Gambling and Gaming are Converging: "Won't Someone Think of the Children!"?

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Gambling and gaming industries are highly dynamic with change largely driven by new technological capabilities which allow users to access online activities with ease and affordability. Global access allows companies to market to large potential audience of consumers and reach beyond their trad



itional users. This has resulted in a cross-over between gambling and gaming products and across platforms and networks, termed 'digital convergence' (King, Delfabbro, & Griffiths, 2010). For example, many popular social games replicate gambling activities and gambling products have been introduced based on popular online games. Difficulties in age-gating the Internet and social media means that children and adolescents are increasingly exposed to and interact with gambling themes (Derevensky &

Gainsbury, 2016; Monaghan & Derevensky, 2008).

Calls from concerned community groups to "think of the children" have occurred in response to many technological advances and popular uptake of new forms of entertainment. This emotional appeal is often made without empirical evidence and can be used to advance and strengthen arguments which are based on minimal evidence. However, the pace of technology means that the research and subsequent evidence often lags behind consumer exposure to and engagement with new products. This creates tension between rushing to implement protectionist policies based on limited data and avoidance of issues through outdated policies, which may fail to offer adequate protections.

Internet technology has undoubtedly made gambling more available using computers and mobile devices commonly accessible to youth. Most reputable online gambling sites require users to establish their identity and prevent those under the legal age from gambling. However, many disreputable sites do not require proof of age and facilitate direct access to all forms of online gambling. Youth engaging in gambling is not a new phenomenon nor restricted to online gambling. Digital convergence has added to the strong presence of gambling-related content across many aspects of modern society. This includes digital advertising for online gambling as well as mainstream advertising and sports sponsorship in jurisdictions where this is permitted (Lamont, Hing, & Gainsbury, 2011). Furthermore, gambling themes are promoted in social media and online games (King, Gainsbury, Delfabbro, Hing, & Abarbanel, 2015), through betting on eSports tournaments, betting with virtual items and the emergence of virtual reality betting.

We conducted a study to investigate the impact of the changing representation of gambling online (Gainsbury, King, et al., 2015). A focus of this comprehensive study included an online survey of 561 Australian adolescents (12-17 years of age).

Almost one-in-five (18%) adolescents surveyed reported having gambled at least once in the past 12 months, and 60% of these respondents reported having gambled online. This is similar to previous research (King, Delfabbro, Kaptsis, & Zwaans, 2014; Volberg, Gupta, Griffiths, Ólason, & Delfabbro, 2010) suggesting a notable proportion of young people gamble before they are legally allowed to. The potential to make money is not the only motivation to play. The adolescents were

motivated to gamble for the excitement and fun, as well as for the competition and challenge and to pass the time.

To explore how these adolescents first came to gamble, we investigated some potential pathways – social media advertising by gambling operators and social casino games. Gambling has a growing presence on social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. This includes promotional content for gambling operators, venues, and gambling-related activities, as well as social casino gaming. Social casino games are free-to-play games that replicate gambling activities but incorporate social components such as leader boards and competitions, linking to SNS accounts (Gainsbury, Hing, Delfabbro, & King, 2014). These are often advertised on SNS in ways that are likely to be appealing to young people (Abarbanel, Gainsbury, King, Hing, & Delfabbro, 2016).

Adolescents are recognised as particularly vulnerable to advertising given their limited ability to critically analyse this content and its context. As such, most jurisdictions have regulations that attempt to minimise the impact of gambling advertising on young people. Despite this, two-fifths (42%) of the adolescents had seen advertisements for gambling operators on SNS and 19% had interacted with gambling operators through these platforms, such as by 'liking' or sharing content. Although the majority reported that these promotions had no impact on their gambling, a substantial number (19%) reported that their desire to gamble had increased and 11% reported that their gambling behaviour had increased because of these promotions.

Social casino games are one of the most popular types of social games, they are easy to play, can be played for short sessions, using multiple devices, and can be social, competitive, or played in isolation. The games are generally free to play, but users can pay to further their game play. The social casino gaming market is estimated to reach $4.4 billion by 2017, accounting for 4 percent of all gaming industry revenues (Takahashi, 2015). Users are encouraged to share updates and invite their online connections to play, which increases the extent to which gambling-themed games are promoted on SNS.

More than one-fifth (23%) of the adolescents surveyed played social casino games. Similarly, to the reasons for gambling, adolescents were most likely to report gaming for excitement and fun, as well as to pass the time and for the competition and challenge. Most social casino gamers (68%) thought that the

game operators encouraged them to try real-money gambling. Although more than half reported no impact of the games, 32% reported the games increased how much they wanted to gamble and 28% that the games increased how much they did gamble.

A relatively high proportion of adolescents (40%) had spent money within social casino games. This is substantially higher than the 1-2% of spending users typically reported in the literature and the small proportion of users under 18 years of age claimed to make purchases by the social casino game industry. About two-thirds (65%) of those who had paid to play stated that they had gambled for real money as a result of social casino games, compared to only 1% of non-paying users (King, Russell, Gainsbury, Delfabbro, & Hing, 2016).

Our findings, among other new research studies, suggest that concerns about the digital representation of gambling including exposure and interaction through SNS and games may have substance. There are several potential ways in which these new activities and promotions can impact youth. One is that the constant exposure to gambling-themes normalises this as an activity. Combined with increased availability of gambling online and positive experiences through games and social interaction, this may increase the likelihood that young people gamble, either before or when legally available. Many youth are able to resist marketing efforts, but the impact is also not always recognised (implicit rather than explicit) and may not occur immediately. Thus, the impact may be seen years into the future.

In-game purchasing appears to be a strong predictor of game players migrating to real-money gambling. Youth often differentiate between games and gambling through the role of and chance to win money. When players start paying real money, this may lead them to want to potentially have real money rewards, which has been reported by adult game players (Gainsbury, Hing, Delfabbro, Dewar, & King, 2015; Gainsbury, Russell, King, Delfabbro, & Hing, 2016). The experience of spending money may normalise this and generalise to spending money on online gambling.

There is a paucity of research on the impact of exposure to gambling themes on young people, including the impact on gambling behaviour and the development of gambling problems. More research is needed to investigate the causal pathway, as opposed to cross-sectional research, which is one limitation of the

current study. The research presented here is also based on self-report, which may be subject to bias and recall inaccuracy. Research is also needed to investigate newly emerging forms of gambling and gaming convergence. In particular, eSports betting, betting with virtual items (e.g., 'skins'), and virtual reality gambling are all rapidly increasing in popularity. These all appeal to a market including young people and their impacts needs to be researched.

Calls to 'think of the children' in relation to digital convergence have some merit. Despite evidence and research gaps, policy makers need to consider the future generation of gamblers and the potential for increased exposure to gambling themes to lead to gambling-related problems. There is evidence that a notable minority of youth are gambling as a direct result of exposure to and interaction with gambling-themes on social media and within games. This may justify further restrictions on advertisements with gambling themes, including for non-gambling products. Gambling-themed products may also be restricted to youth, particularly those which include in-game payments, as these seem to particularly facilitate a migration to gambling. Education, such as through social marketing may be needed for parents to be mindful of children's viewing of gambling themes and use of simulated gambling products. Young people also need to be educated that games do not accurately represent gambling and should be viewed and used with caution.

The convergence of gambling and gaming may be used for a positive effect, such as teaching youth about gambling odds, and to try out 'gambling' and engage in this activity without spending money. However, where this leads to migration to gambling, this is problematic as early gambling activity is a risk factor for gambling-related harms later in life (Gainsbury, Russell, Wood, Hing, & Blaszczynski, 2015; Volberg et al., 2010). The Internet will continue to expose young people to gambling themes and the impacts are only beginning to be seen. Some gambling and gaming operators are likely to continue to target youth with enticing advertising. As such, regulators, policy makers, community groups, and consumers need to recognise the risks for youth and act to protect those most vulnerable.

— Sally Gainsbury

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