

Is It Gambling? Young Players' Perceptions of Loot Boxes, Skin Gambling, and Risk in Mainland China

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INTRODUCTION

As some digital games increasingly combine play, payment, chance, and tradable virtual items, researchers have raised questions about where gaming ends and gambling begins. Loot boxes are in-game mechanisms that provide players with randomised virtual rewards, which may be obtained through gameplay, in-game currency, or real-money purchase (Xiao et al. 2022; Zendle and Cairns 2018). They have been described as gambling-like because some forms combine payment, chance, and uncertain rewards, although not all loot boxes are purchased directly with real-world money (Drummond and Sauer 2018; Zendle and Cairns 2018). Skin gambling refers to gambling or gambling-like practices in which cosmetic game items, or “skins”, are used as stakes, prizes, or objects of exchange through betting, case-opening, trading, or cash-out systems, often on third-party platforms (Macey and Hamari 2019; Wardle 2019). Existing studies have examined these practices in relation to gambling risk, digital item economies, and regulatory debate. Less attention has been paid to how young players themselves understand and compare these mechanisms, especially in non-Western gaming contexts.

The analysis focuses on how young players in mainland China perceive the gambling-like nature and possible risks of loot boxes and skin gambling, and how they draw boundaries between play, spending, gambling, and harm. It draws on selected findings from an ongoing doctoral project on gambling-like features in digital games in China. The wider study uses mixed methods, including a survey of 2,044 university students aged 18–24 in mainland China and semi-structured qualitative interviews with young people who had experience of loot boxes or skin gambling. Data were collected between September and December 2024. Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2006). Survey data were analysed descriptively for the findings presented here. In this presentation, survey findings are used to situate the scale and patterning of engagement, while qualitative interviews provide the main basis for interpreting how players make sense of these practices.

Nearly all interview participants recognised gambling-like qualities in loot boxes and compared them with other chance-based gambling activities, such as lotteries and prize draws. They identified several features that made loot boxes feel gambling-like, including uncertainty over outcomes, repeated spending, and the pursuit of rare rewards. However, recognising these gambling-like features did not necessarily mean that participants viewed loot boxes as equivalent to conventional gambling. Some participants acknowledged their gambling-like nature but considered them less risky because the stakes were lower, the rewards remained within the game, or the activity was perceived as legal and familiar. Others went further by framing loot boxes as a form of legalised or contained gambling that might substitute for, or reduce interest in, more harmful forms of gambling. These accounts resonate with qualitative work showing that players can recognise parallels between loot boxes and gambling while still distinguishing them from conventional gambling through references to game design, perceived harm, institutional definitions, and everyday player experience (Hodge et al. 2022; Rolando and Wardle 2024).

Skin gambling was more often viewed as closer to gambling because it involved tradable skins, third-party platforms, case-opening sites, and the possibility of profit or loss. Interview participants described skins not only as cosmetic items, but also as objects with exchange value, status value, and speculative potential. Participants' understanding of third-party case-opening sites varied: some described them as gambling-like and legally problematic in mainland China, while others saw them as credible because the promised skins were delivered. This suggests that successful item delivery could make gambling-like platforms appear trustworthy. Skin gambling was therefore connected with risk-taking, investment-like thinking, peer influence, and attempts to "win back" previous losses. These accounts echo Wardle's (2019) discussion of skin gambling as part of the convergence between gaming and gambling.

Risk was understood in broader terms than formal gambling classification. Interview participants raised concerns about overspending, repeated draws or case openings, chasing rare rewards, attempts to recover previous losses, regret after spending, and doubts about whether probability systems were transparent or fair. Loot box risks were often softened by their connection to ordinary game progression, collection, character improvement, and social display. Skin gambling risks were more directly linked to tradable item value, third-party platforms, speculation, and the possibility of profit or loss. These perceptions were shaped by the Chinese gaming context, including youth protection policies, probability disclosure rules, payment practices, and local meanings attached to digital items and in-game spending.

By focusing on perception, this paper contributes to games research by showing how gambling-like mechanics are interpreted through everyday play, consumption, social experience, and regulatory context. It argues that the key question is not only whether loot boxes or skin gambling should be defined as gambling, but how young players learn to recognise, minimise, justify, or question their risks within specific cultural and platform environments.

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BIO

Yekun Sun is a PhD researcher in Sociology at the University of Glasgow and a lecturer in psychology at North China University of Science and Technology. Her work spans psychology, addiction studies and digital culture, with previous research on internet and gaming addiction and substance-use interventions. Her current doctoral project extends these interests to gambling-like game monetisation, youth gaming practices, and the boundaries between digital play, consumption, and harm in China.

Gerda Reith is Professor of Social Sciences at the University of Glasgow. Her research examines gambling, addiction, consumption, risk, and social inequality. Her award-winning book *The Age of Chance* reframed gambling as a cultural practice rooted in social structures, while *Addictive Consumption* explored dependency in contemporary consumer culture. Across qualitative and policy-focused research, she has shown how gambling-related harms are patterned by socioeconomic disadvantage, gender, space, and generation. She has contributed to research-policy debates through work with the Gambling Commission, WHO expert groups, and national policy panels.

Heather Wardle is Professor of Gambling Research and Policy at the University of Glasgow. Her work examines gambling at the intersection of public health, policy, and social inequality. She has played leading roles in major UK gambling surveillance studies, including the Health Survey for England, the British Gambling Prevalence Survey, and the Gambling Survey for Great Britain. Her expertise spans research, policy engagement, and public communication, including work with the Lancet Public Health Commission on Gambling and international advisory bodies such as the WHO.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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