



# The Phenomenology of Online Games among Children: Does it Affect Social Relationships

Arie Penemuan Nasution<sup>1</sup>, Maulana Andi Surya<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

✉ [arie0102201065@uinsu.ac.id](mailto:arie0102201065@uinsu.ac.id) \*

## Abstract

The phenomenon of online games is increasingly widespread among children, giving rise to various impacts in everyday life. This study aims to analyze the emotional stability of children addicted to playing the collaborative online game Free Fire and its impact on social relationships. This type of online game offers competitive and collaborative elements, allowing children to engage in virtual social interactions. This research uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews with five children aged 11-12 years, and documentation studies. The results revealed that most children play games intensively, more than 10 times a week, and tend to spend money on in-game purchases. Playing Free Fire affects children's emotional stability, leading to behaviors such as irritability and frustration when losing, as well as consumptive tendencies. But, their social relationships remain relatively intact, as the game provides a platform for interest-based social interaction. However, for some children, excessive focus on gaming can interfere with interactions with those around them. This study highlights the importance of time management and parental supervision to balance digital entertainment with children's emotional and social development. The findings contribute to the study of online gaming addiction, specifically focusing on gaming.

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## INTRODUCTION

Child development is concerned with all aspects of an individual's personality, namely in forming an integrated personal unit. In general, aspects that develop rapidly in children are language, social and emotional development (Marni et al., 2023). Emotional stability is one of the main foundations in shaping children's personality and social attitudes. Children who have good emotional stability tend to be better able to cope with stress, interact with peers, and respond positively to the environment (Wahyuni et al., 2021; Zakiyah et al., 2024).

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Individuals who have good emotional stability are individuals who are able to understand what is being felt and express it appropriately (Mariana, 2021). The emotional development found in elementary school-age children includes basic expressions of anger and sadness, self-control, empathy, independence, self-identity, social relationships in communication (Darmiah, 2019; Debi & Yamin, 2021; Harahap & Ramadan, 2021; Prasetyo et al., 2023; Wyananda et al., 2022). Emotional stability in early childhood is characterized when children express themselves clearly and effectively. If children's emotional development only goes as it should without supervision, guidance and is left unmanaged appropriately, it will have a negative impact on children (Nurhasanah et al., 2023).

At this stage of development, emotional stability in children may be disturbed due to excessive use of gadgets. Overuse of gadgets in children is generally used as a means of play or entertainment, with online gaming activities known to be dominated by adolescents and children of elementary school age (Amran et al., 2020; Nurliana & Ulya, 2021; Permana & Tobing, 2019; Suplig, 2017; Suryani & Yazia, 2023). This condition is because at this age children become more active, have high curiosity, and the peak of playfulness at the age of 8 years (Kiniret & Susilowati, 2021).

Compared to traditional games, online games are more interestingly supported because of the many variations of game types that are presented, ranging from warfare, adventure, fighting, puzzles, and so on, with a graphic display of the game, attractive image resolution (Aprianto & Dafit, 2022). Therefore, because the equipment in the game uses technology with the ease of adequate internet access, it makes users easily access various types of games and are prone to linger and spend their focus on the game.

In the emotional development of children who play online games have forms of aggressive behavior such as attacking an object, verbally or symbolically, and can violate the property rights of others. The habit of playing excessive online games on children's social development has characteristics such as preferring to stay at home without interacting properly, children's social behavior towards peers and family is also not good, children become emotional, have difficulty obeying rules at home, find it difficult to berate friends, bully friends, and children's eye health is disturbed (Anisa et al., 2018; Handriana et al., 2021; Hariani et al., 2020; Kurniawati & Utomo, 2021; Santika, 2021). Excessive use of gadgets makes the process of social interaction in children constrained due to the child's focus shifting from the surrounding environment to the gadget, which is the age of 7-12 years old is the process of learning to socialize both in the family and school environment (Hermawan, 2021).

Some of the indicators felt when playing online games include i) Not feeling satisfied. ii) The desire to continue playing. iii) Repeating the game for the desired result. iv) Restlessness, anger, and frustration if the score is not as expected. v) Feeling uncomfortable when threatened if stopped by force (Nasution et al., 2022). children's social interactions tend to be lacking, become loners and quiet, and have a low self-concept (Ayu & Saragih, 2016). The negative impact that arises from this habit is to bring about changes in behavior, becoming more silent at home without interacting properly.

Other research shows the influence of children who are addicted to gaming by providing both positive and negative views. Meanwhile, in one of the elementary schools in Bangkleyan district, Indonesia. Research results were found that did not show the condition of addiction to playing online games on children who had been given cellphones with internet access from an early age. The majority of users are female while still being able to balance the

achievement of grades >65, and prefer to play with their friends rather than playing online games alone at home. In addition, children are relatively easy to educate than the period before and after. Generally, children can be categorized as calm until they enter puberty. At this age, children's emotions are reflected in their expressions such as fear, embarrassment, worry, anxiety, anger, jealousy, joy, and so on.

Based on these problems, addiction to playing online games in elementary school children is something that must be considered because children can be affected by it, based on the user's gender on children's social activities in the collaborative game type Free Fire. Topics related to online games have been widely carried out, especially in looking at the influence, impact on children's social emotions, it is also known that there are changes in the behavior of elementary school-age children due to online games. The topic of the impact of online game addiction is also developing in adolescence. Next, the impact of playing online games on physical health aspects that show physical fatigue and interfere with eye health. However, based on the aspects reviewed and the type of game used, no specific topic has been found on the Free Fire game with battle royal mode, which is a collaborative and competitive game. Therefore, the emotional stability of children who are addicted to these games on the social relationships of elementary school-age children is a differentiator from previous research that has not been found so far. In addition, this research seeks to explain social integration with digital isolation by analyzing children who are addicted to playing online games between social interactions in the real world and online through the emotional stability of children.

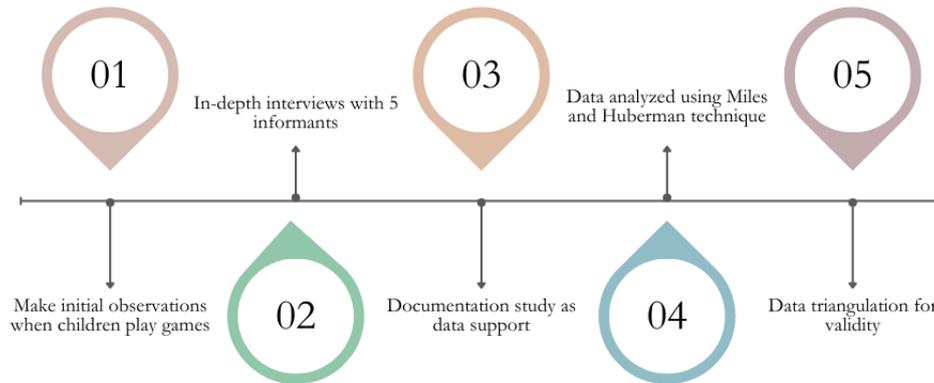
The novelty in this research concerns the type of game used, namely the type of game with collaborative and competitive elements between individuals that allows children to remain involved with social interaction. The game chosen in this study is Free Fire which allows children to play in the form of cooperation in certain groups. In addition, this type of game has certain elements of achievement such as rank, weapons, territory and others so that the game cannot be done only once or twice. Therefore, to identify the emotional stability of elementary school-age children who are addicted to playing Free Fire type games on their influence in social relationships is a gap in the research. Where it is known that children with low emotional stability find it difficult to recognize what they really feel, the method of release in a destructive way, often leaves wounds for those around them and ends in an uncomfortable state for themselves.

In the relationship between technological advances and globalization on social relations, this is a challenge in the world of education itself. An analysis is needed in identifying children's emotional stability so that they are better able to overcome social challenges, especially in the educational environment due to addiction to playing online games. This research was conducted on children from Kampung Sebrang, Bandar Simalungun Regency, which is the target and objective of this research regarding the emotional stability of children who are addicted to playing collaborative games such as free fire on the social relationships of elementary school-age children. In addition, how are efforts and strategies to improve children's emotional stability and social development when symptoms of online game addiction are already present in children.

## METHODS

The research method used is descriptive qualitative research. This type of research uses a phenomenological approach, which is an approach that focuses on finding facts about a social phenomenon and trying to understand

human behavior based on participants' perspectives (Agusti et al., 2018; Engkizar et al., 2021; Kaputra et al., 2021; Pasya & Wirtati, 2025; Putri et al., 2020; Sugiono, 2017). This method was chosen so that researchers can explore the emotional stability of children who are addicted to playing games in the Free Fire collaborative game on social relationships. This method provides flexibility in answering problem formulations that may be missed in a quantitative approach. The data collection techniques used were observation, interviews and documentation studies. To provide a clear picture of the flow of research conducted, the following is a flowchart of research steps.



**Fig 1. Steps of qualitative research methods**

The research began by collecting preliminary data by conducting participatory observations, namely by involving themselves with children when playing online games. Furthermore, in order for researchers to obtain the data needed to answer the problem formulation, researchers also conducted in-depth interviews with five children who became samples in this study. Questions are tailored to the needs in identifying addiction to playing online games, emotional stability and children's social relationships. The data obtained were then analyzed and interpreted by grouping them into several categories. Data validity was reviewed by triangulating the data. The data in this study is based on the results of interviews that have been conducted with several informants. Questions were grouped based on the main themes and grouped on similar answers. The main themes of the interviews were frequency of play, emotions when losing, top-ups, emotional impact, and social interaction. Other data was obtained from observation and documentation studies.

Data collection techniques used observation, interview and documentation techniques. Observation is carried out to measure certain aspects. Researchers conducted participatory observations in identifying Free Fire online gaming activities that were experienced or seen when children performed these online gaming activities. Furthermore, interviews and documentation studies were conducted with children to explore information and gain in-depth understanding that is detailed and broad according to the research objectives. thus, this approach allows for the development of a more in-depth theory about the analysis of children's social emotional stability in the Free Fire collaborative game. Furthermore, the selection of research subjects using purposive techniques, children are selected based on male gender who play Free Fire online games with an age range of 11-12 years in one of the elementary schools.

Data analysis in this study was obtained from the results of the interview data processing that had been carried out. At the data analysis stage, data processing was carried out by categorizing it using the Mile and Huberman

technique, namely by reducing, presenting, and concluding flexibly the data as a whole, free from the limitations of a series of events. After categorizing the data, then the data is reduced to reach a conclusion.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Most children play for hours at a time, with daily play patterns in some children. Frustration, anger, and excessive emotion when losing indicates emotional management challenges in children. Some children spend even at discounts, indicating consumptive behavior. Games become a means of social interaction in both positive and toxic ways. This condition affects children who feel lonely without playing. Furthermore, playing for too long causes fatigue or dizziness, but there are children who feel physically unaffected. From the results of the research conducted, the inability to control playing time indicates the potential for game addiction, but some children show that they are still able to limit time. Further data from the interviews that have been conducted can be seen as follows

**Table 1. Interview data results**

Category	Informant 1	Informant 2	Informant 3	Informant 4	Informant 5
Frequency of play (per week)	13 times	3-4 times	13 times	16 times	Every day
Top-up (withdrawal of money)	Yes	Seldom	Yes	Yes	Yes
Angry/frustrated when you lose	Very often	Seldom	Often	Very frustrating	Often
Reaction when losing	Very angry	A little annoyed	A little emotional	Very angry	Angry and emotional
Anxious/worried because of playing skills	Ever	No	Often	Often	Ever
It's stressful if you don't play	A Little	A Little	No	A Little	Sometimes
Difficulty controlling playing time	Yes	Sometimes	No	Not too	Not too
Influence on emotions	Very affecting	Very affecting	Very affecting	Very affecting	Very affecting
Relationships with people around you	It's still important though to keep playing	Still important	Still important	Still important	Still important

Based on the interviews conducted with the five informants, it was found that most of them experienced various emotions when playing the online game Free Fire. One informant revealed that he often feels angry and frustrated when playing the game, especially when he loses or his team falls behind the opposing team. This was conveyed by the informant as follows:

*My reaction if I lose a game, I get very angry (informant 1)*

This shows that defeat in the Free Fire online game greatly affects his emotions. Meanwhile, another informant admitted that he also sometimes felt angry when playing online games, especially when he lost the game. However, his emotional reactions tend to be under control. This statement was conveyed by the informant as follows:

*My reaction if I lose is normal, just a little upset (informant 2)*

The difference in emotional reactions between informant 1 and informant 2 indicates a different level of emotional intensity between informants. Another informant also said that he often feels angry, especially if he gets a team that is not compact. However, when asked about stress or not when playing games, he admitted that he did not. This was conveyed by the informant as follows:

*I don't feel stressed when I can't play Free Fire online games (informant 3)*

This statement shows that the game is more for entertainment than for emotional needs. This is not in line with other informants who admitted that they often felt frustrated, especially because the enemy was too tough or their teammates were not strong. This was conveyed by the informant as follows:

*I get very frustrated because the enemy is too good and my teammates are sometimes a burden (informant 4)*

This informant also stated that he felt anxious and restless when he had to leave the game midway through, mainly because he was worried that his ranking would drop and affect his performance. Similarly, another informant found it difficult to stop the game at times, especially when he was already into the game. In addition, he also felt angry and frustrated when he lost the game:

*When I lose, I sometimes feel frustrated or angry (informant 5)*

This research shows that emotional stability in children who are addicted to playing Free Fire online games leads to more challenges in management. Caused by experiencing defeat, unstable networks, and feeling anxious when their skills in playing online games decrease. Furthermore, towards social relationships, children can still establish these relationships because peers participate and have similarities and similar playing interests. It is known that children often feel angry and frustrated, but there are also those who rarely or never feel angry and frustrated. One informant revealed that he often feels angry and frustrated when playing games, especially when losing or his team is behind the opposing team. This was conveyed by the informant as follows:

*My reaction if I lose a game, I get very angry (informant 5)*

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*My reaction if I lose is normal, just a little upset (informant 4)*

Another informant also mentioned that he often feels angry, especially if he gets a team that is not united. However, when asked about stress or not when playing games, he admitted that he did not. This was conveyed by the informant as follows:

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*I get very frustrated because the enemy is too good and my teammates are sometimes a burden (informant 2)*

Another informant also stated that he felt anxious and restless when he had to leave the game midway, mainly because he was worried that his ranking would drop and affect his performance. Similarly, another informant found it difficult to stop the game at times, especially when he was already into the game. In addition, he also felt angry and frustrated when he lost the game:

*When I lose, I sometimes feel frustrated or angry* (informant 1)

The informant said they felt restless, especially when playing online games Free Fire parents also gave orders for something. The condition of the children after playing Free Fire online games for a long time varies. When playing online games, other informants said the feelings they felt after playing online games were dizzy and their eyes sometimes felt sore. after playing online games sometimes like tiredness because their energy has been spent playing Free Fire online games. Meanwhile, other informants also said the feelings they felt after playing online games were just ordinary feelings. Free Fire online games also affect the emotional health of children. They feel that online games affect their emotional health which makes them sometimes unstable. This is as expressed by one of the following informants.

*Yes, it really affects my emotional health, which makes my emotions sometimes unstable* (informant 3)

The same thing was also recognized by informants who stated that this game also affected their emotional stability. In addition, they also feel that their addiction to playing Free Fire online games has affected their relationships with people around them. However, the condition of playing the game frequently does not affect their relationship with people around them. This is as expressed by one of the following informants.

*People around me are still important, although sometimes I also like to play online games during gatherings* (informant 2)

The statement from the informant who said that the people around are still important even though he continues to play Free Fire online games when gathering with people around. It is known that children can still respond to people around them but will have a fixed focus on the game they are playing. Meanwhile, other informants also said that the people around them were not too important to them, because they thought the game was the most important so they did not respond to the people around them, making children ignore the people around them.

It is known that first, the frequency of playing: The majority of children play games quite often with activities more than 10x a week. Second, top-up activities: Almost all samples have spent money to play. Rather than for the benefit of learning, children save money to be able to buy sophisticated playing tools such as the types of weapons in the game. Third, emotional impact: games tend to affect children's emotional stability, such as anger or frustration when they lose. Furthermore, when in a state of anger, children often say inappropriate words. Fourth, social relationships: while playing online games, children still realize the importance of relationships with people around them. Therefore, collaborative games like Free Fire can be used by children as a way to maintain social interaction with other children.

The study was conducted on elementary school-aged children aged 6 to 12 years. However, the sample was selected from 10-12 years old. The characteristics of children at this age generally like to move and play and have reactions that tend to be fast, have the ability to focus attention, like the social environment, like the stories of the social environment and the brave nature but still use logic. Emotion is a complex state of feeling thoughts characterized by biological changes that arise from a person's stimuli (Misbahudholam, 2021). A person's ability to manage emotions is referred to as emotional stability. Children with stable emotions tend to be better able to manage stress, establish good relationships with peers, and respond positively to the surrounding environment. The phase of emotional development in elementary school-age children starts from 5-6 years, then develops to a more complex

understanding of emotions such as jealousy, pride, sadness and loss. The ability of emotional stability in children is obtained by children starting with imitation and training or habituation that occurs first in the family environment. Furthermore, emotions become the dominant factor that influences children's behavior in responding and responding to something.

Playing online games for children, apart from being a means of entertainment, turns out to be a means of children's social activities. This is in line with research showing that the effects of addiction in playing online games on the social attitudes of elementary school children affect children's positive social attitudes. Because children play and interact based on similar interests. In this development, children learn to interact with peers and develop social skills such as sharing, cooperating, and solving conflicts. However, children who are addicted to online games show a decrease in motivation, learning outcomes and concentration in action. Based on the description above, online game addiction also affects the economic aspect, which is reflected when children do top-ups or refills. In line with Dawud's research, (2023), children need money to buy game vouchers so that they can still play the types of games they want while still relying on parents' money. As experienced by informants, they often spend their money to top up in online games. Other informants only occasionally top up only when there is a promo or there is a discount. In addition, providing guidance and care for children can be easier to guide because characteristically, emotional changes in children do not last long, and tend to be calmer.

## CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the effect of addiction to playing the online game Free Fire on the emotional stability and social relationships of elementary school-age children. From the results of the study, it was found that children who frequently play this game experience challenges in managing emotions, such as anger and frustration when losing, or anxiety related to playing skills. Despite this, they were still able to establish social relationships, especially with peers who shared similar interests. This research shows that while collaborative games like Free Fire can be a positive social medium, unmanaged addiction negatively affects children's emotions and social relationships. Therefore, parental supervision and educational strategies are needed to guide children in managing playtime so that it does not adversely affect their emotional development and social relationships.

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