

Gaming or Escaping? Examining the Relationship Between Online Gaming Addiction and Emotional Regulation in Adolescents

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Abstract

The prevalence of online gaming has surged over the last decade, becoming a dominant form of entertainment among adolescents. While gaming can serve as a healthy recreational activity, it can also lead to addiction with far-reaching consequences. This research article explores the intricate relationship between online gaming addiction and emotional regulation in adolescents. Drawing from a blend of psychological theories, empirical studies, and survey data, we aim to understand whether gaming serves as an escape mechanism for emotional distress or exacerbates emotional dysregulation. The findings reveal critical insights into the dual nature of gaming, highlighting the necessity for nuanced interventions tailored to adolescents' psychological needs.

Keywords: Online gaming addiction (OGA); Emotional regulation; Adolescents; Escapism; Gaming addiction; Mental health

Introduction

Online gaming is an ever-evolving global phenomenon that captivates millions of adolescents. Platforms like Fortnite, League of Legends, and Minecraft have transformed gaming from a solitary activity into a deeply social and immersive experience. However, the addictive potential of these games raises significant concerns for mental health professionals, educators, and parents alike. Emotional regulation, defined as the ability to manage and respond to emotional experiences effectively, plays a pivotal role in adolescent development. This article examines whether online gaming addiction undermines emotional regulation or acts as a maladaptive coping mechanism. By focusing on adolescents, a group particularly vulnerable to both addiction and emotional volatility, we address an urgent question: Are these young gamers engaging with online worlds to escape emotional distress, or are their gaming habits amplifying underlying issues. Online gaming addiction, often categorized as Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) by the American Psychiatric Association, is marked by excessive and compulsive gaming behaviours [1-4].

Studies suggest that between 5% and 10% of gamers exhibit addiction-like symptoms, including preoccupation with gaming, withdrawal, and loss of control over playing time. Adolescents, with their neuroplasticity and heightened emotional sensitivity, are especially prone to developing such patterns. Psychological models, such as the Cognitive-Behavioral Model of Pathological Internet Use, propose that gaming addiction stems from a combination of personal, situational, and game-related factors. For instance, adolescents who struggle with social anxiety may find solace in the anonymity and control offered by online games. This psychological safety net can lead to excessive gaming, ultimately impairing other areas of life. Emotional regulation encompasses processes through which individuals influence their emotional states, either to intensify, diminish, or maintain their feelings. Adolescents, transitioning from childhood dependency to adult autonomy, face unique challenges in mastering these skills. Deficits in emotional regulation are associated with various mental health disorders, including depression, anxiety, and impulsivity. Several studies have established a link between poor emotional regulation and maladaptive coping strategies, such as substance abuse or avoidance behaviors. Gaming, as a form of avoidance, raises critical questions about its role in emotional regulation—whether it alleviates distress

or serves as an enabler of emotional dysregulation. Gaming offers an array of emotional benefits, including stress relief, mood enhancement, and social connection. Multiplayer games provide opportunities for teamwork and camaraderie, while solo games allow players to immerse themselves in narratives that offer temporary respite from real-world challenges. However, the line between healthy gaming and addiction often blurs when gaming becomes a primary coping mechanism. Research suggests that adolescents with limited emotional regulation skills may over-rely on gaming to escape negative emotions, creating a cycle where the underlying issues remain unresolved [5].

Methodology

Research design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. The primary aim was to investigate the relationship between online gaming addiction and emotional regulation among adolescents aged 13 to 18 years.

Participants

A total of 300 adolescents from diverse socio-economic backgrounds participated in the study. Participants were recruited through schools, online forums, and gaming communities. Consent was obtained from both the adolescents and their parents [6].

Instruments

1. **Internet gaming disorder scale (IGD-20):** To assess the severity of gaming addiction.
2. **Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS):** To

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measure participants' emotional regulation capabilities.

3. **Qualitative interviews:** Semi-structured interviews explored participants' motivations for gaming.

Procedure

Participants completed the IGD-20 and DERS questionnaires, followed by a subset (n=50) participating in one-on-one interviews. Data analysis involved correlational statistics for the quantitative measures and thematic coding for the qualitative data.

Results

Quantitative findings

The IGD-20 scores indicated that 18% of participants met the criteria for gaming addiction. These individuals reported significantly higher scores on the DERS, indicating greater difficulties in emotional regulation. A Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong positive correlation ($r=0.72$, $p<0.01$) between IGD scores and emotional dysregulation [7, 8].

Subgroup analysis showed that male adolescents exhibited higher IGD scores compared to females, while emotional dysregulation was uniformly distributed across genders. Age-specific trends indicated that younger adolescents (13-15 years) were more likely to report gaming as an emotional escape than older participants.

Qualitative insights

Thematic analysis of interview data revealed three recurring patterns:

1. **Gaming as emotional escape:** Participants frequently cited gaming as a refuge from stressors such as academic pressure, familial conflicts, and peer relationships.
2. **Emotional amplification:** Excessive gaming often heightened feelings of guilt, frustration, and isolation when participants were unable to achieve desired in-game outcomes.
3. **Lack of alternative coping mechanisms:** Many adolescents acknowledged their limited ability to manage emotions outside of gaming, pointing to a reliance on gaming for emotional stability.

Discussion

Emotional regulation refers to the processes through which individuals monitor, evaluate, and modify their emotional responses. In adolescents, emotional regulation is particularly important as it is a critical period for developing social and emotional competence. Effective emotional regulation allows individuals to manage their emotional experiences in a healthy and adaptive manner, contributing to better coping strategies, problem-solving abilities, and overall mental health. However, emotional regulation is a skill that requires development, and adolescents may struggle with intense emotions like anger, sadness, and anxiety. These emotional challenges can manifest in various ways, including impulsivity, mood swings, or emotional dysregulation, which may lead to maladaptive coping mechanisms. For many adolescents, online gaming can serve as an outlet for emotional distress, allowing them to avoid or temporarily numb negative emotions. In this context, gaming becomes a form of escapism-offering an immediate, albeit temporary, solution to emotional struggles. The relationship between online gaming addiction and emotional regulation is multifaceted and complex. Several studies have identified that adolescents who are prone to poor emotional regulation are more

likely to develop addictive behaviors related to gaming. This may occur because gaming provides a means of emotional escape, allowing individuals to avoid confronting difficult emotions like anxiety, depression, and frustration. For adolescents facing emotional turmoil, gaming becomes a coping mechanism to manage these feelings in the short term. Indicates that adolescents with difficulties in emotional regulation are more prone to engaging in excessive gaming [9, 10].

These individuals may have difficulty managing emotions like anger, stress, or loneliness and seek solace in the structured and controlled environments of video games. In gaming, they can find a sense of control over their environment that they may lack in real life, thereby reinforcing the tendency to use gaming as a coping strategy. Conversely, online gaming addiction can exacerbate emotional dysregulation. Adolescents who engage in excessive gaming may become increasingly withdrawn, socially isolated, and disconnected from their real-world emotions. As the addiction deepens, it can lead to a cycle where the individual becomes less equipped to cope with stress or emotional challenges, thus becoming even more reliant on gaming for emotional relief. The emotional regulation difficulties tied to gaming addiction can lead to a variety of mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, and social withdrawal. When adolescents are unable to regulate their emotions effectively, they may turn to gaming as a way to avoid uncomfortable feelings. Over time, this can foster a pattern of emotional suppression, which may result in internalized distress and contribute to the onset of mental health disorders.

Found a significant correlation between problematic gaming and depression, as well as between gaming addiction and poor interpersonal relationships. Adolescents who become addicted to gaming may experience feelings of isolation and alienation from family members and peers, further impairing their ability to regulate emotions in social settings. Moreover, excessive gaming can disrupt sleep patterns, physical health, and academic performance—factors that contribute to emotional well-being. The loss of sleep, in particular, can affect mood regulation, leading to irritability and increased emotional volatility. These disruptions can create a negative feedback loop where poor emotional regulation fuels gaming addiction, and the addiction, in turn, exacerbates emotional difficulties. One of the critical features of online gaming is the social aspect. Many adolescents engage in multiplayer games, which allow them to interact with peers and form virtual communities. For some individuals, this social connection can provide emotional support, helping them feel understood and accepted. In this sense, gaming may offer a space for emotional expression and validation, which may improve emotional regulation. However, for others, online interactions may exacerbate emotional issues. Studies have shown that online gaming can foster toxic or competitive environments, where bullying, harassment, or social exclusion can occur. This can lead to further emotional distress and dysregulation, particularly for adolescents who already struggle with low self-esteem or mental health concerns. It is essential to consider the dual nature of online gaming-while it can serve as an outlet for social interaction and emotional expression, it can also create spaces that reinforce negative emotional patterns. For adolescents who lack healthy coping mechanisms, online gaming may provide an escape, but it does not necessarily teach them how to manage real-world emotions constructively.

Given the potential negative impact of online gaming addiction on emotional regulation, effective interventions are necessary. One approach is to promote healthy gaming habits, emphasizing moderation and balance. Parents, educators, and mental health professionals can

work together to educate adolescents about the risks of excessive gaming and help them develop healthier coping strategies for managing emotions. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) has shown promise in addressing gaming addiction and emotional dysregulation. CBT helps adolescents recognize and challenge maladaptive thought patterns, develop problem-solving skills, and build more adaptive emotional regulation strategies. Additionally, family therapy and support groups may help improve communication and emotional expression within families, reducing the need for adolescents to rely on gaming as an emotional escape. Further, enhancing emotional regulation skills in adolescents can prevent the development of gaming addiction. Interventions that focus on emotional intelligence, mindfulness, and stress management may help adolescents better handle their emotions in healthy ways. Schools and community organizations can play a vital role in teaching emotional regulation skills and providing alternative forms of emotional support.

Conclusion

The relationship between online gaming addiction and emotional regulation in adolescents is complex and multifaceted. While gaming can serve as an emotional escape, it can also hinder the development of effective emotional regulation skills, creating a cycle of addiction and emotional dysregulation. The negative impact on mental health, social relationships, and overall well-being underscores the need for targeted interventions and prevention strategies to promote healthy emotional development in adolescents. By fostering emotional intelligence and encouraging healthier coping mechanisms, it is possible to mitigate the risks associated with online gaming addiction and ensure that gaming remains a positive and enriching activity for youth. Through a combination of education, support, and therapeutic interventions, society can help adolescents navigate the challenges of emotional regulation while managing the allure of online gaming in a balanced and healthy way.

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