GaMeSym Policy Brief: Young people's mental health in livestreaming and esports environments

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The crucial finding from this symposium is that young people do not believe social media platforms or their government are doing enough to ensure they can safely and securely enjoy their everyday activities online. There is a perception of a lack of accountability regarding the safeguarding of children and young people by the government and industry sectors.

The symposium was keynoted by world-renowned children's digital rights and literacy researcher Professor Sonia Livingstone (London School of Economics), and digital sociologist Dr Emma Witkowski (RMIT, Australia). GaMeSym was held over two days, in which roundtable discussions were held between academics, industry partners, and young people. The discussions between academics and practitioners made clear that empirical research into the benefits and challenges live-streaming and esports brings to youth mental health is limited.

Policy Backdrop

The UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport recently released safety guidance pertaining to online streaming platforms with the Online Harms White Paper (2020), which included providing practical guidance for businesses on how to improve child safety online.

This policy approach emerged alongside a dearth of empirical research conducted by academics over the previous two decades that examined both the risks and benefits that young people can leverage through their everyday digital practices in online social media (see for example Collin, Rahilly, Richardson, and Third, 2011; Livingstone, 2014; Hart, 2017).

Noticeably, the UK government's white paper mentions mental health in a limited context, focusing on cyberbullying, time spent using digital devices as it correlates to an increased risk of depression or anxiety, and exposure to content that promotes self-harm (Gov.uk, 2021).

Young people's engagement with media and technology has long captured public attention, from the invention of the television to contemporary social media.

Project overview

GaMeSym 2021 was an online symposium held between 2nd and 3rd of June 2021 and coordinated by the University of Leicester, and funded by the eNurture Network (eNurture). eNurture is funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and their support is gratefully acknowledged (Grant reference: ES/004467/1). Any views expressed here are those of the project investigators and do not necesarily represent the views of eNurture or UKRI.

The symposium brought three groups of people together in order to foster a robust discussion on the impact live-streaming and esports were having on young people's mental health, both in terms of challenges and in terms of opportunities:

Academics:

Youth researchers and digital media experts whose empirical work examines the impacts of technology and technology use on young people's everyday life and mental health.

Industry Leaders:

Professionals working in eSports and livestreaming spaces online and offline, such as journalists, eSports team managers, and regulatory body officials involved in monitoring ethical practices amongst gaming athletes.

Young people and Youth Charity Workers:

The Diana Award runs various campaigns aimed at supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing, ranging from anti-bullying programmes to mentoring schemes. Their overall mission is to improve the opportunities of and change the inequalities faced by young people in the UK. The 'youth ambassadors' they brought to the symposium were a group of young people involved in gaming and livestreaming, and the symposium gave them a voice to be heard.

As technology changes, so too do media landscapes, and with it, cause to re-evaluate existing policy frameworks. Esports and livestreaming are media environments that are experiencing recent exponential growth, both financially and culturally.

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As much as 90% of young people follow 'gaming influencers' on social media - esports athletes and professional live streamers – people that are seen by their young audiences as trusted sources of information and inspiration (YouGov, 2021).

However, social media platforms are not clinical settings, and there are few guidelines or rules around how these discussions are handled or shaped. This raises questions for what kind of mental health information young people are accessing on livestreaming sites like Twitch.tv, and what impact this has on their mental health. In what follows we provide the main findings from this project.

Research into the relationship between livestreaming, esports, and young people's mental health benefits and impacts is limited

Research detailing the mental health and wellbeing impacts of social media has been growing for over a decade. It has been established that social media broadly strengthens young people's resilience and wellbeing due to opportunities for community engagement and belonging (Collin et al. 2011), improving resilience to digital risks (Hart, 2017), and another thing here (citation).

When fielding the call for papers for the symposium, there was a clear paucity of empirical research being undertaken within the specific research area of youth, mental health, and esports or livestreaming.

Indeed, most academics who attended the symposium were researching in nascent areas, such as the mental health benefits of gaming more broadly defined (Karatzogianni and Morgner, 2021; Johnson, 2021); young people's gaming and leisure activities (Parasonglou, 2021); or esports and transformations to work-life balance (Scholz and McCauley, 2012).

There is, however, a current lack of funded research examining the mental health impacts of young people specifically – for example, on the risks and rewards leveraged by young people trying to forge careers in eSports or live-streaming their gameplay on platforms like Twitch.tv.

We currently lack the specific data of how many young people in the UK desire a career on Twitch.tv as a live streamer or professional gamer or esports player.

Likewise, there is no data on those young people who have forged a career in these spaces, what the mental health impacts on such work imposes in terms of burnout, economic exploitation, or gendered harassment.

Young people in the UK do not feel adequately equipped or supported to manage the risks of livestreaming and gaming online

Many young people expressed disappointment in the lack of appropriate training and support they received during their education to manage the risks and harms of cyberbullying and other forms of online abuse that they encounter online. This ranged from accounts of teachers being disinterred in providing mentoring or pastoral care and being under-resourced to be trained and aware of emergent social media platforms such as Twitch.tv.

Despite the increasing presence of women in esports and live streaming spaces, young girls in the UK who are interested in gaming in terms of leisure or as potential career path feel under-represented and unnoticed in education settings. Many young women we spoke to shared common experiences of being in the statistical minority on computer courses.

Other young people felt disillusioned with the UK government, who they believe do not understand the nuances of contemporary social media, nor the responsibilities adults must have for young people's online safety. This extended to the platforms themselves, who young people also feel absolve themselves of meaningful responsibility when it comes to safeguarding young people from online abuse.

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Industry is passionate about awareness and support for young people's mental health, but lacks resources and accountability

Industry leaders who spoke at the symposium uniformly expressed shared belief in the potential benefits that live-streaming and eSports brings young people in terms of their career opportunities, ability to experience a sense of belonging, and general wellbeing. However, many acknowledged that the industry is under-resourced, with grassroots organisations often struggling to provide adequate mentoring and counselling service to young people being exploited in terms of low wage contracts and managing the pressures to succeed professionally.

Those who worked with The Diana Award found these to be informative and rewarding initiatives, as they enabled young content creators to foster communities of belonging on Twitch.tv that were proactive in discussing supportive discussion around mental health. While esports is seen as a young, emergent industry, it is drawing large sponsorships and endorsements from large conglomerates, gambling agencies, and media platforms.

What is missing from this discussion, however, is questions being asked such as who is responsible and accountable for the money coming into the industry, and why it is not being allocated appropriately to safeguard young people's mental health - whether they are professional gaming athletes, gaming lives streamers, or young people watching avidly.

Results from the Symposium for Policy Use

Research investigating the positive impacts and experiences of digital media, within the context of livestreaming and esports, is still emerging (c.f. Cabeza-Ramírez, Muñoz-Fernández and Santos-Roldán, 2021; Chan, Huo, Kelly, Leung and Tisdale, 2021; Tjønndal and Skauge, 2021).

The literature available currently does not examine the specific mental health challenges, risks, and opportunities presented to young UK people engaged in live streaming on platforms such as Twitch.tv, or engaging in professional gaming careers in the eSports industry.

Young people in the UK feel that the curriculum in schools and support provided by educators is not contemporary or innovative. Young women's desire or interest in information technology and gaming continues to be either overlooked or not taken seriously.

Many young people feel that their teachers lack the training to adequately provide pastoral care as and when online risks occur as part of their participation in online gaming spaces.

While industry is sympathetic to and supportive of young people's mental health, many feel that the industry lacks the funding and infrastructure to adequately provision mental health training and care for young people at risk of online harms while participating in eSports or livestreaming.

Conversely, others feel that given the large financial investment currently pouring into esports and live streaming, that more can and should be done by companies and platforms to provision adequate mental health training and support to streamers, esports athletes, and young vulnerable audiences online.

Based on the above results stemming from the symposium we are confident in making the following recommendations:

1. More training and resources (such as toolkits, workshops, and audio-visual material) are necessary which target young people, parents, educators, and gaming or livestreaming industry practitioners in regards to mental health issues and other vulnerabilities identified in this symposium and in the wider literature.

2. In relation to educators, education provision has to engage in more innovative and creative ways to relate to young people's leisure activities as these develop. For this, more training regarding how to facilitate young people's needs should be given to educators in primary and secondary schools. and colleges.

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Based on the above results stemming from the symposium we are confident in making the following recommendations:

3. The UK government policy should expand to embrace broader regulation regarding mental health benefits and harms of gaming and livestreaming for children and young people beyond cyberbullying and the usual suspects of this policy field.

4. UKRI would need to develop more funding calls for researching this emerging field of Information Communication Technology (ICT) use and mental health milieu in relation to leisure activities for children and young people in the digital age - an area that is currently under-researched.

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