

Article:**Beyond the Screen: Socialization, Community Building, and Interpersonal Connectivity in Bangladesh Through Video Games****Syed Arman Hossain
Abdullah Al Fahad****Abstract**

This article explores the intricate dynamics of video gaming among the youth of Dhaka, Bangladesh, exploring its profound influence on socialization and community building within the framework of theories such as the Theory of Attainment, Imagined Community, User and Gratification Theory, and Bourdieu's concept of "social capital." Through a comprehensive blend of digital and autoethnographic methods, the research unveils how gaming transcends its solitary image to emerge as a potent cultural force in Bangladeshi society. The findings underscore the pivotal role of gaming in forging social bonds and nurturing communities, both in virtual realms and physical spaces. Gamers actively engage in collaboration, strategic planning, and the exchange of experiences, mirroring the dynamics of real-world social networks. Despite concerns regarding addiction, the article illuminates the impact of video games on social cohesion among the youth demographic. Furthermore, it inquires into gaming culture's remarkable resilience in the face of societal norms and regulatory challenges, shedding light on the adaptive strategies employed by gamers to navigate and thrive in diverse contexts. By exploring the intricate interplay between virtual and real-life experiences, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how video games shape socialization among urban youth in the ever-evolving landscape of Bangladesh.

Keywords

Video Games, Socialization, Community Building, Imagined Communities, Social Capital

Introduction

In the intricate tapestry of human history, the emergence of video games stands as a recent phenomenon, reshaping the landscape of interactive entertainment. Once relegated to the fringes as a niche pursuit, video games have evolved into a cultural juggernaut, capturing the imaginations of youths and children with the advent of mobile gaming. This transformative wave has not only contested traditional leisure activities but has also woven a complex web of connectivity among players, ushering in a new social reality.

The phenomenon of online gaming in Bangladesh marks a paradigm shift, challenging conventional perceptions of social engagement (Hossain and Fahad 2024). While some label it as “unhealthy” or “anti-social,” others view it as an inherent part of the ongoing fourth industrial revolution. Regardless of the diverse perspectives, the undeniable truth remains—video games have ingrained themselves into the fabric of Bangladeshi society, finding resonance among a substantial portion of the population, especially among the youth.

This article embarks upon an anthropological journey to explore the cultural significance of socialization and community building among the youth through video gaming within the urban landscape of Bangladesh. As we navigate through the virtual landscapes of popular online mobile games in Bangladesh, we aim to understand how these digital realms transcend their virtual boundaries, creating a complex network of shared experiences, interactions, and collaborations among gamers. The journey unfolds by examining the cultural nuances, social implications, and the evolving nature of socialization and community building within the context of video gaming in Dhaka.

Literature Review

In realms of video games, interdependence, and cooperation, emerge as pivotal aspects requiring clarification to comprehend the socialization process. The distinction between “bridging ties” and “bonding ties” provides a conceptual framework. Bridging ties, characterized by breadth rather than

depth, expand social horizons (Putnam 2020; Williams 2006). In contrast, bonding ties entail deeper emotional connections, offering substantial support (Depping, Johanson, and Mandryk 2018; Putnam 2020). The prevailing research suggests that while games foster bridging ties, they are less likely to generate deep bonding ties among players (Huvila et al. 2010; Steinkuehler and Williams 2006; Williams 2006).

Depping and Mandryk's (2017) exploration reveals that multiplayer games strategically employ cooperation and interdependence mechanics to engage players. Cooperation involves collaborative pursuit of shared goals, fostering positive associations with relationship formation (Vella, Johnson, and Hides 2015). Games like *Animal Crossing* (Nintendo EAD 2002), actively promote social interaction through in-game mechanisms, counterintuitively encouraging online communication and connection (Ramsdell 2016).

Turning to research on specific games such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment Inc. 2004) and *Counter-Strike* (Valve Corporation and Turtle Rock Studios, Inc. 2003), scholars have unearthed the potential for generating social capital within gamer communities. *Animal Crossing* exemplifies the surge in social interaction in games, peaking in 2020 when it was used for birthday celebrations, highlighting its social impact (Lufkin 2020). Games like *Pokémon Go* (Nintendo Co., Ltd., The Pokémon Company, and Niantic, Inc. 2016) exemplify this trend by encouraging players to venture outdoors, fostering the formation of friendships beyond the digital realm. Contemporary game development emphasizes collaborative gameplay, requiring players to work together to achieve virtual objectives (Yee 2006). Social connections enhance gamer engagement and participation (Chen et al. 2006). Ethnographic studies on *Everquest* (Verant Interactive, Sony Online Entertainment Inc., and Darkpaw Games 1999; Jakobsson and Taylor 2003) and *Lineage* (NCsoft Corporation 2001; Steinkuehler 2007) reveal how player status within guilds and communication patterns establish social hierarchies and connections.

Fei Xiaotong (2015) suggests that gaming socialization mirrors real-world social networks, encompassing various types of interactions. Liu (2021) highlights—online friendships formed in games often extend into offline

connections, underscoring gaming's impact on social life. In their studies using virtual ethnography, Jakobsson and Taylor (2003) alongside Steinkuehler (2007) delved into gaming communities, discovering that gaming has evolved beyond solitary play, flourishing in today's interconnected digital landscape, which contrasts sharply with the era of couch co-op gaming.

Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts (2009) emphasize the impact of family, schools, media, gender, and broader societal influences on socialization, with gaming communities emerging as influential in the digital age. Gaming offers opportunities for self-identification and connection, especially among the youth (Genner and Süss 2017). Lenhart (2015) highlights the prevalence of social gaming, with the majority of teen gamers feeling connected to their gaming peers. Playing with others not only enhances the enjoyment of the activity but also contributes to the formation and maintenance of friendships (Kaye and Bryce 2012; Lenhart 2015; Fitzgerald 2021).

Video gaming has become a complex social phenomenon, where online play is now essential (Williams 2006; Mäyrä 2008). From an anthropological perspective, gaming provides a rich field for studying how people interact, form groups, deal with exclusion, and develop their sense of self (Sığın 2019). Kowert et al. (2014) explore the connection between gaming friendships and emotional sensitivity, finding that emotionally sensitive individuals show distinct patterns in how they engage and form buddy networks within games.

Single-player narrative-driven games blend story and challenges, sparking social interaction beyond gameplay. Puzzles and tasks build communities where gamers collaborate and share tips (Grusec and Hastings 2015). Online gaming platforms foster both romantic and platonic relationships, resembling other social platforms (Peris et al. 2002; Ridings and Gefen 2006). These virtual spaces support forming and maintaining social relationships (Kowert et al. 2014; Schaefer et al. 2011).

The technological evolution shaping contemporary society is evident in the rise of online gaming communities. Platforms such as YouTube and Twitch, crucial for sharing gameplay content, are integral to the gaming

community's social fabric (Brennan 2018). Twitch, especially prominent as a live streaming platform, boosts the global popularity of games like *League of Legends* (Riot Games, Inc. 2009; Clement 2023). Social media platforms further enhance social capital by fostering active engagement and interaction among gamers (Brennan 2018).

The storytelling aspect of video games has evolved with online experiences, keeping players engaged and generating revenue (Stenros, Paavilainen, and Mäyrä 2009). Platforms like Steam saw expansive communities, especially during the pandemic, as games helped people stay connected during lockdowns (Griffiths 2020). While socialization in gaming isn't new (Lufkin 2020), the pandemic highlighted how essential games became for maintaining connections when traditional social avenues were restricted (Griffiths 2020).

Social interaction is vital for the growth and vibrancy of online gaming communities, where social capital thrives through cooperative behavior and mutual reliance (Trepte, Reinecke, and Juechems 2012). These communities build social capital via gameplay and diverse networking options. Identity formation, explored by Goffman (2022), extends online, with individuals crafting their identities in a digital, competitive environment (boyd 2006; Pearson 2009). This online identity formation is a deliberate act of self-representation influenced by virtual portrayals and behaviors.

The ethnographic exploration of online gaming illuminates a complex social ecosystem characterized by cooperative gameplay, the accumulation of social capital, and the deliberate crafting of online identities. This dynamic environment extends beyond the confines of individual gameplay, fostering extensive connections and affiliations within specialized online gaming communities. The synergy between social interaction, shared play, and competitive engagement shapes the intricate tapestry of the contemporary gaming landscape.

Theoretical Approaches

Our exploration of how video games foster socialization and community building among Dhaka's youths primarily draws upon the following

theoretical perspectives: the *Theory of Attainment*, *Imagined Communities*, *User Gratification Theory* (UGT), and Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of "social capital." Each framework provides us with analytical insight through the course of our research.

The *Theory of Attainment*, proposed by Miller and Sinanan (2017), views technological progress as a driver of human advancement rather than a threat to established norms. It argues that technologies like transportation expand human capabilities without altering our fundamental essence. Building on this, Miller and Horst (2020) suggest that technological mediation evolves over time, shaping awareness and lifestyles rather than fundamentally changing humanity. Applying this theory to understand how gaming functions as a socialization process among Dhaka's youth, we see that gaming does not disrupt human connections; instead, it creates new opportunities for developing latent skills and social aspects. Through gaming, young people explore and enhance their abilities, collaborate in virtual environments, and form social bonds based on shared interests and goals.

Benedict Anderson's (2017) concept of *Imagined Communities* offers a profound perspective on how video games foster the creation of virtual communities among Dhaka's youth. Originally applied to nationalism, Anderson suggests that nations are imagined communities where shared identity transcends physical proximity. Sierra (2015) expands on this notion within the context of the digital realm emphasizing how shared interests and symbols shape these communities despite participants' hidden identities and minimal physical interaction.

In digital gaming communities, individuals unite around common goals despite not knowing each other's true identities, fostering a sense of camaraderie that spans geographical distances (Weiskirch 2020). This perspective enriches our understanding of socialization and online identities, illustrating how youths in Dhaka form meaningful connections within virtual realms created by video games. These digital interactions provide crucial avenues for social interaction and identity formation, particularly significant in urban environments where physical spaces for socializing may be limited.

User Gratification Theory (UGT) shifts focus from media content to why individuals consume it, emphasizing personal goals and needs as drivers (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch 1973; Ruggiero 2000). Media users seek benefits such as information, identity reinforcement, social interaction, entertainment, and escapism. In the digital era, UGT is crucial for understanding how digital platforms and social media meet diverse user needs such as social interaction, self-expression, and entertainment (Papacharissi and Mendelson 2011). Platforms like Facebook and Instagram serve as spaces for maintaining social connections, expressing identities, and finding entertainment, showing UGT's relevance in analyzing modern media use.

Online gaming illustrates UGT by offering benefits like achievement, competition, socialization, and escapism (Yee 2006). Games like *World of Warcraft* let players form virtual communities, collaborate, and satisfy social needs digitally. In our research, UGT provides a framework for interpreting gamers as active participants who seek various benefits through gaming experiences. It helps us understand why Dhaka's youth are attracted to specific video games, revealing how these motivations shape dynamic social interactions within gaming communities.

Pierre Bourdieu's framework of habitus, capital, and field provides a robust analytical tool for understanding societal dynamics and power relations. Habitus, shaped by socialization and experience, influences individuals' behaviors and perceptions within social contexts (Jenkins 2003; Wacquant 2014), guiding their engagement in cultural practices rooted in societal norms. Bourdieu's concept of capital—economic, cultural, and social—determines individuals' opportunities and social standing (Blunden 2021; Bourdieu 1986). In various social fields such as education and culture, individuals compete for and exchange these forms of capital (Swartz 1997; Crossley 2001), utilizing habitus to navigate power dynamics and achieve their objectives.

Applying Bourdieu's framework to gaming communities illuminates how cultural and social capital is acquired and utilized among youth in Dhaka. Within digital spaces, gaming serves not only as a platform for entertainment but also as a means of socialization and the display of social capital. Here,

gaming skills, knowledge of gaming culture, and networks within gaming communities become valuable resources that shape individuals' status and interactions.

Research Methods

In order to lay a solid foundation for our research, we embarked on an ethnographic journey from December 2022 to December 2023. By using a variety of research tools, including semi-structured interviews, digital ethnographic approach, and informal dialogue exchanges, we were immersed in the virtual and offline fields of video game culture. Based on our auto-ethnographic experience as avid gamers, with over a decade of combined history, we are analytically involved in video game culture during the research process.

We conducted interviews with 50 participants from Dhaka City, covering a wide range of ages, and genders. Besides face-to-face interviews, we facilitate virtual interviews using digital platforms such as Zoom, Facebook Messenger, and WhatsApp, to offer a precise perspective that reflects the diversity of our research environment. We provided all participants with pseudonyms to safeguard their anonymity and confidentiality, thereby fostering a safe and conducive environment for open dialogue and reflection. We crafted a comprehensive questionnaire with 40 questions—25 closed-ended and 15 open-ended—to deeply investigate the social dynamics among youth gamers in Dhaka. From a diverse group of 50 individuals (35 males, 15 females) aged 15–24, selected based on their gaming experiences and preferences, we gathered valuable insights.

In addition to the questionnaire, we conducted two focus group discussions to foster group dynamics and collective insights. One focus group discussion was held online with *Clash of Clans* (Supercell Oy 2012) players, including ten males and two females, while the offline session involved *PUBG* (PUBG Corporation 2017) players, comprising six males and two females. These discussions yielded rich, contextualized data on gaming practices, community interactions, and socialization processes.

To supplement our primary data, we used the digital ethnographic approach to observe dedicated Facebook groups and observed gamer posts, followed by analyzing content from YouTube channels focused on *Clash of Clans* and *PUBG*. We selected Facebook and YouTube for their popularity among youth in Bangladesh, providing a representative view of the online gaming community. We compile data from semi-structured interviews, participant observations, informal dialogues, virtual interviews (conducted via Zoom, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp), focus group discussions, and content analysis driven by a digital ethnographic approach. Organizing this data systematically, we categorize all transcripts, notes, and recorded sessions for thorough analysis.

Contextualizing Video Games in Bangladesh

Gaming in Bangladesh, once a luxury enjoyed mainly by the affluent with consoles like Nintendo and SEGA, began expanding in the 2000s with the rise of personal computers, although high game costs and piracy were widespread issues. The advent of smartphones and widespread internet access transformed gaming into a cultural mainstay among youth, breaking down socioeconomic barriers. By 2023, Bangladesh's video game market is expected to reach US\$633.6 million, with 26.9 million users projected by 2027 (Statista 2023), highlighting the surge in mobile gaming that mirrors global trends. Despite economic challenges, smartphones have made gaming accessible to a broader spectrum of society, fostering inclusivity and enhancing social and cultural participation in Bangladesh's evolving landscape.

Esports, valued at over US\$1.08 billion and projected to exceed US\$1.62 billion by 2024 (Statista 2023), has gained global popularity, offering viable career paths as players or developers from once being seen merely as a hobby. While developed countries feature esports competitions with substantial prize money and scholarships, Bangladesh is still in the early stages of embracing professional gaming due to limited awareness and understanding (Khalidun 2021). This global shift highlights gaming's evolution into a serious profession, a transition yet to be fully acknowledged in Bangladesh.

The lack of recreational spaces in Dhaka's urban areas has led to widespread adoption of video games as a primary leisure activity (Islam 2022; Ejaj 2018), offering a convenient alternative for social interaction and entertainment amidst limited physical options. Parenting practices in Dhaka increasingly rely on smartphones and digital devices to entertain children (Lev and Elias 2020), reflecting global trends where digital technologies shape children's leisure and social interactions in urban settings (Livingstone et al. 2015). Video games thus serve as a community hub for those lacking other social outlets (Hossain and Fahad 2024). During the pandemic, video games gained recognition for fostering social connections, with platforms like YouTube and Twitch experiencing increased usage (Zhu 2021). This trend was seen in Bangladesh, where widespread internet and smartphone access enabled urban youth to maintain social bonds through gaming despite social distancing, supported by initiatives like the World Health Organization's #PlayApartTogether (Takahashi 2020).

Gaming as Socialization in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, the world of gaming transcends mere entertainment; it emerges as a dynamic force intricately knitting together social bonds and nurturing community spirit. Beyond the thrill of gameplay, video games serve as vibrant platforms that extend their influence into real-world social dynamics. This article delves deep into the pivotal role of online mobile games in fostering socialization and community building among Dhaka's youth.

Popular titles such as *Clash of Clans*, *Player Unknown's Battle Grounds (PUBG)*, *Free Fire* (Garena, and 111 Dots Studio 2017), *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward, Inc. 2003), *EA FC* (formerly FIFA; EA Vancouver et al. 2016), and *eFootball* (PES Productions 2021) stand not just as sources of amusement, but as virtual arenas where individuals converge, interact, and forge lasting alliances. These games facilitate a spectrum of social interactions, from strategic collaborations to casual chats, all within the immersive digital landscapes they provide. Through shared challenges and triumphs, players cultivate bonds that transcend the screen, nurturing a sense of belonging and camaraderie.

In Dhaka, these virtual communities thrive, offering spaces where youth can connect, communicate, and collaborate, irrespective of physical distances. The allure of these games lies not only in their gameplay mechanics but also in their ability to simulate environments where friendships are forged, skills are honed, and social networks are expanded. As such, they represent more than just recreational pastimes; they embody modern platforms that mirror and influence social dynamics, enriching the fabric of community life in Bangladesh's bustling capital.

Social connections through gaming

In Dhaka, Bangladesh, gaming has evolved from a niche entertainment genre to a vital pastime, especially among the youth, driven by increased internet access and the widespread availability of smartphones. What was once a solitary activity has now become a significant medium for socialization and connection among young people. Our research conducted in Dhaka reveals that gaming is not just a popular recreational activity but also a platform that fosters social interactions and friendships. Respondents emphasized gaming as a shared space where they can interact, collaborate, and compete with peers locally and globally, transcending physical boundaries and nurturing a strong sense of belonging.

During our research, we queried a twenty-two-year-old university student regarding his experience with online games. He responded, stating, “playing Clash of Clans has really changed how I relate to others. In six years, focusing on teamwork has grown our clan and made our bonds stronger through shared wins and challenges. It’s like the camaraderie you get from playing regular sports, creating lasting friendships and a tight-knit gaming community.”¹ Thus, games like these provide platforms where youth collaborate, compete, and build relationships, mirroring traditional socialization processes in a digital context. This phenomenon depicts how technology, particularly gaming, is reshaping social interactions and cultural dynamics among the youth in Dhaka. It illustrates a modern adaptation of how individuals actively contribute to

¹ Interview with authors, April 14, 2023.

forming meaningful connections and shared experiences, akin to broader anthropological views on socialization (Sığın 2019; Baumeister and Leary 1995).

In the digital world, gamers playing titles like *Clash of Clans*, *PUBG*, and *Free Fire* often build real friendships that go beyond the virtual realm. A high school student shared their experience: “Yes, I met my online game partners in person. We started teaming up randomly during *PUBG* matches, connected, chatted while playing, and eventually decided to meet. I’ve made friends like him through *PUBG*.”² This story highlights how online gaming, especially in *PUBG*, fosters genuine friendships among teens, showing how virtual connections can grow into meaningful real-life relationships.

Online gaming challenges the stereotype of gamers as solitary figures by fostering deep and lasting friendships in real life. It’s a powerful force in reshaping social connections, especially during times of isolation (Lufkin 2020). Our research shows that over 70 percent of gamers recognize video games as a way to form meaningful friendships, highlighting the social importance of gaming culture. Regular gaming sessions with friends and family bridge distances and build camaraderie. A teenager from Dhaka reflects on this during the pandemic:

Online games became essential for me. Being apart from my cousins in Barisal and friends across Dhaka, gaming wasn’t just fun. It kept us connected daily, no matter the physical distance. Games like *PUBG* and *Call of Duty* allowed us to strategize, chat endlessly on voice calls, and share experiences. It was about companionship and normalcy during uncertain times.³

This case shows how online gaming supports mental well-being and maintains social bonds, especially in challenging times like pandemics.

Social gatherings among gamers in Dhaka, like *Fifa Nights*, are akin to cultural festivals, where participants bring food and create a festive atmosphere. These

² Interview with authors, September 9, 2023.

³ Interview with authors, February 11, 2023.

events highlight the unexpected social elements of video games. Though often viewed as solo activities, video games foster socialization beyond the screen. Enthusiasts bond, share experiences, and form social units resembling kin groups. These groups, while outside traditional kin structures, emulate them by gathering, learning, and sharing meals, creating a strong sense of belonging among gamers.

The gaming culture in Dhaka, Bangladesh, shows that video games are more than entertainment; they foster social interactions among young people. Games like *Clash of Clans*, *PUBG*, and *Free Fire* create spaces for dialogue, collaboration, and competition, facilitating meaningful connections. This aligns with the Theory of Attainment, which suggests technological advancements enhance human experiences without altering essential social behaviors. Stories of players forming real-world friendships after connecting through gaming illustrate how virtual interactions can become genuine relationships, supporting the idea that technology complements traditional social norms (Miller and Horst 2020). The widespread availability of smartphones has made gaming a common medium for social interaction among Bangladeshi youth, reflecting the Theory of Attainment's notion that technological progress meets societal demands for connectivity.

In addition, applying the User Gratifications Theory (UGT) to our research on social connections through gaming in Dhaka, Bangladesh, we find that young people use video games to meet their social needs. The increase in internet access and the widespread availability of smartphones have transformed gaming into a dynamic medium for interaction and connection, aligning with UGT's idea that individuals use media to satisfy needs such as social interaction, entertainment, and identity reinforcement (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch 1973; Ruggiero 2000).

In Dhaka, video games offer a communal space for young people to interact, collaborate, and compete with peers, fostering a sense of belonging and community. Multiplayer games like *Clash of Clans* and *PUBG* enable players to form teams, strategize, and work towards shared goals, reflecting traditional socialization processes within a digital framework. This role of video games

in fostering social interaction became especially evident during the Covid-19 pandemic when many young people turned to online gaming to maintain social ties. Playing games like *PUBG* and *Call of Duty* helped youths stay connected with friends and family, bridging geographical gaps, and fostering a sense of togetherness despite physical isolation. This highlights the social significance within gaming culture and the adaptability of UGT in explaining media consumption across different contexts.

Building communities

Clash of Clans, developed by Supercell in 2012, had 8.5 million daily users at its peak and earned US\$5.5 million (Ikhtear 2015). Players fortify bases and engage in coordinated clan wars, fostering a strong sense of community. Our study explored the community-building aspects of *Clash of Clans* in Bangladesh, revealing high player engagement. We identified over one hundred Bangladeshi Facebook groups dedicated to the game, with 19 groups having over ten thousand members and six groups exceeding one hundred thousand members. The largest group boasts 370 thousand participants. These groups actively share posts and use in-game chat features for communication, strategy sharing, and trading gaming IDs.

The community-building process in *Clash of Clans* creates a genuine sense of belonging, where virtual clan members form dedicated connections. An eighteen-year-old college student shared his experience:

Besides chatting in the game's chat section, we have a dedicated Facebook group where we celebrate victories, share our grief after a narrow defeat, strategize, and even talk about trivial things. I'm also part of a bigger group where players share strategies to win, review new troops and heroes, and upload videos and links. This place feels like home to me, and I've made many friends there.⁴

⁴ Interview with authors, October 27, 2023.

This highlights the role of gaming in fostering real communal ties. The extensive presence of *Clash of Clans* groups on Facebook underscores the importance of social media in maintaining socialization and sustaining gaming communities. These groups serve not only for gameplay but also for strategic discussions, trade activities, and information exchange. Games like *Clash of Clans* are more than strategic alliance simulations; they create a sense of belonging and community, reflecting the principles of social capital and interconnected relationships within online gaming communities (Kowert et al. 2014; Treppe, Reinecke, and Juechems 2012). The numerous Facebook groups dedicated to *Clash of Clans* in Bangladesh extend this virtual community, facilitating information exchange, camaraderie, and shared identities.

Player Unknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG), developed by Krafton, has become a hugely popular online multiplayer game since its initial PC release in December 2017, later expanding to consoles and mobile devices. With gameplay options ranging from individual to team-based, *PUBG* has amassed over 30 million users, cementing its status as a gaming phenomenon (Henningson 2022). The mobile version, *PUBG Mobile*, achieved an impressive 734 million downloads by December 2020, generating over US\$4.3 billion in revenue from mobile devices (Mukherji 2021). *PUBG* exemplifies the evolving landscape of social gaming, with its massive player base and robust social features fostering extensive community engagement on social media platforms (Liu 2021).

In Dhaka, games like *PUBG* and *Free Fire* have integrated socialization and community-building into their core experiences, leveraging platforms like Facebook and YouTube. Our research identified over 70 *PUBG*-related Bangladeshi Facebook groups, with the largest boasting 1.2 million members and 21 groups posting regularly each month. Action shooter games popular among Bangladeshi youth facilitate realistic interactions within the game, fostering friendships and social gatherings. *Free Fire* also enjoys widespread popularity with over 80 dedicated Facebook groups, the largest reaching 310 thousand members, illustrating the extensive engagement of mobile gaming communities in the country.

Games like *PUBG* and *Free Fire* exemplify video games evolving into social spaces, emphasizing player interactions. In interviews, youths described their experiences with *PUBG* communities. A school-going boy reflected:

PUBG groups on social media helped us bond with other players. Whether with friends or strangers, winning together matters. We've formed lasting connections, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic when we were all at home. Our private group has over fifty members who mostly met through the game. We watch videos from top *PUBG* players to learn strategies and improve.⁵

The prevalence of numerous *PUBG* and *Free Fire* groups on social media underscores the importance of virtual communities in gaming, akin to patterns seen in games like *Clash of Clans*. This highlights social media's role in shaping gaming communities, as observed in specific games where players collaborate, strategize, and form genuine connections in virtual spaces.

In our research, we have also observed that video game-driven socialization extends beyond individual games to include broader community events like Konami's *eFootball* and *EA FC* groups, which serve as significant social hubs. Thousands of gamers participate in friendly competition, exchange insights, and tackle challenges collectively. This elevates gaming in Dhaka as a contemporary form of social interaction, where these events serve as focal points for building communities and competitive spirit.

The rise of gaming communities and events reflects a cultural transformation in Bangladesh over the past decade. Video games serve as platforms where individuals meet, share ideas, strategize, and build enduring relationships, fulfilling fundamental human needs for belongingness and community (Baumeister and Leary 1995). These games create online spaces where players form virtual clans and alliances, akin to Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities, united through shared victories, defeats, and strategic planning. Despite the lack of face-to-face interaction, players forge strong connections reminiscent of traditional community bonds.

⁵ Interview with authors, July 21, 2023.

Platforms like Facebook and YouTube are vital for nurturing digital communities in Bangladesh, acting as central hubs where gamers communicate, share strategies, and trade in-game items. They enhance the social aspect of gaming by enabling interaction, idea exchange, and relationship building beyond the game itself. Games such as *Clash of Clans*, *PUBG*, and *Free Fire* illustrate how digital interactions have become integral to social life among young people in Bangladesh, fostering community through collaboration and teamwork in battles and clan wars. These “imagined” communities are based on shared experiences rather than physical proximity, representing modern forms of socialization that facilitate deep connections and meaningful interactions across traditional boundaries.

Games as a source of social capital

In Dhaka’s gaming community, players are motivated not just by victory but by a quest for excellence that extends beyond the game itself, influencing their social interactions and status. Mastering strategies, achieving high scores, and accomplishing impressive feats are ways gamers seek validation, enhancing both their skills and reputation among peers. One gamer equates their in-game accomplishments to real-life milestones, stating, “achieving in the game feels like scoring a century in cricket; it earns me recognition in the real world.”⁶ In Dhaka, gaming serves as a dynamic social arena where players strive for recognition, building social capital beyond mere leisure. Bourdieu’s concept of social capital, emphasizing group memberships and networks (Bourdieu 1986) elucidates how gamers augment their influence through teamwork, alliances, and shared expertise. These interactions cultivate a deep sense of belonging and mutual respect within the gaming community, fostering meaningful relationships that extend offline.

In Dhaka’s gaming culture, video games serve not only as sources of entertainment but also as platforms for social interaction and status-building. Players are motivated by a pursuit of excellence that extends beyond mere gameplay mechanics, driven by their fascination with graphics, narratives,

⁶ Interview with authors, August 12, 2023.

and virtual worlds. This early engagement sharpens their gaming skills and enhances their reputation within the community through shared interests and collaborative efforts. Pierre Bourdieu's sociological concepts, particularly his theory of social capital, illuminate how gamers accrue influence through teamwork, alliances, and expertise, fostering deep connections and mutual respect offline.

Bourdieu's concept of social capital highlights how gaming in Dhaka extends beyond entertainment to become a platform for social interaction and status-building. Players accrue social capital by mastering strategies, achieving high scores, and performing impressive feats, which validate their skills and enhance their reputation among peers, akin to achievements in sports and other social arenas. This pursuit of recognition illustrates gaming as a vibrant social arena where teamwork, alliances, and shared expertise foster influence within the community, promoting a sense of belonging and mutual respect among players both online and offline. Moreover, the appeal of video games in Dhaka transcends gameplay mechanics, offering social benefits through engagement with graphics, narratives, and immersive virtual worlds that shape players' identities and social standing.

Addiction, cultural reaction, and a unique socialization process

In recent years, technological advancements and widespread internet availability have transformed leisure activities in Bangladesh, notably increasing online video game engagement. Concerns among parents about the potentially addictive nature of these games prompted government intervention, including bans on popular titles like *PUBG Mobile* and *Free Fire* (Hossain and Fahad 2024). These measures reflect societal responses to perceived threats, especially among youth. Despite bans, gamers have adapted by using Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) to continue playing, underscoring the enduring influence of these games on Bangladesh's cultural landscape.

This dilemma reflects a global challenge where rapid digital entertainment growth surpasses regulatory frameworks and societal norms. Bans on games like *PUBG Mobile* and *Free Fire* in Bangladesh (*The Daily Star* 2021)

acknowledge concerns about video game addiction but also underscore their deep-seated importance in youth culture. Far from eradicating gaming, these measures highlight their enduring appeal and significance in young people's daily lives. The interaction of technological progress, parental anxieties, and governmental actions paints a picture of a society navigating the transformative effects of digital entertainment. Prohibitive measures highlight a tension between upholding traditional values and adjusting to changing leisure trends, signaling a broader societal transition.

The intergenerational friction—manifested in parental concerns, government regulations, and the resilient response of the gaming community, paints a vivid picture of a society in flux. As video games continue to redefine leisure and social dynamics, navigating this uncharted territory necessitates a nuanced understanding of the evolving cultural paradigms and their implications for the youth in Bangladesh. Dhaka's name evokes an image of dense population, urbanization, and rapid, unplanned urbanization. In this image, the physical space for socialization and recreation is sacrificed. This sacrifice compels the youth to seek alternative avenues for their community building. In this context, video games appear as the platforms which provide these often sought social spaces.

Unlike other global cities, which have established infrastructures for youth engagement, Dhaka has constrained the space for the youth in favor of commercial buildings. Thus, virtual gaming communities have adopted a particularly pronounced and seemingly essential role. Dhaka has swiftly adopted smartphones and internet access in the city has been nearly ubiquitous despite economic disparities. Pair the facts with local cultural nuances—Dhaka becomes a compelling case study on how digital gaming platforms become intertwined with everyday life. In our research, we observed how global gaming phenomena are localized and adapted in the city. Cultural specifics in the city—social norms, educational realities, and familial expectations—lend a rich layer of complexity to the research. Such complexity distinguishes it from similar research in other regions. In a city, where access to resources is subject to rampant inequality, competition, and privilege—video games offer youths from diverse backgrounds an equal opportunity to

participate in these digital social networks. Such aspects may offer avenues for fostering inclusivity and democratization of social interaction in an economically stratified society. Gaming communities in Bangladesh show resilience in navigating challenges such as regulatory measures and game bans. These situations prompt discussions on gaming's societal influence while motivating gamers to innovate—using VPNs to bypass restrictions is an example of such creative strategies. This highlights their dedication to maintaining social connections and gaming enjoyment. Hence, this research is uniquely positioned to address local issues pertinent to Dhaka, such as the impacts of urbanization on youth socialization, the challenges of maintaining cultural heritage in a digital age, and the ways in which global digital trends are localized.

Concluding Remarks

In Dhaka, gaming has evolved from simple entertainment to a cornerstone of youth social life. Our exploration of Bangladesh's gaming culture reveals online mobile games as vibrant arenas where social connections form, communities thrive, and cultural dynamics shift. Ethnographic insights highlight how these games foster social interactions, collaboration, and a sense of belonging among players, adapting traditional socialization to the digital era with widespread internet access and smartphone use.

Players often forge deep, real-life friendships through their virtual connections, supported by dedicated social media groups that serve as hubs for strategy sharing, emotional support, and collective celebrations. These platforms not only amplify the social dimensions of gaming but also blur the lines between digital and physical interactions, nurturing strong relationships among gamers in Dhaka.

Gaming in Bangladesh is a dynamic and evolving phenomenon that significantly shapes youth socialization and community building, blending traditional social interactions with technological advancements. This article emphasizes gaming's pivotal role in contemporary Dhaka social life, offering insights into how digital platforms influence social dynamics and intersect

with culture and community in the digital age. As gaming continues to gain popularity and accessibility, its impact on youth engagement and societal integration in Dhaka will likely expand, presenting new opportunities and challenges.

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