Psychosocial correlates of internet gaming disorder: Psychopathology, life satisfaction, and impulsivity

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1. Introduction

Addiction has traditionally been conceptualized as compulsive drug-seeking behavior, characterized by the presence of tolerance, withdrawal, and craving (O'Brien, Volkow, & Li, 2006). However, this view of addiction may be overly limited, given growing evidence to suggest significant parallels between substance and non-substance or behavioral addictions (Potenza, 2006, 2009). The recent re-classification of “Gambling Disorder” (formerly known as “Pathological Gambling”) from an “Impulse Control Disorder” to the new category of “Substance-Related and Addictive Disorders” in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) formalizes the increasing recognition of the addictive potential of excess engagement in habitual or repetitive behaviors such as gambling (Albrecht, Kirschner, & Grussler, 2007; APA, 2013. APA et al., 2000). Research strongly supports the view of Gambling Disorder as an addiction: problem gamblers report symptoms of tolerance (i.e., the need to increase betting over time), withdrawal (i.e., anger or irritability when unable to gamble), and craving, exhibit attentional biases towards gambling-related cues and rising heart rates in anticipation of winning, display diminished cognitive control and increased impulsivity, and run the risk of relapse even after prolonged periods of abstinence (Blaszczynski, Walker, Sharpe, & Nower, 2008; Cunningham-Williams, Gattis, Dore, Shi, & Spitznagel, 2009; Goudriaan, Yucel, & van Holst, 2014; Tavares, Zilberstein, Hodgins, & el-Guebaly, 2005; van Holst et al., 2012; Wulfert, Roland, Hartley, Wang, & Franco, 2005). Excess engagement in gambling also activates brain areas typically associated with substance addiction, such as the frontal cortices and striatal complexes (Coudriaud et al., 2014; Koehler et al., 2013; Kuss & Griffiths, 2012; Leeman & Potenza, 2013).

Along with extensive research on Gambling Disorder, there has been a steady increase in studies of other hypothesized behavioral addictions, including maladaptive or excessive engagement in tanning bed use (Harrington et al., 2011; Mosher & Danoff-Burg, 2010; Nolan, Taylor, Liguori, & Feldman, 2009), shopping (Clark & Calleja, 2008; Davenport, Houston, & Griffiths, 2012; Lo & Harvey, 2012). Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) was included as a “Condition for Further Study” in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5). Frequent gamers have previously been shown to exhibit core symptoms of addiction, along with significant impairments in psychosocial functioning. However, there remains a lack of consensus regarding the conceptualization and assessment of video game addiction. We examined the utility of nine questions (Cronbach’s α = 0.84), based directly on proposed DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for IGD, in capturing problems related to excess use of online video games. Regular video game users (n = 257) completed an online questionnaire assessing demographics, symptoms of IGD, general psychopathology, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and impulsivity. Participants meeting criteria for IGD (8.7%, n = 21) played video games significantly more often (p = 0.04) and for more hours at a time (p = 0.002), and experienced significantly greater subjective urges to use video games (p < 0.001). Furthermore, those with IGD endorsed significantly more symptoms of depression (p < 0.001), anxiety (p < 0.001), and stress (p = 0.01); lower life satisfaction (p < 0.001), and elevated motor (p = 0.02) and attentional impulsivity (p = 0.01). Proposed DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for IGD appear to capture a clinically meaningful cluster of symptoms that is associated with marked impairments in multiple aspects of psychosocial functioning.

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excess use of video games. Suggested criteria for categorizing respondents as “addicted” to video games also vary markedly across existing studies: some utilize a threshold of two symptoms to identify “problem gamers,” others look for three or four criteria endorsed to assign a diagnosis of “gaming addiction,” while the DSM proposes a threshold of five criteria for a formal diagnosis of IGD (APA, 2013; Brunborg et al., 2013; Gruesser, Thalemann, & Griffith, 2007). Some have also called for a distinction between “core” (i.e., relapse, withdrawal, conflict, and problems) and “peripheral” criteria to differentiate “addicted” versus “highly engaged” gamers (Brunborg et al., 2013).

Prevalence estimates of problems related to excess use of video games vary drastically across studies, which may at least in part be due to the divergence in approaches to assessment. For example, a study of U.S. adolescents estimated that 8.5% of respondents met criteria for “gaming addiction” (Gentile, 2009), while estimated prevalence of “video game addiction” ranged from 1.9% to 2.3% in the Netherlands (Lemmens, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2009), and was found to be even lower in Germany (0.2%) and Norway (0.6%) (Festl et al., 2013; Mentzoni et al., 2011). By contrast, estimated prevalence of “gaming addiction” in Taiwan was estimated to be around 46% (Wan & Chou, 2006).

1.2. Aims and hypothesis

The present study was designed to examine psychosocial correlates of excessive video game use using a brief set of nine questions that are directly based on the proposed DSM-5 criteria for IGD and capture the core components of addiction used to diagnose alcohol and other substance use disorders, as well as behavioral addiction to gambling, including tolerance, withdrawal, mood modification, and salience (Hussain & Griffiths, 2009). Of note, a similar approach has been utilized previously to capture symptoms related to excess engagement in online social networking (Hornes et al., 2014), indoor tanning (Mosher & Danoff-Burg, 2010; Zeller, Lazovich, Forster, & Widom, 2006), and binge eating (Cassin & von Ranson, 2007), as well as food addiction (Gearhardt, Corbin, & Brownell, 2009). We hypothesized that the proposed brief set of questions would successfully capture problems related to excessive use of online video games, including its association with marked impairments in psychosocial functioning.

2. Material and methods

All methods were approved by the local Institutional Review Board. All respondents were informed of the nature and purpose of the study and consented prior to participation.

2.1. Participants

A total of 297 individuals completed the study questionnaire via the secure online server SurveyMonkey. Participants younger than age 18 or not indicating their age (n = 40, 13.5%) were excluded from the analyses, resulting in a final sample of 257 respondents. Respondents included students at a large Northeastern University (66.5%, n = 171) who received research participation credit, and individuals recruited from the community via announcements posted to message boards in online communities for video game users (33.5%, n = 86) who completed the survey without compensation.

2.2. Measures

Respondents provided information on their gaming habits, including frequency of video game use, number of hours spent

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