Investigating experiences of regularly playing online video games

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to investigate the experience of regularly playing online video games (OVG) in order to improve understanding of behaviour in OVGs. Three participants were recruited from two universities. Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured format, the recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Analysis revealed eight emergent themes from the data, encapsulated in three master themes: 1) The importance of the social experience in online video games; 2) Issues within the culture of OVG's; and 3) Versatility and importance of the OVG experience, with the latter being the most prominent theme throughout. Regular play in OVGs was interpreted as: facilitating social interaction; giving players a sense of community; developing social skills; creating a unique identity and image and providing a competitive release and immersive experience. Negative outcomes and experiences were interpreted, such as toxicity in OVG, potential negative behavioral outcomes and strained relationships as a result of regular play. In conclusion, OVGs provide an opportunity for immersion, social development, competitive release, but importantly present some issues for the individual experience. Future research should focus on the social and problematic aspects of the OVG experience.

Key words: *Online video games, social, experience, IPA, behaviour, outcomes*

For the sake of clarity, the term "problematic gaming behaviour" (PBG) or "problematic gaming" is most often used as an umbrella term to describe problematic video game use, its factors and outcomes (Griffiths, Kiraly, Pontes & Demetrocics, 2015). Whilst a consensus is lacking, most models for PGB include outcomes such as preoccupation, overuse, social isolation, conflict and withdrawal (Demetrovics et al., 2012; Griffiths et al., 2015). With the inclusion of Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) into the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of mental disorders (DSM-5), there has been an increase of research on online gaming behavior (APA, 2013; Pontes & Griffiths, 2014). More specifically, research linking online gaming addiction and problematic gaming behavior (PGB) to negative social and psychological outcomes. Some of these associated outcomes include aggression and hostility; loneliness and introversion; social inhibition; low-self-esteem and anxiety (Mehroof & Griffiths, 2010; Porter et al., 2010; Griffiths et al., 2015).

This inclusion of IGD, has also led the development of psychometric tools in order to assess PGB according to the nine diagnostic criteria (Lemmens, Valkenburg & Gentile, 2015; Pontes & Griffiths, 2015). Deleuze et al. (2017) question the validity of these criteria, as they fail to distinguish high engagement from pathological involvement. This critique arises due to IGD criteria being adapted partially from substance abuse diagnostic criteria such as tolerance and withdrawal (Delueze et al., 2017). With regards to these criteria, from a sample of gamers, only 32 endorsed their application to IGD. In further analysis, established risk factors for IGD failed to distinguish between gamers presenting pathological and non-pathological use of OVG (Delueze et al., 2017). In the research, treatment seeking groups were not included, if they had been, it is possible they may have identified with the criteria more and displayed more risk factors. Even so, the findings indicate that gaming behavior may be nuanced and therefore cannot be predicted based on variables adapted from other addiction criteria. Perhaps an approach investigating unique behaviors and experiences is needed in order to understand these nuances.

Looking at a specific example, the IGDS-SF9 measure for assessing IGD, in relation to the DSM-5 criteria, showed good psychometric properties and was a reliable and valid measure (Pontes & Griffiths, 2015). However, one of the variables included in this measure is tolerance (or time playing). Previously, playing time has been associated with depressive symptoms,

mediated by sleep loss, lower academic performance and conduct problems (Gentile, Lynch, Linder & Walsh, 2004; Lemola et al., 2011; Holtz & Appel, 2011). It should be noted that these studies are cross sectional in nature, so causality cannot be assumed. More recently, research suggests that playing time is an unreliable predictor, and the relationship between problematic gaming and associated outcomes is more complex, likely depending on various motivations for playing such as escape and coping. (Laconi, Pires & Chabrol, 2017; Kiraly, Toth, Urban, Demetrovics & Maraz, 2017). This could begin to shed light on the fact that even though many gamers seemingly play intensively, few of them report problems related to their playing habits (Griffiths et al., 2015). Perhaps other people report problems due to suggested stereotypical representation of OVG as socially and psychologically limiting (Kowert, Griffiths & Oldmeadow, 2012). Contradictory evidence such as this and the lack of consensus still present in defining and measuring PGB, which will be explored, again highlights a need for a greater understanding.

A meta-analysis by Mannikko et al. (2020) demonstrates a comprehensive coverage of the research on associated negative outcomes. The researchers suggest the review provides robust evidence for negative associations between PGB, social outcomes and psychological health, most notably depression, anxiety, and OCD. It is crucial to acknowledge these associations, as if potential problematic behavior develops, this kind of research is vital in highlighting the need for a holistic assessment and treatment of PGB in individuals who are at risk (Mannikko et al., 2020). However, the limitations reveal some potential gaps in the current literature base. Firstly, the results reported are largely cross-sectional, meaning no causal inferences can be made regarding PGB and negative outcomes. Most importantly, there was significant variability in measurements used for PGB, approximately half were adopted from pathological gambling criteria, some used modified criteria for substance use disorders. These assessment criteria have been previously scrutinised for their lack of applicability to gaming behaviour (Deluze et al., 2017). Furthermore, most studies defined PGB differently, combined with measures that are contested by researchers as previously stated, indicates a lack of consensus or understanding (Mannikko et al., 2020). This lack of consensus in measurements and definitions again highlights the need for greater understanding of gaming related behaviors.

Contrary to this body of evidence, competing research suggests that OVGs offer a range of opportunities for positive outcomes and growth. This includes OVGs being able to foster interaction for introverted personalities and may provide a haven for youth to experience emotional content they need for development. (Bean, Ferro, Vissoci, Rivero & Groth-Marnat, 2016). Overall, despite possible negative outcomes, OVGs may also have a significant positive effect on their players, including encouraging positive emotion and improved mood and serving social stimulation and encouraging prosocial behaviors and skills. (Gentile et al., 2009; Ewoldson et al., 2012; Granic et al., 2014; Bean et al., 2016). So, the question could be asked, why does there seem to be a negative framing of OVGs in the media? Bean, Nielsen, Van Rooij and Ferguson (2017) suggest this can be explained by moral panic theory (Cohen, 2002), which explains that societies construct narratives about perceived threats and the moral causes of these threats, which some researchers suggest could result in the censoring or even banning of some OVGs, resulting in "an environment in which the positive uses of video games may become less likely" (Kumpel & Haas, 2016; Bean et al., 2017, pp. 7). This would seemingly explain the narrative presented on OVG playing despite much evidence which suggests the benefits to OVG playing and lack of consensus within the field.

Many authors note the importance of clinical diagnosis and make recommendations towards achieving a consensus on gaming behaviour. Namely carrying out research among high engagement players and stakeholders and focusing on improving the conceptualisation and understanding of IGD, as the current research partly aims to do. Van Rooij and Kardefelt-Winther, (2017) argue that, as can be seen from previous literature discussed, video game play is associated with several benefits and formalising OVG playing as a disorder is not without risk. It is argued that implementing a disorder before researchers have a proper understanding of the behaviour, sound theory and proper evidence base seems only to serve the moral panic of the research community, rather than to serve gamers themselves (Van Rooij & Kardefelt-Winther, 2017). Doing this may present a genuine risk to gamers, as researchers suggest premature inclusion of IGD and Gaming Disorder to the DSM-5 and ICD-11 respectively, could result in failure to provide valid identification of problem cases and stigma to healthy gamers (APA, 2013; Aarseth et al., 2017). Bean et al. (2017) also express concern at the lack of basic

conceptual research, investigating gamers experiences and exploring their behaviour and motivations. Without this ideographic understanding, it is argued that we cannot give meaning to PGB or problematic behaviour criteria, as we cannot establish context to these behaviors and outcomes without first investigating gamers experiences (Bean et al., 2017).

Kuss et al. (2017) reiterate that practitioners, researchers and the media need to work together to build a realistic, comprehensive understanding of gaming behavior. It is still recognised that for some the regular play of OVG may be associated with addiction related withdrawal symptoms such as anxiety, sadness, irritability and emotional reactivity, that could require professional intervention or support (Kaptsis, King, Delfabbro & Gradisar, 2016; Kuss et al., 2017). Yet to some, this behavior and regular use of OVG could offer users significant psychological and social benefits. In order to build a comprehensive picture and understanding of OVGs, gamers and their behaviour it is clear this different approach is required.

To achieve this understanding Muriel and Crawford (2018), note that interpreting the playing of video games as an experience plays a central role in ascertaining the different aspects that contribute to video games as a culture and shedding light on the existing research into video game behaviour. Education and psychological scholars' explanations of why people play, stress its very individual nature and meanings both as causes and consequences (Henricks, 2014). Therefore, people's reasons for playing online video games are likely very individual and based on subjective experiences and people's interpretations of these experiences. So, it must be put forward that a crucial aspect to understanding OVG behaviour and people's reasons for playing is to investigate these experiences and interpretations through an ideographic and qualitative approach.

In summary, there may be a moral panic surrounding the use of OVG. This has resulted in a potentially unrepresentative presentation or narrative in the media and literature. A lack of consensus and unclear picture in the current literature and media calls for a greater understanding of the experience of OVG, culture and behaviour. The aim of this research, therefore, is to investigate the lived experience of regular OVG players in order to gain an understanding of

varied aspects of the online video game experience, behaviors and potential outcomes as a result of regular play.

Method

Rationale

The purpose of this research project is to investigate people's experiences of regularly playing OVG. As a result of this, it is crucial that research aiming to investigate this uses a qualitative methodology that employs an idiographic approach, which focuses on obtaining rich and detailed information about lived experiences and how participants perceive these experiences.

The current research therefore takes the stance of a more critical realist, emic approach adopting a double hermeneutic approach in which the design inherently focuses on participants interpretations of their own lived experiences. The methodology was chosen to allow participants to explore their subjective experiences, and how, contextually, they perceive their experiences and importantly what these experiences might mean to the participants.

Design

Sampling and participants. It is suggested that IPA research should select participants from a homogenous pool (Alase, 2017). So, in this case those who had a depth of experience with playing OVG were advertised to. For all participants an email was sent asking if they would like to take part in the study and if they require any additional information. An information sheet, a consent form to sign and debrief form were attached in the email. The interview schedule was also attached giving the participants time to think deeply about their responses, ensuring they could construct real meaning in their answers (Galletta, 2013). Three male participants aged 19-23 fitting the criteria of regularly (or having had regularly played) playing OVG were recruited. All participants were, at the time of data collection, university students in the North-West of England. The names of the participants (Zeke, Sam, Aaron) have been changed to protect participants anonymity.

As it is crucial with IPA research that "Participants are selected on the basis that they can grant access to a particular perspective on the phenomena under study" (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, pp. 49). Regarding this, two of the participants were recruited via advertisement fitting the criteria of regularly playing OVG, one however, was specifically invited to partake in the research since it was believed they would provide detailed and unique experiences and perceptions.

Method of data collection. Three semi-structured interviews with open ended questions were conducted in order to gather the data. The strengths of semi structured interviews (freedom and flexibility for participants to explore their own views) fit particularly well with the IPA ethos. IPA interviews are meant to open and develop a relationship with the participants so that their lived experiences can be explored and analysed by researcher and participant alike (Smith et al., 2009; Ogharanduk, Jubb, Lochrie, Curran & O'Gorman, 2016; Alase, 2017). Consequently, these two methodological choices allow for a thorough exploration of the lived experiences of these participants.

Method of analysis. The main goal of IPA is to gather rich, detailed, and subjective accounts of lived experiences based upon interpretation from the participant and researcher. (Smith et al., 2009). At its most basic components IPA is concerned with phenomenology, ideography, and hermeneutics (Smith et al., 2009). Each of these components and their theoretical underpinnings make it the ideal method for investigating and exploring meaning, reasoning and interpretations based on a lived experience. Even if IPA is widely used, it is still criticised. A regular criticism of IPA research is that it is often driven by preconceptions held by the researcher (Willig, 2017). Whilst this may be true, a detailed interpretative engagement with the material is crucial to the method (Smith, 2011). It is further argued, that in order to build a complete understanding of participants lived experiences, employing several levels of interpretation is necessary, whilst this interpretation is grounded in the words of the participants (Eatough & Smith, 2008).

Interview Schedule

For this research it was crucial to consider designing questions that would allow for participants to explore and capture experiences, their meaning, and how participants make sense of these experiences. As such, questions were developed to give participants the opportunity to explore their experiences and discuss their perceived meanings and interpretations. For example: 'Could you describe any effect you think your experiences whilst gaming may have had on you as an individual? Could you explain your answer?

Smith (2011) notes that a key feature of IPA is rich experiential data. Therefore, it was important that in data collection, the interview questions were tailored to focusing largely on experience. Furthermore, Smith (2011) suggested that a sustained focus on a particular aspect of experience is crucial. As a result of this combined with the overall aims of this research, most of the questions were crafted to elicit discussion around the social and relationship aspect of experience and interpretations. For example: 'Do you feel that your gaming has impacted your existing relationships? Could you talk about your experiences and what about some of these may mean to you?'

As a final consideration, authors suggest questions for an IPA study are open and exploratory, rather than closed and explanatory (Newberry, 2011). As such many of the questions were open, to allow participants to explore these phenomena in their own way and for original and potentially unexpected issues to be raised in the open discussion (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Procedure

Before any research was conducted, ethical approval was gained through a research proposal process according the University of Cumbria ethical guidelines. Two of the interviews were carried out face to face in a safe environment on the University of Cumbria Fusehill Street campus, one interview was carried out over Skype. Some authors argue that participants may be reluctant to discuss certain personal accounts or issues in a face-to-face setting (Opdenakker, 2006). Therefore, the mix of interview techniques in this case may provide some variation and richness within the data. Due to the semi-structured and open nature of the interview, the

researcher was able to prompt and ask further questions to encourage and enable participants to elaborate and explore certain experiences and discuss their meaning. After the interviews were completed, each interview was transcribed verbatim. Each transcript was analysed individually following the somewhat flexible guidelines for IPA analysis from Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009).

Ethical considerations

Ethical guidelines from the British Psychological Society (BPS) were followed throughout this research project (BPS, 2014; BPS, 2018). In accordance with the BPS Data Protection Regulation and UK General Data Protection Regulations, data has been edited to censor or remove any identifying information including names and places. More specifically, with IPA research, one must carefully consider ethical practice, due to the potentially sensitive and personal nature of the data obtained by such phenomenological inquiry (Gauntlett et al., 2017). As is congruent with ethical practice in IPA research, participants were reminded they have a right to withhold any aspects of their experience and could withdraw from the research at any given time; appropriate signposting was given to participants (Dahlberg, Dahlberg & Nystrom, 2008; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012; Guihen, 2019). The interview was designed to be open for the participant to lead the discussion in the direction they felt most comfortable, giving them control over the direction.

Reflexivity

It is important that the researcher can critically and reflexively evaluate how preconceptions and epistemological positions can influence IPA research (Heidegger, 1962; Finlay, 2008). For example, I am a critical realist. Many would argue that IPA is a critical realist approach as it accepts that experience is perhaps multi-layered and open to multiple interpretations (Smith et al., 2009; King & Hugh-Jones, 2018). Furthermore, having had experiences playing and interacting with OVG, these were bound to affect my interpretations and certain aspects of the methodology due to my more positive view of the (social aspect) OVG experience. Early in the design process, the questions were originally tailored more to focus on the more psycho-social aspects of playing OVG due to these preconceptions. To minimise these

preconceptions influencing the data, questions were opened and broadened. Furthermore, I considered how, personally, I may influence participants' discussion and later the analysis and reporting of findings as is recommended in IPA research (King & Hugh-Jones, 2018). I was made aware through reflection and discussion with my supervisor that I was over reporting positive aspects of experience in the analysis, this was resultingly corrected, to provide a balanced and realistic presentation of the analysis, findings, and discussion.

Analysis and Discussion

This IPA analysis of the participants interviews is intended to demonstrate a detailed examination of their lived experience of regularly playing OVGs. Quotes have been extracted from the interviews to demonstrate emergent themes within the data.

Overall, three master themes and eight emergent themes were identified within the data:

1. The social experience in online video games
    a. A rich and unique experience of interaction
    b. A sense of community
2. Issues within the culture of online video games
    a. The problem of toxic interactions
    b. How online video games can negatively impact behaviour
    c. Strained relationships
3. Versatility and importance of the online video game experience
    a. The competitive and immersive experience of online video games
    b. Identity and Image
    c. A focus on improving skills

Master theme 1: The social experience in online video games

This master theme captures the social and interactional aspect of OVGs for each of the three participants. The importance of experiences whilst interacting with others in terms of positive and negative outcomes remained the most occurring theme in each participant's account.

The emergent themes considered in this section are: 1a: A rich and unique experience of interaction, 1b: A sense of community.

Emergent theme 1a: A rich and unique experience of interaction. This first emergent theme highlights the unique social experience and opportunities for interaction that OVGs present to their users.

"…… having friends online just like it's easier its convenient…… people who are online friends are the same tier as my real-life friends" **(Zeke: 79-81)**

"It's like mainly been essential for me to have that and that kind of relationship" **(Aaron: 318)**

For each participant, it was commonplace to state the importance of having the ability to interact with others online**.** This was interpreted by the frequency of the topic and by the wording used to describe this value. Aaron for example stating that it was 'essential' for him to have this ability whilst Zeke suggested his 'online friends' are the same tier as his 'real-life friends'. In the current analysis, it is interpreted that the social aspect of OVG is not only important to why participants play, but participants have formed and maintained friendships of a good quality.

Contrary to the present findings, some authors previously held views that being 'permanently online', is bound to impact quality and quantity of gamers social interactions (Vorderer & Kohring, 2013). Supporting the current analysis, Ramirez (2018) concluded that multiplayer games have the potential to foster strong ties between players, resulting in players making social friends and even 'true friendships', that are no longer dependent on interaction in the games they arose from. It is suggested these friendships of different degrees of intimacy could be an important aspect of personal well-being (Ramirez, 2018). Furthermore, within samples of gamers, social identity and quality of friendships appears to be positively related to well-being and self-esteem (Kaye, Carlisle & Griffiths, 2019). These findings could perhaps explain the importance and 'essential' nature of Aaron and Zeke's online friendships reflected in the current analysis.

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Importantly, Domahidi et al. (2018) reinforce the complex nature of social interaction in OVGs, ranging from competitive play to complex forms of roleplaying. It is suggested that future research should focus on taking a more nuanced view of social aspects in online games as they can be so unique and potentially important. This is in part what the current research provides, by exploring this social aspect more ideographically, gaining insight into experience, we can paint a picture of the effect on social life by the gamers themselves. The current findings seem to suggest that the use of OVG, has made it possible to form and maintain strong friendships and social support. Consequently, this aspect of OVG should be investigated further as to how specifically social aspects could be maintained or improved.

Emergent theme 1b: A sense of community. This theme covers the aspect of the sense of community portrayed by some participants.

"On a personal level it kind of means it's like connecting with other people who have a similar mindset" **(Zeke: 51-52)**

"You meet new people and you try to find common interests and it would always be like a game or something." **(Aaron: 293-294)**

One of the sentiments I took most of all from Zeke and Aaron's description of the social aspect of OVG, was that community is integral in most positive experiences in their play time. When Aaron spoke about social benefits of OVG, the topic of community was brought up regularly, although not directly all the time. It is quite well documented how various online environments can give users a sense of community and resulting social support (O'Connor, Longman, White & Obst, 2015). Yet there is little to no research on this aspect of OVG.

The research that exists, is like the current research project in that it investigates players experiences of this community side to OVG. For example, Crenshaw and Nardi (2016) found that in some MMO's, players form relationships within the community in order to succeed in certain aspects of the game. From this, some players maintained these relationships because they were important to them (Crenshaw & Nardi, 2016; Gui, 2018). Further research has indicated that strong community foundations within online games can lead to social ties and a baseline for social stability over a longer period (Poor & Skoric, 2016).

Whilst the authors note the research is only exploratory and only one type of game (MMO) was focused on, these experiences fit with the discourse that Aaron and Zeke presented. This is then surely an aspect of online games that should be investigated further, as from the existing literature and current research, it appears this aspect of community may be important for gamers.

Master theme 2: Issues within the culture of online video games.

This master theme looks at issues presented in participants' experiences that are unique to the culture and regular playing of OVG. It reflects some of the relational and interactional challenges participants discussed, including the issues of toxicity in online settings and strained relationships. Some participants discuss some of the potential ways in which regularly playing OVG can impact the individual in unwanted or negative ways.

The emergent themes we will consider in this section are: 2a: The problem of toxic interactions; 2b: How online video games can negatively affect behavior in individuals; and 2c: Strained relationships outside of gaming.

Emergent theme 2a: The problem of toxic interactions. This emergent theme addresses the experience of toxic and unwanted interactions, that participants discourse suggests comes from the unique culture and interactions in OVG.

"A lot of it is quite harsh like there's generally no exception as to what they say" **(Sam: 138-139)**

"It can also depending on what kind of person you are it could possibly be quite damaging too" **(Aaron: 135-136)**

"It would either make you withdrawn and not want to interact with other people" **(Zeke: 308-310)**

Interestingly with this emergent theme, participants rarely spoke about their own accounts with toxic behavior or interactions, they more discussed the prospect and potential damage of these interactions.

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In previous research OVG players have collectively identified toxic behavior as being detrimental to their community (Kou, Johansson & Verhagen, 2017). A study specifically looking at the ever-popular game 'League of Legends' and its community identified that toxicity was associated with player stress (Neto, Yokoyoma & Becker, 2017). Some research has suggested the experience of toxicity degrades users' experiences based on participants reports (Kwak, Blackburn & Han, 2015). Yet the specific mechanisms are not investigated and there is a lack of knowledge on how players typically behave within games, serving as a barrier to properly investigate toxicity (Kwak et al., 2015).

Despite this, Saarinen (2017) attempted to understand how toxicity affects players experiences of OVG by investigating toxicity and flow experience, general toxicity negatively impacted on flow experience as reported by participants. Qualitative interview studies of this nature are rare in gaming behaviour, importantly, the findings presented provide a useful comparison to the experiences of those in the current study as both sets of participants note the detrimental effect of toxic behaviour in OVGs. Yet in the present study, participants have also discussed possible damaging effects on the individual, rather than simply play experience. Even with this, it was interpreted that participants presented a discourse normalising toxicity and negative behaviour in their own experiences.

"You can learn to handle negativity a lot…" **(Sam: 172-173)**

"I understand it a bit more just because I've done it so much" **(Aaron: 142)**

From the participants phrasing, I interpreted that they were normalising this kind of toxic behavior. Coinciding with Sam and Aaron's view, Adinolf and Turkay (2018) in investigating competitive OVG player's perceptions and experiences of toxicity reported normalising toxic behavior. The researchers noted that worryingly this included participants not noticing or perceiving racism or sexism, whilst it is unknown if this would apply for contexts outside of gaming, it is perhaps important to consider to players awareness of toxic behaviour may vary (Adinolf & Turkay, 2018). Yet it appears this may have a somewhat limited effect perhaps due to this normalization and experience with toxicity, based on Sam and Aaron's discourse here.

Sam and Aaron's present discussion around normalising toxic behaviour, is also reflected in other research where participants discussed this, supporting the notion that gamers must grow a tolerance for toxic behavior or become driven off, potentially excluding more vulnerable members of the community (Shores et al., 2014; Saarinen, 2017). As we will discuss, OVG are potentially useful in improving social skills, forming and maintaining a level of social support and relationships and raising confidence of some perhaps more introverted individuals (Trepte, Reinecke & Juechems, 2012; Kowert et al., 2014). The discussion in this theme suggests that some individuals may be more susceptible to effects of toxic interactions. This is perhaps an area that could warrant further research, as OVG may be influential for some people's level of social support (Trepte, Reinecke & Juechems; Kowert et al., 2014)

Emergent theme 2b: How online video games can negatively affect behavior in individuals. This emergent theme involves the notion of the more detrimental individual effects of regular OVG playing.

"It can kind of have some addictive traits… you don't handle it well, It can kind of lead to like pitfalls like that" **(Aaron: 251-252)**

"My temper would just generally like outside of games it would be quite bad like it would be short or quick or whatever from just kind of that behavior in a game" **(Aaron: 257-258)**

Interestingly, Aaron was the only participant to lead the discussion in this direction. It appeared to be an aspect of his experience that he felt needed to be shared and, seemed to warn of maladaptive traits that could develop from regular play. The focus on negative aspects of OVG play has been thoroughly discussed and challenged throughout the presentation of this research project so far.

However, in order to explore this aspect of the OVG experience further and to discern whether it can shed light on the existing literature, it would be most appropriate to look at a recent comprehensive meta-analysis of research into the effects of IGD and the outcomes of PGB. Mannikko et al. (2020) found that several psychological health factors were related to PGB, depression and anxiety being the most associated. The research by Mannikko et al. (2020)

recognises the issues with IGD in its current form, namely the ongoing debate regarding lack of understanding of the behavior and unofficial status as an 'addiction' (Kuss, et al., 2017; Saunders et al., 2017). It is also acknowledged that the cross-sectional nature of their own study results in a lack of causality between these potential negative outcomes. Mannikko et al. (2020) also importantly advocate for future research to be take a more socio-ecological approach, investigating the individuals, gaming culture, relationships and community in order to enhance the understanding of potentially problematic gaming behavior.

This study aimed to explore some of these aspects of online gaming, revealing that Aaron is particularly wary of some of the potential downsides and has experienced for example anger issues relating to experiences with other individuals in OVGs. Perhaps this outlines the need for further research that investigates these aspects of the OVG experience to thoroughly understand the experience and develop holistic approaches to treating any problematic behavior. Importantly, the importance that Aaron places on acknowledging and being cautious of these possible downsides, should be carefully considered by any wanting to enjoy the myriad of potential benefits of OVG.

Emergent theme 2c: Strained relationships outside of gaming. This theme captures the perceived affected relationships, due to the nuances and unique ways in which people view OVG and its related stigma.

"At the time I just didn't really care or see the bigger picture" **(Zeke: 150-151)**

"I was too involved with my video games so like in that sense that kind of relationship with my parents" **(Zeke: 154-155)**

I was kind of gaming and stuff it made me put a strain on the relationship between me and my parents because they're trying to discipline me" **(Aaron: 164-166)**

Both Zeke and Aaron described the experience of a 'strained' relationship with their parents in the past. For both Zeke and Aaron, the interpretation was that this strain may have been as a result of a clash of perceptions between the participants' parents, potentially involving

stigma from the parents about OVG, or naivety on the side of the participants as the 'see the bigger picture' quote from Zeke's interview suggests.

The interactions between parents and their children could potentially be important in mediating online and potentially problematic video gaming behavior. Brus (2018) theorises or suggests that young people's problems with gaming are nearly always articulated as an addiction in social interactions with their parents and the topic is stigmatised as a result. This only partially fits with the discourse that Aaron and Zeke present here, as although the parents clearly saw it as an issue and felt a need to address this issue in terms of education and schoolwork, there was no clear intervention and both participants made it clear that this strain was not long lasting or damaging. Interestingly, research investigating social influences on 'pathological gaming' and IGD has noted the critical role that 'interferences' from parents had in mediating the relationship between damaged self-control and increased pathological gaming (Bonnaire & Phan, 2017; Jeong, Ferguson & Lee, 2019). Conversely, the quality and degree of communication between parents and their children reportedly decreased academic stress, promoted self-control and would resultingly decrease pathological gaming (Bonnaire & Phan, 2017; Jeong et al., 2019).

So, it may be likely, that for Aaron and Zeke the communication and levels of understanding between them and their parents was of a high enough quality to not result in any further damage (in terms of problematic behaviors). Relying on previous findings and the current research as definitive would be ill advised, as different interactional dynamics between parents and children have not been considered, which could potentially play a mediating role in the outcomes of gaming behavior (Bonnaire & Phan, 2017). Even so, the current research and existing literature outline the potential importance of addressing stigmatic attitudes and the importance of an open, positive and interactive attitude in communicating with children about their gaming behavior (Eklund & Bergmark, 2013; Jeong et al., 2019).

Master theme 3: Versatility and importance of the online video game experience

This master theme looks at the versatility that the OVG experience provides. It reflects, competition and immersion as important motivations for play and the unique culture and image

that participants identified with. Finally, the ways in which this experience facilitates growth in social skills are considered.

The emergent themes in this section are 3a: The competitive and immersive experience of online video games; 3b: Identity and Image; and 3c: A focus on social skills.

Emergent theme 3a: The competitive and immersive experience of online video games. This theme considers the competitive and immersive aspects of OVG. More specifically, the two aspects of competition and immersion as motivations for play.

"I tried to do for a time when I was young was to do it for like properly a competitive release." **(Aaron: 87-88)**

"It can be quite versatile it's not necessarily just like wasting time it's socialising, it can be competitive, it's very engaging" **(Aaron: 112-114)**

"There is a sense of achievement there and that's really nice to have" **(Sam: 47-48)**

All three participants mentioned some form of competitive or achievement aspect as being an important part of why they play. As Aaron spoke about his experience it came across that the need for competition and having that 'competitive release' was a necessity rather than a light motivation. Recently, with the recognised transformative effect of video games on our society and culture, the necessity for understanding motivations for play is thought to be crucial for academic research and practice (Kordyaka, Muller & Niehaves, 2019).

Historically, educational theorists emphasised the value of play as something that builds the person through knowledge, experience-based skills and habits (Henricks, 2014). Henricks summarises play as "An exploration of powers and predicaments. We play to find out what we can and cannot do and to see if we can extend our capabilities" (pp. 204). Sepehr and Head (2018) propose that flow, the state of optimal experience that can be achieved via having their skills challenged to an extent to perform well in an activity, would be impacted by situational competitiveness and social presence. It was found that the experience of flow was positively impacted by situational competitiveness and social presence (Sepehr & Head, 2018). This relationship between competitiveness and flow, coincides with previously discussed view of

exploring and challenging our capabilities as an explanation of play (Hendricks, 2014). The reliance on self-reported data in this research is a prominent limitation, as several biases can influence self-reported data. Still, these findings add substance to the sentiment that Aaron presented. They show competition, especially in a social setting, may increase the likelihood of an optimum experience when playing video games and perhaps, as this play is 'optimum', the potential growth and person building resulting from the play is also improved (Henricks, 2014).

Importantly the findings from Sepher and Head (2018), showed that social presence, in this case, comparing one another in competitive situations, was particularly important for the experience of flow and is crucially compatible with previous research with regards to the social influence on flow experience. The experience of group flow in social gaming contexts has been shown to enhance positive mood significantly for players (Kaye & Bryce, 2014). The competitive nature of online games has been explored in depth due to associations with violent behavior (Schmierbach, 2010; Adachi & Willoughby, 2011). Regarding recent literature and the present findings, it should perhaps be explored further as a potentially crucial factor in OVG players experience, especially as it seemingly fits with the overall theme of the importance of social interactions in OVG.

> "When you're in a game playing with other people you can forget about everything else… It's just like you're in another world which can help me calm down" **(Zeke: 33-34)**

> "It's almost like an escape from reality really if you want to just get away from the stresses of life…" **(Sam: 23-25)**

> "It's got a teamwork element to it that's quite important… quite important in the fact of why I play and stuff" **(Zeke: 90-91)**

Traditionally in the study of video games, the degree to which players feel integrated within the game is a measure of their sense of 'immersion' (Taylor, 2002). Michailidis, Balaguer-Ballester and He (2018) note that the characteristics of immersion and flow are similar, and total immersion would qualify as a deep-flow episode as both denote an experiential extremity (or optimum experience). So, it appears that there may be interplay between the two

concepts. Zeke's discussion around the subject, reveals he seems to value the importance of teamwork and interaction as a key part of his immersion, which is a focus on the social aspect of heightened experience. This existence of this potential important aspect of experience is supported by the findings of social presence increasing immersion, both in a cooperative and competitive setting (Cairns, Cox, Day, Martin & Perryman, 2013). The researchers recognised that further research is required to accept these findings, more specifically on the influence of social presence in non-competitive OVG settings. Even so, it seems there is a consensus in the literature and the current research that the unique competitive, immersive and flow experiences in OVG not only hold value to the players but are rooted in the rich interaction that the OVG appears to provide.

Emergent theme 3b: Identity and Image. This emergent theme encapsulates the seemingly unique identity of gamers that the participants associate with, along with an equally unique discussion of image that presents itself in playing OVG and is considered often by the participants themselves and perhaps others in their lives.

"I think, think it's always something I'll be doing so I guess it probably means a great deal to me" **(Sam: 62-63)**

"I mean I am a gamer you know it's like, it's like saying you're an athlete or something it's, it is a part of your identity isn't it" **(Zeke: 99-100)**

"We have the same dumb tendencies we kind of end up going down a rabbit hole together" **(Aaron: 366-367)**

This kind of social identity and self-categorisation held by the participants is unsurprising and can be explained by general theories of self, such as social identity theory which could explain aspects like the unique dynamics of speech and tendencies identified by Aaron (Hogg, 2016). Research findings have recently highlighted the applicability of social identity theory to online gaming contexts. More specifically in that some gamers identify with their online avatar and presence, which in turn contributes to social presence and participation in the community (Teng, 2017). Due to its cross-sectional design, this research cannot claim causality, despite this it does begin to paint a picture of what might constitute the 'gamer' identity. Whilst all

participants acknowledged this unique sense of identity, Zeke, I felt conveyed a sense of real ingrained pride in his identity and spoke about it in detail.

"I would say it's part of my personality of my identity of who I am" **(Zeke: 104-105)**

For these participants, particularly Zeke, it seems as if there is a certain culture and identity that holds great importance for the individual. It is suggested establishing and recognising this culture and identity and its components is an important step towards filling this lack of understanding regarding online gaming behavior that still exists within research regarding the experience of OVG (Yuchang, Meng & Yunlong, 2018). Research drawing inspiration from cognitive and psychiatric anthropological perspectives has also suggested that those who study problem gaming should pay greater attention to how OVG experiences are shaped by the culture, comprised of negative and positive factors in OVG (Snodgrass et al., 2017). The research from Snodgrass et al. (2017), is limited in that it, employs a non-representative convenience sample. Yet it once again challenges the narrative and current assumptions that comprise the negative aspects to the experience of playing OVG and points towards a critical look at how current researchers may approach "internet gaming disorder".

In the present research, participants have identified with a unique identity culture, and as previously discussed, a sense of community within their experience of OVG. Similarly, De Grove, Courtois and Van Looy (2015) concluded that the gamer identity is formed and maintained in relation to a larger cultural context, in relation to everyday social interactions. In agreement with these conclusions, the participants' experiences presented here suggest they feel they relate to a certain identity and broader community/culture that is rooted in a social experience and that imperatively, is of great importance (to participants like Zeke). These kinds of insights into this very nuanced side of their experience, could provide game makers and other researchers in the field with a framework to enhance experiences of gamers as it may be a crucial aspect of their experience (Liao, Pham, Cheng & Teng, 2020). Alternatively, this kind of insight suggests that the stereotypical images of gamers held by many, are not all encompassing, and these individuals identify with a complex, unique, and rewarding culture and community.

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Emergent theme 3c: A focus on social skills. This emergent theme encapsulates participants' experiences in which playing OVGs has resulted in positive outcomes relating to personal social growth.

> "I found it helps to I don't know bring you out of your shell a little in some social situations since you've had that experience of talking with people online" **(Sam: 184-185)**

Sam, at this point in the interview, portrayed the usefulness of OVGs in bringing him 'out of his shell'. As Sam presented himself as a more introverted individual, it seems clear that, from his descriptions, his experience of playing online video games with others and having that interaction has enabled him to more easily socially engage. Despite this, there is contention over the effect of OVGs on the social skills of an individual. There has been an increasing concern, with the emergence of social video games, that OVGs substantially hinder or deteriorate social skills, such as the ability to verbally engage with others (Kowert et al., 2015). Griffiths (2010) found that high-frequency OVG players scored poorer outcomes on the Social Situations Questionnaire (SSQ). Yet, as case study evidence suggests, excessive game use is not the same as PGB, and some excessive gamers do not show detrimental effects and PGB is perhaps more contextual (Griffiths, 2010). More so, a longitudinal linear relationship between lower social skills and 'pathological gaming' has also been suggested by other researchers (Liu & Peng, 2009; Lemmens, Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Even concerning this, the other participants seemed to concur with Sam's experience regarding their social development.

> "I feel it made me more confident" **(Zeke: 300-301)**

> "There's a lot of really positive tendencies from it of just being able to talk to people" **(Aaron: 390)**

In contrast, there are some that would advocate for the benefits of OVGs in this area. Some research suggests that OVGs have the potential to increase the user's general sociability and hold potential for facilitating the psychological and psychosocial growth of their users, even allowing for more shy users to overcome their traditional social difficulties (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006; Kowert, Domahidi & Quandt, 2014). More specifically, Ewoldson et al. (2012)

concluded that players acquire important pro-social skills from games that reward cooperation, support and helping behaviors. This fits with discourse of the participants benefitting in the ways they described, with the online video games that the participants mentioned they played.

Importantly, the conceptualisations of video game involvement and social competence were varied and not actually defined by OVG players themselves in every piece of research mentioned here (Kowert et al., 2015). None investigated experiences of OVG players. It could be argued that in order to achieve the full picture on the effect of these OVG on social skills, the players themselves need to be asked. In this current research one of the goals is for these in-depth experiences to convey to researchers how these experiences impact participants social competence, skills and confidence. It is hoped that this can shed light on or even challenge the existing narrative towards OVG users and their social experience, as is congruent with the goal of any IPA research (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009)

Evaluation and Future Research

The aim of the current research was to investigate and explore the lived experience of regular OVG players to gain an understanding of the various aspects of experience, behaviour and potential outcomes. The use of open semi-structured interviews and IPA, an idiographic and phenomenological approach, allowed for this experience to be explored using rich and contextualised accounts (Smith et al., 2009; Gauntlett et al., 2017).

The present analysis revealed that OVG provides a rich and unique social, competitive, immersive, varied experience. Positive outcomes such as social support, a sense of community and positive competitive and immersive aspects of OVG were interpreted from the data. However, some negative outcomes were interpreted, such as strained relationships, potential issues of toxicity, and one participant recognised potential behavioural issues, such as addiction. Primarily, the social, identity and community aspects OVG experience were interpreted as being important for each of the participants, this is in line with research suggesting the positive outcomes in OVG play.

Notwithstanding this, it is important to acknowledge any potential limitations in this research. First, qualitative, phenomenological research has been criticised for its subjective and interpretive nature. Particularly in this case, a reflexive account was outlined, as well as the researchers own preconceptions, which involves a positive outlook on the OVG experience due to regular use and experiences. This may have influenced the analytical and data collection procedure even with precautions made. For some this raises questions of validity and reliability of the findings (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Although it could be argued that by following not only guidelines on the IPA process but recommendations from past IPA research, demonstrates validity throughout this research. Furthermore, sensitivity to context was demonstrated as participants lead the discussion through open ended questions and interpreted themes to reflect participant narratives. Commitment and procedural rigor have been demonstrated in following guidelines for IPA (Smith et al., 2009). Finally, the methodology is coherent and transparent, sharing reflexive accounts of how researcher interpretations may have affected the research process. All of which are core principles of a valid qualitative approach (Yardely, 2008). Despite this, in future research of a similar nature using IPA, it would be recommended that transcripts are analysed by several researchers in order to ensure the credibility of final interpretations (Smith et al., 2009).

Secondly, in line with recommendations for IPA sampling, a homogenous sample was purposefully selected for the current research (Smith et al., 2009; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). However, this sample resultantly consisted of all white, English speaking, male participants aged 19-23. It is suggested that IPA is only concerned with the quality of experience, hence IPA usually benefits from a smaller homogenous sample size (Smith et al., 2009; Alase, 2017). Yet it could be argued that this sample could be missing out crucial aspects of the OVG experience. Hence reducing the extent to which these findings can be generalised. As a result, for future research, it is recommended that experiences are investigated for wider populations of gamers. For example, research has noted the salience of toxic behaviour, general and sexual harassment towards women in OVG, resultingly impacting on their playing experience and even self-blame in some women (Fox & Tang, 2017). This is an area that could merit future research, as if these

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experiences turn out to be wholly negative, the most effective course of action to eradicate this kind of experience must be taken.

Conclusion

The current emergent themes suggest, based on participants experiences, OVG are particularly important for maintaining communication, facilitating social interaction, giving players a sense of community, developing social skills, creating a unique identity and image, and providing a competitive release and immersive experience, even for more introverted individuals or those who cannot access these aspects in other areas of life. Negative outcomes and experiences were also interpreted, such as toxicity in OVG, potential negative behavioural outcomes and, notably, strained relationships as a result of regular play, mainly with parents. In the literature, this lack of understanding between child and parent in OVG playing has led to poor academic performance and increased pathological gaming (Eklund & Bergmark, 2013; Bonnaire & Phan, 2017; Jeong et al., 2019) This may be an important area for future study in order to reduce stigmatising attitudes and better that line of communication between parents and children (Jeong et al., 2019). Furthermore, it may be appropriate to investigate gamer's perspectives on the potential pitfalls or negative outcomes of OVGs. Some interesting accounts were presented by participants in this research, that could potentially shed light on some of the existing research into negative outcomes. Most importantly, as is discussed and explored throughout, due to the participants overwhelming focus on the social aspect of OVGs, it is recommended that future research investigates this social aspect of the experience further. Overall, the present findings have implications for all stakeholders involved within the OVG world, as they point towards the necessity for researchers, game developers and gamers themselves to ensure these immersive, social resources are made readily available and are moderated in a way to ensure users benefit as much as possible. This could perhaps be done by encouraging communication and awareness between parents/carers and their children regarding playing habits and increasing global understanding of OVG behaviour so that potential issues can be recognised and tackled. The indication of these potential benefits and future understanding of the OVG experience can hopefully begin to challenge the negative narrative towards OVG and moral panic in the media and wider community.

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