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# THE INVISIBLE POWER OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY: EXPLORING THE KAZAKHSTAN KIDS' DIGITAL GAME INTERACTIONS IN THE U.S.

The motivations for online communications can be unique in their nuances. For instance, many people pass time online to idle away hours, satisfy vital needs, show social presence, or be helpful to others. The author of the research analyzes digital media interactions of her two sons in the U.S., the country that represented a new cultural space for these boys. The goal of this study is to examine the role of media and communication technologies in the process of building effective relationships between Kazakhstani children and their peers in the U.S. The study aimed to solve the following theoretical and practical tasks: a) using the framework of Grounded Theory, develop an exploratory understanding of why Kazakhstani kids communicated with their peers in virtual space rather than in the physical realm; b) identify and showcase the role of media and communication technologies for Kazakhstani boys in building relationships with American peers via an analysis of their online interactions in digital games. Using observation and in-depth interviews, the author studied how online space helps children from Kazakhstan open the door to offline communication.

This auto-ethnographic research investigation contributes to the Uses and Gratifications Theory by enriching the scholarly conversation with interdisciplinary arguments in the context of the role of media and technology in intercultural communication. The study revealed that American children were more likely to be online after school. Therefore, the often-common way for Kazakhstani children to get the "access keys" to "exciting dynamic communication" with school friends in a new cultural setting was primarily possible only through the Internet. The results of this study offer a fresh understanding of children's online interactions and the role of digital media and communication technologies in the successful integration of children into a new environment. These unique findings represent the practical value of the study.

**Key words:** digital media and technology, online communication, Kazakhstan, USA.

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## Медиа және коммуникация технологияларының көрінбейтін күші: қазақстандық балалардың АҚШ-та дижитал ойындармен өзара әрекеттесу аспектілері

Онлайн-коммуникацияға деген қызығушылық өз ерекшеліктеріне қарай әртүрлі болуы мүмкін. Мысалы, көп адам уақыт өткізу үшін, өмірлік қажеттіліктеріне қарай немесе әлеуметтік белсенділік, пайдалы дүниелермен бөлісу сияқты себептермен онлайн өмірге уақыт арнайды. Зерттеу жұмысының авторы өз ұлдарының АҚШ-тағы, яғни жаңа мәдени ортадағы, дижитал коммуникация тәжірибесін талдайды. Зерттеудің мақсаты – Қазақстандық балалардың АҚШ-тағы құрдастарымен тиімді қарым-қатынас орнату барысындағы медиа және коммуникациялық технологиялардың рөлін анықтау. Бұл ретте автор келесі теориялық және практикалық міндеттерді алға қояды: а) деректерді талдау негізінде «теорияны негіздеу әдістемесін» (grounded theory) пайдалана отырып, қазақстандық балалардың неліктен өз құрдастарымен шынайы кеңістікте емес, виртуалды әлемде қарым-қатынас жасағанын түсіндіретін эксперименталды идеяны қалыптастыру және негіздеу; b) цифрлық ойындардағы балалардың өзара байланысын нақты мысалға алып, медиа және коммуникациялық технологиялардың американдық балалармен қарым-қатынас орнатудағы рөлін көрсету. Автор цифрлық ойындардағы балалардың өзара байланысын талдай отырып, бақылау және терең сұхбат әдістерін пайдаланып, виртуалды әлем қазақстандық балаларға оффлайн-қарым-қатынасқа жол ашуға қалай ықпал ететіндігін зерттеді.

 

Бұл жұмыстың ғылыми құндылығы – авто-этнографиялық талдау «пайдалану және қанағаттандыру теориясы» (Uses and Gratifications Theory) саласындағы медиа мен технологиялардың мәдениет аралық коммуникациядағы рөлі тұрғысында пәнаралық зерттеулердің дамуына үлес қосады. Зерттеу барысында американдық балалардың мектептен кейін жиі онлайн кеңістікте болғаны анықталды. Сондықтан Қазақстандық балалар үшін жаңа мәдени ортада мектептегі достарымен «қызықты және динамикалық коммуникацияға» қол жеткізудің кең тараған тәсілі көбінесе Ғаламтор арқылы ғана мүмкін болды. Бұл жұмыстың практикалық маңыздылығы – балалардың онлайн-коммуникация арқылы жаңа ортамен етене жақын араласуда цифрлық медиа мен коммуникациялық технологиялардың рөлі тұрғысынан бұл зерттеу нәтижелері жаңа көзқарас ұсынады.

**Түйін сөздер:** цифрлық медиа және технологиялар, онлайн-коммуникация, Қазақстан, АҚШ.

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**Невидимая власть медиа и коммуникативных технологий: цифровые игры как инструмент эффективного общения для казахстанских детей в США**

Мотивы для онлайн-коммуникаций могут быть уникальными в своих нюансах. Например, многие люди проводят время онлайн по таким поводам как просто провести время, удовлетворить жизненные потребности, проявить социальную активность, или быть полезными для других. Автор данного исследования анализирует опыт цифровых коммуникаций своих сыновей в США, т.е. в новом культурном пространстве. Целью данного исследования является выявление роли медиа и коммуникативных технологий в процессе построения эффективных взаимоотношений казахстанских детей со сверстниками в США. Данная работа преследовала решение следующих теоретических и практических задач: a) используя методологию обоснования теории на основе анализа данных (grounded theory), сформулировать и обосновать экспериментальную идею о том, почему казахстанские дети общались со своими сверстниками именно в виртуальном пространстве, а не в физическом; b) на примере анализа интеракций детей в цифровых играх показать роль медиа и коммуникативных технологий в построении взаимоотношений с американскими детьми. Используя метод наблюдения и глубинного интервью, на примере анализа интеракций детей в цифровых играх, автор изучила, как виртуальное пространство помогает детям из Казахстана открыть дверь к оффлайн-общению.

Научная ценность данной работы заключается в том, что данный авто- этнографический анализ вносит вклад в развитие междисциплинарных исследований в области «теории извлечения пользы и удовлетворения» (Uses and Gratifications Theory) в контексте роли медиа и технологий в межкультурной коммуникации. Как выяснилось в ходе исследования, американские дети после школы чаще присутствовали в онлайн-пространстве. Поэтому, часто распространенным способом получить «ключи доступа» к «захватывающей динамичной коммуникации» со школьными друзьями в новой культурной среде для казахстанских детей было прежде всего возможно только через Интернет. Практическая значимость данной работы заключается в том, что результаты данного исследования предлагают свежий взгляд на онлайн-коммуникации детей и на роль цифровых медиа и коммуникативных технологий в успешной интеграции детей в новую среду.

**Ключевые слова:** цифровые медиа и технологии, онлайн-коммуникация, Казахстан, США.

## Introduction

The diffusion of information and digital innovations led to the emergence of diverse online platforms and diverse online “playing” places. Internet created the digital networked spaces for lovers of computer games thus creating new layers of affordances within this digital medium.

Earlier studies of media and communication focused on children’s interaction with online computer games in the context of addiction to online games, social isolation, dependency on communicative technology, and the threats of violent content that some games may contain. For example, scholars Gross, Juvonen, and Gable (2002) investigate the interconnection between teenagers’ online time spending and perceived negative effects gained from such exposure. However, in recent years the research paradigm is gradually changing.

Today, while being “alone” in a physical room, players are now allowed to be “together” online, and thus play collaboratively in virtual spaces. Suddenly and unexpectedly, online games emerged as rich social worlds (Ducheneaut et al, 2006), to which every

player enters with his or her unique perspectives, expectations, and gratifications.

More researchers join this fresh scholarly conversation exposing unique motivations and meanings children assign to online communication and computer games in the networked society. However, few studies seem to explore deeply why and how digital users construct meaning in their online interactions.

Therefore, in this autoethnographic study using the Constructivist Grounded Theory approach, the author aimed to investigate the nuances of online interactions of her children, by observing how her boys, aged 10 and 12, make sense of this virtual "playing" space. She aims to explicate the meanings they assign to their online communication and playing in this digital social space.

This exploratory pilot study has three central research questions:

*RQ1: What interactions do kids experience in digital engagement with their peers online while playing a game? And what meaning do they assign to each interaction?*

*RQ2: How do they experience those online interactions and communications? What range of emotions do kids experience when engaging with their peers online while playing the game? How do these emotions help these kids to make and maintain new social connections?*

*RQ3: What is the role of digital media and communication technology for Kazakhstani boys in building effective communication with their peers in the new cultural setting?*

The significant findings of the study revealed that the Kazakhstani boys, young digital users, were utilizing online games as a stage for seeking ways to gain access to social interaction in the offline world and to find ways to spend time excitingly. They were using digital games to obtain opportunities for "exciting" communications with their school friends after school time. Interestingly, playing "together" was more important to them than just playing.

**Literature review**

In the mid-2000s, scholars (Baym et al 2004; Haythornthwaite, 2005) researched how media influences the communication intensity and dynamics of connectivity between people. Baym et al (2004) looked at how college students communicated by comparing their interpersonal online, face-to-face, and telephone interactions. The first study, done via analyzing communication diaries, looked at how much time college undergraduates spend talking, i.e. communicating via the internet, face-to-face, and telephone. Then using a survey, the scholars looked at how much internet the students used within local and long-distance social groups compared to other media forms. The results of the study suggested that the Internet was less frequent than face-to-face communication, the Internet was used nearly as often as the telephone, and online interaction was on almost the same level as telephone calls and face-to-face communication. Overall, the scholars found that while the use of the Internet was positively acknowledged as a model of interpersonal combination, face-to-face remained dominant back then (Baym et al, 2004).

Meanwhile, Haythornthwaite (2005) suggests that people, who are closely connected, use more media to communicate than those who are hardly related. While exploring how the Internet stimulated connections, she suggested several implications regarding the role of media in the dynamics of relationships between people including the following: a) media use is an important factor in controlling the intensity of the relationships in a given network; b) adding media use can serve as a good invisible activator in the weak ties; c) changing the medium of communication can disrupt current vulnerable bond networks (Haythornthwaite, 2005).

Overall, scholars acknowledge that the Internet offers new alternatives for communication in nuanced ways (Shlovski et al, 2006; Kobayashi, 2010; Shen and Williams, 2011). The researchers conducted a national panel survey in 2000 and 2001 to explore how internet use impacts communication and the social environment. The scholars found that intensive use of the Internet is linked to a decrease in the probability of visiting family or friends on a random day. Also, the results suggested that interactions in one medium/space caused the other channels of communication to be used as well. For example, physical visits stimulate more email interaction and phone calls generate more face-to-face visits, but email does not lead to any phone calls or visits (Shlovski et al, 2006).

Scholars Cole & Griffiths (2007) explored social interactions within and beyond the massively multiplayer online role-playing games. The study looked at the data collected from 45 different countries and 912 self-selected players. The results suggested that these games were discovered to be very communicative environments full of chances to meet new people. The scholars found that social interactions played an important role in the enjoyability of these games. The study demonstrated that online video games give people the chance to fully express them-

selves in ways they did not feel comfortable doing in real life (Cole & Griffiths, 2007).

Similarly, Kobayashi (2010) highlighted the democratic power of online communities to generate access to making new connections, or "bridging social capital" via uniting diverse populations around common interests and contexts. The author argues that being free from the limitations of "social attributes and attitudes" of the offline reality allows online communities to easily interact with like-minded individuals.

Other scholars (Ellison et al, 2010) turn their attention to how social network users employ different "communication strategies" to receive benefits from their social relationships. In other words, the scholars investigated the connection between "social capital" and specific online communication practices of BA-level students on Facebook. The researchers observed who users were communicating with and what they were doing with their collaboration partners. The results generated three key dimensions of interaction: a) initiating the relationships; b) maintaining the ties; and c) social information-seeking (Ellison et al, 2010).

It is worth noting that the concept of building "social capital" emerges as one of the central discussion points for studies that look at the relationship between offline and online communication (Ellison et al, 2010; Kobayashi, 2010; Skoric & Kwan, 2011; Shen and Cage, 2013). Scholars define "social capital" as privileges and advantages the users receive from their social relationships and social contacts. These can include such benefits as empathy, and access to diverse perspectives, viewpoints, and information (Ellison et al, 2010).

Not surprisingly, the scholars found a positive link between the use of social network sites and online social capital, reinforcing the idea that social network sites serve as digital instruments for the initiation and continuance of naturally occurring social ties (Skoric & Kwan, 2011). Their results suggest that massively multiplayer online games provide a powerful virtual space for casual communication and for experiencing a range of civic engagement among young people in Singapore, thus helping them to build stronger social capital (Skoric & Kwan, 2011).

Besides pure online interactions, personal offline meetups are also crucial in creating strong bonds between the members of an online community. For example, Shen and Cage (2013) explored how offline meetups among online community participants affected the health and mission of these communities. They discovered, that by meeting offline these groups strengthened their relationships, however, the downside of such interaction was that it was hard for newcomers to join these communities. In other words, these offline social interactions were possible at the expense of bridging social capital (Shen and Cage, 2013).

Discussing the concept of "core networks" is the focus of another study that explored the size and diversity of online gaming communities in China, home to 560 million digital users. The study found that Chinese online gamers have the largest and most diverse "core networks" than significant research investigations done in the past (Shen & Chen, 2015). However, it should be noted that this study was conducted in one homogeneous cultural setting.

Interestingly, the scholarship also looked at the dimension of age when exploring the impact of communication technology on well-being (Chan, 2015). The results of the study that explored this link suggest: a) maintaining strong-tie relationships becomes crucially important as people age; b) "multimodal connectedness" is beneficial for old people, but not for younger people, because young generations have more extensive yet weak-tie networks. The study was conducted among populations aged a minimum of 18 and up to 70 years and beyond (Chan, 2015).

Finally, scholars argue that the outcome of online communication, be it a specific digital engagement or playing games online is always unique; while it could be negative or positive, it always depends on the determinations, situations, and given circumstances of the user (Shen and Williams, 2011).

*Filling Research Gap*

The case under analysis, an investigation of the online digital engagement of the two boys from Kazakhstan in a new cultural setting, is specific for several reasons. Firstly, the U.S. as a country represents a new social environment for these children, because the family arrived from Kazakhstan to the U.S. for academic purposes in August 2017.

Secondly, the temporarily limited financial resources of the family represent a unique "economic" state/condition in which these children have limited opportunities to access physical recreational spaces. In addition, they no longer have direct physical access to their Kazakhstani network of friends and relatives due to the distance in geographical space and the time difference between Kazakhstan and the U.S.

Thirdly, the English language skills of the children in this study represent a new layer of richness of the analyzed case. For the participants of this study, English is their third language after Kazakh

and Russian. Although the boys passed the requirements of ESOL classes, as non-native speakers they are continuously in the process of improving their English language skills both at home and at school. Thus, the unique economic, cultural, and social context of this selected case makes it a rich example for investigating how the children of international scholars construct meaning in their online interactions when engaging digitally with their peers or when playing games online.

*Theoretical Framework and Justification for Research Investigation*

Using the Constructivist Grounded Theory approach, the author attempted to develop a cohesive understanding of how the young players from Kazakhstan perceive their online playing in the U.S. A tentative theory emerged from the data, generated from multiple observations, and in-depth interviews with the two young participants, informal analytical memos, and the concepts that were explicated from open and focused coding. The author called this emergent theory *"Chasing Friends and Fun in Exciting Interactions."*

The key findings of the study revealed that the participants were using online games as a platform for seeking ways to spend time excitingly. They were using online interaction and online games to gain access to "exciting" communications with their school friends after school time. Interestingly, playing "together" was more important to them than just playing.

A closer look and analysis of the data revealed that playing in the "online" mode in the U.S. is perceived by the participants as having more affordances in terms of spending time with fun. As some studies indicate (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004), online games often offer richer emotional experiences, greater exposure to gaining social skills, and more room and space for improving their learning and communication skills.

This exploratory pilot study partially attempts to fill the gap in the scholarly discourse by adding a new layer of analysis by exploring perspectives of this unique case.

**Methodology**

This exploratory pilot study that was guided by the Constructivist Grounded Theory had three central research questions:

*RQ1: What interactions do kids experience in digital engagement with their peers online while playing a game? And what meaning do they assign to each interaction?*

*RQ2: How do they experience those online interactions and communications? What range of emotions do kids experience when engaging with their peers online while playing the game? How do these emotions help these kids to make and maintain new social connections?*

*RQ3: What is the role of digital media and communication technology for Kazakhstani boys in building effective communication with their peers in the new cultural setting?*

Via conducting interviews and observation, the author aimed to generate some preliminary data to retrieve and explicate the meanings that the participants assign to their online interactions in the online game setting. Following the traditions of the Constructivist Grounded Theory approach theorized by Charmaz (2006), the author tried to remain open to any emergent additional data-led questions.

The unit of analysis for this study is the interactions in the online playing of the two child participants. Their unique time and place context, their past cultural background, current U.S. social setting, and the temporality of their presence in the U.S., all of these collectively represent a unique analytical case.

It is valuable to look at this data because analysis of such cases might generate detailed insights into how online playing spaces are explored by diverse online and offline communities. The findings of the study can help game designers to have a clearer understanding of how their games are used by this specific population: how young gamers play and what the affordances of an online playful interaction mean to diverse users. School educators might use this data to design better learning spaces by using online multi-player platforms strategically. Parents might find it useful in changing their perspectives toward online games. They may consider adopting new communication patterns to build better mutually beneficial relationships with adolescents.

It is worth noting that different people assign diverse and distinct meanings to online games. While for some populations, playing games online means avoiding physical contact with offline peers, for others online interactions may mean the opposite. As preliminary findings of this study indicated, for our participants playing games online meant simply following the "bodies" of their friends. In most cases, after school time their friends were beyond physical reach: they lived far away and often preferred hanging online. Therefore, the participants of this study also switched to playing online games. As we see, different social contexts produce different meanings of interactions for players with unique life perspectives.

Therefore, it is interesting to look at how specific populations of online gamers construct meaning when playing games. Joining the community of the *Fortnite* platform offered our small participants a great opportunity to fulfill two gratifications at the same time: playing and communicating without leaving home. For the participants of this study, playing in the online mode was perceived more as a solution in dealing with the problem of limited available affordable leisure options.

To explore what experiences online games offered for the two participants (P1 & P2), the author researched their interactions with and within two online games: the *Fortnite* game for Participant 1 (P1), 12 years old, and *Roblox* for Participant 2 (P2), 10 years old. The author observed and studied their interactions with and within the games by closely looking at their online playing and conducting in-depth interviews with the boys.

**Data Collection and Data Analysis Methods**

Overall, the data collection process included the following: a) conducting observation sessions; b) writing observation jottings; c) documenting first reactions and thoughts immediately after the observation sessions; d) writing more detailed full field notes blended with abstract level preliminary analysis; e) updating/correcting interview questions after observation sessions; f) conducting in-depth interviews; g) transcribing interview audio records; h) reflecting on the transcript data by adding notes to the transcribed interviews.

During the first observation session, the author focused on the *Fortnite* game and Participant 1 (P1). The author asked him to play the game as he normally would. While P1 was playing his game, the second participant was also in the room playing his own game. We labelled him *an offline distractor 1* (OD1) within this observation session.

It should be noted that during the in-depth interviews, it was challenging to get full, lengthy, and precise answers to the questions that the researcher designed because the participants: a) did not sometimes know precisely why they were making the choices they made; b) had challenges verbalizing their answers in English. Therefore, they sometimes asked if they could switch to the Russian language to respond to the question.

P2 was reluctant to give comments during the observation session and was very laconic in his interview answers because the researcher felt he did not feel comfortable sharing his thoughts on the game and was avoiding any disclosure of his feelings. Since the participant's mental comfort was more important than the data collection, the author centered her attention on analyzing the interactions of P1 in his *Fortnite* game setting.

The author aimed to collect as much insightful and detailed data as possible from observation and interviews. However, the first interviews were not completely successful in getting thick raw data, because the children tended to give extremely brief answers. It should be noted that interviewing children requires specific training, mastery, and skills which, the author feels, she had not yet fully developed. Some prior specific experience might have been an advantage in carrying out the interviews in this study.

In her next methodological steps, the researcher analyzed her observation's original jottings, brief field side comments, full field notes, and interview transcripts. Then the analysis process continued with the coding procedure that went through two stages. In the first stage, the researcher applied line-by-line coding to define the initial codes from the data. Then the researcher focus-coded the rest of the data. The informal side notes on the digital and paper memos served as additional sources of information to verbalize the final codes.

Since coding means being deeply engaged with what has been said by the participants, the author tried to formulate gerunds to anchor the focus on the actions rather than themes, first. Thus, the initial codes retrieved from the first interview transcripts included, for example, such codes as *seeing maps and graphics, admiring visual aesthetics, experiencing challenges, prioritizing skills*, *adoring a costume*, *being excited about the design of the game*, etc.

Then the author revisited those codes repeatedly to identify key promising codes for future detailed elaboration. After the careful analysis of the initial codes, the author developed a theoretical sensitivity. She performed it by analyzing the informal analytical notes and memos, and by exploring what these initial codes might mean in a bigger context. For example, the author interrogated the possible interactions between the actions captured and documented through observation and the actions explicated through the initial coding of the interview transcripts. As Charmaz (2006) noted, researchers might unconsciously bring their perspectives when interpreting the data. Indeed, the author admits: that it was challenging to balance between being too subjective and staying too objective to grasp the elusive meanings the participants assign to their online playing.

Overall, the process of theory emergence was cyclical: the thought threads developed, grew, and then dissolved in the memos. The author went back and forth between initial coding and focused coding, note taking and then returning to the observation notes. The analysis was a reiterative process in which, for example, some promising initial codes like *"playing to learn"* brought the author to another idea, a reverse one as "learning to play."

Overall, the process might seem chaotic and messy, but as Charmaz explains this messiness is a necessary step in arriving at a theory in the Constructivist Grounded Theory approach of data analysis and theory building.

**Findings and Discussion**

The key emergent theory that appeared from the analysis of data is that the participants interact with online games as a way of escaping from a non-exciting offline reality, which is a physical space at home, to a more exciting online or virtual place, which is the platform of the *Fortnite* game. By engaging and interacting in the online game they symbolically relocated their "bodies" to the "more exciting" virtual spaces. The researcher titled this theory *"Chasing Friends and Fun in Exciting Interactions."*

The findings of the study could be outlined in three main domains:

**- Interactions with Visual Design:** *Experiencing Aesthetic Enjoyment*

**- Interactions with Peers and Friends online:** *Communicating for Fun*

**- Interactions with Skills:** *Playing to Learn*

Each of these three domains includes multiple layers for which the participants assign diverse meanings. In addition, each interaction domain generates different mixed both enjoyable and negative emotions for the participants at each level of engagement with the respective layer of interaction. For example, while a visual design overall might evoke cool and nice visual pleasures, the inability to buy these beautiful expensive costumes gave the impression that the participants felt frustrated because they could not afford to purchase these in-game outfits.

Similarly, interaction with peers and friends online seemed to bring both joy and anger depending on the exchanged content and context of the interaction. For example, P2 reported feeling satisfied when he was receiving praise from his friends, and reported feeling upset when his friends were trying to teach him some skills. Specifically, P2 said he did not like being treated as a "noob" which meant a new inexperienced gamer in their gaming jargon.

Overall, while engaging with and within "different layers of interaction" of the online game, the participants experienced rich emotions via 1) seeing new visual design; 2) performing activities in the virtual reality; 3) exercising their freedom to create experiences online; 4) communicating with their school friends online; and 5) playing to learn.

**Interactions with Visual Design:** *Experiencing Aesthetic Enjoyment*

The participants experienced rich emotions from seeing the visual design, the virtual locations, and the maps of the game. The analysis of initial codes from the observation notes revealed that images of the beautiful ocean or fantastically yellow cornfield, rich blue skies, or fascinating glider featured in the game served as a powerful source of positive emotions during their online interactions with the game. P1's excited encouragements like *"Look at the rainbow!"* or his enthusiastic singing of *"Alllileyleeleeyleeley!"* or joyful manipulation of his pitch up and down while interacting with the visual elements of the game were interpreted as signs of enjoyment from experiencing visual pleasure. Additionally, in the interview, P1 reported that maps and graphics are one of the elements that keep him engaged in the game. *"It's the cool part,"* he said. The participants also reported experiencing rich emotions from enjoying the perceived "absolute" freedom in creating their online experiences and having an exciting time in the digital space. For instance, this online freedom implied an opportunity to perform dynamic activities like "jumping, running, climbing, hiding, dancing, aiming, firing" freely in this digital space. However, such activities are not always available or affordable in their offline space and reality. During one of his online sessions, P1 was singing: "*I am confident. I am confident."* Experiencing new dance movements in the game represented an engaging element for P1. "*Look, how it can dance!"* he exclaimed encouraging P2 to pay attention to what was happening on the screen. Overall, the online games brought positive emotions to the young participants by letting them create their on-screen active lives.

**Interactions with Peers and Friends Online:** *Communicating for Fun*

The boys experienced rich emotions via communicating with their school friends online in a relaxed, "gaming", virtual space. The following is an interesting discovery from one of the author's memos:

*"While thinking of the reasons why participants chose to play online games in the U.S. and preferred staying online to playing offline, I discovered one detail. When the participants played offline (soccer, basketball, or tennis) in the U.S. they were playing*

*in most cases alone, without any "physical" friends who could join them. In contrast, online games (in the U.S.) often offered "digital" spaces full of digital "bodies," "friends," "peers," and "strangers." Also, as I recall now my observations from our trip to Kazakhstan last summer, my two participants spent most of their time playing outside with many other kids physically present nearby. This discovery made me think that my participants did not necessarily prefer online to offline; in fact, they rather chose spaces or gave preference to the places that offered richer experiences and more interactions with people, peers, and friends. Thus, for example in Kazakhstan, the boys were playing offline because the offline environment was such a space where they could interact with lots of people. Interestingly, in the U.S. "online game" platforms were full of crowds, whereas offline playgrounds were mostly empty. Thus, one of the reasons why the boys end up playing more online than offline is the* ***"people's presence"*** *factor. They were simply following the people, their friends, and peers. They were flexible in switching from online to offline and vice versa as long as they could find friends to play or hang out with."*

P1 reported discussing the game with his school friends. He often made appointments for a virtual playdate at a specific time. For P1, playing with other players is an opportunity to learn new movements and strategies of the game. Playing the game without his peers, he suggested, creates a feeling of an "incomplete" experience. Therefore, he can easily postpone his "dinner time" just for the sake of catching his friends online. Though P1 has a brother, P2 in this study, P1 prefers to play with his friends first. For him playing with friends is a stronger priority. P1 suggested that playing with friends is temporary, elusive, and therefore "urgent." Meanwhile, P1 considers his brother and his constant availability for playing games on any day at any time as something that is normal and, therefore not exciting.

*Competing Demands for Attention*

Two more reasons might explain why P1 preferred playing with his friends rather than with his brother, P2. Firstly, his friends have been playing the *Fortnite* game for a long time; therefore, they are more skillful and experienced and have a richer choice of digital skins, axes, and guns. P1 reported learning more from playing with his friends rather than with his brother. For P1, playing with his peer friends was more challenging. It seemed that this feeling of challenge brought him positive emotions; therefore, he seemed to perceive playing with his friends as more exciting than playing with his brother.

Secondly, playing with his brother was perceived as a burden because his brother, Participant 2 in this study, constantly seemed to expect to be entertained and to be cared about and always seemed to demand the attention of P1. P2 sometimes felt isolated when P1 was focused on playing solely with his friends. Therefore, P1 reported that he felt he was obliged to invite his brother to his gang in the *Fortnite* community. Moreover, there were cases during the observed sessions, when P2 was communicating with the friends of his brother, P1. In some cases, P1 asked P2 to replace him in the game during the important episodes when P1 needed to complete an offline errand.

**Interactions with Skills:** *Playing to Learn*

These interactions include the actions the participants perform to improve their skills. In one of his interviews, P1 reported that playing the *Fortnite* game is not easy. He suggested that one must be competent in the skills to survive. In P1's view competency in this game included such skills as being able to predict the enemies' strategies and movements as well as being able to protect yourself and survive. *"I don't like when players (opponents) land on me or my team and start using their guns on us without stopping,"* he said in one of the interviews. These strong emotions seem to generate the desire to become more experienced and competent.

P1 plays the *Fortnite* game with a focused and deep zeal. He says he wants to train his skills to be one of the final winners. He perceives this place as a space for having fun and learning without any responsibilities. *"Fortnite is a game where I can train my aim and my skills, and "kill" people but don't get in trouble."*

Mental engagement with the *Fortnite* game does not stop for P1 after the game is technically over. Before going to bed, he often watches screen recordings of random games posted on *YouTube* by other *Fortnite* players. He watches very attentively how the on-screen avatars are moving, he listens to the online conversations of these gamers when they are commenting on their strategies. He watches the techniques used by these gamers. He seems to be deeply engaged in this free voluntary learning experience.

When asked about why he was not giving up when losing so many times while playing this game, P1 said he wanted to train his survival skills. He reported that he was learning those skills via direct interaction in the game. Those interactions included jumping, running, avoiding enemies, building pro-

tective walls, and "destroying" houses and furniture. In one of the observation sessions, when asked about why he was destroying "things" in the on-screen location, P1 said that he had to destroy "things" like houses or furniture, to build his walls in the future. Thus, for him, on-screen destroying was perceived as a non-violent activity and as a normal task that he must perform to survive in the game.

*Technical Noise and Offline Distractions*

While this category is not the dominant one, it was dispersed within all previously discussed domains of interactions. The technical noise and offline distractions included such things as a slow Internet connection, broken mikes or headphones, screaming of Participant 2, online lagging, etc. These distractions generated some strong emotional reactions from P1. In one of his interviews, he said he did not like the level of *"toxicity"* in *Fortnite* meaning that some players, mostly strangers, were playing without communicating their violent actions. This "silent killing" by the random stranger players within the game seemed to irritate P1. *"I don't like that most of the random people do not talk, and they can't hear me."*

This technical inability to communicate effectively because of the limited technical capabilities of the game seemed to be a major source of disappointment even when playing with his friends: *"Sometimes my teammates can hear me, but for some dumb and also unknown reason they are not capable of listening to me, which fails the team and we get a low rank in the match."*

Finally, during his playing session, which may include multiple game start-overs, P1 says he does not notice how quickly time flies in the game. He manages to "die," "commit" terminations, to be born again, and to start this cyclical process all over again. When he manages to survive, he dances happily imitating the movements from the screen and seems to enjoy these brief minutes of rejoice. When P1 wins, he jumps high in the room exclaiming *"I won! I won!"* or *"I am so happy!"* Interestingly, his offline home routine is also cyclical but is perceived by P1 as "monotonous" and "non-exciting" whereas his online setting (no matter how repetitive or reiterative it might seem to the outsider's eye) stays an amazing and engaging place to be.

## Conclusion

Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) offer a starting point to establish a bigger picture of major trends in computer-mediated communication (CMC) from a uses-and-gratifications perspective in the media and communication field. The scholars emphasize that there is a need for "a clear understanding of the relationship between the individual user and the technology." According to them, a more nuanced and detailed understanding will help scholars understand the effects of communication technologies better. Thus, the current study can contribute to the scholarly conversation by focusing on how my specific population, international children in the U.S. for whom English is not their first language, uses specific technology to a) satisfy their communicational and educational needs; b) negotiate their identity online; c) enrich their social and emotional experiences.

The researcher of this study admits trying to protect her sons by unconsciously creating safe, peaceful, and comfortable environments at home thus isolating them from potential dangers they might inadvertently face when being outside "home." For example, in Kazakhstan, the society is male-dominated, therefore the boys are expected to be brutal and independent, and boys are expected to fight and speak curse words and use them when needed. This game seems to provide such an "excitingly violent" reality where they get skills that, as Ducheneaut and Moore argue, "could usefully translate to the real world" (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004, p.4).

The findings of this study support the findings of the study by Ducheneaut and Moore (2005) that online games are more than just "killing" people. It is indeed perceived more as a place to find "exciting" experiences and communicate with friends. Playing meant "learning the competence skills" to the participants of this study. They seemed to treat this space as an extension of their "playground" and "informal school time," because they were constantly chasing after their school friends to share fun and conversations in the informal non-school setting.

The scholars claim that games are "more than "mindlessly killing monsters," the games are also about being socialized in a community (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005) that can offer windows for social learning. Thus, it could be stated that games are exciting platforms for learning interaction techniques, acquiring aesthetic taste in visual design, improving communication skills with peers, and learning how to deal with the difficulties of life.

P1 plays games every day. It seems to be his second full-time job after school. He says he feels guilty for playing this game, but he continues to play because he seems to be treating this game not just as he says "one of the million ways to entertain" himself, but also as a space for achieving success via acquiring new skills and on-screen experiences. Fur-

thermore, this study confirms the implications of the earlier studies (Cole & Griffiths, 2007) that online space is a "highly socially interactive environment" that allows building strong friendships and emotional relationships. Additionally, the boys who found themselves in a culturally new setting were using online space and online communication in similar patterns of communicating behavior as digital users of social networks in a study that identified the three key dimensions of online interactions (Ellison et al, 2010): the boys were staying in the digital space to initiate new friendships, maintain current ties and to seek social information about the shared topics and contexts.

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