

INTRODUCTION

The internet is used to communicate, get information, and assist the user in everyday tasks¹. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many features of the internet have protected users from the negative effects of isolation and social distancing on their mental and physical health. For example, receiving daily text messages has been found to reduce pandemic-associated stress, anxiety, and depression rates². Additionally, videos of athletes or fitness influencers shared on platforms such as Facebook or YouTube were a popular way of maintaining physical health during periods of lockdown³. However, while many users benefit from the positive aspects of the internet and its features, some use them to an excessive extent. This can cause problems in the user's social life or lead to decreased performance at work or school. In some cases, the user might even neglect basic needs such as eating and self-care. Such immoderate use of the internet that affects the daily life of the user is known as Problematic Usage of the Internet (PUI)⁴.

Previous research suggests a link between PUI and other mental health problems, such as depression. Furthermore, some PUI behaviours resemble addictions in terms of developing cravings or impairing the user's control on their behaviour, for example online gambling and pornography viewing⁵. Other forms of PUI share characteristics with obsessive-compulsive related disorders. This includes repetitive e-mail checking, excessive streaming, digital hoarding and persistently searching for medical information online (cyberchondria)⁴.

Problematic Usage of the Internet is a relatively novel, yet increasingly important issue. Therefore, a virtual international festival was initiated by the COST Action "European Network for Problematic Usage of the Internet" to bring together experts and members of the public to explore their opinions and concerns towards PUI. A variety of topics such as online gaming and gambling, social media usage, and potential ways to prevent PUI were discussed to identify key issues that need further investigation.

OBJECTIVES

- Discuss the public's knowledge, understanding and concerns surrounding Problematic Usage of the Internet.
- Identify key issues, priorities and unresolved questions which are of particular interest to the general public.
- Explore options to prevent Problematic Usage of the Internet and support affected individuals.

METHODS

An online conference, including 369 members of the public, was conducted through the COST Action Network to understand the public's opinions and concerns towards Problematic Usage of The Internet (PUI). Furthermore, this conference was used to raise awareness within society about different types of PUI and how to protect themselves and others.

While experts and members of the public conducted discussions during the conference, the remaining attendees (the public) were able to use an online chat room to express their opinions and thoughts. The anonymised transcript of the conference was analysed using thematic analysis to detect key themes and sub-themes⁶.

RESULTS

Members of the public stressed beneficial effects of playing video games and using social media apps, such as making new friends with similar interests, maintaining existing relationships despite geographical boundaries, and sharing and acquiring knowledge. However, they were aware and concerned that spending too much time on the internet can interfere with the responsibilities of the daily life of the user and affect their social life and health.

Furthermore, members of the public were aware that the entertainment industry benefits from and contributes to problematic usage of the internet with addictive features that make it difficult to stop using the internet and easy to spend money and time without realising.

Members of the public suggested that users', parents' and teachers' understanding of the games and apps needs to be improved to distinguish problematic behaviour from a leisure activity. Additionally, the entertainment industry needs to be involved in the prevention of PUI by curbing the development of games and apps with harmful features. Further research is needed to explore less known types of PUI and which factors make people, particularly youth, vulnerable to PUI.

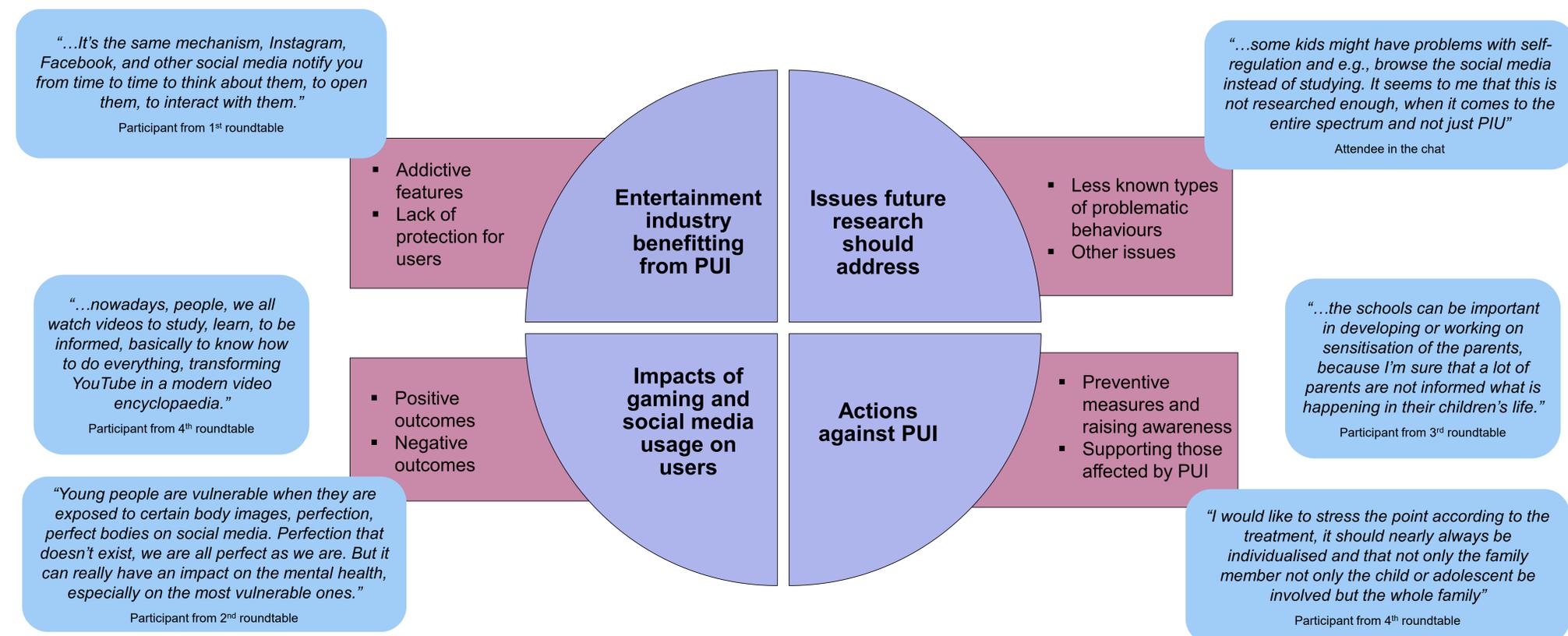


Figure 1: Themes and their sub-themes, including quotes from the transcription of the event.

CONCLUSIONS

Public opinions towards Problematic Usage of the Internet (PUI) showed an increased concern for negative consequences of the internet, specifically different types of PUI such as excessive online gaming and social media use. Furthermore, future research into such issues could help raising more awareness but will also benefit developing treatments to protect internet users and others within society. This includes those that are most vulnerable, e.g. adolescents and children.

There was acknowledgement of the positive outcomes of the internet such as enrichment of social life throughout COVID-19 lockdowns and parents bonding with their children through gaming, but the negative aspects outweighed the positive consequences.

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