

Becoming an FIDE Online ‘Arena International Master’ of Chess at 10: A Case Study on Digital Autoethnography, Reflexive Phenomenology and A Narrative Inquiry in eSport from Nepal

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Abstract

This qualitative single-case study investigates the swift chess advancement of an International Chess Federation (FIDE) rated chess player, who attained the FIDE Online Arena title of ‘Arena International Master’ following a rigorous one-year competitive journey in Nepal. The case is backed up by public records: his FIDE profile shows his ‘FIDE Online Arena’ title and rating profile, and his WorldChess profile shows that he has been practising online since May 2024. The study triangulates various data sources, including weekly training diaries, semi-structured interviews (with players, coaches, and parents), online practice logs, and an archive of PGN game files. It also incorporates documentary evidence of tournament successes, such as being the GLC International U10 winner, the U12 champion at academy events like the 2nd Moonlight inter-school rapid, and achieving high placements like the first in the Mangaladevi, Lalitpur Mayor/Major Cup, and Annapurna events. The analysis of data was predominantly conducted through reflexive thematic analysis, complemented by interpretative phenomenological examinations of specific diary and interview excerpts to emphasise lived experiences. Three interconnected themes emerged: (1) micro-practice and feedback loops facilitating skill acquisition; (2) identity, resilience, and learning from loss in a young athlete; and (3) digital affordances and socio-ecological support (including academy coaching, family, peer networks, and online platforms). The paper places these findings within the context of under-explored South Asian youth sports and suggests actionable measures, structured micro-practice, reflective digital logging, and robust family/academy support that could expedite developmental timelines.

Keywords: Chess, Fide, International Master, Esport, Digital Autoethnography, Phenomenological Narrative Inquiry, Reflexive Thematic Analysis, Qualitative Study, Nepal.

INTRODUCTION

Chess is widely acknowledged as a multifaceted cognitive sport and eSport that involves various aspects of human intelligence, such as strategic planning, memory, pattern recognition, and adaptive problem-solving (Campitelli, 2017; Chikish et al., 2019; Huk, 2019; Rimban, 2023; Saariluoma, 1995). For decades, researchers have looked into how people become experts at chess, but most of the time they have looked at adult grandmasters or people who have been playing for a long time (Campitelli & Gobet, 2008; Charness et al., 2005; Ericsson & Charness, 1994). There

are not many studies that look at how quickly young people can become very talented in a short amount of time, especially in South Asian contexts where chess is becoming more popular but is still not well-researched (Aryal, 2025; Chikish et al., 2019).

Digital platforms like FIDE Online Arena, Chess.com, and Lichess have changed how young people learn chess as an eSport by giving them instant feedback, access to global competitions, and game histories that are recorded digitally (Majhi, 2023; Wen, 2024). Digital practice allows for real-time performance tracking, tactical enhancement, and long-term examination of play patterns, augmenting conventional coaching and in-person tournament experiences (Chang et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2025). For young players, combining digital and offline experiences can help them learn new skills faster and learn more deeply (Edwards, 2013; Erstad, 2015); but there hasn't been much qualitative research on how this works for elite youth athletes.

Nepal has a unique cultural and developmental setting for chess. Chess has been around for a long time, but only recently have structured youth chess programs received more support from institutions. For example, Pavilions Chess Academy helps young players get more competitive exposure (Pavilions Chess Academy, 2026). Schools like Swostishree Gurukul IB World School have come up with new ideas, like life-size chess boards and student-led chess clubs, that make the school a place where students can learn new skills and make friends (Aryal, 2025). DAV Sushil Kedia Vishwa Bharati School actively facilitates the students to participate in competitive chess tournaments and champions its youth players by celebrating their competitive successes, such as their recent top-ten and honorary achievements at 20th and 21st Annapurna Friendship Chess Tournament (DAV Sushil Kedia Vishwa Bharati School, 2026). These contextual factors affect how young chess players deal with the stress of competition, digital learning, and their own motivation (Stegariu et al., 2025).

This study examines the lived experience of an adolescent chess player who attained the title of Arena International Master at the age of 10, achieving rapid skill acquisition within approximately one year of intensive training (FIDE, 2025). The research utilises digital autoethnography and reflexive phenomenological narrative inquiry to facilitate a comprehensive examination of personal motivation, cognitive and emotional processes, familial and institutional support, and engagement with digital learning platforms (Anteliz et al., 2022; Goldstein, 2017; Kinitz et al., 2022; Shields, 2005). The triangulation of diaries, semi-structured interviews, and eSport records facilitates the identification of fundamental themes in the learning process, including resilience, confidence, strategic thinking, and social networking within competitive chess (Cote et al., 2024; Bilal & Eristi, 2025).

The objective of this study is to elucidate the process of expedited chess proficiency from the viewpoint of a young player, incorporating both human and digital aspects. It specifically seeks to offer insights for other young chess enthusiasts, coaches, and educational institutions aiming to cultivate talent in analogous contexts. This research investigates the convergence of accelerated skill acquisition, digital training, and socio-cultural reinforcement in Nepal, thereby enriching the existing literature on youth proficiency, digital education in sports and eSports, and case-study methodologies in qualitative research.

METHODS

Research Design

This research utilised an embedded single-case qualitative framework, integrating digital autoethnography, phenomenological narrative inquiry, and reflexive thematic analysis. The design was selected to encapsulate the authentic developmental experience of a singular youth chess player within his inherent learning ecology, incorporating self-generated reflections, narrative construction of meaning, and triangulated digital artefacts. The case focuses on the first author, whose distinctive path, attaining the FIDE rating over the board and the title of Arena International Master at the age of 10, provided a defined subject for comprehensive qualitative analysis (Priya, 2021; Yin, 2014).

Participants and Ethics

The main researcher who took part in the study was the first author, a FIDE rated player and an AIM. The principal researcher was a minor during data collection; therefore, parental consent and child assent procedures were adhered to in accordance with national ethical standards and the Belmont principles of respect, beneficence, and justice. The co-author of the paper is the supervising adult, a parent and a FIDE National Arbiter, who provided written informed consent and helped with the interview and with the study. He oversaw ethical compliance, confidentiality, and data security. The research adhered to the COREQ (Tong et al., 2007) and SRQR (O'Brien et al., 2014) reporting guidelines.

Data Sources

We gathered a lot of qualitative and digital artefacts over the course of two years (2024–2026):

- i) Reflective diaries—weekly written entries (about 250 words) that record training hours, feelings, feedback, and experiences with competition.
- ii) Semi-structured interviews with the player, coach, and parent, each lasting 45 to 60 minutes, were done separately and recorded and transcribed verbatim.
- iii) Digital practice logs taken from accounts on WorldChess/FIDE Online Arena, Chess.com, and Lichess (game records, win/loss ratios, puzzle ratings, and time controls).
- iv) Game artefacts: more than 150 PGN files from online and over-the-board (OTB) tournaments, including annotated versions of important games.
- v) Tournament paperwork—confirmed public results and social media posts that showed placements (for example, 1st U10 GLC International; 1st U12 Mangaladevi; 1st U11 Himalayan 100×2; 2nd U10 Lalitpur Mayor Cup; top-10 Annapurna and Pushpasadan events).
- vi) Institutional context artefacts—things from Swostishree Gurukul IB World School (like the creation of the life-size chessboard and the Chess Club presidency documentation), DAV Sushil Kedia Vishwa Bharati School (like facilitation to the students to participate in competitive chess tournaments and celebration of their competitive successes, such as the achievements at Annapurna Friendship Chess Tournament) and Pavilions Chess Academy posts that prove training affiliations.

Data Collection Procedures

The diarist-researcher wrote down their thoughts on the same day each week, and then added entries from the past for important tournaments. Open-ended questions about motivation, learning strategies, digital practice habits, and emotional experiences guided the interviews. NVivo 14 was used to manage all of the transcripts and diaries qualitatively. Portable Game Notation (PGN) files were saved in a way that met FIDE standards and linked to diary dates so that they could be triangulated over time.

Data Analysis

Analysis was conducted using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and supplementary Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Eatough & Smith, 2017) for significant excerpts:

- i) Getting to know the material: reading it over and over, taking notes, and writing memos.
- ii) Initial coding: using NVivo to do inductive line-by-line coding and combining text and digital artefacts.
- iii) Developing themes: grouping codes into possible themes and reviewing them with the supervising adult and coach over and over again to make sure they are credible.
- iv) Reflexive synthesis: writing and rewriting analytical stories that connect experience, emotion, and context.
- v) Triangulation: the coming together of different types of data (diary, game, interview, and public records).

There was an audit trail, and reflexive journals kept track of the decisions made during analysis.

Trustworthiness

Data triangulation, member-checking with informants, and supervisory review by the adult co-author all helped make the work more credible. Thick descriptions of the context helped with transferability, an audit trail helped with dependability, and reflexive memos and a clear codebook helped with confirmability. Data triangulation, member-checking with informants, and supervisory review by the adult co-author all helped to make the work more credible. Transferability was addressed through a comprehensive contextual description; dependability through an audit trail; and confirmability through reflexive memos and a transparent codebook.

Ethics and Reflexivity

The corresponding adult author, who is a FIDE National Arbiter and a member of the Central Department of Public Health at the Institute of Medicine at Tribhuvan University, oversaw the ethical approval for this study. The study adhered to the principles of parental permission and child assent as stipulated by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2016) and conformed to international standards for the ethical conduct of research involving children, given that the primary researcher was a minor (OHRP, 2021). All interviewees signed a form giving

their written consent, and the researcher-participant's consent and assent were recorded. Data containing personally identifiable information was stored on an encrypted local device, with anonymised transcripts utilised for analysis and reporting.

The author's reflexive stance as both participant and researcher necessitated constant awareness of subjectivity and interpretation. Autoethnographic notes and analytic memos were utilised to delineate positional influences during data generation and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Regular supervisory debriefings with the adult co-author, along with discussions with the coach-informant, functioned as peer debriefings to reduce interpretive bias. Keeping a record of analytic decisions and versioned drafts helped make things even more open and honest. The researcher adopted a constructivist-interpretivist perspective, acknowledging that meanings are co-created through lived experiences, reflection, and interaction (Frechette et al., 2020; Mills et al., 2017; Smith & Osborn, 2015).

The research adhered to the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ; Tong et al., 2007) and the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR; O'Brien et al., 2014). These frameworks directed methodological transparency, ethical rigour, and reflexivity throughout all phases of the research process.

RESULTS

This section presents the results from the embedded single-case qualitative study of the chess journey of the main participant (the main researcher, the first author) towards becoming a FIDE Online Arena International Master at the age of 10. The analysis synthesises data from reflective diaries, semi-structured interviews, digital practice logs, game artefacts, tournament documentation, and institutional context artefacts, triangulated using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021; 2021a) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008; Eatough & Smith, 2017).

Theme 1: Cognitive and Strategic Development

Subtheme 1.1: Analytical Thinking and Problem-Solving

The main participant showed a lot of improvement in his problem-solving and analytical thinking skills. His reflective diaries showed that he was getting a better grasp of complicated situations and coming up with ways to deal with them. He said, "I started to see patterns in the middle game that I hadn't seen before." The pieces seem to know what I should do.

Game artefacts backed up this progression by showing that his average move quality got better and his mistakes got fewer over time.

Subtheme 1.2: Opening Repertoire Expansion

The main participant added both mainstream and unusual lines to his opening repertoire by using digital practice logs and game analyses. His ability to change his openings based on how his opponents played was clear in his tournament performances, where he used different openings to get an edge over his opponents.

Theme 2: Emotional and Psychological Resilience

Subtheme 2.1: Coping with Defeat

The main participant (the first author)'s ability to deal with losses changed a lot. At first, losses made him angry, but over time, he learned to think about them more thoughtfully. His coach said, "He started to see losses as chances to learn and get better instead of dwelling on them."

The main participant wrote in his diaries that he had changed: "I lost today, but I learned why. Next time, I'll do better."

Subtheme 2.2: Managing Performance Pressure

A common theme was the stress of high-stakes tournaments. The main participant's diaries and interviews showed how he dealt with stress, like using visualisation techniques and mindfulness practices. His parent said, "We did relaxation exercises together before big games." It helped him stay calm and on task.

Theme 3: Social and Environmental Influences

Subtheme 3.1: Supportive Coaching and Mentorship

The main participant's coach at Pavilions Chess Academy played a key role in his growth. The coach stressed how important it was to give personalised help and emotional support through semi-structured interviews. The coach said, "Knowing how he learns and giving him personalised feedback made a big difference in his progress."

Subtheme 3.2: Family Involvement

Family support was a big part of the main participant's journey. His parent, Arjun Aryal, not only helped him with logistics but also talked about games and strategies in a thoughtful way. The main participant's diaries often said things like, "Dad and I went over my games together." He helps me see things I didn't see before."

Theme 4: Digital Tools and Self-Directed Learning

Subtheme 4.1: Utilisation of Online Platforms

The main participant's growth was greatly helped by his use of online sites like FIDE Online Arena, Chess.com and Lichess. Digital practice logs showed that people were regularly playing puzzles, analysing games, and playing games online. He said, "I play online every day." "It's like a gym for my mind."

Subtheme 4.2: Self-Analysis and Improvement

The main participant showed that he could learn on his own very well. He looked at his own games a lot, looking for mistakes and ways to get better. In his reflective diaries, he often wrote things like, "I looked at my last game and saw where I went wrong. Next time, I'll work on that."

Summary Table of Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subthemes
Cognitive and Strategic Development	Analytical Thinking and Problem-Solving, Opening Repertoire Expansion
Emotional and Psychological Resilience	Coping with Defeat, Managing Performance Pressure
Social and Environmental Influences	Supportive Coaching and Mentorship, Family Involvement
Digital Tools and Self-Directed Learning	Utilisation of Online Platforms, Self-Analysis and Improvement

These results show how many different ways the main participant Aryal has grown as a young chess player. Combining cognitive, emotional, social, and digital aspects gives a full picture of his journey, showing how individual agency, supportive environments, and technology can all work together to help him grow and do well in chess.

DISCUSSION

This study offers a comprehensive analysis of the developmental trajectory of the main participant (the first author) in attaining the title of Arena International Master at the age of 10. Utilising an embedded single-case qualitative design that combines digital autoethnography, phenomenological narrative inquiry, and reflexive thematic analysis, the study elucidates the complex interactions among the cognitive, emotional, social, and technological aspects of child's chess development.

Cognitive and Strategic Development

The main participant's advancement in analytical thinking and problem-solving corresponds with existing literature that underscores chess as a facilitator of cognitive enhancement. Studies show that teaching kids how to play chess greatly improves their memory, attention, logical thinking, and problem-solving skills. The main participant's reflective diaries and game analyses confirm these findings, showing that he has gotten much better at predicting what his opponents will do and coming up with complex strategies. This improvement in strategic thinking aligns with Piaget's theory of cognitive development, which asserts that intricate games such as chess promote the shift from concrete to formal operational stages of thought (Campitelli, 2017; Chikish et al., 2019; Huk, 2019; Rimban, 2023).

Emotional and Psychological Resilience

The study shows that the main participant's ability to deal with losses and handle performance pressure changed a lot over time. At first, losing made him angry, but he learned to be strong by using reflective practices and emotional regulation techniques. This finding aligns with research highlighting chess's contribution to emotional resilience, instructing children on managing setbacks, stress, and developing coping mechanisms (Anteliz et al., 2022; Goldstein, 2017). The main participant's experiences highlight the necessity of incorporating emotional resilience training into chess education, as it not only improves performance but also promotes overall psychological well-being.

Social and Environmental Influences

Supportive coaching and active family involvement had a big impact on the main participant's development in chess. His coach's personalised guidance and emotional support were pivotal in his growth, reflecting findings that mentorship and tailored instruction significantly impact youth development in chess. Additionally, the main participant's parents' involvement in his chess journey shows how important family is in creating a good place to learn. This is in line with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, which says that social interactions and guidance are very important for cognitive development (Pathan et al., 2018).

Digital Tools and Self-Directed Learning

Incorporating digital platforms like FIDE Online Arena, Chess.com and Lichess into the main participant's training helped him learn on his own and gave him access to a lot of resources. Research indicates that online chess platforms improve logical-analytical reasoning and provide personalised learning opportunities. The main participant's regular use of these platforms, along with his reflective practices, shows how digital tools can work well with traditional coaching methods to create a more complete way to learn chess. (Chang et al., 2024; Majhi, 2023; Wen, 2024). Digital practice allows for real-time performance tracking, tactical enhancement, and long-term examination of play patterns, augmenting conventional coaching and in-person tournament experiences.

CONCLUSION

This study emphasises the complex aspects of development of young people through chess, demonstrating how cognitive, emotional, social, and technological factors intersect to influence a young player's progression. The first-hand experience of the main participant (the first author) and growth to FIDE's "Arena International Master" within around a year at the age of 10 provides significant insights into the mechanisms and dynamics that facilitate extraordinary success in chess and eSport at a young age.

Subsequent research ought to investigate the enduring effects of early chess and eSport education on diverse facets of youth development, encompassing academic achievement, social competencies, and psychological health. Additionally, research examining the efficacy of different teaching-learning models and the integration of digital tools in chess and other eSport education can provide further guidance for educators and practitioners aiming to optimise learning outcomes for young players in chess and eSports.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

Funding

None

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