Adolescents talk about physical activity, exergaming and virtual reality: a qualitative intervention development study

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Title: Younger adolescents’ perceptions and attitudes about physical activity, exergaming and virtual reality: a qualitative intervention development study

In preparation for Journal of Medical Internet Research

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ABSTRACT

Background. Novel strategies to promote physical activity (PA) in adolescence are required. The vEngage study aims to test whether a virtual reality (VR) exergaming intervention can engage younger adolescents (13-15 year old) with physical activity.

Objective: This study aimed to gather adolescents’ views of using VR to encourage PA and identify the key features they would like to see in a VR exergaming intervention via interviews.

Methods: Participants were recruited through two schools in London, UK. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with adolescents about their views on PA and what might work to increase PA, technology, knowledge and experience of VR, and desired features in a VR exergaming intervention. Data were analysed using Framework Analysis.

Results: 31 13-15 year olds (58% female, 62% from non-white ethnicities) participated in this interview study. The vast majority had no awareness of government PA recommendations, but felt they should be more thoroughly informed. All participants were positive about the use of VR in PA promotion. Rewards, increasing challenges and a social/multiplayer aspect were identified by participants as crucial aspects to include in a VR exercise game. Barriers were related to cost of high-end systems. Being able to exercise at home was very appealing. VR exergaming was viewed as a way to overcome multiple perceived social and cultural barriers to PA, particularly for girls.

Conclusions: Key elements that should be incorporated into a VR for health intervention were identified and described. These also included the use of rewards, novelty and enjoyment in immersive game play, multi-player options, real-world elements, as well as continual updates and new challenge levels. The use of VR to promote PA in adolescents is promising, but some barriers were raised.

Keywords: video games, gaming, exergaming, virtual reality, behavioural research, interactive games, physical activity, sedentary behaviour, health psychology, adolescents

INTRODUCTION

The health benefits of performing sufficient physical activity (PA) are well established and include reduced risk of non-communicable diseases, reduced risk of premature mortality and better mental health [1-3]. There is a dose-response relationship between PA and health with a 20-30% reduction in chronic illness and premature death for those that meet PA guidelines [1-3]. Adolescence (13-17 years) is a key time to intervene, since long-term PA likely confers maximum protective benefit [3]. Those who have high levels of PA in adolescence are more likely to be active in adulthood and lead healthier lifestyles [4, 5]. There are psychological and social benefits of increased PA participation in adolescence [6]. However, less than 15% of boys and 10% of girls are achieving the UK government recommendation for adolescents of at least 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA) per day [7]. Levels of adolescent PA are similarly low in other developed countries [8]. Without intervention, activity levels decline by around 7% per year throughout adolescence, particularly in girls [9]. Strategies to increase PA in this group are urgently required.

It remains unclear what works best to change adolescent PA behaviour [10, 11]. A recent review of digital PA interventions for adolescents recommended education, goal-setting and feedback, self-monitoring, and parental support should be incorporated [12].

Despite recommendation that conducting formative work with target users is important to intervention development [13, 14], very few PA interventions have involved adolescents in development. Prior to developing a school-based intervention, Corder et al. (2015) conducted focus groups with 16-18 year olds and identified choice, novelty, mentorship, rewards, competition and flexibility as key aspects that young people would like to be included [15]. Although co-design or participatory-design (PD) of digital health interventions is not necessarily recommended (because no higher effectiveness was found for games developed with PD), user input is beneficial [16]. This is particularly applicable when considering digital PA interventions [16].

Digital interventions are likely to be particularly appealing for adolescents; more than 90% play video games for at least an hour per day [17]. A variety of exergames are available and many have been commercial successes: Wii Fit sold over 22 million copies worldwide in its first four years [18]. More recently, an augmented reality exergame run on smartphones, Pokémon Go, has seen over 800 million downloads [19]. A study conducted in Hong Kong (participants n=210; aged 16-64 years) found that the use of Pokémon GO was associated with a short-term increase in the players' daily walking and running distances, particularly in those who were less physically active [20].

Levels of PA and physiological response when exergaming are comparable to field-based PA, and significantly increased when compared to standard gaming [21]. Exergames also enhanced enjoyment, self-efficacy and motivation for PA [21]. Exergaming interventions can lead to weight loss in overweight adolescents [22, 23]. However, past research has generally involved small studies and earlier generation exergames.

Virtual reality (VR) has potential to enhance exergaming experience through immersion and presence contributing to the feeling of absorption, flow and fun [23, 24]. New generation VR technologies deliver increasingly realistic experiences, at decreasing cost. Some small laboratory-based studies in adults have found that immersive VR exergames resulted in the same or higher intensity of exercise as standard exercise conditions, but with higher ratings of enjoyment and interest [25, 26]. One also found that perceived exertion was lower and self-efficacy higher during VR cycling compared to standard stationary cycling [27]. An exploratory pre-post study including 9 children and adolescents suggested that an immersive VR game enhanced motivation to be active [28]. Immersion is likely to distract participants from exertion and possibly negative thinking during PA.

We hypothesise that a VR exergaming intervention could increase PA in adolescents. The aim of this study was to interview adolescents about their recommendations for a PA intervention, use of technology, gaming, and interest in VR for PA.

METHODS

Participants

Participants were recruited from two secondary schools in London, UK between January and July 2017. To be eligible participants had to be between 13 and 17 years of age. Given the need to recruit a high number of girls, one was a girl’s school while the other was mixed. Both schools were in areas of high ethnic and socio-economic diversity. Each school sent information packs home with students from two classes. In total approximately 65 packs were sent to the interested students. Interested students each returned and completed parental consent and child assent form. We aimed to interview approximately 30 young people based on guidance provided by Fugard and Potts (2015) [29] and we interviewed all students who returned completed consent forms. Ethical approval was provided by UCL Ethics committee (Project ID 10213/001) with all participants and their parents/caregivers providing informed written consent.

Qualitative interviews

We used a semi-structured interview. We asked: “What is the amount of time you spend being active as well as inactive per week in hours?”, “What is your average sitting time per day?”, “Do you know about the recommended guidelines for PA in your age group?”, What might encourage people of your age to become more physically active?”, “What is your current technology use- what do you use and how long per day or week?”, “What interest you about a particular game?”, “Do you know much about VR?”, “What are your experiences and/or opinion on using VR?”, “Do you use any other health-related technology?”, “How would you help increase PA through use of technology and VR?”. Finally, participants were asked about key features desired in a VR exergame. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in schools June-July 2017 by two researchers (EY and LV) and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

Framework analysis was used which is a flexible and systematic approach for analysis of semi-structured interviews [30]. Two researchers (EY and LV) independently analysed three transcripts, each developing an initial set of codes. The participant’s responses within the interviews were assigned codes and coded into a framework matrix, along with relevant quotes to make it visually straightforward and easy to track. Then two additional researchers (NF and AF) independently interpreted the data to identify common themes among responses. Theme prevalence was not determined quantitatively but instead grouped together into main themes described below. All researchers then met and discussed their interpretations and codes, compared them and made minor adjustments to create the final framework. The final interpretations are shared below, with illustrative quotes (followed by participant’s gender and age).

RESULTS

31 participants aged 13-15 years were interviewed. 18 (58%) were girls. Participants identified their ethnicity as White British (n=7), White other (n=5), multiple ethnicities (n=5), Asian (n=5), Indian (n=2), Bangladeshi (n=2), Pakistani (n=1), Caribbean (n=1), African (n=1), and Black (n=2). Interviews lasted 40-70 minutes (mean = 55 minutes). The themes were apparent and straightforward with no disagreements between the researchers. The main themes and their sub-themes are described in Table 1.

[Table 1 about here]

Table 1: Identified main themes and subthemes

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Main theme | Sub themes |
| PA and sedentary time | * Adolescents were not aware of the PA guidelines for people of their age or of all health benefits associated with PA or consequences of not performing sufficient PA |
| General technology use | * Smartphones were the technology most used by adolescents for recreation * Gaming was popular and exergames were a positive past experience but some games were no longer played (e.g. Just Dance or Pokémon Go). |
| Exergaming | * Exergames were seen as a fun, motivating and encouraging movement covertly * There was a strong appeal of exercising at home and overcoming cultural or social barriers, particularly for girls * Exergames were not seen as a replacement if already involved in sport |
| Experience of VR | * Positivity towards VR but limited experience * Whole body movement, presence and novelty appealing in VR * Barriers with VR included bulky headsets, addiction and price * Perceived parental concern about using VR for PA * Simple public health messages about screen time preferred |

**Physical activity and sedentary time**

***Adolescents were not aware of the recommended guidelines for PA, and of all health benefits and risk associated with PA***

Awareness of PA recommendations for adolescents was very low with 29/31 (94%) participants guessing the recommended guidelines. The intensity or resistance exercises were not mentioned. Participants felt strongly that people of their age *should* be informed of PA recommendations and the links between PA and health. Girls in particular reported this knowledge as a key motivation for being active, and felt this would increase activity in their peers:

*Give [young people] some of the risks that could happen in the future if you do not keep fit and not healthy (F, 14)*

When probed about how they might like this information delivered, the consensus was visually:

*Maybe videos on how to do it because I don't think people [my age] really take in facts (F, 14)*

But tangible rewards were also important motivators for PA:

*So there’s something to work for instead of just saying do it and you’ll be more active. You have to give them something at the end. Anything people my age will find fun. Probably mostly money (M, 15)*

**General technology use**

***Mainly smartphones, mainly for recreation***

All participants used technology up to 6 hours per day (e.g. smartphone, computer), mainly for recreational uses (e.g. gaming, social media), but also practical (e.g. homework). Boys used technology mainly for gaming, whereas girls used technology for watching videos, listening to music and socialising (reported logging into social media between 30-55 times per day). There were positive and negative perceptions of technology related to PA:

*I saw this report, kids nowadays are more overweight compared to before, and that's probably because we're always just sitting down on our phones, tablets and stuff (F, 14)*

*[use technology to encourage people to go outside] because obviously with technology people don’t go outside as much as they used to. So, I don’t know, you just need to get people out. Because the phone is so interesting (F, 15)*

***Gaming was popular and exergames were a positive past experience***

The majority of participants engaged in some type of gaming. Games played were diverse, but common features were continual challenges/levels of difficulty, rewards, competition, social aspects and story modes. Five participants specifically mentioned games that were simple, slow to build and ongoing as leading to playing for a number of years. Exergames were often mentioned; all participants had played them and they were generally described positively, but always in the past tense such as Just Dance (Nintendo Wii):

*I really liked that [Just Dance] but I don’t know, it just died out for some reason, I don’t know why. We had the dancing thing, to step on it, all that kind of stuff, yes. Yes, that was sick (F, 15)*

***Pokémon, gone***

Many participants described Pokémon Go (released July 2016) as something they had tried but no longer used, with some stating technical reasons as off-putting:

*It was really fun in the beginning, but then the servers were overwhelmed with too many people playing (M, 14)*

*[I played it] only once then found out it used up most of my data (F, 13)*

Many mentioned safety concerns preventing use (online security, road safety and getting lost), often reflecting on negative stories they had heard in the media. Others felt it had increased their PA, but still referred to it is as a previous experience:

*Well, at the time where it was big it was really cool because it actually made me go outside and look around and stuff. It did made me walk a lot more (F, 14)*

***Exergames: fun, motivating and encouraging movement covertly***

Exergames were viewed as appealing because they were fun, motivating and good ways to encourage incidental PA:

*I think it’s good because some people may think that, ‘I don't want to do this sport,’ but actually, they are, without realising (F, 15)*

*It’s way better because you’re working out but you’re having fun and you don't realise you’re working out (F, 14).*

Social benefits and competition when exergaming were also described as appealing:

*It’s nice because other people can actually watch it at the same time, it’s not just one person involved in it. So, it makes it fun and motivates the person to even try harder, so it creates competition as well (F, 15)*

***Strong appeal of exercising at home and overcoming cultural or social barriers***

Participants particularly liked the idea that exergames allowed activity in the home:

*Getting fit isn’t always enjoyable and it could also make you confident to do it[…] You can do it in the privacy of your own home (F, 14)*

*Virtual reality….in your own home because people like going running but sometimes people can’t… my parents don’t always let me out, so doing it in my own home... Yes. And also for Muslims, you have to cover your body, so it’s hard to go running while covering your body, whereas at home it’s very easy (F, 14)*

***Exergames not a replacement if already involved in sport***

However, those who were already involved in sport tended to think exergames should not be a replacement:

*I think they're useful, but I think it's better for people to actually do sport (F, 14)*

**Experience of virtual reality**

***Positivity towards VR but limited experience***

Nearly all participants were extremely positive about the idea of using or trying VR. More than half had tried some kind of VR (usually smartphone-based headsets). There were no apparent gender differences in wanting to try, having tried or liking VR. Six participants described having tried a one-off fully immersive experience in an external venue, and one had high-end equipment at home. Very few had any kind of VR equipment at home, and if they did it was usually referred to as being owned by a parent or older sibling. Participants wanted to own it, but felt the price was prohibitive:

*I've used it once when I went to a big shopping centre. I thought it was quite cool but then I looked at the price: thousands (M, 15)*

***Whole body movement, presence and novelty appealing in VR***

Those who had tried VR were positive about it, describing it frequently as ‘cool’, ‘exciting’, ‘fun’ and highlighting the whole body movement, presence and novelty as appealing. Only one participant thought it was “pointless” (F, 14).

*You’re actually in the game, you can feel you're moving with it, it’s not just your fingers and your eyes, it’s your whole body is involved so it’s more involved (F, 15)*

*I think it’s absolutely cool. For [named a standard games console], you sit in front of a TV, but now when it actually feels like you're there, it makes it way more interesting and fun (F, 15)*

Other benefits were raised like widening understanding/experience, or creating safe spaces to try new activities:

*It is like being in real life, but safer, if you know what I mean. Like if you do something serious, it is not real. So, in a way, it is safer to learn things (F, 14)*

***Barriers with VR included bulky headsets, addiction and price***

There were also technical barriers including the size and weight of the headset. Barriers were usually countered with belief that these issues would be addressed as the technology advanced:

*I think it’s a great concept, but I think it has a way to go. It’s not really developed as much yet… Because right now you have to wear like a massive headset that’s really heavy and you have to move around and it’s not as receptive of the little controls (M, 15, owned VR)*

As with other types of gaming, a prominent concern was fear of addiction:

*Just as they're addicted to PlayStation and all of that, they would be addicted to this game (F,14)*

Some participants described physical symptoms of use, like nausea, dizziness, headaches and fear of bumping into others. However, nearly all believed that VR was going to be extremely popular in future:

*I think virtual reality is the future of technology and it will be more involved in everyday life (F, 14)*

***Perceived parental concern about using VR for PA***

Although participants felt positively about a VR exergaming intervention, there was a perception that parents might not be supportive:

*Some parents would be really opposing to it. Just because I know some of my friends, their parents don't like them being on electronics at all (F, 14)*

*Parents wouldn’t buy that for their children because obviously price (M, 13)*

***Simple messages about screen-time preferred***

When asked about how to counteract potentially conflicting public health messages around reducing screen time versus introducing an exergaming intervention, the consensus among participants was that providing information would be sufficient. Many said things like “just tell us” (that screen time needs to be limited) (M, 15) or suggested that it was sitting rather than screen time that was the issue:

*I would say if it's in front of a screen and it does encourage physical activity, it doesn't really matter that it's in front of a screen, as long as you're engaging (14M)*

In addition, this approach could appeal to gamers, who were perceived to be sedentary:

*They’re [gamers] probably more interested in video games, so the virtual reality might encourage them more [to be physically active] (F, 14)*

This view was supported by participants who identified as gamers:

*Because it’s a game. Immediately I hear game, personally, I’m into it already and think it will be more exciting (M, 13)*

Additional features participants reported they would like to see in a VR exergame are shown in Table 2 with supporting quotes

[Table 2 about here]

Table 2. Desired features of VR PA intervention

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Features to incorporate | Quote(s) |
| Include smartphone-based elements | An app [for a PA intervention], because more people have a phone than virtual reality (F, 14) |
| Use a popular accessible activity like dancing / whole body movement | I would probably start with just people getting into dancing, because everyone quite likes that and enjoys that (F, 14)  Something with dancing would be fun, because obviously you have to move your whole body instead of just your arms or your legs (F, 13) |
| Regular updates to prevent boredom | Update it every month so there’s something new every month so it doesn’t get boring (M, 10) |
| ‘Break’ tasks to prevent addiction | It could give you tasks on there. It could be like, ‘Go outside and find the tallest tree,’ or something. It could encourage you to go outside (F, 13) |
| Rewards and prizes | I would design something like... in the game, if you played the [sport] in real life you’d get a massive prize (F, 13) |
| Competition | Something competitive. People are really competitive in school, so something they can really get into and play as a team (M, 15) |
| Multiplayer option | I would probably try and get all my friends involved first, because you don’t really want to do it alone (F, 14)  You need it to be with more people. You don't want to be alone (F, 13) |
| Real world elements | I think it’s a good starting point, definitely for people who can’t go for a run or something. […] But I would still say going outside is always better (F, 14) |
| VR gaming clubs or meet-ups | There’d be a club where you bring your VR, and it would be at an affordable price, where you can bring it and do it with people (F, 13) |

DISCUSSION

Our findings suggest strong support for the potential of VR to promote PA in adolescents. However, there were number of factors relevant to researchers developing any digital PA intervention discussed below.

Participants raised the importance of parental support, in line previous research on digital health interventions for adolescents and studies exploring determinants of adolescent PA [12]. We are separately interviewing parents and teachers about their perceptions of VR exergaming and PA.

Awareness of any government guidelines around PA was low, but desire for knowledge high. Our participants (particularly girls) felt that an educational component would be desirable and presenting information about benefits of PA in a visual format was recommended. This is in line with our prior work suggesting less than 20% of parents knew the government PA guidelines for their children [31]. A review of 17 adolescent PA trials found that education alone did not result in behaviour change. However, multicomponent studies incorporating education found strong effects on PA [10]. Multicomponent studies can be labour intensive (e.g. requiring alteration of environmental infrastructure), so their potential for wide-scale implementation is questionable. The present ‘digital revolution’ and the ubiquity and frequency of technology use by adolescents, highlighted in our study, has greatly increased potential reach.

Rewards were suggested as being important to encourage PA engagement (particularly in boys, but also for some girls), in line with previous studies [15, 32]. The rewards suggested were always material (usually financial). Financial rewards are effective in motivating PA in adults [33] and a trial using incentives and gamification to promote PA in families had positive effects [34]. In line with theories like Self Determination Theory, fun and enjoyment are intrinsically motivating and key motivators for gaming [35] and most adolescents engage in gaming without material reward. Fun was consistently reported as a reason for engaging in exergaming by our participants.

Our data suggests that a home-based PA intervention is appealing to our target population. Most previous interventions targeting adolescent PA have been at least partially delivered in schools, but a more recent cohort found 70-81% boys and girls said they would choose to be active at home or in a gym/leisure centre, as opposed to in school or outdoors [32]. Particularly for the girls in our study, home-based PA had potential to overcome cultural and social barriers. In addition, they were viewed as appealing because they harnessed behaviours (like gaming) that were already being performed. Many suggested including additional intervention elements like community-based meet-ups or groups to enhance the social elements and foster competition. In the aforementioned quantitative survey, adolescents also reported they would choose to be active with their friends (over, e.g., family) [32]. However, some girls in our study felt the ability to exercise privately in their own home was appealing, so an optional social element would be best.

At the time of writing, the cost of the high-end VR equipment required to create a fully-immersive exergaming experience was prohibitive (around £2000 for the equipment and necessary computer), and this was recognised as a barrier by our participants. However, participants expect costs to fall. This is likely and ownership will increase [36]. We are aware that the novelty, reported as important in our study and others [15], will therefore also diminish. This strengthens the argument for developing a digital intervention within a theory-based framework, so the active ingredients can be replicated using other platforms in future. This also emphasises the importance of making digital interventions intrinsically fun and enjoyable so that they are not reliant only on novelty. Indeed, in our study the participants who were most positive were those who had tried VR.

Our study had specific and narrow aims and around 60 minutes worth of discussion per participant. Interviews were conducted by researchers experienced in working with adolescents. Therefore we believed our sample size held sufficient information power to address the research questions [37].

Our participants desired continual updates and additional challenge levels and these are key elements of gaming that can map to specific behaviour change techniques in a digital health intervention [38]. Embedding the digital platform at the centre of a multicomponent intervention, and working with professional developers who understand how to keep a game engaging and challenging, is therefore crucial for success.

Limitations

The results were obtained from a reasonable number of participants in comparison to other studies using thematic analysis [29], with a diverse range of ethnicities and more girls than boys. It is possible that those who were more interested in health agreed to participate. However, since less than 10-15% of the UK adolescent population meet PA recommendations, it is very unlikely that we only recruited active participants. The focus on technology as well as PA was also likely to attract a mix of interests. All participants were between 13 and 15, and results may have been different if opinions were from older adolescents. It is likely that our intervention will target younger adolescents given the value in intervening early (VR gaming is not recommended in those younger than 13 years). We will also continue to work with our public engagement groups and adolescent steering committee to gather information from adolescents from diverse backgrounds.

Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that an intervention to promote PA in adolescents that has VR exergaming at the core is promising. However, it is likely that additional elements will be required to produce sustained behaviour change including educational elements, tangible rewards, prompts to encourage breaks, and parental support.

Acknowledgements

The vEngage study (https://vengagestudy.com/) was funded by the Medical Research Council (Grant number MR/R015430/1). We are extremely grateful to all participating schools, young people and their families for their support. We would also like to thank our adolescent steering committee who have helped shape the original idea for the study.

Conflicts of Interest

This research is sponsored by MRC industry partnership grant and leads to development of a VR game licensed by Six to Start. There is no legal, financial or commercial conflict with our industry partner company Six to Start.

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Abbreviations

Moderate-to-vigorous physical activity: MVPA

Participatory design: PD

Physical activity: PA

Virtual reality: VR