

Global review of online video gaming policies to protect young people from harms

What this research is about

Online video gaming is one of the most popular activities among young people. But concerns have been raised about possible harms linked to online gaming. To address these concerns, governments around the world and the gaming industry have introduced a variety of policies. In this review, the authors explored research on these policies to determine whether they are being implemented effectively and achieving their intended goals.

What the researchers did

The authors searched for studies that were published up until December 2024 using three databases: Web of Science, Scopus, and PubMed. Studies were included in the review if they evaluated a gaming-related policy, regulation, or law relevant to the mental health or wellbeing of young people aged 25 years or younger. Only studies published in peer-reviewed journals in English were considered.

The included studies looked at a variety of policies, regulations, and laws, including age ratings for games, restrictions on gaming time, rules about in-game purchases, and online safety measures. The authors summarized what is currently known about how well these regulations are working based on the results of the reviewed studies.

What the researchers found

There were 43 studies included in the review. The studies were conducted in several countries, with many covering international regulations (21%), followed by Mainland China (19%), and North America (14%). A few studies included stakeholders

What you need to know

The authors reviewed 43 studies that evaluated online video gaming policies from around the world. The studies looked at policies designed to protect young people, including those that addressed age-inappropriate content, excessive gaming, loot boxes and other gambling-like features, and online safety.

The authors generally found that many gaming policies have not been thoroughly evaluated. Age rating systems can help parents and young people make informed decisions, but many youth still play games intended for older audiences. Restrictions on gaming time appear relatively easy to work around and have shown mixed results. Regulations that target loot boxes and gambling-like features, are often not complied with or enforced consistently. The findings can inform future research and policy efforts to improve gaming regulations designed to protect young people from harms.

like parents, industry members, and government officials.

Age rating systems are widely adopted. Studies from North America, Europe, Germany, and Australia generally found that parents were aware of age ratings and sometimes used them when choosing games for their children. However, many young people still reported playing games intended for older audiences. Parents often relied on their own judgment, rather than strictly following rating recommendations. Some studies also found that parents did not always understand the ratings or

what content they were designed to identify. Across countries, age rating systems appear to provide useful information but do not consistently prevent youth from accessing age-inappropriate games.

Some studies from China and South Korea looked at policies designed to restrict how long young people can play video games. The findings are mixed, with some studies finding that gaming time decreased following the introduction of these restrictions. On the other hand, other studies found little evidence that these policies reduced heavy gaming. Many young people were able to bypass restrictions by using adult accounts or finding other workarounds. Some studies also found that reduced gaming time was replaced by other forms of screen use, making it unclear whether these policies improve wellbeing.

International studies as well as those from China, Belgium, and the United Kingdom (UK) looked at policies targeting loot boxes and other gambling-like features in video games. These studies consistently identified challenges with compliance and enforcement. For example, in China, many companies disclose loot box reward probabilities as required, but the information is often difficult to find or understand. For most people, these disclosures do not affect their in-game spending.

Some studies looked at policies related to online safety, consumer protection, and in-game misconduct and crime such as theft and fraud. These studies found that safety features, parental controls, reporting systems, and moderation practices vary a lot across gaming platforms. Studies also identified game design features that encourage impulsive spending, like limited time offers and other tactics that create a fear of missing out.

Generally, many of the policies have not yet been evaluated through research.

How you can use this research

The findings can inform future research and policy efforts to improve gaming regulations designed to protect young people from harms.

About the researchers

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Citation

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