

Escapism: A powerful predictor of internet gaming disorder among video gamers

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A new study in *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, published by Elsevier, is the first to compare professional electronic sport (esport) players with recreational video game players and explores the similarities and differences between what motivates each group. While the two groups are psychosocially different, they found that both esport and recreational gamers run the risk of developing internet gaming disorder when their intense immersion in the activity is tied to escapism.

"Previous research has linked escapism to psychiatric distress and gaming disorder in recreational gamers. While esport gamers have many positive motivators like skill development, our study found that excessive immersion by some individuals can indicate [mental health issues](#)," explained investigator Zsolt Demetrovics, Ph.D., Institute of Psychology, ELTE Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary.

Internet gaming disorder (IGD) is described by leading classification manuals (DSM-5 and ICD-11) as severe behavior patterns that significantly

impair personal, family, social, educational, and occupational functioning. Although the condition affects only a minority of gamers, it is associated with depression, anxiety, and social anxiety. Gaming motivations have also been found to predict gaming disorder, especially the incidence of escapism when gamers play video games to avoid real life problems.

The present study demonstrated a number of novel findings which can help move the field forward and suggests a number of practical and policy implications.

The investigators surveyed close to 4,300 recreational and esport gamers to gather data about [game](#) time, gaming motivations, presence and severity of gaming disorder, and psychiatric symptoms. Additionally, the mediating effect of gaming motivations among esport and recreational gamers between psychiatric distress and problematic gaming was examined.

Their findings revealed that esport gamers spent significantly more time playing video games both on weekdays and weekends than recreational gamers. Esport gamers scored higher on social, competition, and [skill development](#) gaming motivations than recreational gamers. In both groups, escapism appeared to be the common predictor of gaming disorder. In the esport group, escapism was the only motivation that had mediating effect, while in the recreational group, competition, fantasy, and coping also showed weak or even negative association with gaming disorder.

The way in which both esport gamers and recreational gamers escape from reality into virtual worlds may be the result of different mechanisms and psychological backgrounds. In some pro players mental health status (stress level, psychosocial well-being, [self-esteem](#)) can modify the effect of escapism in the development of gaming disorder.

"Escapism can cause negative outcomes and interfere with an esports [gamer's](#) career just like any sportsman's career could end with a physical injury or trauma," noted Professor Demetrovics. "Future studies should focus on exploring escapism's mechanism in different subgroups of gamers in relation to problematic gaming to help the development of prevention, intervention, and treatment programs. Recognizing their risks can lead to increased support methods, such as mental training, optimal self-esteem, and adaptive coping strategies for competitive situations."

Provided by Elsevier

Further, the results suggest that some esports players might be addicted to gaming like professional poker players being addicted to gambling or professional athletes being addicted to exercise.

The results of this study have implications for esports governing bodies. The investigators contend that there is arguably a duty of care for professional esports bodies to ensure that the individuals who engage in the sport, and subsequently develop problems, get help, support, and treatment if they need it. "While esports bodies like the Electronic Sports League have developed rigorous guidelines around the use of performance enhancing drugs, based on our findings they should also develop a code of conduct that includes guidance and diagnostic checklists concerning problematic gaming and gaming disorder," advised Professor Demetrovics.

The number of competitive gamers playing professionally has increased steadily since the early 2000s, and they are predominantly male. Esport gamers develop and train their mental and hand-eye coordination skills while using game-based information-communication technology. According to a recent online survey, esports is a popular career option among adolescents and young adults (below 24 years).

More information: Fanni Bányai et al, The mediating effect of motivations between psychiatric distress and gaming disorder among esports gamers and recreational gamers, *Comprehensive Psychiatry* (2019). DOI: [10.1016/j.comppsy.2019.152117](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.comppsy.2019.152117)

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