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Researchers should avoid causally attributing suicide to video game play as a single factor

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Abstract

Purpose

We highlight a number of concerns regarding a recent publication in *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care* which involves the apparent presentation of three case studies of video game-related suicide.

Conclusions

Although presented as a case report, the publication falls short of ethical and best-practice standards in the reporting of suicide, and risks confusing the public debate around video games effects.

Practice Implications

Recommendations on best practice principles for reporting video game research relating to suicide are presented.

Introduction

We wish to raise a number of concerns regarding a recent paper published in *Perspectives in Psychiatric Care* by Mohammed A. Mamun, Irfan Ullah, Norina Usman, and Mark D. Griffiths (*PUBG-related suicides during the COVID-19 pandemic: Three cases from Pakistan*). The paper presents as a case report of three suicide cases in Pakistan, wherein in each case the victim's death is directly and causally attributed to playing the game *Player Unknown's Battlegrounds* (PUBG).

We note a number of concerns with this publication: 1) errors and poor practice in the data presented, 2) ethical concerns in relation to the depiction of suicide, and 3) a lack of scientific rigour. Together, these issues call into question the extent to which the paper adds evidential value to our understanding of the links between video game play and suicide.

Errors and poor practice in the data presented

The case presentation in all three cases comprises the recycling of text from news reports reporting the deaths, with minimal rephrasing attempts (see Table 1 for an example below).

Table 1. Examples of recycled text

Original Source Text*	Mamun et al. Case 2 Text
"He committed suicide by ... when he "missed his mission" he was assigned."	"...committed suicide by ... after he missed a PUBG mission in the game that had been assigned to him."
"We found his mobile phone on the bed with the PUBG game on at that time near his body."	"Police found his mobile phone near him in his room with the PUBG application still running"
"It was purely a case of addiction as the boy used to play PUBG game [sic] for many hours a day," the SP said.	"The teenager used to play game [sic] for many hours on daily [sic] basis, and was said by those who knew him to be addicted to the game."

“He said the boy’s father had off and on stopped him from playing the game.”	“His parents had told him many times to stop playing the game.”
“On the day of incident [sic], his father and other family members were out of the home leaving [the victim] and another member alone. The boy had locked his room from inside while playing game”	“On the day of the suicide, the teenager was alone and he had locked the door of his room while playing game”

*Source: Dawn News: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1564774/teen-commits-suicide-after-missing-task-in-online-game>

Note: references to method of suicide have been removed in line with WHO guidance (WHO, 2008).

No further information beyond that found in the news reports is offered, nor does it appear to be the case that any of the authors had direct contact with either the victims, those close to them, or clinicians or law enforcement representatives involved in the cases. Furthermore, some elements of the news reports have been misinterpreted or incorrectly represented. For example, in Case 2, the authors report that ‘*the teenager used to play game [sic] for many hours on a daily basis, and was said by those who knew him to be addicted to the game*’. However, the original source notes the following: ‘*It was purely a case of addiction as the boy used to play PUBG game [sic] for many hours a day,*’ the SP said.’ This quote is in fact attributed to a police superintendent, and not someone close to the victim. We also note that the same typographical error has been transferred from the original report to the present paper. Finally, given the brevity and journalistic nature of the original news stories themselves, it is unlikely that such materials, when not analysed critically in conjunction with other data sources or materials pertinent to the cases in question (Blood et al., 2007; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Pirkis & Machlin, 2015; Pitman & Stevenson, 2015), create an image that would be considered neutral or reliable by clinical or scientific, rather than media, standards. As such, it is unclear how the paper adds any intellectual contribution to our understanding of suicide.

Ethical concerns over the depiction of suicide

A further concern with Mamun et al. (2020) relates to the ethical implications of publishing information about suicide, which contradicts best practice guidelines. For example, the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2008) provides guidance on reporting suicide and makes reference to these practices explicitly. The first of these concerns the reporting of suicide methods:

‘Avoid explicit description of the method used in a completed or attempted suicide.’ (p3)

In Case 1 of Mamun et al. (2020), the method of suicide is reported, which would violate acceptable standards of reporting suicide. The WHO guidelines also remind authors that suicide should not be oversimplified in the way causes are attributed:

“The factors that lead an individual to suicide are usually multiple and complex, and should not be reported in a simplistic way. Suicide is never the result of a single factor or event.” (p7)

Suicide is a complex and emotive issue, and rarely is it the case that it can be attributed to a single factor alone (Reidenberg & Niederkrotenthaler, 2020). However, Mamun et al.’s (2020) claims are not in line with what is considered good practice in suicide research. As a group of researchers with expertise in video game effects, technology effects and science communication, we are deeply concerned that a

paper of this nature has been published, and the potential impact it can have on public discourse regarding the impact of video game play (Markey & Ferguson, 2017; Orben, 2020).

There is scant evidence to date that individual games can be considered as having a direct causal effect in suicide or suicidal ideation. Moreover, given the ubiquity of video game playing as a pastime, it is highly likely that many of those who die by suicide in younger age groups play them, making any claims of causality extremely tentative. There is, however, a history of grand claims regarding video game effects that are then subsequently found to be inaccurate, sometimes to the point where a retraction is deemed necessary (e.g. Sosso, Kuss et al., 2020).

More broadly, there is a wealth of research that documents the harmful effects that improper news reporting can have on suicide rates (Niederkröthaler et al., 2020). Such stories often originate from published academic work, and as such, researchers - and journals - have a duty to ensure that the work in question is rigorous, conforms to ethical standards, and isn't sensationalist or speculative, else there is the risk that coverage and promotion of the work can have extremely negative consequences. This is particularly the case for younger populations who may be at greater risk of suicide contagion (Gould & Lake, 2013).

Lack of scientific rigour

Mamun et al. (2020) present no objective or robust research data to demonstrate that individual games have a causal impact on suicide, yet their discussion makes strong causal claims about the relationship between these variables. These claims are supported in a limited fashion by references to papers written by Mamun and Griffiths, which follow a similar format: presenting information gleaned from newspaper articles as objective case reports without additional scientific data, and which involve extensive self-citation (e.g. Mamun & Griffiths, 2020a; Mamun & Griffiths, 2020b; Mamun, Bodrud-Doza & Griffiths, 2020; Mamun, Chandrima & Griffiths, 2020).

Typically, such case studies would draw on data or information from multiple sources, with the investigators engaging in in-depth data collection over an extended period of time via observations, interviews and other relevant quantitative or qualitative methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Some researchers (e.g. Riley et al., 2017) have gone further, and developed research checklists for case reports to ensure high standards of transparency and reliability. In not adhering to norms in the area, the present study therefore has extremely limited value in terms of informing the direction of future research, or in appropriately guiding clinical best practice.

Conclusions and recommendations

In repackaging news articles as formal case reports, Mamun et al. (2020) appear to have breached guidelines regarding the ethical reporting of suicide, and risk confusing the public debate around video game effects. At face value, the article appears to be a clinical research report, and as such may lead some readers to believe that the conclusions are of evidential value. However, at no point were clinicians involved in the cases approached or represented as part of the research team. Given the subjective and anecdotal nature of the content and presentation, it is not clear what the article offers in terms of an evidence base that can be used to suggest implications for psychiatric care in the future. More worryingly, given that there is a clear literature showing the effects of poor reporting on population suicide rates, we are concerned that the present paper has the potential to cause harm by effectively encouraging sensationalist news stories as worthy of academic attention.

Following the WHO's inclusion of gaming disorder in ICD-11, the reputational stakes for video games effects research and researchers interested in the impact of digital play on health and wellbeing have drastically increased. As such, studies which make exceptional claims regarding the impact of games deserve close scrutiny; it is with this in mind that we closely read Mamun et al. (2020) and which inform our concerns about the paper. We find it noteworthy that the study passed peer review without any of the above concerns being addressed.

Given the importance of the WHO's decision, and the gravity under which suicide should be considered, we recommend the following:

1. Researchers should refrain from drawing on newspaper reports as a sole source of information for such studies.
2. In the absence of direct contact with case subjects, or prolonged high quality data collection, researchers should avoid speculative causal statements, either directly or indirectly, about the potential triggers of suicide. This is especially the case when referring to single factors (e.g. Hawton et al., 2020).
3. Policy implications should not be made on the basis of case report studies alone (e.g. Brownson, Chiqui & Stamatakis, 2009).
4. Particularly with regards to gaming effects, research should adhere to the best practice principles of open science (e.g. Munafò et al., 2017).

It is only by demanding the highest of standards in terms of adherence to best-practice principles, that we can ensure that video games effects research is no longer dogged by unreliable or unhelpfully sensationalist work.

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