may function as a contributing factor to suicidal tendencies among youth (Gottfried & Sidoti, 2024; World Health Organization, 2024). Recognizing and addressing these risks is vital for the formulation of preventive strategies that reduce the adverse effects of electronic gaming while fostering safer patterns of engagement among youth.

In addition, this research aims to generate evidence-based knowledge to guide families, educators, and other stakeholders in safeguarding vulnerable populations from these harmful phenomena. Importantly, all preventive recommendations are framed from a social work perspective, ensuring that interventions prioritize holistic well-being, ethical guidance, shared responsibility, and sustainable solutions tailored to the diverse needs of youth.

Research Objectives

To guide this study, specific objectives were established to systematically explore online electronic gaming, its associated risks, and its potential link to suicidal behavior among youth, while highlighting preventive strategies grounded in a social work perspective. The study therefore aims to:

1. Define entertainment media and examine the risks posed by online electronic games.
2. Highlight the negative consequences of excessive or inappropriate use of such media.
3. Investigate the association between online electronic gaming and suicidal behavior among youth.
4. Propose preventive interventions informed by social work principles to reduce the risk of suicidal behavior.

Research Methodology

To examine the phenomenon under investigation, this study adopts a qualitative documentary-analytical approach, involving the systematic collection, review, and analysis of reliable data and documentation (Shu'oun al-Tatweer, 2015; BTS Academy, 2011). This qualitative approach is well-suited for exploring complex social and psychological phenomena, such as the influence of online games on youth suicidal behavior, allowing for an in-depth understanding of contextual and behavioral factors (Gottfried & Sidoti, 2024).

Data Collection

To examine the phenomenon under investigation, this article is grounded in the primary data of the doctoral thesis, which serves as the cornerstone of the present research and highlights the critical importance of the topic under investigation. Data were drawn from peer-reviewed scientific studies and academic research focusing on online electronic gaming and its association with suicidal behavior. Complementary secondary sources—such as newspapers, magazines, media reports, and

recent statistical datasets—were also examined to provide contextual and up-to-date perspectives, including reference to incidents such as the Blue Whale Challenge (Xiao et al., 2025; World Health Organization, 2024).

All data collection and selection processes were guided from a social work perspective, ensuring that the inclusion of studies and reports emphasized interventions, preventive strategies, and protective measures that consider the holistic well-being of youth. This approach prioritizes ethical responsibility, shared community engagement, and the practical application of evidence to support families, educators, and policymakers in mitigating risks associated with online gaming.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using critical analytical methods, which involved careful examination of content, comparison of findings across studies, and identification of shared patterns and trends. Emphasis was placed on recent research to ensure the reliability and relevance of the findings, particularly regarding the psychological and social effects of online gaming and its potential link to suicidal behavior (Gottfried & Sidoti, 2024).

Analysis was also conducted from a social work perspective, highlighting strategies and preventive measures that foster holistic youth development, collaborative stakeholder involvement, and ethically informed decision-making. This approach ensured that interpretations of the data were not only scientifically rigorous but also socially responsible and actionable in real-world contexts.

Ethical Considerations

Given the highly sensitive nature of examining online gaming addiction in relation to suicidal behavior, this study was conducted with careful attention to established ethical research principles. The analysis prioritized the protection of vulnerable populations by avoiding any form of stigmatization or sensationalism, while ensuring that all data were interpreted and presented responsibly. Only credible, peer-reviewed, and ethically conducted sources were included to safeguard the scientific integrity of the study. Furthermore, particular attention was given to ethical reporting practices, recognizing that misrepresentation of such topics can inadvertently cause harm to youth, families, or communities (Xiao et al., 2025).

Embedding the social work perspective into ethical considerations reinforced a commitment to promoting the holistic well-being of youth, ensuring that all research findings and recommendations support protective interventions and community-based strategies.

Entertainment Media and Online Gaming: From Leisure Activity to Suicide Risk Among Youth

The contemporary world is witnessing a digital media revolution, driven by advances in information and communication technologies, profoundly shaping the socialization of children and adolescents (Al-Eifah, 2014). Youth today inhabit an interactive environment integrating digital communication and entertainment, including smartphones, the Internet, and various online games. While these technologies enhance social interaction and cognitive skills, they also expose young users to potential risks, including addiction and suicidal behavior (Smith & Lee, 2024).

Online games have emerged as the fourth most popular form of entertainment globally, after films, music, and sports. Their integration of technology with social interaction increases their influence on adolescents, particularly in Arab countries (Al-Shaferhab, 2017). These games have become a concern for socialization institutions due to their potential negative consequences, including exposure to cyberbullying, harassment, and other online risks (Patel & Ahmed, 2024).

Online Gaming and Psychological-Social Impact

Play, whether traditional or digital, is essential for mood regulation, stress relief, and personal development. Researchers emphasize that play fosters cognitive, social, and emotional growth (Ben Marzouk & Saad, 2015; Kouider, 2011). Online games represent a technologically advanced form of play, offering virtual worlds with potentially harmful content, such as

violent, gambling, or suicide-themed games (Barakat & Tawfiq, 2009; Language of the Era, 2018). These features can directly or indirectly affect adolescents' mental health, behavior, and decision-making processes (Chen & Zhao, 2025).

Internet as a Risk Amplifier

The Internet is a core technological and communication tool, valued for its accessibility, speed, diversity, and interactivity (Language of the Era, 2018). However, its widespread use has heightened exposure to harmful content, including pornography, cyberbullying, harassment, and games promoting suicidal behavior (Sabti, 2017). Studies report that 60% of adolescents experience online harassment, 26% believe seeking parental or teacher help is ineffective, and 54% of Emirati youth are unaware that many of these behaviors are legally punishable (ICDL Arabia, 2015).

In Lebanon, a 2013 study of over 1,000 students revealed that 62% communicated with strangers online, 10% met them in person, and 7.8% experienced sexual harassment (Awijan, 2013). Recent evidence further confirms that high exposure to online gaming and interactive digital content correlates with increased mental health risks, including anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Smith & Lee, 2024; Chen & Zhao, 2025).

Connection to Suicidal Behavior

Evidence indicates that Internet and online gaming content can elevate suicidal risk among youth, particularly with games like the “Blue Whale Challenge,” which instruct players to complete escalating tasks culminating in self-harm (Ghanmi, 2018; Ibrahim, 2018). These findings align with the qualitative observations from our PhD study, where participants—including one of the suicide attempters—identified social media and online gaming as significant contributing factors prior to the attempt. Such accounts highlight the urgent need to investigate how specific entertainment media can act as triggers for suicidal behavior (Patel & Ahmed, 2024; Chen & Zhao, 2025).

Taken together, the evidence shows that online gaming is more than a leisure activity; it is a complex phenomenon with substantial psychological, social, and behavioral implications. Excessive engagement can lead to addiction, social isolation, and distorted identity formation, which may escalate into aggression, mental health challenges, and increased vulnerability to self-harm. These observations highlight the importance of closely examining adolescent suicidal behavior, providing a foundation for exploring the underlying mechanisms through the framework of the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide.

Negative Effects of Online Gaming

The following analysis addresses the multifaceted negative effects of online gaming on youth, highlighting behavioral, psychological, and social risks associated with excessive or unregulated engagement.

Video Game Addiction and Behavioral Risks

Researchers have consistently highlighted that video games, particularly online games, can trigger addictive behaviors akin to Internet Gaming Disorder (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2019). Statistics indicate that excessive gaming fosters negative behavioral patterns, including social isolation, depression, aggression, and impaired self-control, which collectively contribute to multidimensional gaming addiction (Abdelhamid, 2019; Smith & Lee, 2024). A major factor exacerbating these effects is the unrestricted accessibility of these games, allowing youth to engage at any time without supervision.

Prevalence of Online Gaming Addiction

The rapid spread of online gaming in Arab societies has turned these digital games into a dominant leisure activity among youth, attracting them with vivid graphics, immersive storylines, and interactive adventures (Al-Shafeerhab, 2016). Over time, this engagement can escalate into addiction—a behavioral and psychological condition characterized by the inability to control gaming behavior, with severe psychological, social, and health consequences (Abdelhamid, 2019; Chen & Zhao, 2025). Officially recognized by the APA as a mental health disorder in 2019, gaming addiction affects approximately 5–15%

of adolescents in various countries, with males disproportionately impacted compared to females (Al-Shafeerhab, 2016; Patel & Ahmed, 2024).

Several factors contribute to gaming addiction among adolescents, including the desire to escape real-life challenges, a sense of emptiness, and the appeal of virtual worlds offering empowerment, social belonging, and teamwork (Abdelhamid, 2019). Features such as immediate rewards, level progression, and online social networks intensify addictive behaviors. Family dynamics also play a critical role: ineffective parental communication or using games as a distraction increases dependence, particularly when parents themselves are engaged in digital devices (Al-Amoudi, 2009; Abdelhamid, 2019).

Social Isolation and Psychological Disorders

Individuals most susceptible to gaming addiction often exhibit social isolation and difficulties forming meaningful offline relationships due to fear of ridicule or rejection (Barakat & Tawfiq, 2009). The immersive digital environment provides temporary relief and facilitates shallow social interactions, which can later escalate into harmful patterns affecting social life. Excessive gaming has been linked to increased risk of depression, attention deficits, obsessive-compulsive tendencies, weakened family bonds, and reduced social support (Al-Arab, 2017; Smith & Lee, 2024).

Aggressive Behavior Patterns

Online games, particularly those involving role-playing in violent, military, or culturally charged contexts, often convey symbolic messages and hidden agendas, reinforcing aggressive behavior among players (Kouider, 2011). The American Psychological Association (APA) reports a consistent link between violent games and aggression, which can manifest in school violence, antisocial behavior, and reduced prosocial conduct (Ben Marzouk & Saad, 2015; Patel & Ahmed, 2024).

Advanced Risks: Crime and Suicide

In the absence of supervision, online games can escalate to criminal behaviors or even suicidal tendencies. Adolescents fully immersed in games may follow dangerous in-game instructions, increasing risk-taking and self-harm (Ibrahim, 2018; Sabti, 2017; Chen & Zhao, 2025). The risk is particularly high among teenagers due to their competitive nature and strong need for self-affirmation. This aligns directly with observations from our PhD study, where participants—including a suicide attempter—identified specific online games as contributing factors preceding suicide attempts, highlighting the urgency for preventive measures (Smith & Lee, 2024; Patel & Ahmed, 2024).

Online Gaming and Suicidal Behavior

Online games have been described as "mythical illusions," attracting youth into immersive virtual worlds often hidden from parental supervision and experienced in complete isolation. While the intended purpose of these games is entertainment, their content can carry harmful messages, contributing to psychological distress and, in some cases, fatal outcomes such as suicide or violent behavior (Al-Manar, 2018; Chen & Zhao, 2025). Researchers have identified approximately 38 games classified as "suicide-promoting," including Blue Whale Challenge, Mariam, Pokémon, and Fire Fairy. These games manipulate young players, encouraging isolation and performing extreme behaviors, sometimes leading to self-harm.

The internet also provides extensive access to information on suicide. Analyses of search engine results have shown that typical queries yield over a dozen suicide-related terms, such as "how to commit suicide" or "best ways to kill yourself," and approximately half of the top 10 sites for each term provide detailed instructions on suicide (Ibrahim, 2018; Patel & Ahmed, 2024).

Virtual Worlds and Identity Formation

Virtual worlds are three-dimensional programs simulating reality, allowing users to interact and create what is called a "virtual life" (Barakat & Tawfiq, 2009). However, these spaces are often fantastical and highly engaging, encouraging youth to drift from real-life contexts into immersive digital experiences. This shift provides freedom of choice and experimentation but can distort their perception of reality, others' lifestyles, and even their self-concept (Al-Arab, 2017; Smith & Lee, 2024).

The danger of online gaming lies in users' limited awareness of game content. While some games can positively develop cognitive and creative skills, others expose children to negative messages, particularly when played excessively (Al-Haqaiq, 2017). Consequences include deprivation of beneficial real-world play, replacement by a distorted digital environment, academic decline, and reinforcement of aggressive or violent behaviors (Ben Marzouk & Saad, 2015; Chen & Zhao, 2025).

Psychological Isolation and Maladaptive Behaviors

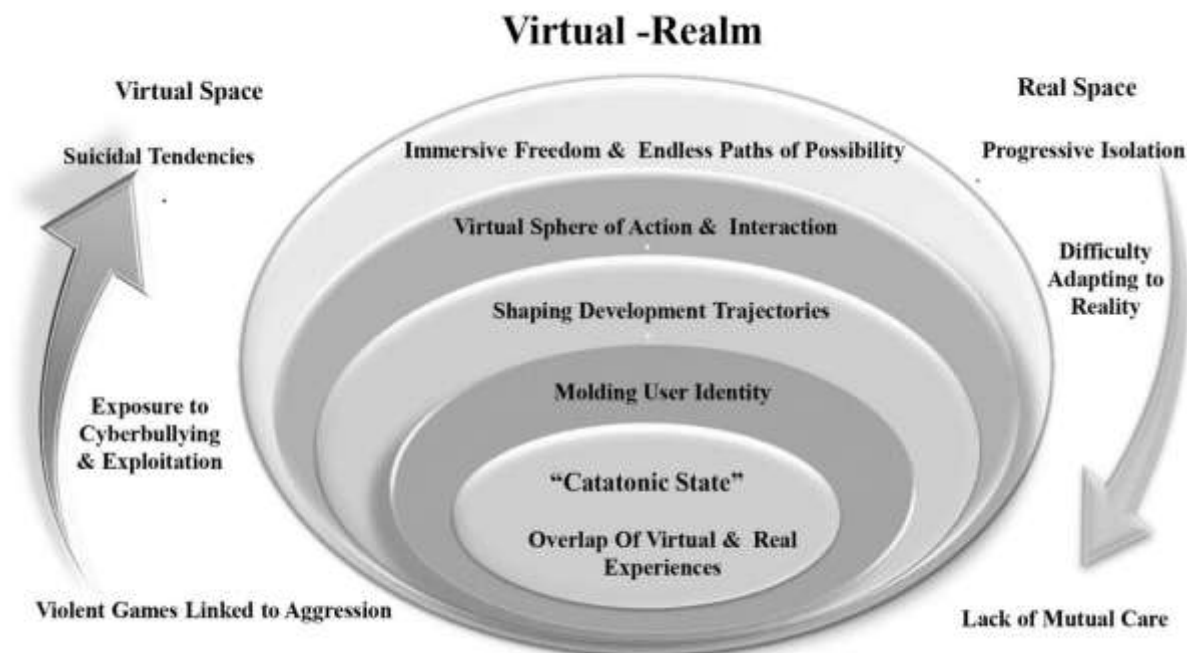
Excessive engagement in virtual worlds can isolate children from reality, creating dependence on the digital space and diminishing their ability to adapt to real-life challenges. Role models and cultural patterns in games are often emulated, leading to states in which children cannot distinguish reality from fantasy, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as “catatonic state” or digital indoctrination. This can result in social withdrawal, isolation, and compulsive online engagement (Barakat & Tawfiq, 2009; Patel & Ahmed, 2024).

The inability to separate virtual and real-world experiences may drive children to imitate game behaviors, such as identifying with characters like “Superman,” increasing aggressive tendencies (Taleb, 2018).

Collectively, these virtual environments foster alternative identities at the expense of real-world identity, heighten addiction risk, and expose youth to cyberbullying and exploitation. In real-world terms, this manifests as social integration difficulties, impaired communication skills, and progressive isolation, which is considered one of the most significant risk factors for suicidal behavior among adolescents (Smith & Lee, 2024; Chen & Zhao, 2025).

The following figure (1) summarizes the virtual realm, highlighting what it provides and its consequences in both virtual and real-world contexts, providing a framework for understanding the impacts of online gaming.

Figure (1)



Overall, the evidence confirms that excessive online gaming generates far-reaching psychological, social, and behavioral risks, ranging from addiction and aggression to isolation and suicidal vulnerability. Yet, despite growing documentation of these associations, the underlying mechanisms linking online gaming to suicidal behavior remain insufficiently understood. Addressing this gap requires moving beyond descriptive accounts toward theoretical models capable of explaining why and

how these risks escalate into self-harm. The following sections therefore turn to suicidal behavior itself, with particular emphasis on the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide as a framework for interpreting these complex dynamics.

Suicidal Behavior

Suicide, or self-inflicted death, is a complex human behavior that has been documented throughout history. The French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1897) was the first to provide a systematic sociological framework for understanding suicide, attributing its roots to disruptions in social relationships (Durkheim, 1897).

Suicidal acts arise from a multitude of factors, including psychological and physical illnesses, wars, conflicts, and economic hardship. A modern manifestation of this phenomenon is "digital suicide," where exposure to online content, including social media and gaming, can act as a precipitating factor (World Health Organization [WHO], 2014).

Theoretical perspectives on suicide vary. Freud (cited in Joiner, 2007) described suicide as self-directed violence, whereas others interpret it as a cry for help, reflecting an attempt to escape intolerable social or personal circumstances. Evidence indicates that many individuals contemplating suicide are not necessarily seeking death itself, but rather relief from psychological pain, as interventions and support can prevent many attempts (WHO, 2014).

Statistically, suicidal behavior is the second leading cause of death among individuals aged 15–29 and the third among those aged 10–14 (WHO, 2014). Globally, approximately 800,000 individuals die by suicide each year—equivalent to one death every 40 seconds. The International Association for Suicide Prevention reports that there are roughly 3,000 suicides daily worldwide, with 20–30 attempts for each completed death. Among those aged 15–24, there may be 100–200 attempts per suicide death (WHO, 2014).

The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide

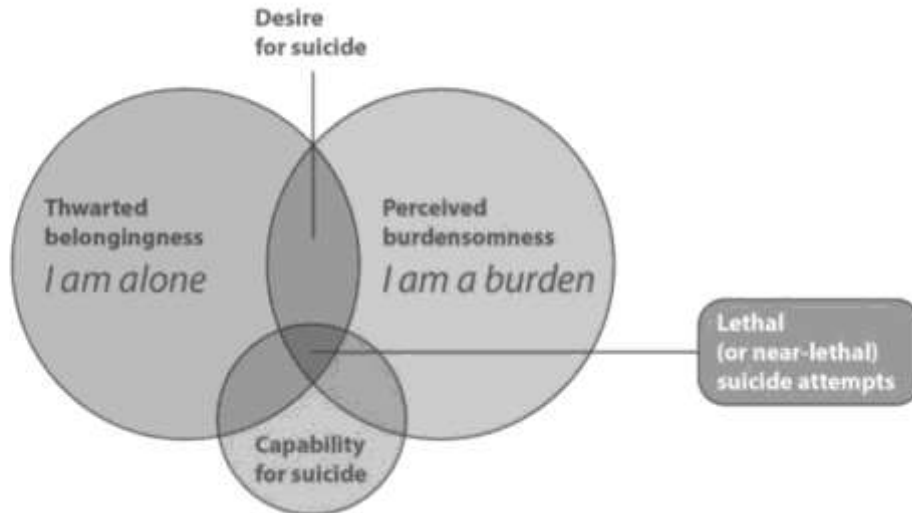
One prominent framework for understanding suicidal behavior is Joiner's (2007) Interpersonal Theory of Suicide, which proposes that suicidal desire arises from two core psychological states: thwarted belongingness, reflecting social isolation, and perceived burdensomeness, the belief that one's existence is a burden to others. Psychoanalytic perspectives further highlight self-directed hatred, chronic shame, and diminished self-worth as additional contributors to suicide risk.

However, these factors alone are insufficient to produce a fatal suicide attempt. A third element, the acquired capability for suicide, is necessary—manifesting as desensitization to pain and fear of death through repeated exposure to injury, violence, or self-harm. When these three elements intersect—social isolation, perceived burdensomeness, and acquired capability—the risk of an actual suicide attempt rises significantly (Joiner, 2007; Van Orden et al., 2010).

Importantly, evidence suggests that exposure to certain online games and social media content may exacerbate feelings of isolation and burdensomeness among adolescents, thereby amplifying the psychological conditions that facilitate suicidal behavior. This underscores the critical role of digital environments in understanding and preventing youth suicide.

The following figure (2) summarizes the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide, illustrating how thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, and acquired capability interact to influence suicidal behavior.

Figure (2)



By situating suicidal behavior within the framework of the Interpersonal Theory, it becomes clear how external influences—such as online gaming—can amplify core risk factors of isolation, perceived burdensomeness, and desensitization to harm. Within this theoretical lens, this analysis turns to the negative impacts of online gaming and their relationship to suicidal behavior, showing how virtual interactions, violent content, and immersive environments may exacerbate vulnerabilities and contribute to pathways of self-destructive behavior.

Negative Impacts of Online Gaming and Their Relationship to Suicidal Behavior

Building upon previous discussions, the negative consequences of excessive engagement with online games—particularly social isolation, depression, and weakened interpersonal bonds—can render adolescents highly vulnerable to exploitation, cyberbullying, and emotional manipulation (Barakat & Tawfiq, 2009; Buokhtamin, 2018).

Research indicates that over 80% of online games involve repetitive violent scenarios, such as killing, warfare, destruction, and self-harm, which may indirectly train users to normalize or enact aggressive behaviors (Buokhtamin, 2018). While technological advancements have made game graphics increasingly realistic and immersive, these developments can intensify risk for susceptible youth. In extreme cases, such exposure has contributed to adolescent suicides worldwide, including in several Arab countries. Consequently, what was initially designed as a source of entertainment can, under specific conditions, become a potential instrument of harm or self-destruction (Caceda, 2014).

It is important to note that suicidal behavior is not caused by a single factor. Instead, it emerges dynamically from interactions between risk and protective factors over time. The presence of one or more risk factors does not necessarily result in suicide; effective protective factors can mitigate risks, forming the foundation for suicide prevention strategies (Joiner, 2011; Wasserman, 2016).

Linking Online Gaming Risks to Suicidal Behavior

The evidence reviewed highlights the multifaceted risks posed by excessive engagement with online games, particularly among adolescents. Social isolation, disrupted family relationships, exposure to violent content, and immersion in virtual worlds not only increase vulnerability to psychological distress but may also create pathways to suicidal ideation and behavior (Barakat & Tawfiq, 2009; Buokhtamin, 2018).

From a social work perspective, it is essential to view these risks within a **dynamic interaction of individual, familial, and environmental factors**. While online games alone do not determine suicidal behavior, they can amplify pre-existing

vulnerabilities—such as depression, low self-esteem, or exposure to abuse—by providing immersive environments that normalize aggression, risk-taking, or self-harm (Caceda, 2014; Talat, 2018).

Adolescents engrossed in virtual worlds may exhibit early warning signs, including withdrawal from social interactions, mood fluctuations, decreased academic engagement, and adoption of behaviors seen in-game, which can escalate to dangerous levels if unmonitored. The combination of repetitive violent game mechanics, social reinforcement in online networks, and lack of parental supervision may act as a catalyst, facilitating the transition from ideation to attempt (Joiner, 2011; Wasserman, 2016).

Therefore, understanding the role of online gaming as a potential risk factor requires a comprehensive approach that integrates psychological assessment, family monitoring, and social interventions. Early identification of risk patterns, education for parents and educators, and targeted social work strategies can mitigate the harmful effects of gaming and reduce the likelihood of suicidal behavior among vulnerable youth (WHO, 2014; Talat, 2018).

Understanding the negative impacts of online gaming highlights the mechanisms through which adolescents may develop heightened vulnerability to suicidal behavior. Beyond recognizing these risk factors, it is essential to identify the observable warning signs that often precede suicidal acts. Early detection allows parents, caregivers, and educators to intervene before ideation escalates into action. Accordingly, the following section focuses on these early warning signs, emphasizing the importance of vigilance and proactive monitoring, particularly for youth deeply engaged in online gaming environments.

Early Warning Signs of Suicidal Behavior: A Basis for Prevention

Contrary to the misconception that suicide occurs suddenly, statistics indicate that more than 70% of suicide cases are preceded by verbal or behavioral warning signs. Awareness of these indicators by parents, caregivers, and peers can significantly facilitate early intervention and prevention (World Health Organization [WHO], 2014).

Given that most victims are children and adolescents, vigilance is especially crucial for those deeply engaged in online gaming. Key early warning signs include (Al-Anbari, 2010; Al-Aifa, 2014; Lahgat Al-Asr, 2018; Mohammad, 2018):

- Spending excessive time in isolation, avoiding interaction with family or friends.
- Patterns of online activity at unusual hours.
- Sudden changes in social media accounts, including profile pictures, avatars, or posted content.
- Noticeable mood fluctuations, depression, or heightened feelings of distress.
- Declining academic performance or loss of interest in routine activities.
- Increased engagement with dark or melancholic music as a form of emotional expression.
- Excessive identification or empathy with other individuals who have attempted suicide.

A common misconception is that adolescents' references to suicide are merely attention-seeking. However, even joking about suicide can indicate genuine risk (WHO, 2014). Some harmful online games exacerbate these risks by requiring players to perform specific physical actions as part of challenges, such as writing "YES" on the hand in early stages of the "Blue Whale Challenge" and sending photographic evidence to game organizers (Talat, 2018).

This evidence underscores the critical importance of monitoring adolescents' online activities and understanding the potential pathways through which online games can influence suicidal behavior.

Recognizing early warning signs is only the first step; effective prevention requires a comprehensive approach grounded in social work principles, which emphasizes family engagement, community collaboration, and the creation of supportive environments to safeguard adolescents and guide their safe use of online technologies.

Recommendations for Preventing the Misuse of Online Games: A Social Work Perspective

A social work-informed framework provides a foundational approach for addressing the risks associated with online gaming among youth, emphasizing holistic well-being—including physical, mental, emotional, and social development—these

principles guide preventive strategies that actively involve families, educational institutions, and community stakeholders (Abdelhamid, 2019). Effective prevention relies on collaboration, advocacy, and evidence-informed interventions to reduce vulnerabilities and promote safe and healthy digital interactions. Embedding social work principles across all preventive measures ensures shared responsibility, ethical guidance, and sustainable solutions tailored to adolescents' diverse needs.

Youth education and safeguarding their physical, mental, and psychological well-being is a collective responsibility shared by families, society, and the state (Abdelhamid, 2019). At the community level, preventive measures include identifying key stakeholders, assessing needs and available resources, and coordinating efforts among relevant institutions to manage risks and support safe digital engagement (Salim, 2001).

Protective Measures in Lebanon

The Lebanese experience exemplifies the application of these principles. The "Child Safety on the Internet" project emphasizes state responsibility in protecting children online through collaboration with all stakeholders, raising awareness about safe internet use and the risks of misuse while promoting children's healthy development (Oweijan, 2013).

The Lebanese Juveniles Law No. 422 ensures protection for children and adolescents at risk, granting judges authority to take necessary protective measures (Articles 25–26). Lebanese penal law also addresses suicide and incitement, penalizing those who assist, encourage, or instruct others to commit such acts, with penalties ranging from several months to life imprisonment depending on severity (Buokhtamin, 2018).

Despite these legal frameworks, research indicates that only 30% of responsibility lies with official authorities, while 70% rests with families. Thus, preventive strategies must engage all stakeholders—including families, schools, and community groups—to achieve meaningful outcomes (Oweijan, 2013).

In alignment with these principles, the Educational Research and Development Center implemented the "Child Safety on the Internet" project on February 5, 2013, coinciding with Safer Internet Day. The initiative focused on raising awareness among children, parents, and caregivers, while developing the skills of educators and social counselors to support children navigating the digital environment safely and to guide parents in creating protective home settings (Oweijan, 2013).

Community-Level Interventions

At the community level, preventive strategies focus on mobilizing stakeholders and policymakers to implement protective measures that ensure children's safety online. This includes enacting relevant laws and procedural mechanisms to safeguard user privacy and prevent exposure to harmful digital content (Fakhar, 2015). Complementary measures, such as public awareness campaigns, media outreach, and engaging recreational activities, further promote responsible and safe digital practices among youth (Mirza, 2013).

While certain online activities and secretive challenges, such as the Blue Whale Challenge, cannot be fully prohibited, proactive measures can mitigate risks and create safer online environments (Shrifahab, 2017). These measures include identifying vulnerable individuals, monitoring children's online behaviors, and observing any notable behavioral changes that may indicate distress.

International examples highlight the importance of legal enforcement in digital safety. For instance, the Russian Parliament criminalized the creation of suicide-promoting groups on social media, imposing penalties of up to six years in prison for individuals who encourage minors to commit suicide (Buokhtamin, 2018). Such legislative measures, when combined with community monitoring and education, strengthen protective frameworks and reduce the potential for online harm.

Family and Educational Institution Roles

The main challenge extends beyond excessive gaming to include the lack of parental awareness regarding guiding children's online behavior at home or in internet centers. Families, as the basic societal unit, carry responsibility for upbringing and

monitoring (Al-Amoudi, 2009). Modern social changes have challenged traditional family functions, increasing risks such as internet gaming addiction and digital suicide. Families can reduce risks through:

- Educating parents about psychological, physical, and social risks of unmonitored gaming (Oweijan, 2013).
- Encouraging parental monitoring of children's websites and warning against chat rooms or irregular groups (Ibrahim, 2018).
- Providing guidance on recognizing early warning signs of suicidal behavior and consulting mental health professionals when needed (Mohamed, 2018).
- Teaching parents digital strategies to limit communications to trusted friends and relatives (Ibrahim, 2018).
- Avoiding early exposure to electronic games (ages 2–6) and selecting age-appropriate devices and games (Ibrahim, 2018).
- Limiting daily playtime to a maximum of three hours (Mohamed, 2018).

Schools serve as pivotal partners in preventing technology-related addiction, as youth are often more receptive to guidance from teachers than parents (Ben Marzouq & Saad, 2015). Recommended school-based interventions include:

- Assigning psychological experts or internet counselors to guide students (Oweijan, 2013).
- Implementing reporting systems to track abnormal student behavior (Oweijan, 2013).
- Incorporating awareness activities for children and parents into curricular and extracurricular programs (Oweijan, 2013).

Empowering Adolescents

Prevention also requires **direct engagement with youth**, involving open discussions on the benefits and risks of online gaming. For children showing signs of addiction, teaching self-help skills is essential, such as gradually limiting playtime and replacing screen time with beneficial activities like sports or family interaction, avoiding harsh punishment (Salim & Abdel-Baqi, 1993; Al-Amoudi, 2009).

Youth empowerment strategies include:

- Developing self-monitoring skills and safe gaming practices (Brook & Mahmoudi, 2018).
- Educating children on creating lists of safe and purposeful websites (Barqa', 2017).
- Raising awareness of both positive and negative aspects of gaming to strengthen threat recognition (ICDL Arabia, 2015).
- Involving children in generating alternatives and solutions for safe gaming practices (Qaymi, 2010).
- Gradually limiting screen time and replacing it with beneficial activities, such as sports or family interactions, avoiding harsh punishment (Salim & Abdel-Baqi, 1993; Al-Amoudi, 2009).

5. Integrating Social Work Principles into Prevention

Framing prevention within social work principles ensures that all interventions prioritize holistic well-being, shared responsibility, and sustainable solutions. Family, school, community, and youth-focused strategies are interconnected within a cohesive framework, promoting safe, supportive, and evidence-informed approaches to managing online gaming risks. This integration enables preventive programs to respond effectively to adolescents' complex needs while fostering ethical, participatory, and sustainable outcomes (Abdelhamid, 2019; Healy, 2014).

Conclusion

Although reported deaths linked to online gaming in Arab countries remain relatively rare, the rise of aggressive and suicidal behaviors highlights the need to strengthen protective measures and promote healthier interactions between youth and society. Excessive engagement with online games can amplify psychological vulnerabilities, including social isolation, emotional distress, and desensitization to harm, increasing the risk of self-harm or suicidal behavior.

A social work perspective emphasizes holistic, ethically guided interventions that prioritize adolescents' well-being. Families, schools, and communities play pivotal roles through supervision, awareness programs, and structured preventive measures. Coordinated efforts among caregivers, educators, health professionals, and policymakers ensure participatory and sustainable strategies.

By addressing both individual vulnerabilities and environmental influences, evidence-informed interventions can foster resilience, digital literacy, and safe engagement in virtual environments. While online gaming offers cognitive and recreational benefits, targeted preventive strategies are essential to safeguard youth, reduce risks, and promote balanced, responsible use of digital platforms.

Reference:

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"من البكسل إلى الهلاك: المخاطر الخفية للإنتمار في الألعاب الإلكترونية"

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الملخص:

أحدثت التكنولوجيا الافتراضية تحولاً جذرياً في طرق تفاعل الشباب الاجتماعي وبناء هويتهم. من بين هذه التقنيات، برزت الألعاب الإلكترونية كأحد أكثر أشكال الترفيه تأثيراً، حيث تخلق عوالم افتراضية غامرة يقضي فيها المراهقون أوقاتاً متزايدة. ومع أن هذه المنصات قد توفر تحفيزاً معرفياً وتفاعلاً اجتماعياً، إلا أن الأدلة المتزايدة تشير إلى مخاطر كبيرة تشمل الإدمان، والتعرض لمحتوى ضار، والارتباط بالسلوكيات المؤذية للذات والانتحار، كما يظهر في حالات مثل "تحدي الحوت الأزرق".

يفحص هذا البحث العلاقة بين الألعاب الإلكترونية والسلوك الانتحاري لدى الشباب، من منظور العمل الاجتماعي، مسلطاً الضوء على الأبعاد السلوكية والنفسية والاجتماعية كأساس لتطوير استراتيجيات وقائية قائمة على الأدلة. ويستند البحث إلى رؤى أولية من بحث الدكتوراه الذي ألهم هذه الدراسة، بالإضافة إلى مصادر ثانوية تشمل الدراسات المحكمة، والتقارير الإعلامية، والبيانات الإحصائية العالمية، مما يتيح تحديد عوامل الخطر والضعف المرتبطة بالعوالم الافتراضية بشكل منهجي.

تشير النتائج إلى الحاجة الملحة لتدخلات وقائية تدمج مبادئ العمل الاجتماعي على مستوى الأسرة والمدرسة والمجتمع، مع التركيز على الرفاهية الشاملة، والمسؤولية المشتركة، والاستراتيجيات المستدامة. ويختتم البحث بتوصيات عملية تشمل حملات التوعية، والتشريعات الوقائية، والتعاون متعدد القطاعات لتعزيز استخدام آمن للتقنيات الرقمية.

يساهم هذا البحث في إثراء المعرفة حول المخاطر الرقمية، موضحاً دور الألعاب الإلكترونية كعامل مهم في السلوك الانتحاري لدى الشباب، ومقدماً مسارات فعالة للوقاية والتدخل في البيئات الافتراضية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الشباب؛ الألعاب الإلكترونية؛ العالم الافتراضي؛ خطر الانتحار؛ منظور العمل الاجتماعي؛ التدابير الوقائية؛