Opinium

Mental Health and Gaming - UK

Key findings

8 November 2021

Project details

PROJECT NUMBER	Diversity In Gaming Thought Leadership
PROJECT NAME	Mental Health and Gaming - UK
CLIENT COMPANY NAME	Opinium
SAMPLE	1,361 UK gamers aged +18
FIELDWORK DATES	1st – 17th October 2021

Introduction

Following 18 months of lockdown, working from home, concern for loved ones' wellbeing, and huge social movements, focus on mental health has never been as prevalent or important as it is today. It is an issue that affects everyone indiscriminately, but a historical lack of open discussion has meant that it is something that many people struggle to deal with. With recent events bringing a focus back onto this topic, and many high profile stars such as Dwayne Johnson, Andy Murray and Adele talking more openly about their struggles with mental health, many people are re-evaluating their own mental wellbeing and exploring how it may be improved.

Simultaneously, with billions of people around the world confined to their homes taking up new hobbies, research from Opinium in September 2020 showed that the overall 'gaming population' increased by 63% in lockdown, coinciding with the launch of next-generation gaming platforms, and the rocketing popularity of esports and online streaming.

With that in mind, this report will explore the relationship between gamers and their mental health, looking at who they are, how they game, what they do, and how all of this contributes to their mental wellbeing.

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Results

Two thirds of young gamers say playing video games improves their mental health

Looking at the relationship between gaming and mental health from a bird's eye view, three in five gamers (60%) say that gaming improves their mental health, with just 2% saying it worsens it. A further 15% said that their mental health was significantly improved by gaming.

Interestingly, young gamers were more likely to say that gaming improves their mental health, with nearly two thirds (64%) of gamers between the age of 18 and 34 experiencing this, falling to half (49%) of gamers over the age of 55. However, despite younger people finding that gaming improves their mental health more than older gamers, when asked to rate their mental health from 0 (very poor) to 10 (very good), young people scored lower than older gamers (6.6 vs 7.7).

Average mental health of gamers by age

18-21	22-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	66-75	Over 75
6.1	6.6	6.7	6.7	6.8	7.5	8	8.7
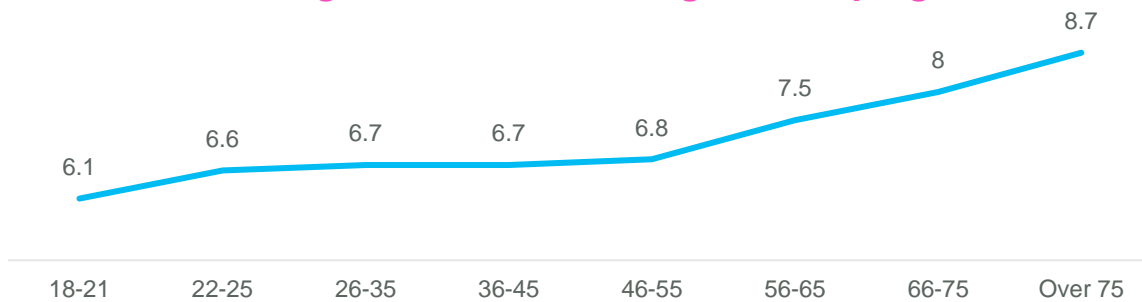
When comparing a gamer's mental health with the age at which they started gaming, a pattern emerges that the younger a gamer was when they started gaming, the lower their mental health is now. Gamers in the lowest bracket for mental health started gaming at an average age of 15 years old, compared to the highest bracket for mental health, who started gaming at an average of 23 years old.

It was also found that male gamers gave themselves a higher average score for mental health compared to female gamers (7.1 vs 6.6), although this is to be expected with women being typically more willing to talk openly about mental health than men.

Gamers who spend longer playing video games are more likely to have better mental health

The average amount of time a gamer spends playing video games in a typical week was 8.8 hours, with gamers who play for longer are more likely to say that their mental health is better. Gamers who rated their mental health between 0-3 were likely to play an average of 8.2 hours of video games in a typical week and were likely to spend £19.20 on video games and additional content in a typical month. Time spent gaming increases to 9.4 hours among the group of individuals who rated their mental health either a 9 or a 10, over an hour longer than those with worst mental health, and their average monthly spend also increased to £24.20.

Overall, the most popular video game genres among those surveyed were puzzle games (43%), adventure games (41%), and action games (39%). The most commonly played video game genre among players in the highest bracket for mental health was shooter/FPS, which was played by 42% of players in the highest bracket, followed by action games at 39%. Players in the lowest bracket for mental health were most likely to play puzzle games (56%) and simulation games (43%).

Half of gamers feel accepted in the gaming community

When it comes to one of the contributing factors to mental health in gaming, almost half of gamers (46%) said they feel accepted in the gaming world. This rises to 57% among gamers in the top bracket for mental health and falls to 34% among gamers in the lowest bracket. However, only 9% overall said that they did not feel accepted, with 45% neither agreeing nor disagreeing.
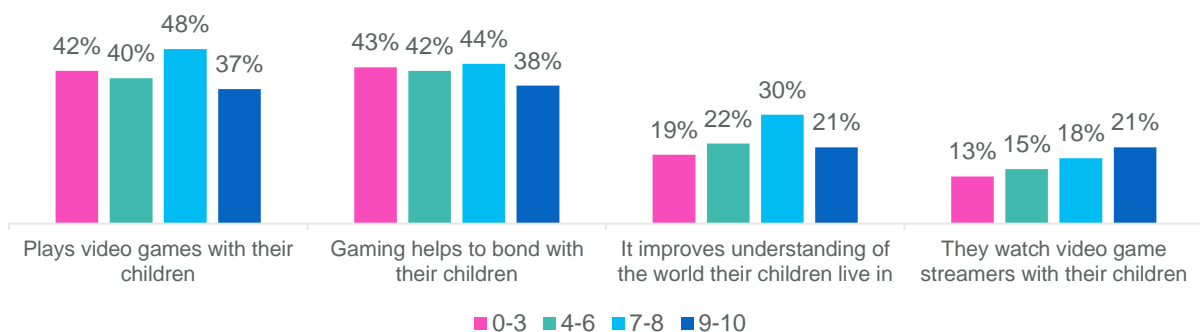
Interestingly, when asked if they felt judged on having gaming as their hobby, gamers with poor mental health actually felt less likely to feel judged than those with better mental health. One in five (20%) gamers with mental health scores less than 3 said they felt judged, with 24% of gamers with a mental health score between 8 and 10 saying they felt the same way.

This reflects the feedback we received about the gaming community in general. It is the volume and variety of gamers within the community which provide it its strength, particularly on online platforms. This is what has earned the gaming community its reputation among gamers of being welcoming to all, even if those partaking in it feel as though they are judged for doing so by those not in the community.

Two in five gamer parents play video games with children – and see it as a bonding experience

Gamers with children were more likely to have higher scores for mental health compared to those who are not parents (7.1 vs 6.5). When asked to elaborate on how parenting is incorporated into their gaming, two in five respondents (42%) said that they often play video games with their children and that gaming helps them bond with their children. Interestingly, gamers in the highest bracket for mental health were the least likely to play video games with their children, and the least likely to agree that it helps them bond with their children.

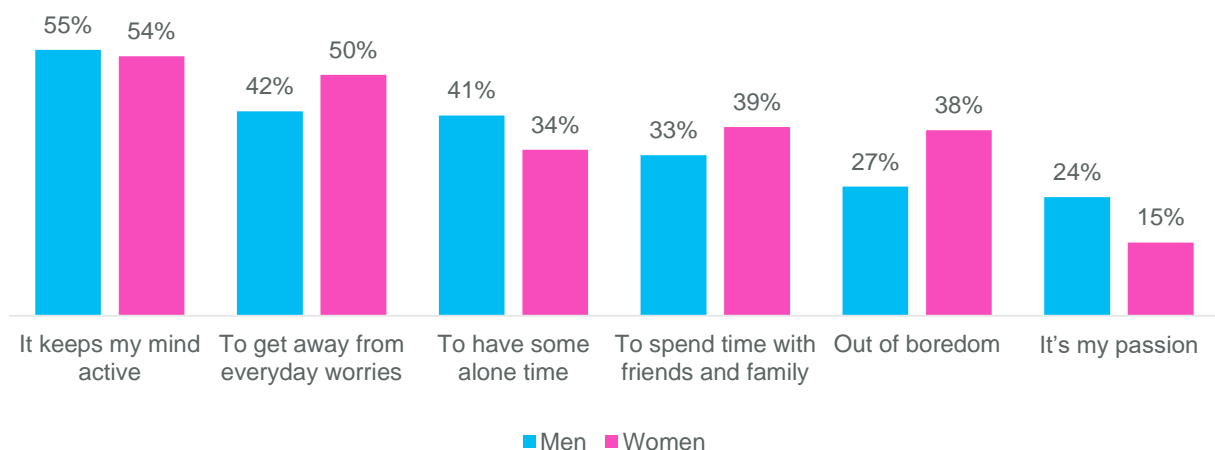### Parents who game with their children - by mental health score

	Plays video games with their children	Gaming helps to bond with their children	It improves understanding of the world their children live in	They watch video game streamers with their children
0-3	42%	43%	19%	13%
4-6	40%	42%	22%	15%
7-8	48%	44%	30%	18%
9-10	37%	38%	21%	21%

■ 0-3 ■ 4-6 ■ 7-8 ■ 9-10

More than half of gamers play video games to keep their minds active

When asked what gamers' reasons were for playing video games, the most common response was that it keeps their mind active (54%). The next most common reasons were to help them get away from everyday worries (45%), a way of having some alone time (38%), and a way of spending time with family and friends (36%). Whilst the most common reason for both men and women was to keep their minds active, women were more likely to play to get away from everyday worries (50% vs 42%), whereas men were more likely than women to play to have some alone time (41% vs 34%), or because it is their passion (24% vs 15%).

Amongst gamers with the highest scores for mental health, the main reason given was to keep their mind active (58%), while gamers with the lowest scores for mental health said they primarily played games to get away from everyday worries (61%).

Why men and women play video games

55% 54% | 42% 50% | 41% 34% | 33% 39% | 27% 38% | 24% 15%

It keeps my mind active | To get away from everyday worries | To have some alone time | To spend time with friends and family | Out of boredom | It's my passion

■ Men ■ Women

The majority of gamers view gaming as a source of stress relief and as an escape from reality

When asked how gaming makes them feel, the most common associated emotions were amusement (51%), happiness (48%), and comfort (37%). Female gamers were much more likely than male gamers to feel amusement from video games (57% vs 46%).

There is also an interesting pattern of how your emotions surrounding gaming change with age. Gamers between the age of 18 and 24 were more likely to feel anger, love, and fear, while older gamers were more likely to feel independence. Among respondents who said that gaming made them feel independent, a common explanation behind this was that in games they could "be whoever [they] wanted to be", or that they could "feel like [they] can escape". One respondent explained that they feel independent playing video games because they "feel safe getting lost in a good game and feel inspired to take on the world alone".

Among those who elaborated on why gaming improves their mental health, common themes included gaming as a form of escapism and being able to forget their problems, as well as a source of stress relief and happiness.

> *"It's stress-relieving. It lets you forget the problems in life for a moment while you are playing, like hitting the reset button on your brain once in a while to just give it a break."*
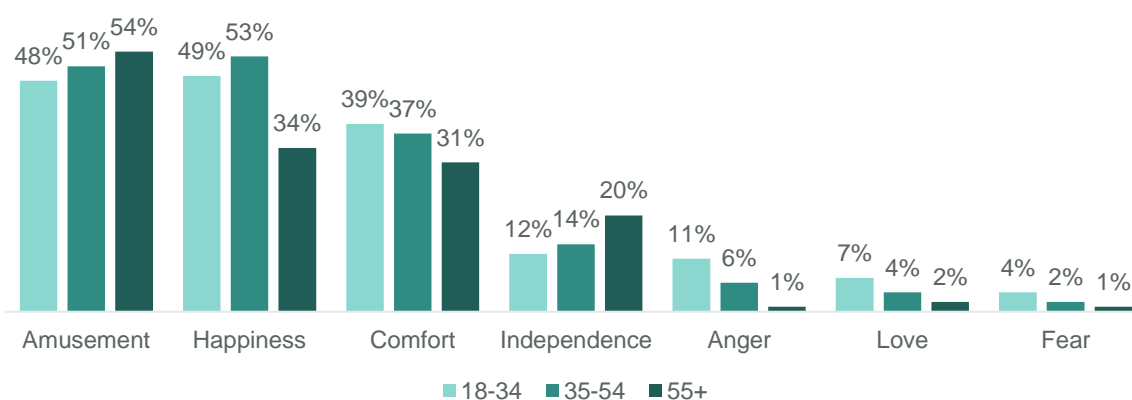
When gamers who believe that playing video games worsens their mental health were asked to comment on why they thought this was the case, responses were focussed around being unproductive or "lazy" and finding themselves spending their time gaming instead of being physically active or spending time with loved ones.

> *" I should be interacting with real people instead of wasting my life on computer games."*

The majority of gamers (54%) agree playing video games gives them a sense of enjoyment, which is roughly consistent across gamers of all levels of mental health.

Nearly half of gamers also agreed that gaming helps to reduce stress (48%) and is a way to escape the "real world" and distract themselves (47%). This view of gaming as a form of escapism is especially prominent among gamers who describe themselves as having a poor level of mental health. This was agreeable to over three in five gamers (61%) in the lowest bracket for mental health (0-3), falling to 51% in the 4-6 bracket, 47% in the 7-8 bracket, and dropping further to just 38% in the 9-10 bracket. This is likely because gamers with good mental health are less likely to feel that they need a form of escapism.

How gaming makes people feel

	Amusement	Happiness	Comfort	Independence	Anger	Love	Fear
18-34	48%	49%	39%	12%	11%	7%	4%
35-54	51%	53%	37%	14%	6%	4%	2%
55+	54%	34%	31%	20%	1%	2%	1%

Other gamers said that gaming often makes them feel sadness, although there was a wide variety of reasons behind this. Some sadness was directed at the pastime itself, with one respondent saying, "it can make me feel like my life is being played away".

Another rationale behind a source of sadness in gaming was when other players in the community exhibit toxic behaviour, or if an individual game is of bad quality. However, there were other forms of sadness experienced within gaming, as one respondent explains, "you can get attached to certain characters on an emotional level & with some games, you feel a connection & a sense of sadness when something bad happens to the character's storyline".

Summary

Overall, gaming has been shown to have an overwhelmingly positive effect on mental health. Three in five gamers say that gaming improves their mental health, with just 2% saying it worsens it. Despite young gamers scoring their mental health lower than older gamers, they were also much more likely to say that gaming improves their mental health. This may suggest that that gaming is more frequently used as a coping mechanism for young people to boost their mental wellbeing, whereas for older gamers it is seen as more of a means of passing the time or simply staying occupied.

On average, gamers with the best mental health will game for longer in a typical week than those with the poorest mental health and will spend more on games and additional content in a typical month. While this would suggest that more time spent gaming results in better mental wellbeing, it was also found that the younger you are when you start gaming, the more likely that your mental health is lower now. The average age at which people in the lowest bracket for mental health started gaming was 15 years old, compared to the highest bracket who started at the age of 23. However, it is possible that these gamers have found themselves struggling with their mental wellbeing, which is being experienced by increasingly younger demographics, meaning that they were likely to consider playing video games earlier in life, as a form of escapism, or simply to relax and "switch off".

The general perception of a typical 'gamer' often revolves around teenage boys gaming alone; however, this is often far from the truth. More than three in five gamers interviewed were parents, many of which often play video games with their children as a bonding activity, and to better understand the world their children live in. Interestingly, it was also found that gamer parents in the highest bracket for mental health were the least likely to play video games with their children, and the least likely to agree that it helps them bond.

It is the experience of gamers that the gaming community as a whole is overwhelmingly accepting of all who partake in it. However, despite the acknowledgement of the gaming community as accepting and beneficial to mental health, roughly one in five gamers feel judged for being a gamer, particularly when it comes to the non-gaming community.

About Opinium

OPINIUM is an award winning strategic insight agency built on the belief that in a world of uncertainty and complexity, success depends on the ability to stay on pulse of what people **think**, **feel** and **do**. Creative and inquisitive, we are passionate about empowering our clients to make the decisions that matter. We work with organisations to define and overcome strategic challenges – helping them to get to grips with the world in which their brands operate. We use the right approach and methodology to deliver robust insights, strategic counsel and targeted recommendations that generate change and positive outcomes.

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