

## The Analysis of Gacha Game Addiction on the Players' Personal Monthly Expenses

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**Abstract:** Gacha is a gaming system that relies on the player's luck on getting their most desired item or character, with the term originating in Japan around the 1960s from Gashapon or Gachapon, referring to a variety of vending machines which dispensed encapsulated toys with different rarities people can get in random, and is also currently one of many well-known systems existing within mainstream online games. The appeal of the Gacha system lies in the presence of rare items amongst many ordinary ones that can only be obtained either by luck or microtransaction, hence the addiction that follows. Questionnaires regarding the players' addiction to microtransactions as well as the system were provided to young adults. Subsequently, our findings indicate that most Gacha game players have repeatedly participated in the microtransaction for the monthly membership subscription in order to receive member-exclusive rewards for them to spend on the character they wanted.

**Keywords:** addiction, gacha system, microtransaction, mobile games, online games

### INTRODUCTION

The term Gacha was first popularized in Japan around 1960s from *Gashapon* or *Gachapon*, referring to a variety of vending machines which dispensed encapsulated toys with different rarities people can get in random, and is also currently one of many well-known systems existing within mainstream social network games (SNGs).

A person's interest in the internet is generally based on the needs, preferences, as well as character of the individual, two of which have led to modern day teenagers' obsession over online games. One of many existing types of online games that attracts the attention of players is social network game (SNG), with the term *social game* itself being "an industry term for video games played on social media services such as Facebook" (Paavilainen et al., 2013, p. 796). SNGs normally feature multiplayer mechanics and were originally designed as browser games. It can be summarized that SNG is a type of game that can be played with other players connected to the same social network, without having to be in the same location, as opposed to playing console games. As time and technology progress, smart mobile gadgets have begun to be sold at relatively affordable prices compared to traditional gaming consoles such as PlayStation, Xbox, and Nintendo Switch. Since the success and popularity of mobile games have risen beyond console games, it is no longer surprising that SNGs have started to be implemented on mobile games that the number of SNG enjoyers has skyrocketed over time; certainly, alongside the games' increasing quality. Additionally, there currently exist numerous

widely known SNGs that can be downloaded and played on smartphones, for example; *Mobile Legends: Bang Bang* (Moonton, 2016), *Fate/GrandOrder* (Type-Moon, Aniplex, 2015), and *Punishing Gray Raven* (KURO TECHNOLOGY, 2019).

Most SNGs use a free-to-play (F2P) business model that allows players to play for free, unless they choose to buy some of the virtual goods offered within the game. For this reason, it is important for SNG games to monetize their players by providing paid special features or items to players who have an incentive to spend money to speed up the game progress on their account. This virtual buying and selling activity in SNG is called microtransaction, also known as the pay-to-win (P2W) system by gamers who have been familiar with SNGs for a long period of time. “Microtransactions denote payments for purchasing applications for mobile phones or payments for purchasing the additional content for video games” (Tomić, 2017, p. 241), with premium paid items and subscriptions that are usually offered, such as cosmetics, in-game currencies, as well as monthly/seasonal passes.

One of the earliest SNG titles in Japan was *Tsuri Star* (釣り☆スタ!) which was developed by the Japanese internet media company GREE in 2007. In the game, players can catch various types of fish in the various available fishing locations, and players can also play together (co-op) or compare results to compete with other players. A survey conducted by Mobile Marketing Japan in October 2010 even revealed that “playing games” has accounted for 70% of SNS users’ main reasons for joining, outnumbering social contacts with friends and associates (<http://mobilemarketing.jp/commonimages/20101006press.pdf>, 2010, p. 4, in Japanese). Because mobile game culture in Japan has been popular since the early 2000s with an ever-increasing number of enthusiasts, SNG began to be implemented into mobile games, and in early 2010, the gacha system began to appear in mobile games, especially in Japan. Now, almost all mobile games that make the most profit in Japan are games with the gacha system.

In the beginning, the variety of mobile games in Japan was quite large compared to other countries, ranging from puzzle games and virtual pets that relied on camera technology on mobile phones, to three-dimensional (3D) games that had graphic quality equivalent to PlayStation games in Japan. his era. “In 2014 and 2015, Japan was the number one country in terms of Android Google Play revenue and the number two country in the iOS App Store” (Shibuya, Teramoto & Shoun, 2016, p. 97), and at the present, almost all mobile games that earn the highest profits in Japan are gacha games. Since then, the gacha system has been considered as a core part of the Japanese mobile game culture, especially with how “otaku culture now reaches beyond Japan” (Azuma, 2009, p. 10), the popularity of gacha system in the mobile game market increased likewise, for what was “intended only for the Japanese domestic market went worldwide” (Pramanta, 2019, p. 646). Some games of which are no less popular with fans of Japanese Gacha games are made in China, for example, *Genshin Impact* (COGNOSPHERE, 2020), *Azur Lane* (Yostar, 2017), and *Arknights* (Yostar, 2019).

Although “gacha in online freemium services is regarded as a mechanism similar to gambling” (Koeder, 2017, p. 5) based on previous Japanese studies, many fans remain in strong support of these gacha system games for a variety of reasons; one of which is the players’ interest in the existing characters. Ever-so-frequently, the feeling of fondness toward a certain character

is more than adequate to serve as a reason for some players to carry out microtransactions in order to obtain that one specific character they like, alongside their matching weapon, accessories, and duplicates. From a consumer's perspective, this is certainly categorized as one of the bad effects of gacha games, because oftentimes the desire to own as many characters as possible grows into a sense of obligation for players to continue to spend money. After all, "Virtual Gacha for digital content is a popular revenue-generator in mobile social games." (Yamakami, 2012, p. 1233). Some players are even constantly spending large sums to compete with others, hence the general difficulty to find those who have never spent a single dime in the long run in the realm of gacha games. Players would have several motivations for drawing gacha in games where they had the chance to get randomly assigned goods. As a result, temporary events are frequently developed to keep up the player base. Limited-time events take many forms, the most popular being limited-time gacha, followed by limited-time discounts and limited-time ranking (Shibuya, Teramoto & Shoun, 2015, p. 3). These events provide the players a certain chance to get uncommon and more valuable characters that are supposed to be easier to obtain due to enhanced rates of attainment for a set length of time. Regardless of whether real money was used to purchase in-game items, all subjects have a similar but slightly different drive to obtain whatever is offered in the game.

Previous researches did not investigate the possible financial impact of mobile social games upon some of its players in-depth, owing to a lack of world-wide popularity of the act of microtransaction outside of competitive needs before gacha games were being acknowledged globally. The novelty of this paper rests in its examination of the financial impact that the players received, for basing on what the author has written, the problem that will be discussed in this research is, whether microtransactions in gacha games trigger the birth of addiction so deep it affects the players' monthly expenses or have the players have been accustomed to the system so much that they would willingly create a separate saving they will exclusively use for microtransactions. It is, however, very important to distinguish the difference between the act of microtransaction from mere micropayments, for not every purchase made on mobile devices could qualify as microtransactions.

## **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

Previous studies regarding customer loyalty refer to the link between an individual's emotional condition and their inclination to support a business. This viewpoint holds that societal standards and situational conditions have an influence on a relationship. Psychology, sentiments, and conative precursors of relative attitudes, as well as persuasive, perceptual, and social effects, are regarded as unshakeable contributions (Dick and Basu, 1994). If they are emotionally linked to failure, they will likely to persist with it. Consequently, a sense of devotion to something emerges. It is typically characterized as "a good attitude toward a brand that leads to consistent acquisitions over time" (Assael, 1992). This reflects with Griffiths' (1990) research, which showed that problem gamblers frequently see themselves as coming close to winning rather than downright losing.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This research was mainly done through collecting online questionnaire responses from young adult players who have regularly played and paid real money on gacha games to be dissected further in descriptive manner, detailing the players' addiction in regards to their loyalty to the

game, hence its qualitative nature. This paper does not address the entire diversity of mobile social games outside of gacha games, nor does it extend to their detailed payment behaviours.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Deep-Rooted Loyalty Which Caused Players to Stay for Long-Term

A number of gacha games that are known to own a big playerbase cater to anime fans. Their characters are designed according to popular archetypes of anime characters which usually pander to certain types of people, for example, the character of Yae Miko from *Genshin Impact* (COGNOSPHERE, 2020) is beloved by the majority of male players for being the scheming yet mischievous *kitsune* shrine maiden, just as Dan Heng from *Honkai: Star Rail* (COGNOSPHERE, 2023) is beloved by many female players for being the calm and cool male as well as the most logical one in the player's team within the storyline of the game *Honkai: Star Rail* itself. Developers of anime gacha games do know their market and which sort of fans to target, and seeing how the playerbase usually consists of consistent players and even 'Whales', it is safe to assume that anime gacha game will keep using this same formula of designing fantastical storylines and appealing characters, pandering to those who may wish to play only for the sake of collecting the available characters, completing achievements, and of course, to compete against each other in terms of dealing damages.

Being something that originates from Japan, there do exist several players who have succumbed to the gacha game addiction which ended up ruining their very own lives, if not also those who are considerably close to them. This has caused gacha to be deemed just as immoral and predatory as real gambling activities by the Western community; a bold statement which, in result, brought many arguments from international playerbases, including South-Eastern and Eastern Asian playerbases. The feeling of being dissatisfied before they have yet to collect or complete everything thoroughly that the game has to offer may ignite a phenomenon that the Japanese people called *Ki ga Sumanai* (気が済まない), since the lifestyle of carrying dissatisfaction has always been the daily pattern of Japanese people since the ancient times (Wahyuningsih, T.M., 2012, p. 177-178).

Those feelings of adoration and wanting to thoroughly complete the game is what led to some players to spend real world currency, oftentimes rather consistently, and sometimes heftily without any regard of their income. However, not all spenders are considered severely addicted despite staying loyal to their most cherished gacha game, such as the three subjects whose responses may be read as below:

**Table 1.** Questionnaire response from Subject 1 who has been familiar with gacha games since 2013

Questions	Answers
Is there any specific difference that sets gacha games apart from other types of games?	You can get rare items that may not be owned by the majority of the players as a part of your collections or to raise your status.

What do you find most entertaining?	The community, storyline, graphics' quality, and the game's type. (RPG/RPG/etc.)
What are your thoughts about the gacha system and microtransactions?	It's all right. There are some that do extreme milking, but there are also some that are fair by implementing a 'Guarantee System'.
Do you think it is important to partake in the microtransaction activity?	Could be yes or not. Yes, if only the game requires you to purchase certain items to stay relevant on the leaderboard; no, because personally, I only recharge when I want to collect something. I suppose it's fine as long as you understand the limits.
Why did you choose to take part in the microtransaction activity?	Because I want to collect the character as to show my interest toward the said character.
Does the microtransaction that you do impact your monthly expenses?	Yes, I would allocate a special budget from my earnings if I wanted to purchase on a certain month. I have never personally used money outside of the said budget.
Have you been able to seize certain opportunities and take advantage from the games with gacha system, for example, opening a piloting service?	Yes, I run a piloting service because I saw the good opportunity and the competition that is fortunately still healthy between pilots.

**Table 2.** Questionnaire response from Subject 2 who has been playing gacha games since 2016

Questions	Answers
Is there any specific difference that sets gacha games apart from other types of games?	Something that truly sets this game apart from others is of course the gacha system which relies heavily on luck (with money involved, sometimes) to get the character you want.
What do you find most entertaining?	When I rolled on the character's banner that I like and got them. After that, it'd be from how interesting the story could get.
What are your thoughts about the gacha system and microtransactions?	As a hobby, it's fine. There are various transaction options at the ready, so it really

	helps the players to make an in-game purchase involving real money.
Do you think it is important to partake in the microtransaction activity?	I don't think so, because I only do it when I feel like doing it, not because I set other players as personal standards. For me, there's no competition, it's just me being happy to be able to do what I love doing.
Why did you choose to take part in the microtransaction activity?	Because I like a certain character or item in the game that I want, and fortunately am capable to afford what is offered.
Does the microtransaction that you do impact your monthly expenses?	It doesn't impact my monthly expenses that much, because I always separate the budget for top-ups from the rest of my necessities. If I don't think that I have to spend my money, then I won't buy anything and save the remaining budget for upcoming purchase opportunities.
Have you been able to seize certain opportunities and take advantage from the games with gacha system, for example, opening a piloting service?	Not really, I only play the game in my spare times to entertain myself.

**Table 3.** Questionnaire response from Subject 3 who has been familiar with gacha games since 2018

Questions	Answers
Is there any specific difference that sets gacha games apart from other types of games?	In general, what sets them apart is the gacha system itself. They're mostly anime-based and are marketed toward anime-games' enjoyers, even though there are some that aren't anime-based games. The contents of gacha games are usually <i>'life service'</i> in nature, which means they're constantly receiving updates.
What do you find most entertaining?	The peculiar character designs and interesting storylines.



<p>What are your thoughts about the gacha system and microtransactions?</p>	<p>There are so many entertaining aspects from the gacha games themselves, some even left different impression on me, especially those with good contents and storylines. Microtransaction in a game, however, is a bad civilization for some games that force the players to purchase because there are major power imbalance between <i>free-to-play</i> players and the spenders. It can cause gambling addiction on people, which is a very bad thing in itself, because I've personally seen someone whose life has turned upside-down because they sacrificed family's fortune for their gacha addiction.</p>
<p>Do you think it is important to partake in the microtransaction activity?</p>	<p>If you're the competitive-type, there are several games in which certain amount of spending is required to remain at the top leaderboards, but there are also non-competitive games where microtransaction's used only for limited skins (cosmetics), or to buy in-game currency for gacha.</p>
<p>Why did you choose to take part in the microtransaction activity?</p>	<p>To get limited premium items or to roll gacha.</p>
<p>Does the microtransaction that you do impact your monthly expenses?</p>	<p>Yes, microtransaction naturally increases outcome, therefore a more detailed money management is required since personal income is consistent by nature. It would be dangerous for someone to do microtransaction without further financial planning.</p>
<p>Have you been able to seize certain opportunities and take advantage from the games with gacha system, for example, opening a piloting service?</p>	<p>I personally don't, but piloting services are certainly sought after because some contents are time-consuming or requiring adequate skills that aren't possessed by all people.</p>

### 1. The Uniqueness of Gacha

Subject 1 and 2 both seem to agree that a sense of exclusivity is what differentiates gacha games from other games. Through either luck or real-world currency, players may own items and/or characters that are not owned by every single player of the game. Whereas Subject 3 has their own definition of uniqueness, that is, gacha games being a game that is 'life service' in nature. Compared to conventional console games which may release *DLC* (Downloadable Content) to prolong its hype, gacha-centric games cannot be played offline, hence its nature of constantly receiving updates, patches, and new contents, all for free.

## 2. Entertainment Aspects

Subject 1 finds the basic aspects of gacha game to be entertaining, such as its graphics, character designs, storyline, as well as the type of the game itself, whether it is an RPG, Roof, or something else, which resonates the closest to Subject 3, who finds the peculiar character designs as well as the storyline to be keeping them around for longer. Subject 3 had also stated that, according to their opinion, gacha games are mostly anime-based, therefore anime enjoyers would normally flock to play new anime-based gacha games in order to collect the characters they find most appealing. Subject 2 finds the action of rolling the gacha itself to be the most entertaining part of all, as well as the storyline.

### 1.1. Roulette and Jack-Pot Mechanism

In anime-based gacha games, there normally exist limited item banners which are meant to be gone after a certain period of time. In order to get the item and/or the character featured on the banner, players are expected to either grind their way to earn the adequate in-game currency, or spend real money as a shortcut. The thrill of losing the 50:50 chance of obtaining the featured item/character is what usually kept the game on-going and the community riled up, like how *shitsuke* is implemented in Japanese workplace which serves as a motivation for the employees with promises of reward (Wahyuningsih and Aryanto, 2016).

## 3. Gacha System and Microtransaction

Subject 1 and 2 agree that doing microtransaction within the game is all right as a hobby, which means that it will not get taken all too seriously. Subject 3 does admit, too, that the gacha system has left several good impressions on them, though, like Subject 1, they do acknowledge the major power imbalance because of it; one of which Subject 1 stated to not be that much of a hassle due to the 'Guarantee System' that exists in most modern gacha games.

### 3.1. Power Imbalance

Subject 3 admits that, due to the nature of microtransaction itself, the playerbase of gacha games are divided into two: those who pay and those who choose to play for free completely, with the latter usually being addressed as free-to-play (F2P) players. The power imbalance may be evident in how paid players' units are normally stronger than those who play it for free. In MMORPG type of gacha games, this sort of massive imbalance may seem unfair to some, though, all players have seemingly be aware of the nature of the imbalance itself.

## 4. The Importance of Microtransaction

Subject 2 and 3 appear to agree that microtransaction can be important for certain games with competitive players, for example, the need of staying on top of the leaderboards. However, the need to spend itself is not mandatory for players who wish to play casual on the game, such like Subject 1.

### 4.1. What The Subjects Purchase



Pointing back to the start of the discussion, all subjects seem to only participate in the microtransaction activity during certain period of times when they truly wished to own a certain character they adore or to purchase other items and cosmetics when they could still afford them.

## 5. The Impact of The Players' Spending Habit

Fortunately, all subjects realize the importance of budgeting for their specific needs within the games they play. The games they play certainly impact their monthly expenses, seeing how they are casual spenders within the games themselves, however, unlike the unfortunate incident that Subject 3 had ever witnessed, none of the subject still acknowledge the importance of their well-being before the games.

## 6. Opportunities Outside of The Game

Not many people have the opportunity to gain something back from the game, such as selling secondary, unused accounts or opening a piloting service as Subject 1 does. Most of the players do enjoy casual gaming like Subject 2, but also like Subject 3, many do acknowledge the importance of the existence of piloting services due to the time-consuming nature of gacha games which require the players to spend so many time grinding; something that not all working adult players can do.

## CONCLUSION

Though it is possible to spend real-world currency for some pixelated characters, the gacha system games are not as predatory as some people may have thought, as long as the players realize the importance of self-preservation before anything else, such as spending money on something more valuable and important first before they are used to purchase some in-game goods that may never do anybody good in real life.

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