



The time course of simulated and monetary gambling amongst youths

What this research is about

Gambling is defined as risking something of value to win something of value. The outcome has to be determined at least in part by chance. Simulated gambling refers to games that imitate many characteristics of gambling. This includes looks, sounds, and actions. Yet, these games do not provide an opportunity for a cash payout. Such games include social casino games that replicate gambling products. Video games may also include gambling content as part of the gameplay experience. For example, loot boxes in video games contain random items that vary in value. They can be earned through gameplay or purchased with real money.

Gambling has become normalized amongst youths, who are more vulnerable to gambling problems. Several studies have found that engagement in simulated gambling is linked with monetary gambling. The aim of this study was to examine the time course of young people's engagement in several forms of simulated gambling and monetary gambling (i.e., which games were played first). Another aim was to examine which simulated gambling products were associated with gambling problems and harms.

What the researchers did

Participants were 1,026 residents of Australia who reported having played video games in the past 12 months. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 25 years old, with an average age of 21.87 years. About 59.1% of participants were women and 40.2% were men. About 79.1% of participants were born in Australia. About 6.7% identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Participants completed an online survey with the following measures:

What you need to know

Simulated gambling products contain gambling elements, but they are not classified as gambling and are legally available to underage people. There are concerns about a "gateway effect" from simulated gambling to monetary gambling. This study examined the time course of young people's engagement in simulated and monetary gambling. It also looked at the associations between simulated gambling and gambling problems and harms. The use of loot boxes and video games with gambling content tended to come before monetary gambling. Engaging in simulated gambling products in which gambling is a core element (e.g., social casino games) tended to occur after monetary gambling. Most simulated gambling products were associated with greater harm from monetary gambling.

- Screening and quota questions. The researchers asked how frequently the participants played video games and some demographic questions.
- Simulated and monetary gambling engagement. The researchers asked the participants if they engaged in 7 simulated gambling products at any point in their life. These included loot boxes (paid and free), social casino games (paid and free), video games with gambling content, fantasy sports (free), and demo games (free). The researchers also asked about 12 monetary gambling forms. If participants had engaged in any form of simulated/monetary gambling, they were asked how often they engaged in that form in the past 12 months; the age at which they started

playing; and the age at which they most recently engaged in that form.

- Gambling problems in the past 12 months were assessed using the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI). The NODS-CLiP was used to assess gambling problems over the lifetime.
- Gambling harm was assessed using the Gambling Harm Scale 10-item version.

What the researchers found

According to the PGSI, three-quarters of the participants who had gambled in the last 12 months experienced some degree of gambling problems (scores of 1 or higher). According to the NODS-CLiP, about half of the participants who had ever gambled experienced gambling problems in their lifetime.

About half of the participants had engaged in opening free loot boxes, playing video games with gambling content, and playing free social casino games in their lifetime. About a quarter to a third had taken part in free fantasy sports, paid loot boxes, paid social casino games, and demo games.

Young people who had engaged in any simulated gambling products in their lifetime were more likely to have gambled in their lifetime and in the past 12 months. Most simulated gambling products, except for free loot boxes, were associated with having a higher PGSI score. Most simulated gambling products were also associated with having experienced gambling problems during one's lifetime.

Young people tended to engage in free loot boxes and playing video games with gambling content before any monetary gambling. They were more likely to engage in free fantasy sports before gambling on casino games, novelty betting, and paid fantasy sports betting. Young people were more likely to engage in paid loot boxes before engaging in sports betting, casino games, novelty betting, esports betting, skin gambling, and fantasy sports betting. But paid loot boxes were more likely to occur after scratch cards and lottery tickets. Young people were more likely to play free social casino games before novelty betting, but after scratch cards and bingo. They were more likely to

play paid social casino games and demo games after engaging in scratch cards, lottery tickets, EGMs, and bingo. In the case of paid social casino games, young people were more likely to play these games after having tried sports and race betting.

How you can use this research

This study can inform policy makers and researchers about the relationship between simulated and monetary gambling.

About the researchers

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