
Mindscales of the Gamer: A Phenomenological Study of Internet Gaming Disorder among Sri Lankan Adolescents

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Abstract

Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) has emerged as a significant mental health concern among adolescents, undermining psychological well-being, academic performance, and interpersonal relationships. In Sri Lanka, stringent cultural values, such as strict familial hierarchies and high expectations for academic excellence, and intense educational pressures, shape gaming experiences. This study examined adolescent gamers' lived experiences through in-depth semi-structured interviews with seven participants recruited via snowball sampling from online gaming communities. Participants were active gamers who reported significant daily-life disruptions. Interviews (30–40 minutes) were transcribed verbatim and analysed iteratively to ensure thematic credibility. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis guided thematic exploration. Four superordinate themes emerged: Mindscales of the Gamer; Connected Yet Fragmented; When Escape Becomes the Only Escape; and The Real Cost of Virtual Victories. This paper focuses on the Mindscales of the Gamer theme, comprising two subthemes, Escaping Real-Life Stress and Gaming's Effects on Thoughts and Actions, to illustrate gaming's dual role as a refuge and a cognitive intruder. Participants described gaming as providing immediate emotional relief from academic and familial stress, yet their accounts revealed lingering mental preoccupations that disrupted concentration, decision-making, academic engagement, and self-care. Excessive gaming was also associated with academic neglect and deterioration in self-care practices, compounding its adverse effects on mental health. Some adolescents reported enhanced self-worth and social validation, reflecting literature on digital belonging. These findings uncover a paradox in which brief relief may lead to enduring cognitive and emotional challenges. The paper underscores the need for culturally tailored interventions combining emotion-regulation training with strategies to interrupt gaming-related rumination. Focusing solely on Mindscales of the Gamer delivers in-depth psychological insights and actionable guidance for fostering resilience among adolescents in pressured environments.

Keywords: Internet gaming disorder, Sri Lankan adolescents, cognitive preoccupation, stress relief, phenomenology

Introduction

Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) is increasingly recognised as a significant challenge undermining adolescent mental health, academic performance, and interpersonal relationships (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Although numerous studies have employed quantitative methods to assess IGD prevalence in Western populations, a substantial gap remains in understanding how cultural, familial, and academic pressures shape the experiences of young people in non-Western contexts such as Sri Lanka (Ariyadasa, Silva, & Jayawardene, 2023; Perera & Fernando, 2020). In Sri Lanka, rigid cultural values, manifested, for example, in strict familial hierarchies, high expectations for academic excellence, and deep-rooted respect for authority, combine with intense academic demands and digital escapism to produce complex behavioural patterns that standardised diagnostic tools often fail to capture; researchers such as Ko et al. (2014) and Lemmens, Valkenburg, and Peter (2011) have highlighted these challenges.

Weinstein et al. (2017) link excessive gaming to anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal, but few studies consider the sociocultural context. In Sri Lanka, strict parental oversight can both heighten stress (Su et al., 2018; Király et al., 2018) and, with emotional support, encourage adaptive coping. Ariyadasa, Silva, and Jayawardene (2023) further show that cultural norms critically shape gaming patterns, underscoring the limits of standard quantitative models.

Accordingly, the central research question guiding this study is how Sri Lankan adolescents experience and interpret Internet Gaming Disorder within the context of strict cultural norms, familial expectations, and academic pressures. Although much research has focused on gaming in Western contexts, significant gaps remain regarding its manifestation in non-Western settings, as indicated by studies in the Colombo District (Ariyadasa, Silva, & Jayawardene, 2023). To address this gap, the study pursues two primary objectives. The first is to examine the psychological and emotional consequences of excessive gaming, focusing on its function as a temporary coping mechanism for academic and familial stress. The second is to evaluate how cultural and familial factors shape gaming behaviours and the progression of IGD, a perspective supported by emerging evidence from Pontes et al. (2019) and Su et al. (2018), alongside work by Perera and Fernando (2020), which suggests that rigid parental control may have both destabilizing and stabilizing effects. Sensitive methodologies are employed to reconcile these conflicting perspectives and inform culturally tailored interventions.

By synthesising diverse empirical findings with rich qualitative narratives, the present research proposes an integrative framework for understanding Internet Gaming Disorder that acknowledges both individual vulnerabilities and broad sociocultural determinants. Studies by Schneider, King, and Delfabbro (2022) and Pontes et al. (2019) indicate that current measurement tools fail to capture the intricate interplay among familial, academic, and cultural pressures. Such evidence justifies the use of mixed-methods approaches to develop culturally tailored interventions. This comprehensive perspective is essential for designing effective strategies that promote adolescent resilience and mental well-being in Sri Lanka, while guiding future research into the complex dynamics of digital escapism. This integrative approach is vital for sustainable outcomes.

Materials and methods

Study design

A qualitative research design was adopted to explore the video gaming habits, mental health, and behaviour of Sri Lankan adolescents. Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit in-depth narratives,

and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) captured personal lived experiences and meaning-making processes (Smith et al., 2022).

Participants

Seven adolescents (aged 13–19) were recruited via snowball sampling by IPA guidelines (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Participants were required to be active gamers who reported noticeable impacts on their daily lives, emotions, or social interactions; parental consent was obtained for those under 16. Adolescents with psychiatric conditions unrelated to IGD or those who were not regular gamers were excluded to ensure a focused, relevant sample.

Procedure and data collection

After screening via an online questionnaire, seven eligible gamers gave informed consent and completed 30–40-minute semi-structured interviews (face-to-face or online). Questions explored gaming motivations, emotional well-being, social impacts, and parental influence. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, anonymised, and securely stored. Ethical protocols—confidentiality, withdrawal rights—were strictly observed. Transcripts underwent repeated IPA readings to extract and verify emergent themes.

Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality

The lead researcher is a final-year undergraduate in psychology whose training emphasises developmental sensitivity and empirical rigor. Holding a neutral view of gaming, as neither inherently harmful nor innocuous, but recognising the risks of addiction, enabled an open stance toward participants’ narratives. Attuned to adolescence as a critical developmental stage, the researcher gave particular attention to identifying risk groups without presupposing outcomes. No personal biases were detected that negatively influenced data collection or interpretation; rather, the researcher’s balanced perspective fostered objective engagement with emergent themes. Throughout the analysis, reflexive journaling and regular peer-debriefing sessions were employed to monitor and mitigate any unintended influence, thereby reinforcing methodological credibility.

Results

Table 1: Summary table

Subtheme	Focus	Representative Quote	Key References & Critical Insight
Escaping Real-Life Stress	Performance, contingent emotional regulation	“Sometimes I’m happy, sometimes I’m sad. It depends on winning or losing.”	Ko et al. (2014); Weinstein et al. (2017): mood-dependent relief creates volatility; Schneider et al. (2022): digital affirmation without offline alternatives
Gaming’s Effects on Thoughts and Actions	Persistent cognitive carryover and behavioural intrusion	“I feel inside my brain that I’m still playing the game.”	Lemmens et al. (2011); Mihara & Higuchi (2017): sleep disturbances; Pontes et al. (2019): relapse cycles

IPA of seven Sri Lankan adolescent gamers revealed four superordinate themes—Mindscapes of the gamer; Connected yet fragmented; When escape becomes the only escape; and the real cost of virtual victories—which together capture gaming’s psychological, social, and academic impacts (Ariyadasa et al., 2023). Here,

we focus on Mindscapes of the Gamer to show how, under high academic and familial pressure, gaming offers stress relief yet triggers persistent cognitive disruption (Perera & Fernando, 2020).

Mindscapes of the gamer

Escaping real-life stress

Ko et al. (2014) demonstrate that gaming can serve as an effective, short-term buffer against stress, yet this relief often depends on in-game success. In Sri Lanka's context of high academic and familial expectations, participants described gaming as a deliberate strategy for emotional regulation. Participant 1 explained, "It's fun, but it's also a way to escape when I'm stressed or bored." Participant 7 added, "When I play, I don't have to think about my problems, my mom yelling, or anything like that."

Participant 5 further revealed the performance-contingent nature of this relief, "Sometimes I'm happy, sometimes I'm sad. It depends on winning or losing." These accounts align with Weinstein et al. (2017), who warn that mood-dependent coping via gaming can foster cyclical emotional volatility. However, Schneider, King, and Delfabbro (2022) argue that for adolescents lacking offline validation, digital environments can provide vital affirmation, suggesting that the problematic aspect lies not in gaming per se but in the absence of alternative coping resources. Empirical data from Pontes, Macur, and Griffiths (2019) show that reliance on gaming for emotional relief increases risk of compulsive use when outcomes fluctuate, while Ariyadasa, Silva, and Jayawardene (2023) found that Sri Lankan adolescents under intense academic scrutiny are especially prone to adopt gaming as their primary emotion-regulation mechanism. This critical interplay underscores the necessity of interventions that not only teach emotion-regulation skills but also broaden adolescents' repertoire of adaptive coping strategies beyond digital escapism.

Gaming's effects on thoughts and actions

Lemmens, Valkenburg, and Peter (2011) found that prolonged gaming often leads to cognitive carryover that impairs attention and planning. Participants in the current study echoed this: Participant 2 remarked, "I feel inside my brain that I'm still playing the game," and Participant 4 noted, "Sometimes, while playing, I feel like I'm actually living inside the game." These descriptions illustrate a blurred boundary between virtual and everyday cognition. In addition, Participant 6 shared, "I dream that I'm inside the game... I even screamed in my sleep," Participant 7 admitted to gaming "12 or more hours" daily. Such behavioural patterns reflect Mihara and Higuchi's (2017) findings on gaming-induced sleep disturbances and Pontes et al.'s (2019) documentation of relapse cycles in behavioural addiction. These intrusive thoughts and disrupted routines corroborate Ariyadasa et al.'s (2023) evidence that academic anxiety exacerbates cognitive preoccupation, creating a feedback loop where stress triggers gaming, and gaming perpetuates stress.

Discussion

Dual role of gaming in a high-pressure context

Ko et al. (2014) argue that gaming provides rapid stress relief, yet Lemmens, Valkenburg, and Peter (2011) caution that cognitive aftereffects persist long after play ends. In this study, Mindscapes of the Gamer shows that Sri Lankan adolescents under stringent cultural and academic expectations use gaming to "press pause" on stress (Participant 1; Perera & Fernando, 2020), but that very refuge seeds mental preoccupations that impair concentration and self-regulation (Weinstein et al., 2017). Schneider, King, and Delfabbro (2022) observe that online validation can bolster self-worth, yet without concurrent skill-building

in emotion regulation, relief via gaming becomes an unstable foundation that may exacerbate emotional volatility.

Culturally sensitive interventions with specific implementation pathways

Building on Pontes, Macur, and Griffiths's (2019) critique of one-size-fits-all programs, schools might introduce a weekly 10-minute mindfulness "cool-down" after major exams, led by trained counsellors, to interrupt gaming-related rumination. Teacher-facilitated "digital off-ramps," such as scheduled device-free breaks between study periods, can provide alternative avenues for stress management and peer support (Weinstein et al., 2017). Family workshops, co-hosted by school psychologists and parent-teacher associations, could teach parents to co-develop "gaming contracts" with adolescents that set mutually agreed screen-time limits, promoting collective decision-making and reinforcing respect for family hierarchies (Ariyadasa, Silva, & Jayawardene, 2023; Perera & Fernando, 2020).

Limitations and generalizability

The single-theme focus on *Mindscales of the Gamer*, while enabling rich depth, precludes insights into social and behavioural dimensions captured by the other three themes, limiting broader applicability (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The modest sample of seven gamers, all recruited via online communities, raises questions about transferability to rural or non-gaming subgroups (Ariyadasa et al., 2023). Future research should test these findings with larger, more diverse cohorts to determine whether emotion-regulation and digital-off-ramp interventions are effective across varying cultural and demographic contexts.

By elaborating on context-specific limitations and outlining concrete pathways for school- and family-based programs, this discussion strengthens the bridge between phenomenological insight and actionable strategies for supporting Sri Lankan adolescents' mental health.

Conclusion

This study focused on *Mindscales of the Gamer*, exploring how Sri Lankan adolescents use gaming to navigate academic and familial pressures. Through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of in-depth interviews, two subthemes, *Escaping Real-Life Stress* and *Gaming's Effects on Thoughts and Actions*, emerged. Participants described gaming as an immediate source of emotional relief yet reported enduring cognitive preoccupations that disrupted concentration, planning, and self-care (Ko et al., 2014; Lemmens, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2011). Theoretical implications underscore the importance of incorporating emotion-regulation training and cognitive-debrief techniques, such as mindfulness breaks and structured digital off-ramps, within culturally sensitive school and family programs (Schneider, King, & Delfabbro, 2022). Practical applications include embedding these strategies into existing mental health curricula to foster resilience. The study's single-theme focus and modest sample size limit generalizability, but the phenomenological depth enhances understanding of gaming's cognitive dimensions. Targeting these altered *Mindscales* will enable focused interventions that bolster adolescent resilience.

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