

# How Do Online Multiplayer Video Games Shape Teenagers' Sense of Social Identity and Belonging within Gaming Communities? An Ethical Perspective

Luojia Xu

Jiangsu Tianyi High School, Wuxi, 214101, China

**Abstract:** The rise of online multiplayer video games has significantly shaped the social experiences of teenage players, especially within the context of their sense of social identity and belonging. This paper explores the ethical implications of such games, highlighting the negative influences they may have on teenagers. It examines the prevalence of cyberbullying, toxic behaviors, and the financial involvement in free-to-play (F2P) games, particularly focusing on how these factors impact the well-being of young gamers. Cyberbullying, which thrives in the online gaming environment, can lead to long-term psychological harm, while toxic behaviors within gaming communities foster a hostile atmosphere, impeding social interaction and personal development. Additionally, the monetization strategies employed by F2P games, such as loot boxes and in-game purchases, can induce gambling-like behaviors among teens, exacerbating social inequality and fostering addictive tendencies. The paper concludes with recommendations for industry-wide changes, including better moderation, ethical monetization practices, and educational initiatives to promote responsible gaming, ultimately creating a safer and more supportive environment for teenage players.

**Keywords:** Online Multiplayer Games, Cyberbullying, Toxic Behaviors, Free-to-Play Games, Teenagers' Well-being.

## 1. Introduction

With the advance of online technologies, the Internet has gained prevalence worldwide. It serves as a tool that connects people from different areas of the world together. Along with the rise of the Internet is the rise of online multiplayer video games. Online multiplayer games are games in which more than one person can play within the same game environment simultaneously. These games require an instant internet connection on different gaming terminals, including personal computers, gaming consoles, and mobile platforms, and provide an immersive virtual world for players (Barnett & Coulson, 2010). This kind of game is especially attractive to teenage players. According to The Washinton Post (2018), almost three-quarters of Americans ages 14 to 21 either played or watched multiplayer online games or competitions

in the previous year. Through the perception of teenage players[1], such games convey a massive amount of information. Also, since this type of game requires instant communication and interaction between different players to work toward the same goal, it has a strong social aspect. Taking all these factors into account there raises the question that of how can participation in such games shape teenage players' sense of social identity and belonging within gaming communities. This article will look at this question from an ethical perspective, specifically revealing a negative influence on teenage players.

## 2. Common Types and Representative Online Multiplayer Games

Table 1. Common Types and Representative Online Multiplayer Games

Category	Example Games	Description
MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena)	<i>League of Legends, Dota 2</i>	Two teams of players control individual heroes to compete in a strategic, real-time battle focused on destroying the opponent's base.
MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game)	<i>World of Warcraft, Final Fantasy XIV</i>	Players create characters and explore a persistent virtual world, engaging in quests, dungeons, and large-scale multiplayer interactions.
Battle Royale	<i>Fortnite, PUBG, Apex Legends</i>	A large number of players compete on a shrinking battlefield, with the last player or team standing declared the winner.
Online FPS (First-Person Shooter)	<i>Call of Duty: Warzone, Counter-Strike: Global Offensive</i>	Players engage in fast-paced shooting matches with real-time teamwork and strategy in a first-person perspective.
Cooperative Survival	<i>Minecraft, Valheim</i>	Players collaborate to build, survive, and explore in sandbox-style or open-world environments, often with resource management and crafting.
Casual/Social Multiplayer	<i>Among Us, Fall Guys, Roblox</i>	These games emphasize social interaction, creativity, and lighthearted competition, often with mini-games or user-generated content.

### 3. Prevalence of Cyberbullying

Through the exposure to online community environment, teenage players are suffering a lot from cyberbullying, which is described as an aggressive[2], deliberate act committed by a group or individual against a victim who is unable to defend themselves over an extended period of time using electronic forms of contact (Zhang et al., 2022). With the rise of online social platforms, cyberbullying does not require any physical contact from the bully to the victim. Instead, the bully conducts virtual aggression to victims using visual and linguistic content. Cyberbullying typically takes the form of sending abusive or threatening texts, making and sharing embarrassing pictures or videos, trolling (posting offensive or frightening content on social media, chat rooms, or online games), and excluding kids from online friendship groups, games, or activities. Cyberbullying can have a profound psychological and emotional impact on teenage gamers[3], as they are at a developmental stage where social acceptance and peer relationships are particularly important to them. Continuing to be subject to this hostile behavior can not only undermine their enjoyment of gaming but can also lead to lowered self-esteem and withdrawal from online and offline social interactions. It has become a major concern for parents and teenagers themselves regarding the alignment with legislative public policy efforts (Kutner et al., 2007).

### 4. Formation of Toxic Behaviors

Toxic behaviors significantly harm individuals' gameplay experience in multiplayer video games. Since such games allow players to simultaneously interact with others in real time, toxic behaviors can spread among players at a rapid rate, often creating a domino effect within the community (Kordyaka & Kruse, 2021). These behaviors, which include but are not restricted to hostile language[4], swearing, and threats, can intensify conflicts and foster a highly hostile environment (Sun et al., 2024). Such negative emotions can have a profound impact on players' physical and mental health, leading to increased stress, increased frustration, and reduced enjoyment of the game. For adolescent players, who are in a critical developmental stage of social connection and self-identity formation, exposure to toxic behaviors can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and alienation, and in severe cases, can lead to long-term emotional distress or social withdrawal (Donner, 2024). The competitive and performance-oriented culture of many multiplayer games adds additional pressure, often making younger players more susceptible to internalizing negative interactions. Furthermore, the prevalence of toxicity in multiplayer environments can create a hostile atmosphere that discourages participation, particularly for those who are new to gaming communities or belong to marginalized groups[5], such as women or players from underrepresented backgrounds. The anonymity afforded by online platforms amplifies these issues, allowing players to act with reduced accountability and making it easier for such behaviors to flourish. Over time, repeated exposure to these hostile interactions can normalize toxicity within gaming communities, undermining the inclusive and collaborative potential of multiplayer gaming[6]. Addressing these challenges requires targeted interventions, such as fostering positive community standards, implementing effective

moderation systems, and promoting empathy-driven education for players to reshape the culture of online gaming.

### 5. Gambling Behaviors and Monetary Involvement

Free-to-play online games, shortened for F2Ps, as indicated by their name, are games that give players access to a significant portion of their content without paying or do not require paying to continue playing. Usually, F2Ps include game types like battle royale (*Apex Legends*, *Naraka: Bladepoint*), tactical first-person shooter (*Counter Strike: Global Offensive*, *Overwatch 2*), and battle arena (*DOTA2*, *League of Legends*). While free-to-play games are appealing due to their accessibility[7], they often incorporate monetization strategies that can have detrimental effects on teenage players. These games frequently include in-game purchases, loot boxes, and microtransactions, which encourage players to spend real money to enhance their gaming experience or gain a competitive edge. Research indicates that such mechanics can lead to gambling-like behaviors among teenagers, as the randomized nature of loot boxes mirrors the psychological effects of gambling (Zendle & Cairns, 2018). The "near-miss" outcomes and the unpredictable rewards often trigger dopamine release, fostering addictive tendencies. Monetary involvement in F2Ps also creates a disparity among players, where those who spend money can gain significant advantages over others, contributing to feelings of frustration and exclusion among teenagers who cannot afford such expenses. Additionally[8,9], excessive spending can lead to financial problems for young players, especially if they lack the financial literacy or parental supervision to manage their expenditures responsibly (King & Delfabbro, 2019). These monetization strategies may also blur the boundaries between gaming and gambling, exposing teenagers to the risks of developing long-term addictive behaviors. As a result, it is crucial for game developers to implement transparent monetization practices and for parents and educators to raise awareness about the potential risks associated with these features to protect the well-being of young players.

### 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the challenges posed by cyberbullying, toxic behaviors, and monetization strategies in online multiplayer and free-to-play games highlight the complex impact of gaming on teenage players. Cyberbullying and toxic interactions not only harm players' mental health but also create exclusionary environments that undermine the social and collaborative aspects of gaming. Meanwhile, monetization practices such as loot boxes and microtransactions introduce financial and psychological risks, fostering gambling-like behaviors that can lead to addiction and social inequality. Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach, including better moderation, ethical monetization practices, and education on responsible gaming. By fostering a safer and fairer gaming culture, the industry can better support the well-being and development of teenage players.

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