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# Gambling and social gambling: An exploratory study of young people's perceptions and behaviour

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**Summary.** Background and aims: *Gambling-type games that do not involve the spending of money (e.g., social and (demo) [demonstration] gambling games, gambling-like activities within video games) have been accused in both the legal and psychological literature of increasing minors' propensity towards prohibited forms of gambling thus prompting calls for gambling regulation to capture address such games and subject them to age restrictions. However, there is still a shortage of empirical data that considers how young people experience monetary and non-monetary gambling, and whether they are sufficiently aware of the differences.* Methods: *Data was collected from 23 qualitative focus groups carried out with 200 young people aged between 14 and 19 years old in schools based in London and Kent. As the study was exploratory in nature, thematic analysis was adopted in order to capture how pupils categorise, construct, and react to gambling-like activities in comparison to monetary forms of gambling without the constraints of a predetermined theoretical framework.* Results: *Despite many similarities, substantial differences between monetary and non-monetary forms of gambling were revealed in terms of pupils' engagement, motivating factors, strengths, intensity, and associated emotions. Pupils made clear differentiation between non-monetary and monetary forms of gambling and no inherent transition of interest from one to the other was observed among participants. Only limited evidence emerged of (demo) games being used as a practice ground for future gambling.* Conclusion: *For the present sample, non-monetary forms of gambling presented a different proposition to the real-money gambling with no inherent overlap between the two. For some the «softer» form minimised the temptation to try other forms of gambling that they were not legally allowed to engage in, but (demo) games may attract those who already want to gamble.* Policy implications: *Regulators must recognise and balance these two conflicting aspects.*

**Keywords:** *Social/demo gambling, gambling-like activities, monetary gambling, UK, minors, protection from gambling-related harm*

## Jocs d'apostes i el joc d'apostes social: un estudi de les percepcions i el comportament juvenil

**Resum.** Antecedents i objectius: *els jocs d'atzar que no impliquin despesa de diners (per exemple, jocs socials i demos, i jocs d'atzar dins de l'àmbit dels videojocs) han estat considerats, tant per la literatura jurídica com per la psicològica, causants d'augmentar la propensió dels menors cap a formes prohibides de joc, per la qual cosa s'han llançat alertes a les entitats reguladores per aprehendre i restringir amb paràmetres d'edat aquest tipus de*

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*jocs. Tanmateix, encara escassegen les dades empíriques que analitzin com viuen els joves els jocs d'apostes monetaris i no monetaris, i si en són prou conscients de les diferències.*

*Mètodes: les dades van ser recollides de 23 grups d'estudi, amb enfocament qualitatiu, realitzats amb 200 joves d'edats compreses entre els 14 i els 19 anys a escoles ubicades a Londres i Kent. Com es tractava d'un estudi de naturalesa experimental, es va adoptar l'anàlisi temàtica a fi de veure com els alumnes categoritzaven, construïen i reaccionaven davant de les activitats de joc d'atzar en comparació amb les formes monetàries d'aquests jocs que manquen de les limitacions d'un marc teòric predeterminat.*

*Resultats: malgrat les semblances, es van observar diferències substancials entre les formes monetàries i no monetàries dels jocs d'atzar quant a compromís dels alumnes, motivació, factors, força, intensitat i emocions associades. Els alumnes van diferenciar clarament les formes monetàries i no monetàries del joc; tanmateix, no es va observar preferència per una o una altra forma entre els participants. Únicament van sorgir algunes evidències respecte dels jocs demo, que s'utilitzen com a àmbit de pràctica de futurs jocs d'apostes.*

*Conclusió: per a la mostra present, els alumnes van mostrar una predisposició diferent en funció de si es tractava de formes no monetàries o formes monetàries reals, però sense un solapament inherent entre ambdues. Per a alguns, la forma «més suau» va minimitzar la temptació de provar altres formes de joc prohibides legalment, però la demo de jocs pot atreure a aquells que ja estan disposats a apostar.*

*Les implicacions normatives: els reguladors han de reconèixer i avaluar aquests dos aspectes contradictoris.*

**Paraules clau:** Social / demo jocs d'atzar, activitats de jocs d'apostes, jocs d'apostes monetaris, Regne Unit, menors d'edat, protecció contra danys relacionats amb el joc d'apostes

## Introduction

Due to omnipresence, technological convergence, and increased sophistication, the playing of social/«demo» (i.e., demonstration) gambling games by youth has been raised as a potential concern in the context of minors' protection from gambling-related harm (Derevensky, Gainsbury, Gupta et al., 2013; Griffiths, 2010; Griffiths, 2011; Parke, Wardle, Rigbye & Parke, 2013). However, existing evidence remains contentious as to whether demonstration games (more popularly known as «demo games»), social gambling games, and/or gambling-like activities within video games increase young peoples' propensity to take up actual gambling. It is equally still uncertain whether the existing correlation can be explained by the overlap in motivations to play both video games (including social/«demo» gambling games) and real money gambling or by minors incorrectly developing and transferring cognitive misconceptions from video games into real money gambling. Such determination is of crucial importance to legislators and policymakers (Harris & Hagan, 2012), as identification and adequate regulation of all activities that encourage minors to try out gambling should constitute an inherent part of any strategy that aims to protect them from gambling-related harm.

The empirical evidence is unequivocal that early initiation of gambling has been identified as one of the most important risk factors in developing gambling-related problems. Furthermore, young people have been found to be at increased risk of developing such disorders (Messerlian, Byrne & Derevensky, 2004) because their still underdeveloped cognitive abilities cannot fully appreciate associated risks, and they are sometimes unable to control their impulses (Hume & Mort, 2011). It has also been found that the earlier the initiation of a gambling problem, the longer and more severe the negative consequences and recovery periods (Shead, Derevensky & Gupta, 2010). Minors are at

significantly increased risk of suffering from a gambling disorder compared to adults (Blinn-Pike, Worthy & Jonkman, 2010; Meyer, Hayer & Griffiths, 2009; Ipsos Mori Young People Omnibus, 2014; Wardle et al., 2014; Volberg, Gupta, Griffiths, Olason & Delfabbro, 2010), and the negative consequences last well beyond the actual disorder itself (Gupta & Derevensky, 2014) because educational failures or early criminal convictions are difficult to overcome in adulthood (Raisamo, Halme, Murto & Lintonen, 2012). The UK Gambling Act 2005 specifically provides in s.1(c) that one of the Act's licensing objectives is to «*protect children and other vulnerable persons from being harmed or exploited by gambling*». Accordingly, if such games are found to encourage the early and unlawful uptake of monetary forms of gambling by minors they should not be permitted to be played by those who are underage.

Within the British context, social/«demo» gambling and gambling-like activities within video games currently are not considered to fall within the legal definition of gambling (s.6 Gambling Act) as they do not offer any direct financial monetary prizes and do not give any formal possibility to cash out any winnings, or to withdraw any payments that have been made towards the acquisition or subscription of the game (Charif, 2011; Purewal, 2012). This removes such games from the rigorous age-verification regime that applies to gambling and places them within the remit of regulation of video games and online gaming. In contrast to the comprehensive and strict gambling legislation, the regulation of non-gambling games is very fragmented and at best incomplete. Since July 2012, the role of rating video games has been allocated to the Games Rating Authority by the Video Recording (Labelling) Regulation 2012 under s.41 of the Digital Economy Act. In effect, the UK law incorporates the Pan European Game Information (PEGI) system and requires all video games that are suitable to be played only by those over the age of 12 years old to be classified.

PEGI explicitly lists gambling as one of the components that must be included in the consideration when classifying video games, but this has not stopped many games with overt or covert gambling elements such as *Super Mario* or *Moshi Monsters* from being classified as suitable for those under 18 years of age. Moreover, the PEGI system typically rates games that are sold in physical form. It was only relatively recently that PEGI Online began to offer greater protection to minors on the internet. However, PEGI Online is different in terms of operation and scope, and adds to the complexity and fragmentation of the regulatory provisions. Irrespective of the laws, it is well known that many games that contain gambling-like elements and social/«demo» gambling games are freely accessible to minors. Such a situation could, on the one hand, lead youth to try out gambling for real, which would justify further regulation in this area. Alternatively, it may inhibit youth gambling for money because they can play for free. In this case, the precautionary approach to policymaking is not appropriate, making the need for a sound empirical evidence base even more important.

Several factors could potentially contribute towards minors believing that both gambling and gambling-like games represent similar forms of fun. Both utilise similar colourful graphics and attractive audio features (Messerlian et al., 2004; Temcheff, St.Pierre, Derevensky, 2011) and similar structural characteristics designed to prolong play (Parke & Griffiths, 2006; Karlsen, 2011; Griffiths, 2011; King, Delfabbro & Griffiths, 2011), and both satisfy similar emotional needs such as, arousal, competitiveness, escapism, and a relief from stress and boredom (Griffiths & Wood, 2000; Hellstrom, Nilsson, Leppert & Aslund, 2012). While gambling software has to comply with strict regulations issued by the Gambling Commission under the authority of the Gambling Act 2005 to ensure genuine random distribution of prizes and fairness to players, no such regulation applies to gambling-like games. However, similarities may underpin cognitive misconceptions whereby players think that they are able to control the outcome of both types of games in the same manner (Derevensky, Gupta & Magoon, 2004) without fully appreciating that video games are typically designed to enable players to improve their performance and scores by persistent training, a characteristic which is never replicated in gambling games, which are determined by purely random events. Some «demo» games on real online gambling sites have been found to inflate pay-out rates of over 100% that were not maintained during the actual for-money gambling sessions (Sevingy, Cloutier, Pelletier & Ladouceur, 2005). Such features may lead minors (and adults) to want to experience similar success with real money. The lack of monetary rewards may not be very noticeable during online play as the Internet is a cash-free environment, and it is generally accepted that virtual representations of money (e.g., e-cash, chips, credits, tokens, etc.) lower the psychological value of money (Griffiths, 2003), meaning that individuals gamble greater

amounts with virtual forms of money compared to actual money (Lapuz & Griffiths, 2010). Social/«demo» games may also constitute a powerful form of advertisement (Monaghan, Derevensky & Sklar, 2008), and they may increase overall familiarity with the mechanics of gambling, which in turn may render minors more inclined to try for real (King, Delfabbro, Kaptsis & Zwaans, 2014).

Existing empirical evidence about social/«demo» gambling remains inconclusive (Parke et al., 2013), but it is becoming very clear that a distinction should be made between «demo» games on gambling websites, social gambling games via social networking sites, and gambling-like activities within video games (King, Delfabbro & Griffiths, 2010). A clear correlation has been found between «demo» games and gambling (King et al., 2010; Forest & McHale, 2012), and social games and gambling (Wohl, Gupta & Derevensky, 2014). However, studies also suggest that this association may be merely coincidental (Bednarz, Delfabbro & King, 2013; Gainsbury, Hing, Delfabbro Dewar & King, 2015), as those who seek out the free gambling games on gambling websites as opposed to coming across them on other platforms may already have a latent predisposition to be interested in gambling (Floros, Siomos, Fisoun & Geroukalis, 2013). It has also been acknowledged that gambling for money and gambling socially may attract different types of individuals (Gainsbury & Derevensky, 2013). Social gambling may in fact discourage players (including minors) from being tempted to gamble for real (Gainsbury et al., 2014), with the consequences of minimising their potential financial losses and lessening the likelihood of their taking part in unlawful activities.

No conclusive correlation has been established between gambling-like activities within video games and real gambling (King, Ejova & Delfabbro, 2012). With respect to young people, early studies found that those children who played video games for longer periods of time were also more likely to gamble than their peers (Gupta & Derevensky, 1996; Wood, Gupta, Derevensky & Griffiths, 2004) but this finding was contradicted in a subsequent project where the effect of association between the two variables became insignificant once control and other factors such as gender had been applied (Delfabbro, King, Lambos & Pugliese, 2009). Nevertheless, a correlation between engagement in online gaming and online gambling with a *«particularly high clustering of addicted gamblers in the higher frequency of social networking use»* and gaming was identified in a sample of 2,107 students aged between 13 and 19 years old living on the Greek Island of Kos (Floros et al., 2013).

To date, the contradictory and exploratory nature of research means that the area continues to be of particular interest to regulators and policymakers in various jurisdictions (Harris & Hagan, 2012, UK Gambling Commission, 2013). However no study, as yet, has directly asked young people what they think about the relationship between gambling-like games and real

gambling games. The present study was exploratory and aimed to examine the relationship between gambling and gambling-like games via the use of qualitative focus groups with school pupils recruited from within British schools and youth clubs.

## Method

### Participants

A total of 23 qualitative focus groups with 14 participating institutions were carried out with pupils recruited from within schools and youth clubs in the London and Kent areas during the school day, and comprised a total of 200 active participants. An active participant was defined as a pupil who expressed at least one substantive opinion during the focus group discussion. Eleven focus groups were carried out with pupils from Year 10 (14- to 15-years old), eleven focus groups were carried out with pupils from Year 12 (17- to 18-years old) and one focus group was carried out in a youth club (14- to 19-years old). There were 71 male and 36 female participants from Year 10, and 34 male and 59 female participants from Year 12. Individual focus group sizes ranged from three to 30 pupils.

### Procedure

A comprehensive list of all London schools was compiled using data available from all London Borough Council websites. All schools were contacted between December 2012 and April 2013. Each school was first contacted up to two times by email asking if they would like to participate in the study. Participation of all schools and all pupils from within the schools was voluntary and self-selecting, and formed a convenience sample. Nevertheless, the sample represented secondary schools from affluent, middle-class and deprived socio-economic areas, as identified by the number of pupils entitled to a free premium or free school meals and included single-gender as well as co-educational institutions. No incentives were given to schools or pupils, but the first author offered to conduct a gambling awareness workshop or a talk on careers in law as a «thank you» for the school's participation.

All pupils participated voluntarily and were assured of confidentiality, were identified by pseudonyms only, and were able to leave the sessions at any point. All focus groups utilized a semi-structured interview schedule and lasted between 20 and 90 minutes, with the first three sessions being treated as testers. As opening questions, pupils were asked to describe the video games that they played and what they thought gambling was, without attempting to give a «correct» definition. Initial responses were then further probed to ensure that pupils discussed the importance they attached to money of varying amounts, items of monetary value regardless of worth (e.g., chocolate), items with no intrinsic monetary value (e.g., match-sticks), the distinction between chance and skill and the value

of virtual in-game currency, points or virtual property. Pupils were then asked to indicate whether they recognised gambling-like activities within video games, whether they considered «demo» and social gambling to be real gambling, and whether they thought that gambling-like activities would make them more likely to gamble with real money. Additionally, pupils were asked about their abilities to influence outcomes in both video game playing and gambling. The sessions were transcribed verbatim.

### Analysis

As the study was exploratory in nature, thematic analysis was adopted in order to capture how pupils categorise, construct, and react to gambling-like activities in comparison to monetary forms of gambling (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Given that the aim of the study was to identify how young people experience these two forms of activities, a realist method was applied to reflect the behaviours and views of the participants to better understand the experience of this age group. Data were coded and re-coded manually with the assistance of *Microsoft Office* by the first author in order to identify the themes that arose from the discussions and their prevalence within and across the focus groups. No textual analytic software was used to analyse the data. The themes were then categorised under the broad concepts of (1) engagement, (2) recognition of activities, (3) motivating factors to participate, and (4) beliefs and attitudes towards the two forms. This has allowed for an in-depth exploration of the issues and for interpretation of the views and opinions beyond semantic analysis and for comparisons with suggestions made within the existing literature. Ethical approval was granted by the research team's University Ethics Committees.

## Results

### *Video gaming engagement and motivations versus gambling engagement*

Video gaming participation was reported by pupils to be widespread, popular, and easily accessible to both age groups, both in terms of the number and variety of games and the average time spent. Of the 200 active participants, only nine pupils stated that they were genuinely not engaged in any sort of video gaming, this group representing 4.5% of the overall sample size. At the initial stage of the discussion, a higher number of participants declared their non-involvement in video gaming, but in the course of the session it became apparent that they were in fact playing several games, albeit only occasionally. Time spent on the activities varied from playing only during an occasional visit to a friend's house to playing up to six hours during a school day and 15 hours at the weekend. Very excessive playing was rare, but Ray (14, m) was described by his friend Joe as «a crack addict for games».

The vast majority of games played were either free of charge or for one-off payment, with only a few participants subscribing to strategic games that required monthly subscription payments. Those who paid for subscriptions either for the game itself or for the live functions on *XBox* were also the ones that tended to play more often and for longer periods of time. The most popular games, defined as those mentioned by every single focus group, were *Call of Duty*, *Subway Surfers*, *The Sims*, *FIFA*, and *Angry Birds*. The next most popular games (defined as mentioned by at least three different focus groups) were *Grand Theft Auto*, *Assassin Creed*, *Fruit Ninja*, *Marios*, *Halo*, *Moshi Monsters* and *Minecraft*. Only negligible differences were noticed within the game choices between the two age groups, despite some of them being PEGI classified as suitable only for those over 16 (e.g., *Call of Duty – Classic*, *Call of Duty Declassified*, *Halo*, *Fable 2*) or 18 years of age (e.g., *Call of Duty – Modern Warfare*, *Grand Theft Auto*). Collectively, those aged 17 to 18 played fewer of the games rated PEGI 3 or 7 than those rated 16 or 18, whereas those aged 14 to 15 years played all games frequently regardless of rating.

Of all the popular games that were listed by pupils, *Call of Duty*, *Moshi Monsters* and *Super Mario* contained gambling-like elements. With regards to real-money gambling, a small but a significant minority of pupils said that they had gambled for money in commercial venues at some point prior to the focus group, but only 12 pupils had gambled illegally more than three or four times in their entire lives. Of the 200 pupils, 30 had gambled on an activity that was unlawful for their age, with seven of them having gambled online. However, of those 30, only three had gambled by themselves. Ray (m, 14) had played slot machines while on vacation in Las Vegas, but not in the UK. Joe (m, 14) had played slot machines at a betting shop in London, and Katy (f, 14) had played slot machines in an amusement arcades when out with her older brother. All other participants purchased the tickets or betting slips with the assistance of another older person, or they used another person's Internet account to place bets or gamble by themselves. All seven that had gambled online with real money stated that it was done with the online account holders' permission. Eight participants who reported having gambled on lottery and scratchcards were lawfully allowed to play, as all of them were over the age of 16 years at the time of purchasing the tickets.

Gambling prevalence was considerably higher when non-age restricted activities, such as penny pushers, toy grabbers, or non-regulated activities such as playing with friends and family at home or at school was included. A significant number of pupils had played poker or blackjack with families for money as well as other non-monetary items such as chocolate, grapes and confectionary. One pupil had a real slot machine at home that he played with family members with real money, although he said that his parents never allowed friends or neighbours to play it. Similarly to participation in permitted or unregulated forms of gambling, a

large number of pupils admitted to playing fun gambling games on their mobile phones, on *Facebook*, and with friends and families without money (highlighting that many phones came pre-loaded with poker and slot machine applications). Card games (of all varieties) were by far the most commonly cited social gambling activity, and some pupils admitted to playing free roulette or slot machines online. One pupil had played «flip-a-coin», a free gambling game on the Internet.

### Gaming and gambling motivations

The motivations for playing video games were surprisingly consistent between groups and between participants in the groups. The three main common inter-related themes were (i) the need for fun, interactive, easy entertainment, and reduction of boredom, (ii) peer pressure, social interaction and competitiveness, and (iii) ability to experience activities that were impossible and/or undesirable in real life. Reduction of boredom and seeking entertainment were the most prevalent motivating factor for playing video games. Many pupils reported that they played because, for example:

«I get so bored at home; there is nothing else to do so I play [Call of Duty]» (Zaki, m, 14)

«I played I guess, it was kind of boredom because I had siblings but they were quite older so I never really played with them so boredom» (Twinker, f, 17)

«[I play] «to pass time, like on a bus or something» (Angel, f, 17).

These two aspects (i.e. boredom and entertainment) were linked, but there was no complete overlap, and some pupils openly admitted to playing games instead of doing other compulsory activities such as homework or household chores. One pupil explicitly admitted:

«I use games for procrastination. I always avoid doing work and instead I just play games because work is just boring and not fun» (Jenny, f, 17).

The second most popular motivating factor related to peer pressure, social interaction, and competitiveness. All participants acknowledged that, at present, gaming was a normal and highly popular activity. Pupils referred to the teenagers' semi-cultural expectations of being involved in gaming in order to fit in, «be cool» and generally be «in the know» amongst their peers, much like having a profile on social networking sites. Those who did not play were often left feeling like outsiders amongst groups of friends, or left out of group conversations. However, the impact on specific individuals appeared somewhat small, as peer pressure did not seem to influence them to do anything they did not want to do in the first place. Rather it ignited their interest in activities engaged in by their friends and families. In fact, the socially interactive nature of gaming (i.e. the ability to play games together and compete with each other) was seen as a positive aspect of the gaming envi-

ronment that further enhanced the appeal of this form of entertainment. For example, Ray (m, 14) who was also described earlier as a «*crack addict of gaming*» argued that the only reason he played so much was because of the social interaction and lots of general chatting with friends and other people who he met online beyond the interaction in the game itself, and if that aspect was not available, he would not be so involved.

Playing with others increased the actual enjoyment of the activity for pupils by making it more engaging, fun and interactive. It also gave additional motivations to continue to play so as not to let friends down if they were not so excited anymore to continue themselves, as well as generating topics of conversation during school breaks and other times and making games more competitive. As one pupil noted:

«[If] you are just playing on the XBox you feel like 'oh, ok, I won' but it's just a computer but when you play against others is like 'yeah, I beat Jago!!!, I beat Jago!!!'» (Badonde, m, 14)

Success amongst friends in a gaming environment was seen psychologically as very rewarding, and it gave a sense of achievement that although not as important or significant as real life achievements, still gave immediate pleasure and satisfaction. For instance:

«The competitiveness of those games is important; you have a leader board, and every time you get there and if you are on the top, it is, being on the top I suppose is always very rewarding» (Clappy, m, 18)

The third and final common motivational theme was related to players' ability to engage in activities that were not impossible or would otherwise be undesirable in real life. This aspect was cited by a smaller number of pupils, but for them it was the most influential parameter of the game. For Ahsan and Skittles (m,15 and f,14 playing on *The Sims*) it was the experience of something unknown and the freedom of experimenting with their creativity that made the games interesting:

«Because you can do anything to them; like dress them up and you can have pets; a job and a family as well» (Niss, m, 18)

For Osama (f, 15), Laq (f, 14), Karm (m, 14), Peter (m, 15) and Kurt (m, 17), it was the freedom of participating in otherwise undesirable activities, to escape from social constraints, and to release their stress and anger without real life consequences that attracted them to the virtual environments. The need to escape was explicitly stated:

«When I play computer games I am trying to escape reality; it is a fantasy and I don't connect it to any real thing and it counts for everything including violence» (Niss, m, 18)

A few pupils were drawn into gaming because of the ability to experience activities that they would find

impossible in real life, either because they were physically impossible for a human or because they were not easily attainable to them due to lack of financial means. For instance:

«Because this is something that you wouldn't be able to do in real life, experience something that you wouldn't experience normally» (Kenzo, m, 14)

«Like in Football Manager, you are in control, in games like you wouldn't normally take on [the role] in real life, say you may be studying and then at one point you may be like in control of a team and the responsibility makes it more interesting» (Giovanni, m, 14)

Finally, other reasons for playing included the addictive properties of the game that make the game irresistible and hard to put down. This was noticeable from many pupils, who often reported exceeding the time they allocated themselves or that had been allocated by their parents as a gaming period, along with the intrinsic desire to beat their own high scores. The term «*addiction*» was used very frequently, but most pupils used it in a rather loose sense when they simply referred to playing for a prolonged period of time and not really wanting to give up as opposed to finding themselves truly unable to stop and suffering negative consequences as a result.

On first examination, motivation for gambling participation showed many similarities to video gaming, but a closer examination demonstrated significant differences in the actual motivating factors as well as in the strength of displayed emotions. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most common reason cited for gambling was the desire to win money, but equal weight was given to the influence of family or friends. For example, Sasha (f, 17) bet on the Grand National horse race once a year with her mum who «*won on it once and she won a lot so I wanted the same, I thought I will win too*». Similarly, Christiana (f, 14) placed a bet on a horse with the help of her dad «*because everyone was doing it*». Claire (f, 17) bought a scratchcard because «*all my friends were buying them*», and Angel (f, 17) played with her friend because he asked her to choose the number on *Paddy Power's* online roulette and she just did that. Only one pupil (Eric, m,17) admitted playing online roulette for money, despite disapproval from his father and lack of awareness of his mother.

A small number of pupils played lotto and bought Scratchcards when they turned 16 (and were legally allowed to play) because they wanted to experience something new that was previously prohibited. However, they usually played only once and had not tried again:

«It was my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday so I could, so I thought that I just did. It was the first time when I have done it and I have never done it again» (Sarah, f, 17)

«I played on Scratchcards...I just wanted to win...I had a bad day and I thought that because I had such a horrible day I was going to win to make it better».(Carly f, 17).

Here, Carly's experience with gambling was motivated by escapism, although she may not have recognised that at the time. Actual enjoyment and entertainment factors were more notable in their absence, with only a few pupils listing them as their main reasons for gambling during the discussion.

### Recognition of gambling activities within video games

Games containing gambling-like elements were recognised by most pupils, and their recollections were very accurate. The games listed were *Grand Theft Auto* (casino), *Sims 2* (casino within a hotel), *Moshi Monsters* (type of mini lottery), *Super Mario* (mini-slot machines), *Call of Duty* (casino and betting on special match), and *FIFA*. *FIFA* was an example of a game with a vibrant external market where players can buy or sell virtual points for real money, and where gamers have to gamble their virtual points in order to get a better footballer in games that are decided by random selection and based purely on chance. Those that win are then able to trade their points for real money on marketplaces such as *eBay*. For some pupils, this constituted a form of gambling, but it must be noted that not everyone agreed with this. Other games named by individual pupils included *Falls* (car race betting); *Redemption* (card games), *Team Fortress 2* (gambling on unknown content of treasure boxes) and *Habbo Hotel* (dice game). Jaffa (f,17) remembered a personal adverse experience of gambling-like activities within *Habbo Hotel*, when at the age of around 13 she inadvertently spent £50 of real money to roll a dice with the hope of winning the other bidder's virtual furniture and accessories. This resulted in her being forbidden by her parents to play the game altogether. At the time of playing, Jaffa did not realise that she was in fact gambling and only realised when she was older.

### Does playing (demo) gambling games or gambling-like activities constitute gambling, and does one lead to the other?

The question about the relationship between non-money gambling and real-money gambling generated polarised responses. The main theme focused on the lack of financial risk (as opposed to financial rewards) with social/(demo) gambling, as well as the lack of thrill and excitement that they associated with real-money gambling. Pupils did not consider the initial acquisition price as important as they paid for what *«they knew they were getting»*. Pupils that answered this question affirmatively were in minority, and highlighted the structural similarities of the activities themselves but they also easily emphasised the distinctions of each form.

All pupils were unanimous that there are material differences between gambling for real money and gambling for fun, but the responses were multifarious with regards to whether social gambling increased the perceived attractiveness or increased overall propensity for real-money gambling. The main differences stated related to anxiety when participating in both

activities, with real-money gambling being considered as significantly more stressful. This, in their view, caused players to be more tense, more focused and competitive, and potentially more aggressive, which put some pupils off from being tempted to try it. For example:

*«With gambling for money you get the fear factor, which isn't for everyone»* (Luffy, m, 17)

*«I guess you get more of a thrill if you play for money»* (Burt, f, 17).

*«I don't do gambling but I can imagine it being very stressful because you can like lose a lot of money»* (Barry, m, 14)

*«If you lose [in video game] it does not bother you as much as it would if it was for actual money»* (Nina, f, 14)

*«If you play with real money you can win more money, you become more competitive, you play hard so instead of being lazy you will try hard, obviously because you are playing for something»* (Martin, m, 14)

*«The only thing you gamble if it is not for something of value is your, not pride but sort of, you are not really gambling anything it is not of value so it is not really gambling and this makes it less exciting»* (Badonde, m, 14).

For some, the financial risks were negative. For instance:

*«Because playing for money is more competitive and it brings out the worst in people I think (sic), whereas games are more social and gambling you just doing in for yourself rather than having fun»* (Chad, f, 14)

Alternatively, some of the pupils who gambled for real did not see any appeal in social gambling. For example:

*«But I don't really know; it's not fun; I don't think it's fun at all if you are not playing with real money»* (Eric, m, 17)

*«Gambling for fun is so lame, if you gamble for fun it's so boring, it does not make you feel happy with yourself, there is no thrill, no excitement»* (P3, m, 18)

With regard to the impact social/(demo) gambling may have on the likelihood of becoming involved in monetary gambling, none of the pupils was aware of the relationship that has been highlighted in the academic literature. However, some suggested that such link might exist, but all of them displayed a significant *«Third Person Effect»* (Fang & Seounmi, 2004) and none of them thought that such link would be particularly strong. For instance:

*«I think there is a link, I don't think it is that strong but if you play video games it's like you clearly have got much enjoyment in winnings...when maybe if you do start gambling you are more likely to get addicted or want to do it all the time»* (Twinker, f, 18)

Others addressed the potential learning aspect of practice games and the experience it might bring:

*«It would be some practice, if I would then go and really gamble I would be like I actually gambled before, not new although I haven't so it's like I have already have a great experience» (P1, m, 18)*

*«Once you know the rules you want to put real money on it so you can get something real back» (Twig, m, 17)*

Others thought that if someone kept winning in the free practice games they would eventually want to *«try their luck»* for real. Those with this view all seemed to appreciate that the odds in real gambling are different to practice gambling, but they still thought that winning in practice games may encourage trying to play with real money. However, all of the pupils who expressed those views were emphasising that they were referring to what others may think or do, and that such behaviour was not reflective of what they thought or did, as they were clearly aware of the differences between non-monetary gambling and real gambling. Others did not think that there was any link at all. For example:

*«I don't think there is anything to learn from it, I can't really think how, what you could really learn from that. There are some people who basically go out and try to get better deals and trade with players and they may go on eBay and sell those items off; so in any way people have learnt sort of basic economics but I don't think they can learn a great deal about gambling or what is behind the game» (David, m, 17)*

John (m, 17) also believed that interest in non-monetary gambling was not transferable to interest in real gambling because he thought people played these kinds of games for different reasons. Some pupils also pointed out that the experience of gambling-like activities within video games or social/demo gambling may actually be negative in the short-term but positive in the long-term, as it may discourage children from playing for real money due to exposure to the feelings of loss, even though no real money was involved. For example, Zulu (m, 14) referring to his own experience, said that *«it may teach you some things»* and those things listed were in fact that an individual may lose and this may cause the person to feel really upset and realise that it is not worth playing.

*Have any pupils displayed cognitive misconceptions with regard to the differences between gaming and gambling?*

All pupils conceded that persistent practice and prolonged playing of video games would enable them to increase their skills and become more successful gamers, although none acknowledged that this was because the games were specifically designed to enable that to happen. With regard to gambling, only two pupils believed that they were able – to some extent – to control the outcome of monetary gambling. Karm (m, 14) thought that it was possible to improve reaction time that would enable him to better control *«the stop button»* on a slot machine to ensure that all fruit symbols match. This may be possible on a few types of British slot machines, but his view was not based on any ex-

perience with social/(demo) games. Karm also thought that he could increase his chances of winnings by carefully observing the pattern of play on a given slot machine and by choosing the one that had not paid out in a while. Eric (m, 17) thought that players are always guaranteed to win at roulette if they play only black or red, and always double the amount after each loss. He also used the *«demo»* games as a primer in order to learn the rules and discover the odds. Several pupils claimed that their skills may improve their chances of winning in gambling, but those who said so were referring only to the activities where some skill does, in fact, play a part, such as poker and sports betting, while still recognising that their influence is not complete.

## Discussion

The purpose of the present study was primarily to contribute to the debate as to whether, in young people's views, social/*«demo»* gambling and gambling-like activities within video games increase minors' propensity towards real-money gambling and whether these activities should be regulated and only available to those who are over the age of 18. As was pointed out earlier in the paper, a clear correlation between engagement in social/*«demo»* gambling and actual gambling has been established in several studies (Wohl et al., 2014; King et al., 2010). There have been various speculations as to the reasons why young people may potentially move from playing social/*«demo»* gambling games into real gambling. It was posited that (i) both real money gambling and non-monetary gambling adopt similar colourful graphics and attractive audio-stimulants (Messerlian et al., 2004) that may cause a potentially smooth transition within the digital world, (ii) that gamblers' and gamers' motivations are sufficiently similar as to facilitate such a cross-over (Griffiths, 1991), and (iii) that simulated gambling may facilitate development of cognitive misconceptions that players have more control over the outcome of real gambling than is the case (Monaghan et al., 2008) or that they are able to win as frequently in real life as in the practice rounds, which in turn may encourage them to move from free to paying mode (Temcheff et al., 2011). Furthermore, it has been argued that the true nature of gambling-like activities within video games may be unnoticeable to players, thus potentially exposing minors to the excitement of gambling without being able to cognitively understand the true nature of the activity (Griffiths & Parke, 2010).

No evidence as yet has been presented in the United Kingdom as to how young people perceive these activities, whether they perceive the two activities as similar or different propositions, and whether the aforementioned reasons that may facilitate the move from social/*«demo»* gaming into real money gambling can be supported empirically. The findings of the present study indicate that for the sample the two forms of entertainment represented different propositions, and that non-monetary gambling may divert minors

from engaging in otherwise prohibited gambling due to the possibility of satisfying some similar needs without the involvement of financial risks.

The qualitative nature of the focus groups meant that the present study was not intended to prove or disprove the existence of the correlation between social/'demo' gaming and real money gambling. Instead it focused on exploring how young people experience monetary and non-monetary forms of gambling, and whether they are sufficiently aware of the differences and similarities between them in order to analyse whether further regulation in this field is needed. Nevertheless, some comparisons with available quantitative data can be made that further evince the value of the data collected in the present study. The prevalence rates of video gaming (95.5%) and gambling (15%) within the current sample were directly comparable to the prevalence rates of 99% reported by the Ipsos Mori Futurelab Gaming in Families Research for video gaming, and 16% reported by the Ipsos Mori Young People Omnibus 2014. This indicates that the present sample seemed fairly representative of their age cohort. The fact that the majority of participating pupils also engaged in playing Category D gambling machines such as penny pushers or toy grabbers is not surprising, as in the United Kingdom these machines are lawfully accessible to all regardless of age, and minors of all ages are legally allowed to play them (s.46(2) of the Gambling Act 2005; The Categories of Gaming Machines (Amendment Regulations 2014).

Pupils' recognition of gambling-type activities within video games appeared very accurate. This suggests a good ability amongst young people to recognise the structural nature of gambling activities and distinguish between features within the game that can be influenced and those that depend purely on chance or random events. Only two focus groups reported that they had not come across any gambling activities within video games. Pupils from these two groups may have experienced potential difficulties with recognition. Nevertheless, in all other groups, pupils were able to name various games containing not only overt gambling but also covert types of gambling, and to explain why they classified them as such. This somewhat contradicts the findings reported by Hume and Mort (2011), who noted that the majority of participants aged between 13 and 30 years old had a problem understanding what gambling truly is or what the potential risks are, with many seeing gambling simply as a «*sport*» or «*another game*». However, it must be noted that both samples were located in distinct jurisdictions with varying legal treatment of online gambling and gaming, which may have resulted in the reported differences.

Pupils in the present study were able to make a very clear differentiation between video gaming and real gambling. Video gaming was visibly constructed as socially acceptable, desirable, and a valuable teenage leisure activity amongst all participants. Gambling for money was mainly considered to be a vice and was

approached by them with some reservations. This demonstrates that strict legal regulation does – at least to some extent – influence minors with regard to their behaviour, and reinforces the need to ensure that all activities that encourage minors to try out real gambling should fall within the remit of the Gambling Commission in Great Britain.

Nevertheless, most pupils in the sample treated social/'demo' gambling as just a game, and those who considered it equivalent to real gambling still treated it as a «*less harmful*» or softer form. Indeed, those pupils who indicated that they gambled for real money did not seem to be particularly attracted to social gambling, and their involvement in one or the other of these activities brought about materially different emotions and attitudes. Those who engaged in social gaming were not necessarily interested in «*trying it out*» with real money either, even though some of them thought that other individuals may be interested. This supports the recent empirical findings by Gainsbury et al. (2013) who suggested that social gaming and real gambling, despite their similarities, may attract different types of individuals. Although it does not directly contradict the findings reported by Wohl et al. (2014) who found that a large proportion of social gamers migrate to real gambling within six months of starting to play on social sites, it contributes to the arguments advanced by Bednars et al. (2013) that the association may be merely coincidental and not causative.

With regard to motivations, the initial appearance of similarities between video gaming and gambling became less important when further considerations applicable to gambling were considered. Both activities were engaged in due to family influence or peer pressure, in order to bond with family members, to relieve boredom, and to experience competitive but friendly banter. Accordingly, the reasons for playing given by the present sample correspond well to the studies that carried out an analysis of players' motivations, and indicated that both video gaming and gambling help produce similar outcomes in terms of emotional needs satisfaction, relief from stress and boredom, socialisation, arousal and competitiveness (Griffiths & Wood, 2000) and/or escapism (Hellstrom et al, 2012). However, the scale and strength of emotions (both positive and negative) was significantly stronger with respect to gambling, with the desire to win money, to try their luck, to experience the stress of risking something of value and the thrill of suspense when something real was at stake, were much more influential and more strongly felt with monetary gambling only. Social/'demo' gambling and playing video games were instead played predominantly to pass the time or to socialise. This means that these activities tend to fulfil similar but not identical needs. The strong preoccupation with money, and the need to risk something of value meant that that adoption of video like audiovisual effects in gambling games seemed to have little motivating influence, contrary to the suggestions made by Messerlian et al. (2004).

Entertainment games typically allow players to improve their performance and scores through persistent training and betterment of their playing skills, but no amount of practice can influence the outcome of purely random events in games of pure chance, and only relatively limited improvements can be achieved with combined skills and chance, if chance dominates. Although neither is based on pure skill, it has been speculated that this may underpin cognitive misconceptions whereby minors develop inappropriate perception that they are able to control random events by incorrectly comparing video games to gambling either on a conscious or subconscious level, and that they may transfer such misconceptions with regard to odds, skills, and/or chances of winning (Derevensky et al., 2004). This may result in adolescents trying real money gambling due to belief that if they are particularly successful at playing video games they will be equally fortunate in real gambling.

The above suggestion received only negligible support. The sample generally had an excellent understanding that while they can improve their skills in a typical video game, this does not apply to gambling (whether social or real) unless it is a game with some skill (poker, sports betting), although not many of them were able to appreciate that this is because video games utilise algorithms to ensure that this occurs (Gainsbury et al., 2013). Only one pupil thought that he could improve his chances of winning on a slot machine by improving reaction time when pressing the stop button, but this belief was not caused by anything related to online gambling games. He thought that he could increase his chances of winning by carefully observing the pattern of play on a given slot machine and by choosing the one that had not paid out in a while. As this strategy may indeed work on some old British slot machines, this may not necessarily have been a misconception, especially as he was aware that this process only increased his chances slightly but did not offer any certainty of winning.

The other pupil used (demo) games (but not social games) as a «warm-up» in order to work out the odds or work out the system that he could apply to real gambling. This offered some limited support to the argument advanced by Temcheff et al (Temcheff et al, 2011) that such sites may be seen as a practice ground where those who already know that they wish to gamble for real can learn the rules of monetary gambling games (and do so before anyone needs to play with money) or to experiment in a safe environment before placing any money at risk. However, he was in a significant minority, with the majority of other pupils in fact believing that most gambling games are «rigged» or «doggy». Some clearly stated that the (demo) gambling games deliberately misrepresented the odds of winning in order to give the impression that winning is likely and frequent in order to encourage participation in real gambling. In the main, the pupils thought this never reflected the true pay-outs. Such an attitude constitutes a protective factor against some of the at-

tempts identified by Sevigny et al (2005) to lure consumers by providing inflated pay-out rates during the «demo» session that did not reflect the actual odds in payable mode, and also against the potential misunderstandings with regard to the difference in skill level that can be acquired in either video games or gambling.

Several participants (with both positive and negative views of gambling) suggested that practice play may ultimately lead players to monetary gambling, especially if during the free games they regularly win, either against a computer or against other individuals. Some pupils felt that such players may become bored with gambling without external incentives or, if winning, may want to have similar feelings but with real money. However, all of them demonstrated the «Third Party Effect» (Fan & Seonumi, 2004), as none of them considered that these arguments applied to themselves, arguing that they were not susceptible to such influences and this may happen generally to others. Those that already gambled for money were no longer excited or interested in social/(demo) forms of gambling in the same manner. Nevertheless, the availability of such games was seen positively by participants in the present study. This supports the more recent findings by Gainsbury et al. (2014) that for some players, including those who are not as yet legally entitled to play, that social/«demo» gambling games represent a less financially risky alternative to real money gambling that may in turn limit their overall financial risks.

The risk of subconsciously becoming excited by gambling due to exposure to gambling-type activities within video games or social gambling (without conscious recognition of this fact) only materialised for two pupils during their earlier adolescence, but their lack of understanding was corrected during further development and did not necessarily influence their subsequent behaviour or attitudes. Two pupils did not realise that they were gambling when they were (i) playing dice roll in *Habbo Hotel* with real money and (ii) playing card games with family for real money when they were young. However, they became clearly aware of this once they got older. For Jaffa, this experience of gambling was very negative, as she not only lost out on the virtual furniture that she was keen on having, but her parents then prevented her from continuing to play the game that she liked and enjoyed following her loss of £50 on the dice roll. Here, parental intervention, despite the immediate displeasure may be seen as a protective action, yet she subsequently engaged in other types of real gambling (e.g., betting on the Grand National horse race). Twig on the other hand had fond memories of playing cards with family members for money, but those memories did not cause her to develop any desire to gamble for real on any commercial sites or betting shops. Nevertheless, the findings offered some support to the recent argument advanced by King et al. (2014) that exposure to social/«demo» gambling or gambling-like structures may increase pupils' familiarity with the mechanics of gambling and how

such games operate. This in turn may desensitise them to the risks posed by gambling and may contribute to the erosion of many of the restraints that the sample displayed towards this form of activity.

An important insight also emerged demonstrating that, for some pupils, playing video games with or without gambling-like elements or gambling socially suppressed the need to gamble with money or exposed them to experiences that taught them that gambling is «*not a risk worth taking*». Such a finding has not as yet been reported in existing studies on minors and represents a new observation that deserves further exploration. They liked being able to experience the fun and the enjoyable elements of playing as well as the social interaction with their families and friends without taking any financial risks and exposing themselves to the fear or stress of possibly losing money. Although losing social games or video games still created negative feelings, they were nowhere near as strong or significant as losing at gambling games, which for some individuals generated quite substantial amounts of aggressive and violent behaviour.

### Limitations

The qualitative nature of the study prevents any generalisations, and the results are only indicative of the opinions and feelings of the sample interviewed. The risk of young people giving socially desirable answers is always present, and it is possible that only pupils who were perceived to have the «correct attitude» were selected. This is unlikely as pupils expressed many polarised views during their heated debates. However, most pupils attended mainstream education, and this may have created a bias by excluding those who were expelled, truants, and those attending special needs schools. This was, to some extent, counterbalanced by one focus group carried out with socio-economically deprived members of a youth club. No substantive difference was observed, with the exception of a rate of gambling participation that was higher than in other focus groups. There is also a risk that children and young people may not necessarily fully or consciously appreciate how their activities truly influence their current or future behaviour, and this may cause a divergence between views expressed and the actual impact of activities.

### Conclusion

The pupils in the present sample clearly viewed gambling and social gaming as very different propositions. Despite their similar characteristics, pupils clearly differentiated between activities with real life consequences and those that only resulted in losing points or in-game credits in a video game, with those that involved gambling for money being significantly more important and serious than the latter category. Winning, losing or even merely playing video games generated substantially lower levels of emotion than was

the case with monetary gambling, which provoked additional physical reactions of stress, tension, fear, aggression and more intensive competitiveness. Only a very small number of pupils displayed beliefs and perceptions that may have put them at risk of gambling-related harm resulting from social gaming. It could be argued that in order to protect even this small proportion of children and young people that may be at risk, such activities should be regulated and banned for anyone under the age of 18. However, despite the appearance of an initial attractiveness of such an argument, this proposition becomes more complicated in light of the emerging evidence that for some young people, social gaming represents a substitute for real gambling, the removal of which could prompt them to try monetary forms of gambling. In such situations, treating social/(demo) gambling the same way as monetary gambling may prove counterproductive.

The compromise position would be to produce a system of regulation that would require social/(demo) gambling sites to ensure that odds of winnings are not misrepresented at any point. This supports the EU Commission recommendation that asks Member States to ensure that «*play-for-fun games used in commercial communications are subject to the same rules and technical conditions as the corresponding play-for-money games*» (VIII.42 Commission's Recommendation 2014/478/EU, 2014), and implementation of this measure should be strongly supported. Social gambling games should include warning messages in a similar way to real gambling sites, and should display an indication that they are truly permitted to be played only for points and in-game credits that are not transferable in any shape or form between the players or outside the game itself, while still allowing young people to play. That would potentially address both sides of the argument and would, at least to some extent, protect vulnerable youngsters, while allowing those who do not like financial risk a viable alternative.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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## Juegos de apuestas y el juego de apuestas social: un estudio de las percepciones y el comportamiento juvenil

**Resumen.** Antecedentes y objetivos: los juegos de azar que no impliquen gasto de dinero (por ejemplo, juegos sociales y demos, y juegos de azar dentro del ámbito de los videojuegos) han sido considerados, tanto por la literatura jurídica como por la psicológica, causantes de aumentar la propensión de los menores a formas prohibidas de juego, por lo que se han lanzado alertas a las entidades reguladoras para aprehender y restringir con parámetros de edad este tipo de juegos. Sin embargo, todavía escasean los datos empíricos que analicen cómo viven los jóvenes los juegos de apuestas monetarios y no monetarios, y si son suficientemente conscientes de sus diferencias.

Métodos: los datos fueron recogidos de 23 grupos de estudio, con enfoque cualitativo, realizados con 200 jóvenes de edades comprendidas entre los 14 y los 19 años en escuelas ubicadas en Londres y Kent. Como se trataba de un estudio de naturaleza experimental, se adoptó el análisis temático con el fin de ver cómo los alumnos categorizaban, construían y reaccionaban ante las actividades de juego de azar en comparación con las formas monetarias de estos juegos que carecen de las limitaciones de un marco teórico predeterminado.

Resultados: a pesar de las similitudes, se observaron diferencias sustanciales entre las formas monetarias y no monetarias de los juegos de azar en cuanto a compromiso de los alumnos, motivación, factores, fuerza, intensidad y emociones asociadas. Los alumnos diferenciaron claramente las formas monetarias y no monetarias del juego; sin embargo, no se observó preferencia por una u otra forma entre los participantes. Únicamente surgieron algunas evidencias respecto de los juegos demo, que se utilizan como ámbito de práctica de futuros juegos de apuestas.

Conclusión: para la presente muestra, los alumnos mostraron una predisposición distinta en función de si se trataba de formas no monetarias o formas monetarias reales, pero sin un solapamiento inherente entre ambas. Para algunos, la forma «más suave» minimizó la tentación de probar otras formas de juego prohibidas legalmente, pero la demo de juegos puede atraer a aquellos que ya están dispuestos a apostar.

Las implicaciones normativas: los reguladores deben reconocer y evaluar estos dos aspectos contradictorios.

**Palabras clave:** Social / demo juegos de azar, actividades de juegos de apuestas, juegos de apuestas monetarios, Reino Unido, menores de edad, protección contra daños relacionados con el juego de apuestas

