

From the mouths of social media users: A focus group study exploring the social casino gaming–online gambling link

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Background and aims: The potential link between social casino gaming and online gambling has raised considerable concerns among clinicians, researchers and policy makers. Unfortunately, however, there is a paucity of research examining this potential link, especially among young adults. This represents a significant gap given young adults are frequently exposed to and are players of social casino games. **Methods:** To better understand the *potential* link between social casino games and online gambling, we conducted three focus groups ($N = 30$) at two large Canadian Universities with college students who were avid social media users (who are regularly exposed to social casino games). **Results:** Many participants spontaneously mentioned that social casino games were a great opportunity to build gambling skills before playing for real money. Importantly, some participants expressed a belief that there is a direct progression from social casino gaming to online gambling. Conversely, others believed the transition to online gambling depended on a person's personality, rather than mere exposure to social casino games. While many young adults in our focus groups felt immune to the effects of social casino games, there was a general consensus that social casino games may facilitate the transition to online gambling among younger teenagers (i.e., 12–14 yr olds), due to the ease of accessibility and early exposure. **Discussion:** The results of the present research point to the need for more study on the effects of social casino gambling as well as a discussion concerning regulation of social casino games in order to minimize their potential risks.

Keywords: social casino games, online gambling, social media sites, focus groups, qualitative research

The gambling industry has always relied on technology and technological advances to drive its profitability (Turner, 2008). One such advance is the Internet, where social media sites (e.g., Facebook) have presented an opportunity for gambling operators to increase their profits by attracting potential new customers. Aside from advertising for online gambling sites (as well as land-based venues), social media users are increasingly provided with the opportunity to engage in gambling-style activities through a freemium model (i.e., free to play with option to purchase additional credits) via social casino game applications. The explicitly expressed hope among gambling operators is that exposure to social casino games will result in migration to gambling (Morgan Stanley Report, 2012). It is well established that social casino games have become immensely popular on social media sites, with over 173 million active players worldwide (Martin, 2014). However, there is still a paucity of research that has examined whether there is a link between playing social casino games and subsequent online gambling (for exceptions see Gainsbury, Russell, & Hing, 2014; Kim, Wohl, Salmon, Gupta, & Derevensky, 2015). It has been argued, however, that the greatest harms of social casino games may be introducing online gambling to people who have never gambled online (Derevensky & Gainsbury, 2016). In this light, avid social media users represent a potentially vulnerable population that may be at risk for the influence of social casino games. Herein, we provide the

results of a focus group study conducted with avid social media users who have regular exposure to social casino games.

SOCIAL CASINO GAMES

Frequent users of social media sites are exposed to a plethora of online gambling-like activities including poker or casino-type activities, played with virtual money. These *social casino games* (Gainsbury, Hing, Delfabbro, & King, 2014) have become exceedingly popular and are among the most profitable games on social media sites (Shu, 2014). With no actual money being risked, it would be easy to assume engagement with such social casino games is a benign form of entertainment. However, it has been argued that exposure to casino-styled games via social casino gaming may pave the way for later gambling (Derevensky & Gainsbury, 2016; Parke, Wardle, Rigbye, & Parke, 2013). The argument is that people are at times reluctant to play casino games given they perceive themselves as lacking

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sufficient skill. By playing for free on social casino applications, individuals can become comfortable with the game before advancing to online (or land-based) casinos to play with real money. Providing support for this contention, Kim et al. (2015) showed 26% of social casino gamers who have never gambled online migrated to online gambling within a period of six months.

One reason why people may be likely to transition from social casino games to online gambling is that they share many similar characteristics. For example, social casino games look and sound like online gambling (Bramley & Gainsbury, 2015). It has been suggested that the visual and auditory features of social casino games are positively reinforcing and thus, increases the use of social casino games (similar to online gambling; Bramley & Gainsbury, 2015; Derevensky, Gainsbury, Gupta, & Ellery, 2013). Moreover, akin to betting with real money, social casino players can purchase virtual credits (known as micro-transactions) for extra features or extended play, making the games psychologically similar to gambling (Griffiths, 2013). Given the similarities between social casino games and online gambling, it is not surprising that some people find it difficult to distinguish between playing for free or paying to play (Parke et al., 2013). Furthermore, in some jurisdictions (e.g., UK), users of social media can gamble for real money directly on Facebook, further blurring the line between social casino games and actual online gambling.

CONVERGENCE OF GAMBLING AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The potential link between social casino gaming and online gambling has not been lost on gambling operators. In fact, the Morgan Stanley Report (2012) explicitly stated that the migration of social casino gamers to online gambling is likely a focus of gambling operators. Indeed, gambling operators have begun purchasing, merging or partnering with social casino gaming companies (Sapsted, 2013; Schneider, 2012). Additionally, there has been a steady increase in advertisements for online gambling sites on Facebook (Gainsbury, Hing, Delfabbro, Dewart, & King, 2015), including during social casino game play (Parke et al., 2013). This has resulted in social media users reporting very high levels of exposure to gambling advertisements on Facebook (Gainsbury, Delfabbro, King, & Hing, 2015). The ubiquity of social casino advertisement might be a concern as social network ads are the most common way players learn about new social casino games (www.superdataresearch.com) and importantly, as exposure to these games may facilitate the transition to online gambling (Kim et al., 2015).

One *hypothesized* mechanism by which social casino games may lead to online gambling could be due to the structural characteristics of social casino games. Specifically, social casino games are not based on mathematical odds and random chance, but are based on algorithms that are designed to enhance player enjoyment and keep players engaged (Gainsbury & Derevensky, 2013). One means to achieve this end may be to increase the frequency and

magnitude of wins social casino gamers experience during play (particularly in comparison to what is typically experienced when gambling). Unfortunately, however, when players experience an increased amount of wins on social casino games, they may have an unrealistic evaluation of their own skills and, therefore, believe they are able to be highly successful should they transition to actual gambling.

In sum, there is preliminary empirical evidence to suggest a link between social casino games and online gambling. Given social casino games may influence the transition to online gambling, more research is needed to understand the potential link between social casino games and online gambling – especially among populations that may be vulnerable to the effects of social casino games. In this light, the overall objective of the current research was to explore the potential association between social casino games and online gambling. To this end, we recruited a sample of emerging adults (i.e., ages 18–24) who are avid social media users.

We chose to recruit a sample of emerging adults for several important reasons. First, a recent empirical investigation found that 42% of youths had seen promotions for gambling on Facebook, and over 23% reported playing social casino games (Gainsbury, King et al., 2015). Thus, significant portions of young adults who use social media are exposed to and engage in social casino games. Second, while there is generally a paucity of research on social casino gaming, there is little to no research examining the influence of social casino gaming in this specific age population, a gap we aimed to address in the present research. It should be noted that we did not restrict our sample to social casino games users. We did so because we were interested in the extent to which social media users in general were aware of social casino games (as a result of advertisements, friends playing the games, Facebook newsfeeds) and their perceptions of these games.

OVERVIEW OF PRESENT RESEARCH

The present research used multiple focus groups to collect qualitative data on social casino games and their potential link to online gambling. Focus groups are a form of group interview that capitalizes on communication between research participants in order to generate data, and group interaction becomes an essential component of the methodology. Rather than the researcher asking each person to respond to a question in turn, individuals are encouraged to talk with one another, asking questions, exchanging anecdotes and commenting on each other's experiences and points of view. This method is particularly useful for exploring people's knowledge and experiences and can be used to examine not only what people think, but also how they think, their motivations and underlying reasons, especially when there is a paucity of research into the given subject matter.

The focus groups dealt with several main themes; (a) participants' general use and impression of social media sites, and (b) participants' thoughts and experiences with social casino games; specifically the link (if any) between social casino games and online gambling. A licensed

clinical psychologist trained in conducting focus groups led the discussions, accompanied by two note-takers. Each group lasted approximately 60–75 minutes in duration and discussions were conducted at two Canadian Universities (in Montreal and Ottawa).

METHODS

Participants

Thirty young adults (17 males, 13 females) enrolled in one of two large Canadian universities were recruited for one of three focus groups. The inclusion criteria were as follows: college students between 18–24 years of age who indicated using social media Internet sites a minimum of 4 times per week and who never gambled online. We recruited social media users as we posited avid social media users who have regular exposure to social casino gaming could contribute meaningfully to our understanding of some of the influences leading to online gambling. In addition, the sample was limited to individuals who have never gambled online as researchers have theorized social casino games may act as a “gateway” to online gambling (Derevensky & Gainsbury, 2016). Thus, the greatest potential harms of social casino gaming might be to those who are exposed to social casino games and as a result subsequently migrate to online gambling.

Procedure and materials

Upon arrival, all participants were provided with a description of the study objectives and were asked to read and sign an informed consent indicating they wished to participate in the current study. Upon providing informed consent, participants were asked to complete a brief questionnaire including demographic items.

Each focus group was recorded with use of digital recording devices (two were used at each session to ensure no loss of data and the capturing of all dialogue). Discussions were subsequently transcribed and coded. Two coders independently reviewed all transcripts. The initial categories generated by the data were highly consistent between the two raters in regards to general themes and number of categories. The data was reviewed two more times to resolve any disagreements. Category names were reached through consensus after discussion between raters. NVivo 10 qualitative research software was used to organize and quantify the data.

Ethics

The study procedures were carried out with high ethical standards as outlined in the American Psychological Association’s Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (Standard 8; Research and Publication) and in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. The study obtained approval from the Carleton University Research Ethics Board (Certificate #12-031). All participants were provided with sufficient information needed to provide informed consent to participate. Moreover, participants were

informed they were free to withdraw their consent at any time during the study without penalty.

Participants in the first group were compensated \$20 for their time and those in the remaining two groups were provided with \$40 (the increased compensation was used as an incentive to attract more participants and was cleared by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board). Additionally, participants were provided food and beverages throughout the course of the focus groups. All participants were orally debriefed and provided with a written debriefing form upon completion of the focus group session.

RESULTS

Preliminary results

From the background questionnaire, the vast majority (96.7%) indicated viewing their social media sites multiple times per day, with only one participant viewing less frequently (i.e., only once per day). The devices most often used to access social media sites included smartphones and laptop computers, with 70% of respondents indicating using a combination of devices. Despite recruiting social media users in general, approximately half of the participants (16/30; 53.3%) reported engaging in social media games. Moreover, all participants expressed awareness that social casino games were available on Facebook and reported exposure to them via advertisements and newsfeed posts.

Main results

Twenty-one themes emerged from the discussions with avid social media users. Social media was credited for keeping people connected, informed (via pictures and status updates, access to news), and the enhancement of self (ego building). While not verbalized frequently, there was a general consensus (nodding and agreement among the participants) that social media is an integral and important part of everyday life, and that to not be part of it can be difficult and isolating for some.

The most verbalized aspect of social media pertained to the games that could be played in a social way. It was argued that since social media sites are designed to connect people within a social forum, the idea of having the option to play games within a social context makes perfect sense. There were, however, mixed feelings about the games overall. Some found them to be boring, annoying, an avenue for procrastination, all consuming (think about the games even when not playing), not sufficiently sophisticated enough (i.e., graphics), while others viewed them simply as a waste of time. There was a good deal of resentment expressed over how Facebook now charges money to players for certain games in order to enhance and prolong their play and thus be more competitive.

Some of them [Facebook games] have micro transactions and that means that you pay for advantages in the games and you pay for that with real money. So people can actually spend money to waste more of their time.

It makes no sense to pay money to get things that accentuate your play in this fake world.

However, the socially competitive aspect of the social casino games (leader boards, bragging online about one's score) was mentioned in favorable terms. That is, participants relished the idea of playing social casino games and watching their score (e.g., their credit total) relative to their friends (i.e., watching the leader boards) as well as bragging on social media sites about their score. A few participants noted that their ego was nourished and enhanced with such games.

... the successful games all have a component of competitiveness and the leader board and all that, so it gets addictive and you can level out or interact with your friends. Even though there isn't real money, there is prestige. You're in a way proving to others that you are better than them, or the computer.

Most university students are broke. We need these free games. It feeds your ego and your self-esteem when you get lots of points.

The second most referred to issue was the loss of control. Social media games were described as being very addictive in nature, resulting in obsessive-type behavior (preoccupation even when not playing). When it came to the topic of games and certain features offered on social media sites, there was a general sense of 'if it is right there, we will use it' (even if it is not optimal) as opposed to searching for better options. For example, one participant noted:

Well I think it is about the behavior of people. People are lazy in general. Say you go to a supermarket and check for something that's on sale when you see something else you want too that's for sale in another store but that store is far away you will probably just grab the things altogether so since Facebook is very popular and most people would just see the Texas Hold'em poker and save the trouble of going on another site. It's this kind of behavior among people.

The potential link between social casino game and online gambling

There was a general consensus that social casino gaming provides an excellent opportunity for learning how to gamble. Specifically, participants noted that social media sites serve as a way for youths to learn the rule of particular gambling games and become familiar with how to play via the social casino gaming opportunities. Moreover, participants highlighted the ease of accessibility, the constant presence and how easy it is to access social casino games in today's era of the smartphones and tablets as some of the features that contribute to social casino games being a medium to develop and build their skill before transitioning to actual online gambling.

It's a good way to learn too. Like, if you were going to the casino, it's a good way to learn how to gamble. That's how I learned to play Texas Hold'em.

When you are 18, you can start gambling. Once you start gambling, you think I can gamble now. And I think that's why university students are more prone to using these Texas Hold'em websites because you are finally legal and you can learn how to play with these app games.

Facebook is just a place to learn. To learn how to gamble. My friends started playing on Facebook to learn and now they are playing on Poker Stars. It starts on Facebook.

Importantly, a number of participants spontaneously mentioned that they thought social casino games on social media sites helped promote and pave the way for online gambling.

*A few of my friends started on Facebook playing Texas Hold'em and then they started playing on Poker Stars for real money, and they were losing like a lot of their money and like at the time, they did not realize what was going on. They had a hard time with the transition from playing online for free, to paying for playing online; and they were losing like hundreds of dollars. **Moderator:** And when you say that they didn't understand, did they tell you that? **Participant:** Yeah, they talked to a lot of people about it, and they said 'I didn't understand how I got from one place to another place, from playing for fun to being in trouble.'*

I know some friends of mine who started playing Texas Hold'em on Facebook and then they win and then they are on top on the leader board and they want to try in real life so they go to a real casino. So I think this is where it sends a bad message.

For the fake money games, for example, Texas Hold'em on Facebook you can login everyday and they give you a certain amount of money and that like makes you more vulnerable and to make you more prone to play.

I would think that when you are playing just for fun, and you want maybe a bit more of a challenge, you start playing against other people for the competition, and if you're doing quite well, you think 'maybe I could actually win something.'

The curiosity is one of the things that we always have and if you can play for free then you want to try it and if you discover that you are good at it then why not just put some money and you might win for real.

Other participants, however, challenged this notion. Specifically, some argued that social casino games were sufficiently enjoyable and there was no need to seek real gambling experiences on other sites. Some were adamant that there was not a link between social casino games and online gambling, and if there was, that it had more to do with individual characteristics rather than the games themselves.

I don't doubt that those web sites can get you hooked. I don't think it is the website, I think it is the personality of the person going into it that is the issue.

I would probably not try it for real money because I just don't want to. I tend to separate having fun and earning money as two different concepts but to some people who

are willing to take chances and risks it is definitely something they will try at some point.

It depends on the person. Some people are more competitive and are more likely to want to step it up, but some people are just happy playing for fun.

Personally I don't gamble and I don't have any intention to gamble but if I were to try to something like a gambling game I would not do it through Facebook, I would do it through an actual site to do it. So personally Facebook would not be a gateway for me.

Personally, I don't think it does, well not necessarily. I play poker, I like poker I do play with my friends with money but I never play on Facebook. . . . But if I have some things to do if I want to play poker I'm not going to say let's go on Facebook, actually no, if I want to play poker I am going to call my friends meet up and do this right and I think this is way more interesting and you are way more into the game when you do it for real than when you do it on Facebook.

Moreover, some participants mentioned that at their age (i.e., young adults), social casino games did not influence the transition to online gambling, as they were already of age to gamble at a casino.

I think it is different for our age group. If I want to gamble I can get off my butt and have a shower and go to the casino and get in no problem. I can sign up on an online gambling site with my credit card and my real date of birth with no problem. But if I was 14 and I really want to play poker, I cannot get onto this site because I don't have a credit card, but I can go on Facebook and they give me free tokens or some fake money system. And I can play and oh I can win, and now I am a leader and I should go play for real now because then I can win real money and then it is a downward spiral all because I was able to play this game when I shouldn't be able to.

Thus, participants expressed having mixed perceptions about (and emotional reactions to) social casino gambling as a pathway to online gambling. There was a general consensus, however, that for some populations, social casino games could influence the transition to online gambling. Specifically, many participants expressed that, for younger teenagers the early exposure to social casino games may be a risk factor for transitioning to online gambling. Moreover, accessibility and ease of social casino games were mentioned as a possible risk factor for youths.

Because we have already been exposed to it whereas someone who is younger maybe 12, 13 or 14 would be like oh its Texas Hold'em maybe I'll play.

Back in the day, we didn't know about poker or gambling until our fathers or uncles taught us about it, but it's different today. It is so accessible on Facebook. Exposure is much earlier and greater.

It's so easy. Facebook is so accessible. Gambling (for fun) is so accessible to young people on Facebook. It's a

real easy way for them to get overly involved with it. It's ok for people who know their limits, but people who don't know that, like younger kids, it's not.

Lastly, the lack of age restriction and verification on social casino games was mentioned as a worrisome factor for some participants.

I don't think Texas hold'em on Facebook has an age restriction so you can fake your age.

Yeah if there is no age restriction, a 13-year-old kid might think oh well I can play for free and when I actually get a job I could play with real money, so yeah.

DISCUSSION

Social media sites were initially developed as a way for people to connect and communicate with family and friends. Over the years, however, they have evolved and now offer users the opportunity to engage in games, including free gambling simulated games. The purpose of the present paper was to qualitatively examine the perception of social media sites among young adults generally and the perceived potential link between social casino games and online gambling from social media users who are frequently exposed (and are players) of social casino games more specifically.

Twenty-one distinct themes emerged from the focus groups. Social media sites were credited with keeping people connected and was generally agreed upon that it was an important aspect of people's daily lives. The most verbalized aspect of social media sites was the games that could be played. Given social media sites were designed to help connect people, being able to play games in a social way on sites such as Facebook made sense to the participants. However, while some participants reported enjoying playing social casino games, others felt they were a waste of time and not "sophisticated enough." Interestingly, participants reported that social casino games provide an opportunity to build self-esteem and prestige through leader boards. Moreover, participants felt that social casino games provided a great learning opportunity for individuals to practice for free and hone their skills, before playing for real money. Indeed, several participants reported having first learned to gamble on Facebook (e.g., Texas Hold'em) before actually gambling for money, while others reported knowing friends who started playing social casino games before transitioning to actual online gambling sites.

When it came to the potential link between social casino games and online gambling, participants' views were mixed. While some emerging adults felt there was a clear link between social casino games and online gambling, others did not. Specifically, some participants believed that when you are doing well in social casino games, it gives you a sense that you could win real money. This belief may have been accentuated by the higher payout rates in social casino games. Indeed, rather than being based on random chance and mathematics, social casino games are based on

algorithms to maximize player enjoyment (Gainsbury & Derevensky, 2013), which includes a higher proportion of wins. The accompanying inflation of skill and cognitive distortions (e.g., I can make money if I now play on actual gambling sites) as a result of the inflated payout might be one potential mechanism by which social casino games may lead to online gambling.

Conversely, however, the view of social casino games being linked to online gambling was contested by other participants who perceived that the transition to online gambling was dependent on the individual's characteristics (e.g., personality) rather than the social casino games themselves. One message that was communicated very clearly in the focus groups was that social casino games might be risky for younger underage teenagers. Some participants noted that since they have already been exposed to gambling and as they were of age to gamble at a land based casino, social casino games did not have much influence over the transition to online gambling. However, there was an overall consensus that since there is a lack of enforced age restrictions and verification on social casino games and given their accessibility, these games might be particularly problematic for adolescents. The feelings of being immune to the effects of social casino games expressed by the emerging adults in the focus groups are concerning. Indeed, participants felt that because they were of a legal age to gamble and moreover have been exposed to gambling, they felt social casino games would not have an influence on their transition to online gambling. However, research conducted in our lab suggests a significant portion of young online gamblers first started playing social casino games before transitioning to actual gambling. Thus, the sense of invulnerability may pose a risk factor among young adults who are frequently exposed to social casino games but have yet to gamble online.

The lack of age regulations on social casino sites warrants further discussion. Currently, social casino games are not regulated but rather have a recommend "Best Practices" framework, as they are technically not gambling activities as no money is actually being risked. However, some have called for the regulation of social casino games as they feel social casino games represent a risk factor for the development of disordered gambling (Derevensky & Gainsbury, 2016; see Schneider, 2012). Moreover, despite age restrictions, some online gambling sites have lax age verification measures. For example, a 16-year-old was able to place bets on a staggering 81% of the sites tested (Griffiths, Derevensky, & Parke, 2012). Thus, minors who engage in social casino games have a potential avenue to transition from playing for fun to paying to play. Given, online gambling has been theorized as a potentially harmful way of engaging in gambling activities (e.g., McBride & Derevensky, 2009; Potenza et al., 2011; Wood, Griffiths, & Parke, 2007), this can be a potentially dangerous avenue for youths. Moreover, as teenagers are especially vulnerable to the effects of advertisement and might be more impressionable (Binde, 2014) it might be prudent to put in place age restrictions and/or information regarding the true odds of social casino games and online gambling. However, these sites if used as a prevention tool might be useful in dissuading individuals from gambling.

In addition to the lack of age restriction, the advertisement of gambling activities is another important topic that warrants further investigation. Previous studies have found that the promotion of social casino games on Facebook was an important factor in engaging in these games (Gainsbury, Delfabbro et al., 2015). Given advertisement for gambling is ubiquitous on Facebook, and as advertisements may increase gambling behaviors (Hing, Cherney, Blaszczynski, Gainsbury, & Lubman, 2014), it might be fruitful for future research to examine whether advertisement of gambling on social media sites influence the gambling behaviour of young individuals.

A limitation of the present study is that we chose to restrict our sample to young adults (i.e., university student). As such, the themes and views expressed in the present paper might not generalize to gamblers in the general population (Gainsbury, Russell, & Blaszczynski, 2014). That said, young adults have been identified as a population in which examining the influence of social casino games to online gambling would be fruitful (Gainsbury, Hing et al., 2015), given they are at a vulnerable stage in their lives – especially when it comes to social media advertisement and peer pressure. We also take this opportunity to reiterate that participation in the current research was not restricted to social casino game players. Interestingly, all the young adults in our focus groups were aware that social casino games existed on Facebook and reported being exposed to these games via Facebook. With that said, it would be of importance for researchers to conduct focus groups with social casino game players, exclusively. Doing so may provide important insight about what attracts social media users to social casino games and why they continue to play such games.

CONCLUSIONS

We view the results of the current study as a preliminary foray into a potential link between social casino games and online gambling. The results of the focus groups provided rich and valuable information on the potential link between playing for fun and gambling with money. However, we like others, believe more research is needed to further examine the link between social casino games and online gambling in order to mitigate the harms social casino games may have on the development of future gambling behaviors. Fortunately, regulators have started to take notice of social casino games, and further research will help shed light on the potential risks (and benefits) of these immensely popular games.

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Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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