



Adolescent simulated gambling via digital and social media: An emerging problem



Daniel L. King*, Paul H. Delfabbro, Dean Kaptsis, Tara Zwaans

School of Psychology, The University of Adelaide, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 20 November 2013

Keywords:

Convergence
Pathological gambling
Social media
Adolescence
Addiction

ABSTRACT

Recently, there has been significant expansion in the range of gambling activities supported by digital technology. The convergence of gambling and digital media is of particular concern with respect to the immense potential for earlier age of gambling involvement, and development of positive attitudes and/or behavioral intentions toward gambling. This study examined the prevalence of adolescent involvement in a range of digital and social media gambling activities, and the association between exposure to, and involvement in, simulated gambling and monetary gambling and indicators of pathological gambling risk. A total of 1287 adolescents aged 12–17 years were recruited from seven secondary schools in Adelaide, South Australia. The results indicated that a significant proportion of young people engage in a range of simulated gambling activities via internet gambling sites, social media, smartphone applications, and video-games. A logistic regression analysis showed that adolescents with a history of engagement in simulated gambling activities appear to be at greater risk of endorsing indicators of pathological gambling. These findings highlight the need for further research on the potential risks of early exposure to simulated gambling activities, as well as greater consideration of the need for regulation and monitoring of gambling activity via digital technologies.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Gambling and digital technology

In the last decade, there has been significant expansion in the range of gambling activities supported by digital technology (Griffiths & Parke, 2010; King, Delfabbro, & Griffiths, 2010). The “convergence” (Griffiths, King, & Delfabbro, 2013) of gambling and digital media is of particular interest and concern to researchers, regulators, and allied health practitioners because of its potential to increase the likelihood of young people developing an interest in gambling at a younger age (Derevensky, Sklar, Gupta, & Messerlian, 2010; King et al., 2010; Griffiths, King, & Delfabbro, 2012; Phillips, Ogeil, & Blaszczynski, 2012). Although some earlier research suggested youth participation rates in online gambling activities are usually lower than for terrestrial forms of gambling (Griffiths & Wood, 2007; Ipsos, 2009; Najman, Allen, Madden, & Brooks, 2008), more recent market research data (e.g., Casual Connect., 2012; Church-Sanders, 2011) suggest that the popularity of online gambling is increasing rapidly. This growth has led to concerns about the potential negative impacts on young people,

given that the ubiquity of these new activities allows them to gamble more covertly and unrestrictedly than was the case before (Flores, Siomos, Fisoun, & Geroukalis, 2013).

Although much has been written about the increasing pervasiveness of monetary gambling on digital media, another less recognised concern relates to the growth of simulated gambling, or gambling without the possibility of monetary reward (King et al., 2010; Griffiths, King, & Delfabbro, 2012). Simulated gambling may be defined as a digitally simulated interactive gambling activity that does not directly involve monetary gain but is otherwise structurally identical to the standard format of a gambling activity due to its wagering features and chance-determined outcomes of play. Although the boundaries between gambling and video-gaming are becoming increasingly blurred (for example, gaming features may be found in some gambling-like activities, and vice versa), simulated gambling may be distinguished from many forms of video-gaming (e.g., shooting action games, role-playing games) because in video-games there is a clear relationship between player strategy or actions and outcomes. Simulated gambling is a continually evolving mode of gambling that encompasses free-to-play gambling games using virtual credits, smartphone and social media apps, and hybrid video-game/gambling activities with monetisation features such those found in MMOs like *Runescape* (Delfabbro, King, Lambos, & Puglies, 2009; Griffiths & Wood, 2010; Johansson & Gotestam, 2004). Some of these activities

* Corresponding author. Address: School of Psychology, Level 4, Hughes Building, The University of Adelaide, Adelaide, SA 5005, Australia. Tel.: +61 8 83133740; fax: +61 8 8303 3770.

E-mail address: daniel.king@adelaide.edu.au (D.L. King).

(e.g., gambling apps on Facebook) may be considered financial because they allow players to purchase extra credit using real money, but they do not enable the player to ‘cash out’ winnings. Simulated gambling activities generally feature no age restriction or barriers to entry (King et al., 2010), employ inflated profit rates (Sevigny, Cloutier, Pelletier, & Ladouceur, 2005), and are presented as youth-friendly entertainment (Griffiths & Parke, 2010). Further, the emergence of gambling on video-gaming platforms has blurred the structural boundaries between gambling and gaming activities (Griffiths, 2008; Harper, 2007; King, Delfabbro, Derevensky, & Griffiths, 2012). For example, many forms of online video gambling or social media sites feature gambling, often for credits or points paid for with real money, and many internet gambling providers offer free-play games that are rather like video games.

1.2. The risks of simulated gambling in adolescence

Potential problems related to simulated gambling may be particularly germane to young people for several reasons. The first is that young people are, by definition, developmentally immature and not always able to appraise the riskiness of activities, including gambling (Delfabbro, Lambos, King, & Pugliese, 2009; Hardoon & Derevensky, 2002; Volberg, Gupta, Griffiths, Olsson, & Delfabbro, 2010). Second, young people are particularly avid and savvy consumers of digital media and online services, including video games, laptops, tablets, and smartphones. Large-scale studies suggest that the average Australian adolescent spends about five hours per day engaged in digital media activities, including 2.5 h using the Internet (Australian Communications & Media Authority, 2007, 2008). Most youth use Facebook to communicate and post information, browse wikis, video tutorials, and other forums to create, gather, and share information, and visit sites such as eBay to buy and sell goods. Many acquired skills and knowledge of web functionality and online navigation may be transferable to use of online gambling activities and features. Additionally, the significant amount of leisure time spent on the Internet suggests there is significant potential for exposure to gambling promotions, online gambling activities, and assorted incentives to gamble (McMullan & Kervin, 2012; Messerlian, Byrne, & Derevensky, 2004; Monaghan, Derevensky, & Sklar, 2008). Third, young people are often influenced by psychological and social factors (e.g., peer group pressure, the desire to conform, disillusionment, depression, low self-esteem, poor emotion regulation) that make isolated technology-based activities particularly attractive to them (Potenza et al. (2011)). Current national and international evidence confirms that many young people experience problems associated with online technology use (Ferguson, Coulson, & Barnett, 2011; Gentile, 2009; King, Delfabbro, Griffiths, & Gradisar, 2011; King, Haagsma, Delfabbro, Gradisar, & Griffiths, 2013b; Kuss, Griffiths, & Binder, 2013; Sletten, Torgersen, von Soest, Frøyland, & Hansen, 2010). Although the risks of excessive online social networking and video-gaming are well-documented, less research has examined whether simulated gambling activities can give rise to similar social and psychological problems.

1.3. Research on adolescent gambling

Research studies of young people aged under 18 years suggest that between 50% and 70% gamble at least once per year and that between 1% and 4% display behaviors consistent with a gambling pathology (Delfabbro, 2012; Hardoon & Derevensky, 2002). Pathological gambling is usually associated with poorer social relationships and psychological functioning; a greater likelihood of involvement in other high risk behaviors; and, poorer educational performance (Delfabbro & King, 2012). Adolescents with gambling problems are more likely to have peers and family who gamble,

have unrealistic views about the nature of gambling, and a history of gambling problems in their immediate family (Delfabbro, 2012).

An emerging but limited body of research suggests that simulated gambling may co-occur with monetary gambling activity. To date the largest study of simulated gambling among youth has been conducted by Ipsos (2009), who surveyed 8598 adolescents about their gambling and ‘gambling-like’ behavior. Over 25% of adolescents had played in ‘money-free’ mode of gambling in the week preceding the survey, with opportunities on social networking sites four times more popular than those presented on real gambling sites. Although the design of the study precluded statements of causality, simulated gambling behavior was the strongest predictor of monetary gambling, and also significantly predicted at-risk gambling. Comparable findings have been reported in other studies (Byrne, 2004; Griffiths & Wood, 2007; Hardoon, Derevensky, & Gupta, 2002). Griffiths and Wood (2007) surveyed 8017 adolescents aged 12–15 years, and reported that 29% of adolescents who had gambled online also reported playing the free ‘demo’ games. Byrne (2004) reported that young people with gambling problems were significantly more likely to report online simulated gambling in the past year than those without gambling problems. Hardoon et al. (2002) reported that 25% of youth with serious gambling problems and 20% of those at-risk for a gambling problem reported playing online using practice/trial sites. Similarly, research on adult gamblers conducted by McBride and Derevensky (2009) reported that 77% of online gamblers ($N = 563$) reported playing ‘gambling-like’ games (e.g., practice modes) in addition to monetary gambling on the Internet. Overall, it may be observed that the literature on youth simulated gambling is limited by: (a) its age of publication (i.e., older findings may not accurately reflect the current status of youth gambling given changes in the technological and social context of gambling), (b) the lack of studies conducted outside of the UK, and (c) the lack of detailed examination of a range of gambling activities available through digital and social media.

1.4. The current study

The vulnerability of adolescents may place them at greater risk of problematic patterns of gambling via new and emerging digital and social media. On the one hand, it has been proposed that early exposure to gambling activities may condition a range of “safer” responses to gambling stimuli (e.g., smaller bet sizes, infrequent/social play), or develop knowledge about the chance-determined nature of gambling, including the belief that one is very unlikely to win in the long-term. As Najman et al. (2008) state:

Practice play can affect the appeal of gambling games by removing some of the mystery and excitement that surrounds previously unobtainable casino type games. By experimenting with simulated casino games young people become accustomed to them and become easily bored.

However, an alternative view is that simulated gambling activities may facilitate the transition to monetary forms of gambling (McBride & Derevensky, 2009), and/or develop a behavioral tendency toward sustained gambling activity and riskier gambling strategies (Bednarz, Delfabbro, & King, 2013). The research literature on gambling convergence is currently limited with regard to explaining how and to what extent adolescent gamblers may become involved in these new forms of gambling and gambling-like activities. However, it is well-documented that online gambling service providers employ numerous strategies and techniques outside the scope of current regulation to entice young players to initiate and develop a familiarity with gambling (Derevensky et al., 2010; McBride & Derevensky, 2009; McMullan, Miller, & Perrier, 2012).

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