

research snapshot

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Adolescents' lived experiences of simulated gambling while growing up

What this research is about

Simulated gambling games are digital games that include elements of gambling. They present risk, chance, and reward, but they do not offer real monetary prizes. Youths usually engage in loot boxes, games with mini gambling components, and social casino games. Youths who engage in these types of simulated gambling have increased chances of developing disordered gaming and gambling. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of simulated gambling as youths grow up. This includes their behavioural trajectories and how simulated gambling relates to gaming and gambling activities.

What the researchers did

Participants between the ages of 12 to 17 years old living in New South Wales, Australia, were interviewed. About 60.6% of participants lived in metropolitan areas, while 39.4% lived in regional areas. Participants took the DSM-IV-MR-J, which was used to classify them into non-problem, at-risk, or problem gambling categories.

The researchers conducted 47 online interviews. The interviews aimed to understand the participants' experiences of simulated and monetary gambling as they grew up. This included exposure to, attitudes towards, and participation in simulated gambling, as well as motivations and impacts. Five participants along with another 42 adolescents completed 5 or more days of posting on three online communities. They were asked to spend about one hour per day answering questions and discussing the same topics as the interviews. Of the 89 participants, 34 experienced at-risk/problem gambling, 41 were in the non-problem gambling group, and 14 did not gamble.

What you need to know

This research explored the lived experiences of simulated gambling as youths grow up, and how simulated gambling relates to gaming and gambling activities over time. The researchers interviewed youths aged 12 to 17 years old. They also invited youths to complete online postings on the same topics as the interviews. The researchers found that as youths grow up, they engage more in simulated gambling. Youth's motivations also expand, and simulated gambling becomes normalized as part of game play in childhood.

What the researchers found

The researchers highlighted five main themes from the interviews and postings.

Simulated gambling is a normal part of gaming during childhood. Most participants remembered playing video games throughout childhood. Childhood exposure to simulated gambling involved loot boxes, mini gambling games, and in-game advertising. Participants mentioned not viewing simulated gambling as a gambling-like activity. Instead, they accepted it as a normal part of game play. Most participants had little parental guidance related to simulated gambling activities as gambling activities. It was only when reflecting on their childhood that some participants realized that simulated gambling could lead to gambling. Participants reported enjoying simulated gambling as a child.

Socialization into simulated gambling in early adolescence. Exposure to simulated gambling increased for most participants. During early adolescence, gaming became a shared activity with

friends. Participants viewed simulated gambling as having a social value. Some participants moved from incidental engagement to purposefully seeking out simulated gambling. These experiences opened the door to gambling-like experiences. Some participants spent real money to purchase in-game currency to play simulated gambling activities.

Awareness during later adolescence about exploitation and harm from simulated gambling.

During later adolescence, participants still engaged in simulated gambling as it was embedded into the games they played. Participants became aware that simulated gambling outcomes were manipulated, unregulated, and more favourable in comparison to monetary gambling. They were also critical of the industry's motives for embedding simulated gambling in games. Most participants were concerned that simulated gambling could lead to harmful gaming and be a gateway to monetary gambling.

Symptoms of a gambling disorder associated with simulated gambling. Participants in the at-risk/problem gambling category reported symptoms of gaming disorder in relation to their simulated gambling. These symptoms tended to develop following a strong early attraction to simulated gambling. Excessive behaviours were linked with strong emotions from winning and losing. A few participants mentioned chasing losses. Some also mentioned using simulated gambling for emotional escape as a coping mechanism.

Associations between simulated gambling and monetary gambling behaviour. Some participants described that simulated gambling increased their attraction to monetary gambling. They also recounted how easy wins fostered excitement and erroneous beliefs about chances of winning. A few participants with at-risk/problem gambling said they lost their interest in simulated gambling as they grew older. Instead, they played real gambling games as they thought they could win money, have control over the game outcomes, and use their skills and knowledge.

How you can use this research

This research provides insight into the impacts of early simulated gambling experiences on youths.

About the researchers

Nerilee Hing, Lisa Lole, and Matthew Rockloff are affiliated with the Experimental Gambling Research Laboratory in the School of Health, Medical and Applied Sciences at CQUniversity in Bundaberg, Queensland, Australia. **Hannah Thorne** is affiliated with the Experimental Gambling Research Laboratory in the School of Health, Medical and Applied Sciences at CQUniversity in Adelaide, South Australia, Australia. **Kerry Sproston and Nicole Hodge** are affiliated with DMB Consultants in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. For more information about this study, please contact Nerilee Hing at n.hing@cqu.edu.au.

Citation

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