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Using Surveys to Investigate Violence and Mental Health Online: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

This case study will address some of the practical and ethical challenges that my colleagues and I encountered while conducting a study exploring the possible links between compulsive gaming, quality of intimate relationships, and use of violence against partners. It will present some of the benefits of using online surveys to explore sensitive research topics such as intimate partner violence and will discuss relevant considerations that should be addressed by researchers interested in this area of investigation. Some of the reflections arising from conducting this study will be presented, and specific situations will be used as examples to offer guidance on how to address practical challenges linked to conducting online research using quantitative methods. The considerations expressed aim to inform the debates around conducting ethical research using social media and online data collection methods and to offer concrete examples of how researchers can use reflectivity to inform their decisions.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to:

- Understand the main challenges that may derive from conducting online research on sensitive topics
- Evaluate the benefits of using and reflecting on participants' feedback on the study and its contents
- Estimate the importance of providing participants with valuable information on the study while avoiding the risk of bias
- Critically appraise the dilemmas emerging in connection with participants' disclosure of abuse perpetration and victimization

Introduction

The considerations expressed in this case study relate to the study “Internet Gaming, Emotional Regulation and Intimate Relationships: Exploring Links and Underlying Dynamics” that I recently conducted as a principal investigator (PI), in collaboration with a team of academics and Postgraduate Psychology students.

This study explores the psychological characteristics of people who engage in frequent online gaming and is aimed at investigating the complex links among gamers' emotional regulation abilities, the perceived quality of their intimate relationship, and the possible use of violence and aggression against their intimate partners.

This case study will present some of the most relevant reflections that emerged in connection with this study and some of the actions taken to address the practical and ethical dilemmas we encountered during the research process. First, it will introduce considerations on the importance of liaising with social media group administrators, as they often act as “gatekeepers” when conducting online research using social media as advertising platforms. Practical considerations on how much information should be provided to

potential participants will also be addressed, as researchers often need to balance the necessity to offer clear descriptions of the research aims with the need to avoid the risk of influencing the participants' answers. Furthermore, this case study will offer suggestions on how to manage the participants' feeling of being "left out" as they do not meet the study inclusion criteria and/or they feel that their experiences are not appropriately captured by the survey questions. Lastly, it will present some considerations on the ethical challenges of conducting research that may lead to the disclosure of criminal activity.

Project Overview and Context

In recent years, prolonged and compulsive involvement in gaming has been recognized as a pathological condition, and "gaming disorder" has been introduced as a diagnostic category both in the International Classification of Diseases for Mortality and Morbidity Statistics, 11th revision (ICD-11) ([World Health Organization, 2018](#)) and in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (DSM-5) ([American Psychiatric Association, 2013](#)). The DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) (e.g., withdrawal symptoms, anxiety and irritability, and inability to refrain from gaming) depict a clinical condition characterized by impulsivity, tendency to lose control, and emotional dysregulation ([Brand et al., 2014a](#), [Verdejo-García et al., 2008](#)). Impulsivity and emotional dysregulation are also common predictors of intimate partner violence (IPV) ([Edwards et al., 2003](#); [McNulty & Hellmuth, 2008](#)). In particular, studies on young adults consistently highlighted a positive association between difficulties in emotional regulation and increased IPV rates ([Gratz et al., 2009](#); [Harper et al., 2005](#)). A possible explanation for this may lie in the perpetrators' tendency to present with alexithymia, that is, the persistent difficulty in recognizing, expressing, and regulating emotions in an appropriate manner ([Engin et al., 2010](#); [Timoney & Holder, 2013](#)).

Therefore, there could be psychological dynamics (e.g., impulsivity and difficulties in emotional recognition and regulation, tendency to feel anxious, and/or social withdrawal) that may contribute to explain why people who are drawn toward gaming may also be less able to regulate conflict with intimate partners, thus potentially resorting to IPV. This considered, it is important to progress our knowledge regarding the links among compulsive engagement in gaming, mental health symptoms, and emotional regulation abilities in gamers, as these factors may lead to a better understanding and prevention of IPV.

The research design adopted for this study was cross-sectional, a type of research design often used for population-based surveys to understand the relationships between different variables in a given population at a specific point in time ([Lavrakas, 2008](#); [Setia, 2016](#)). According to the existing literature ([Kuss & Lopez-Fernandez, 2016](#); [Kuss et al., 2013](#); [Wallace, 2014](#)), young people are considered to be more vulnerable to developing IGD-related behaviors, as compared to older generations. Therefore, our sample was composed of young adults (ranging from 18 to 35 years of age) who engaged regularly (at least 5 hours per week) in online gaming in the 6 months preceding the study and who were in an intimate relationship at the time of participation.

The data were collected online, using an online survey created via the software Qualtrics (Qualtrics, Provo, UT) that was regularly posted on social media. More specifically, we used an opportunity sampling method

by posting the study advert (containing the survey link) on Twitter, Reddit, and Facebook gaming groups and pages with at least 100 registered members. The study advert was posted after obtaining permission from the group administrators, and the group members could self-select as participants by accessing the survey link and expressing their informed consent to participation.

In this case study, I will present some considerations that arose from conducting this study. First, I will discuss some lessons learned from conducting online research on sensitive topics, presenting some of the challenges that my colleagues and I encountered and the key reflections deriving from them. Second, I will present some of the key ethical considerations that emerged as relevant while planning and conducting this study. By doing so, I am hoping to provide valuable practical and ethical insights for researchers interested in investigating sensitive topics using online data collection methods.

Section Summary

- Definition of the key aspects of the study considered.
- Presentation of the rationale for conducting research investigating the links between compulsive gaming and intimate partner violence.

Research Practicalities

“I am an ‘invader’... with good intentions”

One of the challenging aspects characterizing this study entailed the need to gain the trust of the administrators of social media groups and pages (commonly known as “admins”). Often, researchers are perceived as “invaders” of what is considered as a close-knitted space in which people having common interests can interact in a safe and relatively protected space. Therefore, researchers using social media for recruitment may face the reluctance of group admins (acting as “gatekeepers”) to allow them to advertise their study on the groups they created and/or oversee

A good strategy to overcome this potential barrier is to provide valuable information on the topic of the study and the recruitment strategy that will be used. For example, my collaborators and I found it useful to engage in concise but informative conversations with group admins, aimed at providing a more in-depth description of the study objectives and reassurance regarding the ethical treatment of both participants and their data. Ensuring that the research aims are as transparent as possible is also in line with the principle of “scientific integrity” enunciated by the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics ([The British Psychological Society, 2021](#)). Unfortunately, not in all cases this was sufficient, and at times, we did not obtain permission to advertise the study in groups that met our criteria. In this case, I find it is good practice to respect the group admins’ decision and where possible, to invite them to contact a member of the research team in case they might want to discuss the study further or might be willing to reconsider their decision.

Balancing Transparency and Risk of Bias

During the recruitment stage, many potential participants showed interest in our study and asked questions on it and its underpinning hypotheses. Although offering clarifications may be useful to encourage participation, providing too much information on the study aims and hypotheses may increase the risk of bias. In particular, in a study focusing on personal dimensions such as mental illness and quality of intimate relationships, participants may feel more “exposed” and therefore may be more likely to incur in social desirability bias. This type of bias occurs when people’s answers are influenced by the attempt to preserve a positive image of themselves and/or give a positive impression to others (Larson, 2019). Therefore, we opted for providing general information on the aspects explored via this study (e.g., perceived quality of intimate relationships in a sample of gamers) but without sharing, for example, the specific hypotheses and expected relationships among variables we were hoping to find. Nevertheless, in order to ensure adherence to ethical principles in research, the participants were informed via the participant information sheet (PIS) that at the end of the study, they would have been able to contact me (as PI) to obtain a summary of the study findings and more specific information on the hypothesized relationships among the variables investigated.

The importance of ensuring transparency was highlighted by one specific incident in which one of the participants who had completed the survey added a comment underneath the advert expressing his disappointment for what he believed was a study aimed at confirming that gamers are inherently violent individuals, likely to be physically abusive toward their partners. After discussing this issue in a supervisory meeting, we decided to contact this individual to offer more information on our research purposes, which were far from wanting to draw a unilinear, rigid, and pathologizing picture of gamers as “abusive partners.” He appeared to be very grateful for our decision to reach out to him and seemed to truly appreciate the additional information we provided.

“Shame I can’t take part in it”: Addressing the Feelings of “Exclusion” in Participants Who Did Not Meet the Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

One of the benefits of conducting research using social media is the interactive nature of these platforms, which translates into the possibility of receiving feedback on the experiences and perceptions of participants (or potential ones) on the study proposed. Although some of our study criteria were inclusive (e.g., there were no restrictions on participants’ gender), others set stricter parameters for participation, meaning that some of the individuals who expressed interest in the study could not take part in it. For example, due to the need to involve younger generations of gamers, one of the inclusion criteria indicated that participation was limited to people from 18 to 35 years of age. Similarly, participants had to be in a relationship with an intimate partner at the time of their participation in the study, as we aimed to gather information on the possible presence and intensity of abusive behaviors against current partners.

This left some individuals to feel excluded from the possibility to take part in the study, and some of them asked direct questions on the reasons for the criteria utilized. In order to clarify the rationale for the choice of our inclusion/exclusion criteria, we used a clear and easily accessible language to respond to people’s

questions, and we paid attention to replying to comments on these aspects to reduce the negative effect that feeling “unfit for participation” may have on people who are willing to take part in research.

“Your questions don’t represent my experiences—can you change them?”

As all experiences are subjectively interpreted, individuals undergoing similar life experiences may have different perceptions of them. This is one of the key aspects of constructivism, a theory that poses that all individuals assign a “constructed meaning” to their reality, which reflects their point of view and personal interpretations of the events occurring in their lives ([Mahoney & Granvold, 2005](#); [Raskin, 2002](#)). Consequently, some participants voiced their concerns about not feeling appropriately “represented” by the questions asked. In other words, they felt that different questions (or a different wording) should have been used in the survey to enquire about their experiences.

As students and researchers know, when using validated measures, it is not possible (or at least, not recommendable) to modify the wording or the order of the items in a set measure. Indeed, validated measures (as the ones we adopted for this study) undergo a process known as “validation,” consisting of different stages having the purpose of identifying good “indicators” of a particular construct (e.g., depression). Once identified, questions and statements that can appropriately capture the complexity of that construct are developed and used to assess its presence and intensity. The conclusive stage of validation entails testing the validity and reliability of the measure created by assessing its psychometric properties ([Gremigni, 2020](#)).

Nevertheless, some of the participants in this study (and others conducted previously) highlighted that some of the items they were presented with sounded quite “odd,” repetitive, or not reflective of their experiences.

Examples of these items were:

- “Have you ever jeopardized your school or work performance because of gaming?” (Item 10 of the Internet Gaming Disorder Ten-Item Internet Gaming Disorder Test [IGDT-10]; [Király et al., 2017](#)). Some participants found the term “jeopardize” too “extreme” and felt that although gaming may influence their school or work performance, it is not likely to “jeopardize” their ability to focus or to be productive in these areas.
- “I insisted on sex when my partner did not want to or insisted on sex without a condom (but did not use physical force)” (Item 19 of the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale, Short form [CTS2S]; [Straus & Douglas, 2004](#)). One participant highlighted that this was a confusing statement, as she sometimes tried to “entice” her partner’s sexual desire but was not sure whether this statement could adequately capture the dimension of “playful seduction” or whether, instead, it only referred to the use of coercion to have sexual intercourse.

In both these situations, we opted for avoiding the risk of bias that may have stemmed from offering clarifications on these items. We acknowledged that these statements were open to different interpretations, and we suggested participants to select the answer that they felt best described their views and experiences.

Section Summary

- Description of some challenges encountered in gaining gatekeepers' trust.
- Discussion of the solutions we adopted to find an appropriate balance between providing participants with information on the study and the need to avoid bias.
- Suggestions on how to justify the choice of the inclusion and exclusion criteria adopted in the study (to counteract feelings of "exclusion").
- Discussion of some of the actions taken to respond to participants' feedback on the measures used in the survey.

Ethical Considerations

Protecting Anonymity: Recognizing Without Identifying

According to the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR; [Information Commissioner's Office, 2016](#)), consent to process personal data can be withdrawn at any time. Consequently, if participants wish to withdraw their consent to the use of the data provided after participation, researchers need to have a system in place to identify the data provided by a specific individual in order to remove them from the dataset. This may create some challenges in finding an appropriate compromise between the need to ensure that participants will remain anonymous (which is relevant particularly when investigating "sensitive topics") and the need for researchers to be able to identify the data of specific participants.

To address this issue, we asked participants to create a "unique identification code" (UIC). The UIC was formed by combining the first two letters of the individual's first name (e.g., "NA"), the day of their date of birth (e.g., 01), and the first two letters of their surname (e.g., LO). The intent was to create a code that used information (e.g., name and date of birth) that is unlikely to change in a relatively short timeframe, so that participants could easily retrieve this code should they wish to withdraw their consent to the use of their data.

Some participants commented that they were unsure as to why they were asked to create this code and one implied that we may have "hidden motives" to ask for this information. As these comments were public (i.e., visible to the other members of the social media group), it was of utmost importance to clarify why this code was needed, to prevent potential participants from doubting the ethical treatment of their data. We usually addressed this by replying to comments directly (so that our clarifications could be visible to other group members), highlighting that the PIS (shown to participants before accessing the survey) contained exhaustive information on the measures taken to protect participants' anonymity and the confidentiality of their data.

Participants Disclosing Criminal Activity: What Should Researchers Do?

When conducting research that may lead to the disclosure of illegal activities, such as violence against partners, researchers face an important ethical dilemma: this is, whether they should report the participants or protect the confidentiality of their data. Although there is a lack of comprehensive guidance on this

matter (Finch, 2001), according to regulations applied in different UK academic institutions (e.g., University of Exeter, 2018; University College London, 2020; University of Sheffield, 2021), researchers do not have a legal obligation to report illegal activity to the relevant authorities, with some exceptions (abuse of minors or vulnerable adults, money laundering, and crimes connected to terrorism) (University College London, 2020). The BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (The British Psychological Society, 2021) also acknowledges that research involving potentially sensitive topics (such as participants' sexual behavior and their experience of violence) should elicit careful considerations around ethics and risk management, but does not provide clear recommendations on how this should be achieved.

As our participants were asked questions on their IPV perpetration and victimization, our study presented a certain level of "risk." Although for IPV perpetration we could take no direct action (due to the participants' anonymity and in light of the considerations expressed above), both the PIS and the debrief sheet (DS) that we included at the end of the survey contained useful information for individuals who may be experiencing IPV. More specifically, to reduce the risk that IPV survivors may experience distress when recalling the abuse, the PIS indicated that they could take a break during the completion of the survey or stop completion altogether. Moreover, both in the PIS and DS the participants could find contacts of organizations and charities (e.g., Mind and Samaritans) that albeit based in the UK, can be accessed globally via their website, phone, or by email.

As this study targeted a population (young people frequently engaging in gaming) that may or may not display abusive behaviors against partners, the resources included in the DS referred to organizations providing support to people with mental health issues and/or experiencing distress (including, but not limited to, people living in abusive relationships). The prevalence rates of abuse against partners that will emerge from the findings will provide us with a clearer picture of the likelihood for gamers to perpetrate and/or being a victim of domestic abuse. This knowledge will inform future versions of the DS that we will use in studies involving gamers. For example, if female gamers reported higher rates of IPV as compared to their male counterparts, future versions of the DS will include the contacts of organizations specifically supporting female victims of abuse.

When creating the DS, we also faced the challenge of finding international organizations (as the study survey could be completed by people of any nationality, provided they were fluent in English) supporting IPV perpetrators. In future versions of the DS, particularly if our findings will indicate a high prevalence of IPV perpetration in our sample, a list of services to help perpetrators end the abuse will be provided, with a preference for services that are remotely accessible (e.g., via phone or live chat) and free of charge. This should allow perpetrators to receive support regardless of the personal and external barriers they may face (e.g., financial difficulties, disabilities affecting the possibility of accessing in-person support, and living in remote areas with no access to local services).

It is worth noting that providing information on support available will not mean that perpetrators (or victims) will seek help to end the abuse. The protection of anonymity implies that researchers need to accept the impossibility to ascertain whether participants will access support and from which organizations. In other

words, researchers are faced with a fundamental choice: on the one hand, they can ask participants to self-identify (e.g., via their email address) to be able to contact them and provide support directly (e.g., via debrief sessions) or signpost them to third parties (organizations and/or professionals) who may be able to offer support. On the other hand, they can opt for methods (e.g., asking participants to create a code, as we did in this study) that allow for the protection of the participants' anonymity but make it impossible to retrieve single participants in order to provide advice on how to access help, if needed. As mentioned above, we chose to preserve the anonymity of our participants and made this choice in light of two main considerations. First, when conducting research on sensitive topics (such as mental health and IPV), ensuring that participants will remain anonymous can increase the chances that their responses will be more genuine ([Lavender & Anderson, 2009](#); [Ong & Weiss, 2000](#)). Second, the core aim of conducting research should be to improve existing knowledge and inform current and future practice ([Craighead et al., 2019](#)). To elaborate this second concept further, while in clinical practice professionals' focus should be on the individual(s) relying on their support, researchers' primary commitment should be to the wider society, as research is a task carried out in the public interest—according to the [Information Commissioner's Office \(2016\)](#) definition. Therefore, researchers' primary aim should be to produce valid and reliable data on specific phenomena (such as compulsive gaming, mental illness, and IPV) and on their mutual connections, hereby allowing institutions, authorities, and policymakers to devise effective ways to prevent and tackle these complex issues.

Section Summary

- Discussion of the measures used to protect the participants' anonymity and feedback received on them by some of the participants.
- Reflections on some of the measures used to manage the risks potentially arising from violence perpetration and victimization.

Conclusion

This case study has addressed some of the challenges that can characterize online research on sensitive topics such as IPV, and I have described some of the solutions adopted to tackle these challenges. Using the [Schön \(1983\)](#) “reflection-in-action” and “reflection-on-action” model, my colleagues and I gathered information during the stages of data collection, informed by the feedback received by the participants in our study. This allowed us, for example, to “reflect in action” and address the participants' questions and comments providing clarifications on the study and on important ethical aspects (e.g., data protection) that increased the participants' trust in us as researchers. Emerging evidence suggests that more one-to-one contact with researchers can improve participants' understanding of the research aims and what participation will entail ([Flory & Emanuel, 2004](#)).

Keeping an “open channel” of communication with our participants taught us a valuable lesson: Engaging with participants' comments can be a useful way to improve their understanding of the study and the beneficial impact it may have on knowledge and future practice, allowing them to provide fully informed consent to

participation. At the same time, participants' feedback can be a precious source of information on the aspects that may be less clear and/or more controversial. This may inform, for example, the choice of including certain measures in future studies or the wording of the instructions provided to participants when completing certain tasks.

The points mentioned above constitute our "reflection-on-action," which will inform our "reflection-for-action," that is, the process of thinking about future actions with the intention of improving or changing practice (Olteanu, 2017). This considered, future studies will be planned in accordance with what we learned while conducting this study. For example, instead of asking participants to create a UIC explaining that it is a way to retrieve their data, we may ask them to keep a record of the date and exact time they have completed the survey. As Qualtrics stores this information, it could be used to retrieve the data provided by a specific participant. This option would not be exempt from potential issues, as two (or more) participants may complete the survey on the same date, at very similar times. Moreover, if a participant accessed the survey multiple times, unless they kept track of the date and time of each access, it would be difficult to remove all the data provided by that specific person. Nevertheless, this option may help to reduce participants' resistance in completing the survey and may allow for a more thorough anonymization of the data collected. Other options may also be taken into consideration, such as the possibility to ask participants to choose a pseudonym (e.g., Crow98) that could be used as UIC.

To conclude, this case study has provided some insights into our reflections-in-action and on-action emerging during this study, which we hope will be useful to researchers conducting studies on sensitive topics using online methods of data collection.

Classroom Discussion Questions

1. How can researchers try to gain the trust of social media group administrators, to be able to advertise their study?
2. What are the risks discussed in this case study, related to offering too much information to potential participants before participation?
3. What is the main benefit addressed in this case study related to using clear and accessible language when providing clarifications to potential participants on the study inclusion/exclusion criteria?
4. Why is it important for researchers to have a way to retrieve participants' data in the dataset (even in studies in which participants are anonymized or pseudonymized)?

Web Resources

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