

knowledge snapshot



A review on preventing Internet addiction harm in Europe

What this article is about

Internet addiction has been around since the mid-1990s. Internet addiction is a broad term. It includes many types of addiction problems related to the use of the Internet. Online gambling and online gaming are two examples. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) recognized Internet Gaming Disorder in 2013. Subsequently, the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) included Gaming Disorder in 2018. The inclusion of Internet addiction has led to many debates. The media have also alerted the public about online addiction problems. Online addiction problems are now understood as international public health concerns. Unfortunately, the prevention of Internet addiction has not been very successful.

The authors reviewed research studies on Internet addiction published in Europe from 2013 to 2018. They aimed to identify the main concerns of Internet addiction, characteristics of people with such problems, and interventions. The researchers also provided policy options for harm reduction.

What was done?

The researchers looked for relevant studies using the databases PsycINFO and Web of Science. The studies must collect data from participants in a community or clinical setting. The studies must also be in a language known by the researchers (English, Spanish, French, German, Polish, Italian, or Portuguese).

What you need to know

A total of 19 studies were included in the review. Ten studies were from Southern Europe. Eight studies were from Western Europe, and one study was from

Why is this article important?

This article provides a timely review of Internet addiction in Europe from 2013 to 2018. This review is intended to help inform policy to prevent harms from Internet addiction. It summarizes the characteristics and harms associated with generalized Internet addiction as well as online gambling and gaming addictions. The review found that individuals with problematic Internet use were usually male adolescents. Those with online gambling addiction were usually adults. People with an Internet addiction often had other mental health problems (e.g., social anxiety, depression). Cognitive behavioural therapy was effective in treating Internet addiction. Based on their review, the researchers developed four policy options.

Northern Europe. Almost all participants were adolescents and young adults. Only a few studies assessed online gambling, which were usually with middle-aged adults.

Studies of generalized internet addiction (GIA) users consisted of adolescents. Community samples tended to be balanced in both genders. More males were included in clinical samples. In terms of specific Internet addiction, gamers were usually adolescents. Gamblers were mostly adults. Gamers and gamblers were mostly males. This was especially true for clinical samples. Clinical samples of gamers were often young males who played Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games. These studies usually included parents as part of the treatment.

Eight studies looked at problems associated with GIA. A wide range of harms were presented, including

problems in daily functioning. Other mental health problems were also common, especially depression and anxiety. Cognitive-behavioural therapy was helpful in treating GIA. Prevalence rates of GIA were higher in clinical samples than community samples. Difficulties managing emotions and poor coping could increase the risk of GIA. School interventions appeared helpful in reducing Internet addiction.

Nine studies reported on problems with Internet gaming. Different scales and methods were used to assess Internet gaming addiction. Males and older adolescents were at higher risk. Clinical samples were more common than community samples. Cognitive-behavioural therapy was used to treat gaming addiction with good outcomes. Other mental health disorders were also quite common. Some studies supported school and peer intervention, especially if the preventive programs also targeted impulsivity.

Three studies were on Internet gambling disorder. All used different measures. Gaming and gambling shared similar features, including being more common in males. But, gaming and gambling were also found to be their own unique mental health problems. Individuals with both gambling and gaming problems were most likely to have other mental health problems. Online interventions for gambling seemed to be only helpful for motivated individuals. Interventions could be harmful if people were not motivated to change.

The first policy option is no action. It is based on the idea of natural recovery. It should only be considered if problems last less than a year. This option may not be appropriate given the growing public health concern of Internet addiction. The second policy option is to support professionals by providing evidence-based information on preventing and treating Internet addiction. It also involves improving research in this area. The third policy option is to educate vulnerable populations on healthy Internet use. Education should also focus on developing other fun activities. The fourth policy option is to support communities and families. It involves helping improve communication in families. It also includes providing

information to families and schools about the risks of overusing the Internet.

Who is it intended for?

This research is for policymakers and clinicians to help prevent Internet addiction problems. Schools could also put in place prevention programs.

About the researchers

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About Gambling Research Exchange (GREO)

Gambling Research Exchange (GREO) has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. GREO is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization that aims to eliminate harm from gambling. Our goal is to support evidence-informed decision making in safer gambling policies, standards, and practices. The work we do is intended for researchers, policy makers, gambling regulators and operators, and treatment and prevention service providers.

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