

Ambiguities in existing Iranian national policies addressing excessive gaming

Commentary on: Policy responses to problematic video game use: A systematic review of current measures and future possibilities (Király et al., 2018)

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Considering the scarcity of available science and controversies around effective policies addressing gaming disorder and its health-related consequences, Király et al. have conducted a systematic review on current evidence regarding this issue. We, a group of researchers in this field, would like to express our perspective from Iran. With rapid growth of gaming, Iran seems to be facing some specific policy issues and challenges, which are going to be reviewed in this short commentary.

Keywords: excessive gaming, Internet gaming disorder, gaming policy, Iran

INTRODUCTION

With current controversy and debate around the concept of gaming disorder (Saunders et al., 2017), a recent systematic review on available policies addressing excessive gaming, conducted by Király et al. (2018), has provided invaluable information for researchers working in this area. It has shed new light upon this neglected issue and highlighted the importance of the topic and the scarcity of available policies. However, classic systematic review methodology, relying mainly on peer-reviewed publications and not much on local and non-published documents, seems to be not the method of choice for policy analysis. It seems highly possible that the majority of countries have endorsed at least some policies to address problematic gaming, which have not been included in this systematic review.

Looking at the evolution of policies addressing substance-use disorders, it seems that supply reduction has been always the first measure for reducing public health risks and consequences of substance use. Supply reduction has been the main drug control policy for decades and continues to be so in many countries. There is now consensus that supply reduction per se cannot avert the health-related consequences of substance use. With the inevitability of technology growth and gaming (as a byproduct), it is highly important not to make the same historical policy process for gaming. In this systematic review, the authors

have also proposed the inadequacies of “limiting availability” for problematic gaming. Family empowerment, raising public awareness especially for the youth, and development of manuals for this purpose seem to be more suitable interventions, which can be endorsed in preventive policies.

With the rapid growth of gaming market and associated behaviors, Iran, like many other countries, seems to have taken only some preliminary measures to address this problem and lacks proper and adequate policies to tackle this phenomenon. In 2015, it was estimated that 23 million people (out of the country’s total 80 million population) were gaming for at least 1 hr/week (Iran Computer & Video Games Foundation, 2017). The majority of these gamers were adolescents.

The monetary and financial aspects of games and gaming are important issues in Iran. Due to long-lasting sanctions and the country’s delay in endorsing international copyright treaties, the gaming market in Iran is dominated by black market and pirated games, resulting in barriers for setting policies and executing regulations. The subsidized Iranian-made

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games along with the black market and pirated foreign games are extremely cheap and the cost of obtaining a game is close to nothing. The low price rates might contribute to widespread distribution of offline games and excessive gaming. Considering the above, we would like to express our perspective and country-specific situation of available policies in Iran.

In Iran, Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC), established in 2012, is the highest organizational body for policy-making on cyberspace. Iran's president (head of the council), chair of the Parliament, head of the Judiciary System and 12 ministers, and high-rank officers, as well as several specialists are members of this council. The main aim of the SCC is to develop safe, secure, and effective cyberspace. In the new SCC policy released on computer games, it has been clarified that all computer games must be evaluated and authorized by the Ministry of Culture before being distributed in the country.

Under the supervision of SCC, the Iranian Computer and Video Games Foundation (IRCG, 2016) is responsible for support and development of Iranian game industry. It aims to prevent money from getting out and prohibiting the so-called western values (such as depicting Middle Easterners as terrorists and American soldiers as the saviors, promoting western lifestyle and culture) from entering the country. Development of Persian games is fully endorsed and playing these games is positively reinforced. IRCG hosts periodic national events and leagues, which in the absence of a rival institution, receives significant attendance and popularity among the youth. In the eyes of IRCG, problematic gaming is not the main concern. They have mainly focused on the contents and preserving copyrights for Persian games. With emphasis on the appropriateness of the content, the IRCG has established the Entertainment Software Rating Association (ESRA) that is responsible for rating game content in the country (Piasecki & Malekpour, 2016). The ratings provided by ESRA mainly function as a guide for families and users to obtain age-appropriate materials and do not operate as a controlling mechanism. However, there is no scoring system for the addictiveness of the games.

As mentioned earlier, being more worried about the cultural appropriateness of the contents of the games, authorities in Iran have adopted conservative disciplinary approaches. Keeping a limit on the bandwidth of the Internet connection and filtering several "foreign" games have been widely implemented (Shadloo et al., 2017). Although people pay for their Internet connection (at home or on their cell phones), high-speed Internet connections are not widely provided to the public. It seems that broadening the Internet bandwidth is not among the country's priorities. *Pokemon Go*, *Clash of Clans* (for a limited period), *Travian* (for a limited period), *Grand Theft Auto*, *Battlefield*, *Warframe*, and *World of Warcraft* are among the examples of filtered games. The reasons for filtering games might be quite diverse, e.g., restricting server administrators' access to users' personal data or limiting the cultural impact of the games on the youth. End users, on the other hand, have used virtual private networks or ping-reducing applications to be able to purchase and use these online game platforms.

Although not supported by sound evidence, there is a consensus that these measures have been partially effective in decreasing access to and use of online games that have high-resolution graphics or require high-bandwidth Internet connection for Iranian customers.

Reviewing the existing policies, it seems that while restricting policies (e.g., parental control or age-rating systems) have not been quite feasible and successful in the country, "fatigue-like" policies, in which low bandwidth hinders full implementation of the game interface options and targets the whole population rather than at-risk groups, have had some impact. A cross-national study comparing the pattern of access, gaming, and the extent of game-related harms in countries with and without such mass restrictive policies could provide a better understanding of this matter.

In Iran, no operationalized national plan on reducing addictive risk and harms of gaming is yet available. However, regarding health-related interventions, the Ministry of Health in collaboration with the Iranian National Center for Addiction Studies has taken the initiative to develop prevention, as well as treatment guidelines and is planning to integrate early detection and treatment into the primary healthcare system. In addition, a few clinics with a focus on technology-based addictions have been established. Moreover, the Ministry of Education has developed an optional (non-core) course for high-school students on media literacy, which includes a section on media addiction (Daneshvar et al., 2017).

CONCLUSIONS

In line with the review conducted by Király et al., there has been no study on the efficacy of the available policies in Iran. Outcome measures and other aspects of such assessments are still vague and the science for evaluation of the effectiveness of policies and interventions for gaming needs to be further developed and distributed. The paper by Király et al. provided new information, but a multisite or cross-national study on policy analysis in several countries could provide a better opportunity to explore a variety of policies and their impact. In addition, with the promotion of Iranian-made games and the associated growth of its market, it seems necessary that problematic gaming should be inserted in the agenda of the SCC and other regulatory bodies.

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