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COMBATING DANGERS AND SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN IN ONLINE VIDEO GAME ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

Online video game environments have emerged as a critical frontier for child safety, providing opportunities for entertainment, social engagement, and digital development while simultaneously exposing millions of children to emerging online risks. These risks include data breaches, online sexual grooming, cyberbullying, exposure to harmful algorithmic content, and other forms of digital exploitation. As children increasingly participate in online gaming communities, ensuring their safety requires comprehensive policies that integrate child rights, digital literacy, technological responsibility, and effective governance mechanisms. Nepal, as a nation with one of the fastest-growing digital youth populations, faces distinct challenges in addressing child online safety due to limited digital literacy among children, families, and communities, as well as insufficient legal and institutional infrastructure. This position paper outlines the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal's stance on child online safety within the UNICEF framework. It emphasizes the importance of collaborative approaches to protect children in digital environments. Nepal proposes three interconnected initiatives: the Nurturing Guardians Initiative (NGI), which focuses on empowering parents and caregivers with digital safety knowledge; the School Shield Program (SSP), which promotes digital literacy and responsible online behavior among students; and the Cross-Border Sentinel Project (CSP), which strengthens international cooperation in addressing transnational digital threats. The paper argues that child protection in digital spaces is a universal right requiring coordinated global action involving governments, technology providers, educational institutions, and communities. Through collaborative policies and preventive strategies, a safer and more inclusive online gaming environment can be achieved for children worldwide.

Keywords: Child Online Safety; Online Gaming; Cyberbullying; Digital Literacy; Child Protection;

INTRODUCTION

Online gaming platforms now connect over 3.4 billion users worldwide. However, they have simultaneously become the third most common vector for child data breaches globally, with an estimated nearly 9 in 10 children playing online games (UNICEF, 2024 & *UNICEF Working Paper-2025*, n.d.). Nepal, home to one of the world's fastest-growing digital youth populations, confronts a unique double-edged challenge: the promise of digital literacy is starkly countered by the serious risks and exploitative environments of unregulated global platforms. Children are not merely losing data; they are being exposed to a live ecosystem of harm, encountering sexual predators who groom victims through anonymous chats, cyberbullies who inflict lasting psychological trauma, and algorithmic pipelines that push violent, hateful, and sexually explicit content. Without the robust legal infrastructure available to developed nations, children in Nepal stand on the front lines of this digital crisis, paying for their digital access with their safety.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), ratified by 196 states, explicitly guarantees every child the right to protection from all forms of violence, abuse, and exploitation (Article 19). In the digital age, this protection must extend to virtual environments where children

now spend a significant portion of their lives. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has further affirmed that governments have a duty to protect children from harmful online content and exploitation (General Comment No. 25). Nepal ratified the CRC on September 14, 1990. Domestically, Nepal's Online Child Protection Procedure (OCPD) of 2021 mandates safe internet use for minors in schools and cybercafés, and requires online service providers to implement child protection mechanisms. Nevertheless, a critical gap remains between policy intent and on-the-ground reality, driven by three interlocking challenges: low digital literacy among parents and educators; the absence of robust legal mechanisms to prosecute cross-border online crimes; and a rising tide of gaming addiction, with national research indicating that nearly 30% of Nepali adolescents exhibit mild-to-moderate internet addiction symptoms (ChildSafeNet, 2024). *Child online safety* (online gaming, cyberbullying, digital literacy, child data privacy, grooming, and internet addiction).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Safeguarding Children

Safeguarding children work can expose nurses to emotionally challenging situations, including cases of abuse, neglect, or family violence. These experiences may affect nurses' emotional well-being, job satisfaction, and professional performance. By understanding these potential impacts, managers can provide adequate resources such as supervision, counseling services, training opportunities, and peer support programs. Appropriate managerial support helps nurses maintain their resilience, deliver high-quality care, and effectively fulfill their safeguarding responsibilities while protecting their own well-being (Newman & Vasey, 2020). The findings suggest that safeguarding education should move beyond traditional classroom-based learning and incorporate more experiential and practice-oriented approaches. Practical workshops enable healthcare professionals to develop the skills and confidence required to identify safeguarding concerns, make appropriate referrals, and collaborate effectively with other agencies.

Furthermore, the use of multiprofessional case vignettes encourages participants to understand the roles and responsibilities of different professionals involved in child protection. This collaborative learning approach can enhance communication, decision-making, and interprofessional teamwork, ultimately leading to more effective safeguarding practices and improved outcomes for vulnerable children and families (Littler, 2018). Although child protection policy and practice in Mongolia have continued to evolve, substantial protection gaps remain, particularly regarding the lack of safeguarding measures for children participating in cultural and ceremonial events. From a child-centered governance and rights-based perspective, it is essential to integrate cultural traditions, legal frameworks, and institutional practices to ensure children are protected from abuse, exploitation, and other forms of harm in public gatherings. As key professionals in the child protection system, social workers should assume a leading coordination role in safeguarding children at public events,

including risk assessment, interagency collaboration, preventive planning, and the implementation of child protection measures to uphold children's rights and well-being (Mavag & Adilbish, 2026)

Online Video Game

The unexpected finding that intrinsic motivation, integrated regulation, identified regulation, and external regulation were not associated with Esports game addiction highlights the complexity of motivational mechanisms underlying gaming behavior. While previous studies have often linked strong gaming motivation to excessive play, the present findings suggest that self-determined forms of motivation may not inherently increase the risk of addiction. Instead, addiction appears to emerge when gaming is driven by psychological pressure or a lack of meaningful motivation. This finding supports the assumptions of Self-Determination Theory, which posits that controlled and non-self-determined forms of motivation are more likely to be associated with maladaptive outcomes. Consequently, interventions aimed at preventing Esports game addiction should focus on reducing internal psychological pressures and addressing motivational deficits rather than discouraging gaming participation altogether (Wang et al., 2026). The concept of problematic smartphone use has been widely adopted in the literature because smartphones serve as the primary gateway to numerous online activities. However, this concept is inherently limited because it focuses on a specific device rather than the underlying behavior. In contemporary digital environments, individuals can engage in the same online activities through multiple platforms, including smartphones, tablets, laptops, and desktop computers. Therefore, problematic behavior is more accurately associated with particular online activities than with the device used to access them. As a result, researchers have suggested replacing the term "problematic smartphone use" with more activity-specific concepts, such as problematic social media use, problematic online gaming, or problematic online shopping. Alternatively, broader umbrella terms may be employed to capture a range of problematic online behaviors across different technological devices. This perspective allows for a more precise understanding of digital addictions and problematic technology use by emphasizing the behavioral source of the problem rather than the technological medium through which it occurs (Demetrovics et al., 2026).

METHOD

This study employed a survey approach and reviewed literature to gather relevant information concerning child safety in online gaming environments and chat platforms that utilize machine learning (ML) algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI) tools. The survey was limited to academic works published between 2017 and 2021, drawn from research databases accessible through portals such as IEEE Explorer, Elsevier, Springer, ACM, Cambridge, Wiley, ProQuest, and Sage. Several specific keywords were used in the search without any additional filters, including terms like "cyberbullying and AI", "child predators and games", "cyber threats", and "child safety in online

games". The research focuses on the literature that describes the threats to online gaming children and presents a solution to detect and combat child predators on gaming platforms and chatting platforms available as part of social media.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The digital world presents a broad range of activities suited to people of all ages. Among school-age children, online gaming has emerged as one of the most favored pastimes. While the digital environment opens up rich learning opportunities, it simultaneously harbors various threats originating from adults, peers, and certain organizations. Online threats targeting children are broadly grouped into three categories:

1. Content Risk

Children are at risk of being exposed to age-inappropriate content, including pornography, violence, extremism, and hate speech. Beyond these, content that encourages self-harm and inaccurate or unverified information also poses significant threats to children's development. According to UNICEF research, exposure to gaming content affects children's social relationships, academic performance, physical activity, and mental health, potentially leading to depression, social anxiety, and gaming addiction. To date, findings on the overall impact of online gaming on children's well-being remain inconclusive.

2. Contact Risk

Children's interactions in the digital space can expose them to threats from both adults and peers, such as harassment, exclusion, defamation, and even contact with child predators. The consequences of bullying are severe, ranging from depression and anxiety disorders to suicidal tendencies and substance abuse. Children with disabilities tend to be especially vulnerable to these threats. The distribution of manipulated images or videos of children also represents a serious risk that can permanently damage a victim's future.

3. Conduct Risk

Conduct risks arise when children themselves take on the role of perpetrator, for instance by bullying their peers. Such risky behaviors include harassment, exclusion, sexting, and the creation of inappropriate content. Online bullying is considered more harmful than face-to-face bullying because the content can spread rapidly and remain accessible for a longer period, making it significantly harder for victims to recover. Sexting, which involves sending sexually suggestive messages or images through digital media, is a fairly common behavior among teenagers. Its consequences vary widely, but when such content is shared with a broader audience, it frequently results in embarrassment, harassment, and deeply damaging situations for those involved.

The Nurturing Guardians Initiative (NGI)

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), ratified by 196 states, explicitly guarantees children's rights to protection from all forms of violence, abuse, and exploitation (Article 19). In the digital age, this protection must unequivocally extend to virtual environments where children spend a significant portion of their lives. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has affirmed that governments have a duty to protect children from harmful content and online exploitation (General Comment No. 25). Nepal ratified the CRC on September 14, 1990, and adopted a new national constitution that same year, reaffirming its commitment to children's rights.

The School Shield Program (SSP)

The Government of Nepal's position is unequivocal: the protection of children in digital spaces is a non-negotiable national priority. This commitment is enshrined in the Online Child Protection Procedure (OCPD) of 2021, a regulatory framework that mandates safe internet use for minors in schools and cybercafés, and requires online service providers to implement child protection mechanisms. National policy, as articulated by the Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens, is firmly oriented toward a multi-stakeholder approach that strengthens law enforcement, expands public awareness campaigns, and enhances transnational cooperation.

The Cross-Border Sentinel Project (CSP)

Despite strong policy intent, a critical gap between legislation and reality persists. Nepal faces a tripartite crisis: first, a profound lack of digital literacy among parents and educators, with a ChildSafeNet study revealing that 34.6% of children lack basic knowledge about protecting their personal data online; second, the absence of robust child-specific legal mechanisms to prosecute cross-border online crimes effectively; and third, an alarming rise in gaming addiction, with national research indicating that nearly 30% of Nepali adolescents exhibit mild-to-moderate internet addiction symptoms (ChildSafeNet, 2024), directly impacting their mental health and social well-being.

International Legal Framework and Nepal's Alignment

To bridge this gap, Nepal proposes three concrete initiatives under the framework of multi-stakeholder cooperation. The Nurturing Guardians Initiative (NGI) establishes local Digital Literacy Hubs in partnership with ChildSafeNet to equip parents with practical skills, from configuring parental controls to recognizing predatory behavior in game chats (Faraz et al., 2022); (Jang & Ko, 2023) The initiative also launches a "Talk, Do not Ban" campaign to help families develop workable media agreements that build trust rather than enforce control (Banić & Orehovački, 2024); (Hassan et al., 2025)), enabling children and parents to jointly decide which games are appropriate and when they may be played.

Addiction Risks & Mental Health

Online gaming platforms have posed serious threats to the mental health of children and adolescents. Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) has a recorded global prevalence of approximately 10% among adolescents and young adults, strongly correlated with stress, bullying, anxiety, depression, and poor academic performance (Gao et al., 2022). Longitudinal studies further demonstrate that problematic online gaming significantly increases the risk of later depression, anxiety, and psychotic experiences, and can exacerbate the impact of ADHD traits in adolescents (Narita et al., 2025). Consistently, gaming addiction among children is associated with reduced life satisfaction and poorer subjective health outcomes (Stevens et al., 2020).

Protection Approaches: Schools, Parents & Technology

Effective strategies for protecting children in digital spaces operate across multiple layers. School-based education on healthy internet habits has been shown to significantly reduce children's exposure to online risks (King et al., 2018). Within the family, active parental mediation combined with adequate digital literacy is key to limiting children's exposure to online hate content, exploitation, and fraud (Hassan et al., 2025). Psychological resilience training has also proven effective in breaking the link between IGD, risky online behavior, and depression in adolescents (Tsui & Cheng, 2021). Nevertheless, technical tools such as content filters, parental controls, and AI-based predator detection remain fragmented and insufficiently robust for large-scale implementation.

Cyberbullying, Harmful Content & Sexual Exploitation

Beyond addiction, children who engage in online gaming, particularly multiplayer and violent games, face heightened risks of cyber aggression, exposure to pornography, and emotional and behavioral problems (Hou et al., 2022). Toxic behaviors such as hostile communication and repeated grieving have been shown to trigger depression, anxiety, and compulsive platform use among victims (Zsila et al., 2022). More alarmingly, online gaming spaces have also become arenas for child sexual exploitation, grooming, human trafficking, and the dissemination of hate speech (Faraz et al., 2022; Chui et al., 2025; Reeves et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

The conclusion presented in this paper makes clear that online gaming environments pose escalating and multifaceted risks to children globally, and Nepal is no exception. From Internet Gaming Disorder and its documented links to depression and anxiety, to the pervasive threats of cyberbullying, sexual grooming, and exposure to harmful content, the digital landscape demands urgent, coordinated, and sustained intervention. Nepal's tripartite crisis, encompassing low digital literacy, inadequate cross-border legal mechanisms, and rising gaming addiction among adolescents, reflects broader systemic failures that no single actor can address alone. Nepal's three proposed

initiatives offer a replicable and rights-based model for developing nations. The Nurturing Guardians Initiative empowers families through practical digital literacy.

The School Shield Program institutionalizes digital citizenship education, equipping children with the knowledge and resilience to navigate online risks safely. The Cross-Border Sentinel Project addresses the enforcement gap that allows online perpetrators to operate across jurisdictions with impunity. Grounded in the obligations of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and supported by an expanding body of global research, Nepal calls upon UNICEF member states to translate policy commitments into concrete action. Child protection in virtual spaces is not a privilege reserved for wealthier nations; it is a universal right that demands a universal response. Every child, regardless of nationality or economic circumstance, deserves a safe digital future.

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