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

Daniel King, Paul Delfabbro, Dean Kaptsis and Tara Zwaans

What was the research?

The recent expansion of simulated and monetary gambling activities to the digital world has lead to growing concerns about the potential for adolescent involvement in gambling activities. Simulated gambling refers to digital, gambling-like activities that do not directly involve monetary gain but are otherwise the same as gambling.

This study, an exploration of adolescent simulated gambling, had three objectives:

- to examine the prevalence of adolescent involvement in simulated gambling
- to measure the association between simulated gambling and monetary gambling activities
- to assess whether simulated gambling exposure was associated with indicators of pathological gambling.

This research was conducted by a team from the School of Psychology at the University of Adelaide and received partial funding under a 2012 Young Researcher Grant from the European Association for the Study of Gambling.

How was the research conducted?

This study surveyed 1287 high school students aged 12-17 from seven secondary schools in Adelaide, South Australia. In addition to providing demographic information, participants responded to questions to determine:

- electronic media use
- gambling behaviour
- indicators of pathological gambling and mental health.

Responses from all questions were collated and analysed using a number of statistical techniques.

Findings from the study need to be considered in the context of several limitations:

- the study does not follow participants over time and therefore cannot answer questions about causality (e.g. does simulated gambling cause monetary gambling?)
- data on past involvement in gambling activities is self-reported, considered less accurate than other forms of data collection
- due to a small rate of pathological gambling found in the study, gamblers were classified at-risk with relatively mild symptoms
- a number of potentially predictive risk factors for pathological gambling were not considered in this study (i.e. impulsivity or family history of pathological gambling).

What were key findings of the research?

Simulated gambling

- 32 per cent of adolescents surveyed had participated in simulated gambling at least once in their lifetime and 13 per cent had participated in simulated gambling in the past year
- One in ten participants had used gambling apps on Facebook and one in twenty had used gambling applications on a smartphone
- The most commonly reported experience of past exposure to simulated gambling was gambling in video games
- The most popular types of simulated gambling activities among participants were online card games, EGMs and sports betting activities

Monetary gambling and pathological gambling risk

- Monetary gambling activities among participants included scratch tickets (15.3 per cent), race wagering (10.4 per cent), card games (9.4 per cent) and internet gambling (2.3 per cent)
- One per cent of participants were probable pathological gamblers

Association between simulated gambling and monetary gambling

- Over 40 per cent of those playing simulated gambling games reported a preoccupation with gambling or an intention to gamble in the future, compared to 20 per cent of those not involved in simulated gambling
- For at-risk gamblers (a group combining all gamblers with a greater than no-risk status), participation in simulated gambling activities was more prevalent than expected

How might this research be useful?

This study provides an insight into adolescent engagement in both simulated and monetary gambling activities using electronic devices such as smart phones and video games.

The study supports previous studies which provide evidence that underage adolescents participate in monetary gambling. Although the rate of on-line monetary gambling in this study was relatively low (2.3 per cent), the study suggests that greater industry and regulatory efforts may be required to address the issue of underage gambling.

Finally, the study provides a valuable preliminary insight into the relationships between simulated gambling, monetary gambling and digital media, and highlights the need for further research in this field.

Want to know more?

The full report from this study is available for a fee through the journal Computers in Human Behavior.

How to cite this research
