

Burning Questions of Treating Addiction in Middle Europe – The German situation

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The World Health Organization has delayed time and time again on publishing any conclusive data on video game addiction (VGA). This could be because they have not yet acquired sufficient scientific data about VGA from the whole of the European Union (UN) to verify its significance in public health. In the United States, spending too much time playing video games was classified as an addiction by the American Psychiatric Association in 2013 (1). In the Far East, a type of mental disorder, termed “hikikomori,” was first described at the beginning of the century, where electronics effectively replace all social function. Specifically, it describes the phenomenon of teenagers and young adults substituting their interpersonal relationships with electronic devices and living in total social isolation (2). It is time for European decision makers to take a stand and announce that they will not wait any longer to emphasize this issue because VGA will officially be included in the international classification of diseases from 2022 (3).

Regarding many new psychological diagnoses, initially there was a pushback from the public toward the VGA diagnosis in early stages. However, as smart devices became more ingrained in our everyday life, the time spent on them has exponentially increased. Some experts believed that it was a growing problem when just PCs and video game consoles were the primary source; however, with the advent of smart devices, there seems to be no end to the number of games and apps available. Virtually everyone, child, adolescent, and adult, owns a smart device—even those from economically challenged countries. Additionally, outsiders have little to no influence on what others do on their smart device. Identifying where useful or relaxing activities end and harmful, socially crippling activities begin is not easy. American researchers have demonstrated that an astounding 99% of boys and 94% of girls, aged 2–17 years, regularly play video games. The numbers are also high for American adults, with 50% of men and 40% of women engaging in video game activity on a regular basis (4). A recent international daily news source reports that in the Far East, treatment camps for teenagers with electronic device addiction are being organized since 2007 (5). Studies in the EU show 5%–6% prevalence, but Austria and Germany are naturally at a greater risk owing to their technical and economic development (6). Interactive entertainment is a wildly successful international industry. In 2016, both China and North America topped the list of countries providing revenue to this burgeoning industry and Germany was the top country in the EU (7).

Behavioral addictions, such as VGA or gambling) and their financial factors have an economic significance. For instance, they can increase the number of absences from work, and this can impact the financial resources of the addict; this problem is not restricted to the United States; it is also noted in Austria and Germany (8). The ratio of German patients with VGA is 6% in pre-puberty and puberty (10–18 year olds) and 8% over the age of 18 (9). However, these data do not include those at risk in the sub-clinical stage. Additionally, a study with 12,000 participants showed that 70% of subjects admit to lying about the time spent on gaming, highlighting an issue of self-administered questionnaires and their potential of including underestimated data (10).

It is obvious that this phenomenon is a modern, globally spreading challenge of the 21st century that we have to face. It is clear that we need to take action; prevention, early treatment, and improvements in educating medical personnel regarding these novel mental health issues are needed. In 2008, 99% of German households had a mobile phone, 99% had a

computer, and 96% had access to the internet (11). It is clear that electronic media will most likely continue to play a huge part in our lives and those of future generations.

Lastly, the growth of cyberbullying (an online form of harassment) is an important factor worldwide. A recent study showed that 600,000 of 12.3 million German students were victims of cyberbullying (12). In Germany, mostly classmates are bullies; however, this stays hidden from the teachers and others as a great part of bullying happens through electronic devices and video games; thus, extra attention is needed when it comes to electronic media usage (13). Another study in Germany shows that victims of cyberbullying have high rates of suicide and can be virtual outcasts online and many of the individuals have negative experiences with online communities (14). It is cardinal because being at risk of cyberbullying has a connection to time spent video gaming: as the level of addiction to virtual reality increases the negative feedback becomes more important and has a greater influence to children's self-representation.

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