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The bad, ugly, and potentially good sides of social casino gaming

What this research is about

Social casino games are casino-themed games, like poker. They are widely available on social media platforms such as Facebook. Social casino games are free to play but offer micro-transactions that allow gamers to purchase additional credits to continue play. Some gambling researchers and policy-makers are concerned that social casino gaming may lead to problem gambling behaviours. Other researchers believe that social casino gaming may serve as an alternative to actual gambling. Thus, they suggest that social casino gaming may be able to reduce gambling behaviours and related harms. The current article reviews past research on the link between social casino gaming and gambling. It provides a discussion of the consequences (good and bad) of social casino gaming. It also proposes a path model of social casino gaming to describe the different effects it may have on gambling behaviour.

What the researchers did

The researchers reviewed theory and past studies about the relationship between social casino gaming and gambling. They categorized the potential effects of social casino gaming on gambling into: (1) the bad (social casino gaming leading to gambling); (2) the ugly (social casino gaming leading to disordered gambling); and (3) the potentially good (social casino gaming helping to reduce gambling). The researchers suggested a path model of social casino gaming's impact on gambling behaviour.

What the researchers found

Several studies have shown that social casino gaming can lead to gambling behaviour (i.e., the bad). Social casino games provide exposure to gambling via in-

What you need to know

This article is a review of the consequences of social casino gaming. It discusses the bad (migration to gambling) and ugly (increased rate of problem gambling) sides of social casino gaming. But it also suggests that social casino gaming can have good effects. The researchers have no doubt that some people will migrate from social casino gaming to gambling and a small portion of those people may develop gambling problems. However, they argue that the path depends on a person's exposure to social casino games and motivations to engage in them. For disordered gamblers who want to reduce their gambling, social casino games may act as a replacement to help them reduce their cravings to gamble.

game ads for online and land-based casinos. These ads contain positive messages about gambling, such as it is a way to win money. Also, social casino games share similar structural features (e.g., sounds) with casino gambling games. These similarities make it more difficult for gamers to tell the difference between social casino games and gambling games. In addition, social casino games are designed to have higher odds of winning (i.e., their outcomes are not random). This may lead gamers to believe that they are skilled or lucky at the game. Thus, they may false believe that they will experience similar positive outcomes when gambling with real money. Finally, social casino gamers who make micro-transactions are more willing to share their credit card information with gaming operators, and probably gambling operators. They may also attempt to win real money after spending money on a game.

Some studies suggest that social casino gaming may lead to the development of disordered gambling (i.e., the ugly). Many people who play social casino games also play gambling games and vice versa. Also, social casino gamers who make micro-transactions have similar traits to disordered gamblers. For instance, they are impulsive and sensitive to rewards. Finally, social casino gaming can have negative impact on real-world functioning. This is also seen among disordered gamblers.

Despite their bad and ugly effects, social casino gaming may help some people reduce their desire to gamble (i.e., the potentially good). Exposure to gambling games through social casino gaming may reduce gambling's appeal. Gamers may be able to better control themselves once they begin to gamble with real money. Also, past research found that disordered gamblers who reported playing social casino games to reduce cravings to gamble had an overall decrease in gambling.

The researchers suggested a path model of social casino gaming's impact on gambling. The model starts with a person's exposure to social casino games and leads to one of three ends: (1) increased gambling behaviour; (2) decreased gambling behaviour; or (3) no impact on gambling behaviour. A person's motivation to play social casino games is the determining factor of how social casino gaming impacts gambling behaviour. Motivations that can lead to increased gambling are playing to build gambling skills, to make social connections, or to occupy time. Motivations that do not have an impact are playing to feel good and for excitement, or to cope or escape negative life situations. Motivations that can decrease gambling include playing to reduce the urge to gamble for real.

How you can use this research

Policy-makers should take a proactive stance towards regulating social casino games to prevent their potential harm. For instance, they should require pauses in social casino games that allow for educational messages about the odds of winning in real-world gambling. They should ban the purchase of virtual credits (i.e., micro-transactions). Treatment

providers may suggest playing social casino games as a replacement activity to problem gamblers who are actively seeking to reduce their gambling. Future research should explore factors that influence the link between social casino gaming and gambling.

About the researchers

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Keywords

Social casino games, gambling, micro-transactions, migration, disordered gambling, treatment, benefits

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