

Problematic Video Game Use in Latino Adolescence: A Preliminary Study of Loneliness, Coping, and Emotional Psychopathology

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ABSTRACT

Internet gaming disorder (IGD) is an emerging mental health concern characterized by compulsive gaming that disrupts daily functioning. IGD is increasingly understood as rooted in psychosocial, rather than purely behavioral, factors. This cross-sectional study ($n = 159$, Puerto Rican adolescents) employed convenience sampling through an online survey to examine IGD's relationship to psychosocial factors (e.g., loneliness, coping, emotional psychopathology). IGD showed minor associations ($r < .20$) with loneliness ($p = .485$), and its social ($p = .747$), romantic ($p = .827$), and family ($p = .315$) dimensions. Stronger correlations ($r > .40$) emerged with anxiety ($p < .001$), depression ($p < .001$), stress ($p < .001$), and maladaptive coping ($p < .001$). These findings emphasize IGD's bidirectional ties to emotional psychopathology and its complex relationship with loneliness. Adolescents may use gaming to cope with loneliness and emotional psychopathology, emphasizing the need for prevention efforts that improve social and coping skills.

KEYWORDS

Internet Gaming Disorder, Adolescents, Loneliness, Anxiety, Depression, Coping Strategies, Puerto Rican Adolescents, Behavioral Addiction

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INTRODUCTION

The rise in online video game use among adolescents has intensified concerns about its potential health risks, particularly internet gaming disorder (IGD) (González-Bueso et al., 2018; Rahul et al., 2025). IGD is classified as a behavioral addiction characterized by impaired control over gaming and a persistent prioritization of gaming over other daily activities, despite significant personal, academic, or social consequences (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; World Health Organization, 2020). Reported prevalence rates vary substantially, from 2% to 8.5% in the United States and 3% to 4% globally, consistently peaking during adolescence (Fam, 2018; Gentile et al., 2009; Stevens et al., 2020; Wartberg et al., 2017). This variability reflects the absence of diagnostic standardization and heavy reliance on psychometric screening instruments, which differ in measurement structure, cutoff thresholds, and cultural validation (Bernaldo-de-Quirós et al., 2019; Griffiths et al., 2014; Pontes, 2017).

Adolescents appear particularly vulnerable to developing IGD due to an interaction of biological, psychological, and social factors. Biologically, maturation of the prefrontal cortex limits executive functioning and impulse regulation (Blum et al., 2015), increasing susceptibility to prioritizing immediate gaming-related rewards over long-term responsibilities or health. Psychologically, adolescents frequently engage in gaming as a coping mechanism for stress and emotional difficulties, including anxiety (Wang et al., 2017) and depression (Ferreira et al., 2020; Pallavicini et al., 2022). Although gaming can provide temporary relief and facilitate social connection in multiplayer environments (Pallavicini et al., 2022), it may also amplify self-isolation, especially for adolescents experiencing bullying or social exclusion (Gelūnas, 2025). Socially, peer interactions have an important part in shaping behavioral norms. When adolescents are integrated into gaming-oriented peer groups, these influences can extend past companionship, reinforcing maladaptive gaming patterns, and increasing IGD risk (Meehan et al., 2024). These biopsychosocial patterns show the multifaceted and, at times, contradictory impact of gaming on adolescents' psychological and social well-being.

These vulnerabilities are consistent with the Interaction of Person-Affect-Cognition-Execution (I-PACE) model (Brand et al., 2016), a widely used theoretical framework for understanding the development and maintenance of behavioral addictions, such as IGD. The model emphasizes the interaction among biological predispositions (e.g., underdeveloped prefrontal regulation), affective states (e.g., stress, depression, anxiety), cognitive processes (e.g., peer-influenced expectancies, maladaptive coping beliefs), and executive functioning deficits, including impaired inhibitory control. Within this framework, emotional psychopathology, peer pressure, and reduced executive functioning contribute to increased cue reactivity and craving, thereby increasing adolescents' susceptibility to problematic gaming behaviors. This framework is useful for organizing psychosocial correlates of IGD because it allows emotional symptoms, coping processes, and interpersonal experiences to be understood as related but conceptually distinct contributors to problematic gaming.

Despite the recent inclusion of IGD in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, Text Revision (DSM-5-TR) (American Psychiatric Association, 2022), diagnosis remains challenging due to inconsistent criteria and limited integration of psychological and social variables that are commonly implicated in IGD. Specifically, these are anxiety, depression, loneliness (in its family, romantic, and social dimensions), and maladaptive coping strategies. Each of these has been associated with IGD individually, but few studies have examined them collectively in adolescents. This study steps in to help remedy this shortcoming by evaluating these variables as simultaneous predictors of IGD, with the aim of informing future diagnostic criteria and targeted interventions.

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