



The Benefits and Risks of Playing Esports for Young People

Our Research

Esports are a rapidly growing form of organised team sport involving competitive videogaming. The benefits or harms of participation are not well understood. While some research suggests that gaming can discourage socialising and physical activity, these claims have largely been debunked. However, overseas studies have noted the increasing use of gambling mechanisms in Esports games. These may expose young people to financial harms. This study aimed to understand how a group of NZ high school students had benefitted or been harmed because of their participation in Esports. To do this, three focus groups were conducted with 27 students (Years 9 to 12) in Ōtautahi Christchurch. The results have been grouped into five key points below.

Esports Can Foster Community

Several participants said that playing Esports helped them to make friends and be involved with a community.

“A few of us weren’t able to play physical sports... I had a medical issue which couldn’t allow me to play sports for a while, so I wanted to still be a part of something, you know? Join a team. And then, I found Esports, and I was like, oh this sounds fun. I tried it out and I’ve been enjoying it. It’s been helping me. It’s like a sports team; everyone’s together, they’re having fun, and you’re learning something... It opens a new doorway to those who can’t play physical sports.”

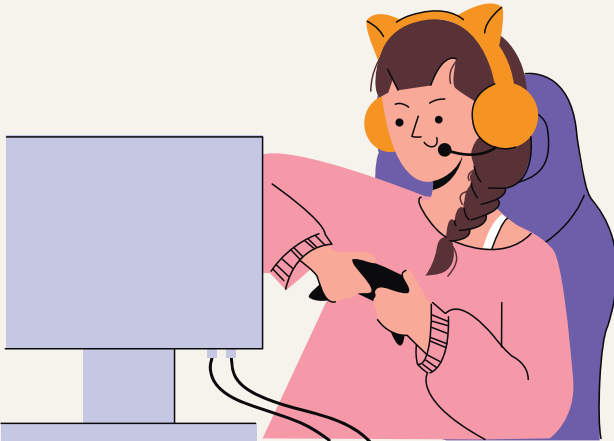


Esports Can Create Emotional Resilience

Competitive Esports can be stressful, but participants said this is “fun stress”. According to one student, when playing Esports, “it’s the stress that teaches you how to work together as a team, and improves your problem solving”.

Another said that “when you’re under stress [that is not related to gaming], it’s really hard to think. And if you can improve on that, then you automatically get better at the game and in real life”.





Online versus In-person Gender Dynamics

When playing Esports online, female players may encounter people saying “sexist things”, leading to them being “afraid to talk”. One male participant said that “since you’re behind a screen, you’re anonymous. The toxicity is rampant”. However, the “good thing about having an in-person space [where participants can play Esports together] like this, is everyone’s more respectful and playful”. In-person Esports participation may reduce the risk of female players experiencing sexism.

The Key Implications

- Generally, the gaming aspect of playing Esports was not described as being harmful.
- Participants reported that it allowed them to meet new people and learn to manage stress.
- However, some participants did report financial harms from engaging in gambling through Esports games.
- Participants highlighted that game developers are now hiding gambling-like mechanisms in their games.

Are Esports “Addictive”?

Some participants said they thought playing Esports was addictive. According to one, when they had to “study for an upcoming exam, it’s really hard to get off the game”. However, most participants said that they met various (school and life) obligations before spending time gaming.

“I play after dinner, which only leaves me with two, three hours. I play at 6pm or 5pm and then end at 8. Or sometimes, 1 hour, because I go outside with my friends to the park.”

Esports Games can Allow for Gambling

Several students had used real money to purchase a ‘loot box’ while playing an Esports game. A loot box allows a player to obtain a randomly selected virtual item. This process is effectively a structured lucky dip, and therefore simulates gambling.

Most participants had also spent money in games on ‘microtransactions’. These allow players to buy in-game items. Some students reported spending several hundreds of dollars on these. These are not always gambling opportunities, as players can choose the item for their purchase. However, game developers are now introducing an element of chance into these purchases, by randomising which items are purchasable on a given day, creating artificial scarcity. Several students said that they had spent “pocket money” on these items, with their parents being unaware of this.

Acknowledgement

We wish to acknowledge Sport Canterbury Healthy Families Ōtautahi Christchurch, the principals, teachers and librarians who helped us to organise this research, and the students who shared their expertise and insights with us. We would also like to thank AUT Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences for providing some financial support.