RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

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Strengthening healthcare services from the perspectives of people with lived experiences of gaming and/or gambling-related harms

What this research is about

Gaming is a popular activity, especially among children and young people (CYP). There is concern that gambling-like elements in video games, particularly loot boxes, may encourage CYP to engage in gambling. Researchers have suggested that CYP may experience unique gambling-related harms because of their developmental stage.

A public health approach can help address risks of harm from gaming and gambling. Previous research found that people with gaming and gambling-related problems may not access healthcare services unless they experience acute mental health issues. Moreover, there is evidence that healthcare practitioners may not know the best ways to offer support to CYP who experience gaming and/or gambling-related harms.

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of people with gaming and/or gambling-related harms with respect to healthcare services and support systems. Additionally, the researchers wanted to understand how these experiences can help strengthen healthcare services and support systems to protect CYP at risk of gaming and/or gambling-related harms.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited five adults (aged 28–49) in the UK to participate in two focus groups. One focus group had three participants, while the other had two participants. Four of the participants were male and one was female. Young Gamers and Gamblers Education Trust (YGAM) and Betknowmore UK networks helped with the recruitment.

What you need to know

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of people with gaming and/or gambling-related harms to inform healthcare services and support systems. Additionally, the researchers wanted to understand how these experiences can help strengthen healthcare services and support systems to protect CYP at risk of gaming and/or gambling-related harms. The researchers recruited five adults aged 28-49 with lived experiences of gaming and/or gambling-related harms to participate in two focus groups. The researchers identified five themes from the overlap of gaming and gambling experiences and related harms. The key themes were (1) escapism; (2) identity; (3) preventative education; (4) safer environments; and (5) health-based narratives.

Participants had to be at least 18 years old. This requirement followed the age restrictions of the Gambling Act 2005 regarding recruiting participants for discussions of gambling. Participants had to have lived experiences of gaming and/or gambling-related harms, but they must confirm that they were at a point of recovery. Four participants mostly experienced gambling-related harms, while one mostly experienced gaming-related harms.

What the researchers found

The researchers identified five themes from the overlap of gambling and gaming experiences and related harms.

(1) Escapism: Gaming and/or gambling behaviour provided participants with an escape from their lives. Escapism was seen as cyclical, as

gaming/gambling behaviour was both a 'cure' and a cause of negative life experiences. Gaming and gambling were used to avoid facing real-life consequences while providing participants with a physiological rush.

(2) Identity: Participants discussed how their gaming or gambling activities became part of their identity. For example, in-game items helped participants raise their social status. Participants discussed experiencing an increase in harm during transitional moments in their life (e.g., family breakdown, moving into higher education, episodes of poor mental health). Gaming and/or gambling provided them with a sense of community, and virtual environments gave access to different communities through which they could build a sense of identity.

(3) Preventative education: Participants agreed that there is a need for preventative education and early intervention for CYP. They talked about the need for CYP role models and peer-to-peer conversations, changing family attitudes towards gaming and gambling, and raising awareness of risky activities through educational institutions.

(4) Safer environments: Participants discussed how wider systems could be used to help prevent gaming and gambling-related harms. Safer environments could be fostered through compassionate practice (e.g., communication, person-centered care), public health messaging, consumer protection regulations, and product designs.

(5) Health-based narratives around illness and support: Participants discussed the nature of gambling addiction as an illness, but this narrative was not as clear and focused when talking about gaming-related harms. Participants also mentioned the lack of information about how to seek treatment and support for addictions, and the importance of seeing recovery as an ongoing journey.

How you can use this research

This study provides insight into how evolving technology, such as online gambling, can create vulnerabilities, especially for CYP. Policy makers and healthcare professionals can use the findings to design targeted interventions to support CYP who engage in gaming and gambling.

About the researchers

Kevin Davidson, Sarah E. Hodge, and **Constantina Panourgia** are affiliated with the Department of Psychology at Bournemouth University in Bournemouth, UK. Kevin Davidson is also affiliated with the Department of Educational Studies, Goldsmiths College, University of London, UK. Sarah E. Hodge is also affiliated with the School of Sciences at Bath Spa University in Bath, UK. **Maggie Hutchings** is affiliated with the Faculty of Health & Social Sciences at Bournemouth University in Bournemouth, UK. Kev Clelland is affiliated with Young Gamers and Gamblers Association (YGAM) and Betknowmore in London, UK. For more information about this study, please contact Sarah E. Hodge at s.hodge@bathspa.ac.uk.

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About Greo Evidence Insights

Greo Evidence Insights is an independent, non-profit organization specializing in research, knowledge mobilization, and evaluation in the health and well-being sectors. Greo transforms research and insights into actionable strategies to prevent and reduce harm related to gambling, gaming, technology use, and substance use. To learn more about funding for Research Snapshots visit our website.

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