

# research snapshot

summarize | mobilize



## Social casino games as a form of gamble-play

### What this research is about

Social casino games are free-to-play games that mimic gambling activities. They are available on social media platforms such as Facebook. In social casino games, players risk virtual credits rather than real money. The use of virtual credits in social casino games makes them a video game rather than gambling. Also, players do not receive a payout for winning but are rewarded with new in-game experiences.

Social casino games are extremely popular and worth billions of dollars. Social casino games are a mixture of three different industries. The industries include social media platforms, casino gambling, and the game industry. Social casino games casualize risk and normalize uncertainty. They are also a form of “gamble-play” but do so within a social media platform. In these games, the costs to play in terms of money and time are lower. Hence, they offer an experience in which taking risk is fun and entertaining.

In this study, the researchers used the app walkthrough method to show how social casino games are consumed or used. They also showed how social casino games incorporate gambling industry strategies into a mobile game format.

### What the researchers did

The researchers used three popular apps to demonstrate how social casino games casualize risk. The three apps were *Slotomania*, *DoubleDown Casino*, and *Zynga Poker*. They used these three examples to show how social casino game are consumed, their environment of expected use, and the app registration and entry. The researchers also showed how these games are designed to introduce interruptibility, informality, and competitive play.

### What you need to know

Social casino games are free-to-play games that mimic gambling activities. Social casino games mix three industries: social media platforms, casino gambling, and the game industry. In this study, the researchers showed how social casino apps are an example of casualizing risk and normalizing uncertainty. They did so by using the “app walkthrough method” with three popular social casino gaming apps: *Slotomania*, *DoubleDown Casino*, and *Zynga Poker*. Using these three examples, the researchers showed how social casino games use game progression and reward mechanisms instead of monetary payouts. They also showed how social casino games incorporate social media mechanics into their games. Overall, social casino games are used as an example to show how risk and chance-based mechanics are becoming more incorporated in our daily lives.

Interruptibility and informality allow people to play in short periods of time whenever they are free. In this way, game play is built into players’ daily lives.

### What the researchers found

*Slotomania* is the most popular social casino game and it is a slot machine game. *DoubleDown Casino* allows players to play not only slot machine-like games but other casino games such as roulette. *Zynga Poker* is a pure poker simulation game.

*Slotomania* looks and feels like a physical slot machine. *Slotomania* is promoted as an activity of leisure and emphasizes “me time”. *Slotomania* also emphasizes exotic adventure themes in its games.

Zynga Poker is much more limited in terms of games than Slotomania. In Zynga Poker, the focus is on the speed of play in which players can get in and out of poker tables quickly. DoubleDown Casino tries to mimic the full casino experience in its games. Its broad scope and branding point directly to its connection with the casino industry.

It is easy to register and sign up for all three apps. Although the games are meant to be for people aged 21 years and over, there is no age verification. All apps highly encourage people to link their Facebook accounts but it is not required to play. Not linking with Facebook misses out on certain features of the apps. Zynga Poker and DoubleDown Casino are more aggressive in encouraging players to link their social media accounts with the apps. Linking a player's Facebook account with the apps serves two purposes. First, it helps with player engagement and retention. Second, it helps network effects to kick in and the apps increase in value for players when others join.

Physical electronic gambling machines are designed to keep players from playing as long as possible. But social casino games use different strategies. First, the apps are designed to interrupt play. Slotomania stops play frequently and asks players to share their winnings on Facebook. When starting the apps, players must navigate multiple screens promoting new deals and events to be able to play the game. In social casino games, everyone is treated as a winner and is rewarded based on their play. For example, the more frequently a player plays on the apps, the more rewards they will unlock. Social casino games also take advantage of mobile phone technology to send notifications to players. This is done to encourage players to sign in to the apps.

Each app offers loyalty programs, which is similar to the "comping" strategy in physical casinos. Comping is when casinos provide players who spend heavily with rewards. In social casino games, the app's loyalty program offers VIP experiences. These experiences are unlocked based on how much a person plays. Most social casino games have reward mechanisms instead of monetary payouts. These rewards include unlocking new gaming experiences. They could also

include a ranking system where players progress to higher levels.

Exiting any of the social casino gaming app is easy. Players can delete the app if they want to leave forever. Social casino gaming operators also have the right to delete a player's account. A player's account may be deleted if they have not played for a certain amount of time. It could also be deleted if they are caught cheating.

### How you can use this research

This research can be used to better understand how risk and chance-based mechanics are being increasingly incorporated in our day-to-day lives.

### About the researchers

**Alexander Ross** and **David Nieborg** are affiliated with the University of Toronto in Toronto, Canada. For more information about this study, please contact David Nieborg at [david.nieborg@utoronto.ca](mailto:david.nieborg@utoronto.ca).

### Citation

Ross, A., & Nieborg, D. (2021). Spinning is winning: Social casino apps and the platformization of gamble-play. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 21(1), 84-101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540521993931>

### Study funding

No funding was received for this study.

---

### About Gambling Research Exchange (GREO)

Gambling Research Exchange (GREO) has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. GREO is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization that aims to eliminate harm from gambling. Our goal is to support evidence-informed decision making in safer gambling policies, standards, and practices. The work we do is intended for researchers, policy makers, gambling regulators and operators, and treatment and prevention service providers.

Learn more about GREO by visiting [greo.ca](http://greo.ca) or emailing [info@greo.ca](mailto:info@greo.ca).

