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Child and Adolescent Mental Health

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Debate: Academics should collaborate with the technology industry, but not in lieu of noncollaborative research

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Academic research collaborations with the technology industry should be complementary to and, importantly, *must not replace* noncollaborative research that is independent from the industry (and, in particular, 'adversarial research' whose negative findings will likely operate against industry interests). Reflecting on the author's own research projects concerning companies' compliance with video game loot box regulation, he agrees with Livingstone et al.'s proposition (*Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 2022, 28, 150) that research seeking to identify problems (and thereby work against the industry's interests) should be conducted independently (p. 151), at least initially. He also echoes the sentiment expressed by Zendle and Wardle (*Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, 2022, 28, 155) that 'a moratorium' (p. 156) or a ban on industry collaborations is *not* a proportional response to legitimate concerns about conflict of interest stemming from the video game industry's discretionary provision of data access. A combined approach that conducts both noncollaborative and collaborative research, but with the latter being conducted only after the former's unbiased results are known, might prove fruitful. Academics must bear in mind that industry involvement at any particular stage of the research, or at all, is not always appropriate. Some research questions should not and cannot be answered objectively with industry involvement. Funding bodies and other stakeholders should also recognise this and not render industry collaboration compulsory.

This is a response to the debate series on industry-academia collaboration led by Livingstone, Orben, and Odgers (2022). Other debate contributions have already demonstrated that the potential merits are undeniable. However, the potential negatives must also be duly recognised. Access to data can be perceived as a sort of quasi-funding by the technology industry: similarly to how monetary funding can dictate and redirect research priorities, so too can this be done through selectively providing data access (Zendle & Wardle, 2022). The industry can get academics to 'ask the *right* question,' specifically, the 'right' question whose 'right' answers would be commercially beneficial to the industry. These so-called 'right' questions might indeed often be the 'wrong' questions to be asking from a public health perspective.

To illustrate, in the video game context, the industry has provided data on gameplay time to help research players' wellbeing (Johannes, Vuorre, & Przybylski, 2021). However, it has *not* shared data on monetary spending, particularly regarding gambling-like loot boxes, despite repeated calls from policy makers, academics, and Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) advocacy groups in many countries to do so (e.g. Etchells, Morgan, & Quintana, 2022, pp. 11–12). Five years after initial concerns were raised, no data has been provided by even one socially responsible company. Academics have therefore been forced to resort to using less reliable self-reported data (Xiao, Henderson, Nielsen, & Newall, 2022, p. 166). Policy makers and the public were thereby deprived of the best available evidence by the industry's inaction.

One should fairly query here: are research questions relating to gameplay time the 'right' questions for academics to ask from the industry's perspective (because the industry has provided data to answer them), but those relating to monetary spending on loot boxes the 'wrong' questions (because the industry has provided no data)? One might be tempted to presume...

Are not the 'wrong' questions for the industry, precisely the right questions for the public (represented by independent academics) to ask and demand answers to? Research involving industry collaboration *must not replace* research without industry involvement. 'Noncollaborative research,' which operates without and potentially against the industry (which then might be a subcategory of 'adversarial research'), should be contrasted with 'collaborative research,' which operates with the industry.

Researchers should consider doing both types of research but, at least in a regulatory compliance context, this should be done in the specific order that noncollaborative research should come first and then potentially be followed by collaborative research. This is because, when assessing and demonstrating the industry's failings, industry involvement may lead to a change in corporate behaviour (e.g., compliance behaviour) that render the study's results inaccurate.

The author's study (Xiao, 2023a) finding that the 'ban' on loot boxes in Belgium has not been effectively

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complied with by companies was conducted as a registered report to maximally adopt open science principles (which industry-academia collaborations should also always strive towards) (see Chambers & Tzavella, 2022). The author's announcement that he will be conducting this study on social media appears to have caused, approximately 2 days later, one company in the preregistered sample to change its corporate compliance behaviour by removing a game from the Belgian market (but not from any other national markets) and thereby evading scrutiny (and public reporting of its potential consumer protection failings) (Xiao, 2023a). Upon publication of the preprint of this study and popular media reporting thereof, companies have also reportedly taken compliance actions following the author's recommendation (see https://web.archive.org/web/20220915221337/https://www.gamedeveloper.com/pc/-i-roblox-i-game-i-adopt-me-i-ends-netherlands-service-due-to-loot-boxes).

Had the industry been involved with this study's research process, then it is highly likely that compliance behaviour would have changed immediately as a result of that initial involvement, such that no objective assessment and reporting of the companies' compliance behaviours could have been subsequently made. The research process of involving the industry inherently influences the eventual results, which is detrimental to some studies. On the other hand, early industry involvement, which allows companies to promptly fix (or, viewed more cynically, hide) their mistakes and omissions, may cause an earlier reduction of consumer harms, because the companies would have complied upon being initially involved in the study rather than following publication of the study's results some months later. However, the results of such a study involving the industry would always be biased and inaccurate by tending to show the industry's compliance behaviour in a more favourable light than is true. Indeed, inviting industry involvement and advising its members as to their failings might prejudice subsequent or concurrent investigation by regulators. Inviting only some industry members without inviting all industry members would also be unfair by tending to show the uninvited companies in a less favourable light.

The obvious impact of the study would also be less apparent if compliance behaviour was changed as part of the research process (e.g., the report would provide a lower, less 'impactful' noncompliance rate), thus reducing the likelihood of the media reporting on the results and rendering public dissemination less effective, which might mean fewer companies in total would have complied consequently. To illustrate, the total number of companies involved in the study (which practically would be limited) that fixed their noncompliance plus companies that subsequently became compliant upon publication of a less impactful study might be fewer than the total number of companies that would have become compliant upon publication of a more damning and impactful study. One must balance the pros and cons of involving the industry: (a) better accuracy and more practical impact with the research versus (b) more immediate removal of harm (however likely only to a limited extent, and with the potential for the industry to conceal its failings)? Similarly, one must balance how open science should be incorporated into the research. With the author's latest ongoing study (Xiao, 2023b), although it is being conducted as a registered report, he decided not to share the underlying subject matter publicly until after data collection and eventual publication of the preprint, and not to collaborate with relevant industry stakeholders (even though there are potential benefits to doing so) to avoid the results being potentially unduly influenced.

In the author's opinion, it was right to conduct the Belgian study without industry involvement as noncollaborative research. Nonetheless, following on from that study, collaborative research with industry involvement on the same subject matter is worth pursuing, e.g., working together with companies and industry interest groups to develop ways to ensure better compliance with loot box regulation in the future. However, after such collaboration, it would again be appropriate to conduct noncollaborative research (with no involvement of the industry, e.g., without informing the industry that said study will be run) to assess whether those co-developed ideas have been effectively adopted. Oscillation between the two is likely to prove productive. If an individual or a research group cannot shift between the two (given that the timeframes for research projects often overlap and that the industry might closely monitor certain researchers' activities), then perhaps the work should justifiably be divided between multiple research teams that focus only on one type of research. Our knowledge will be better for it so long as research involving industry collaboration and research that do not are both conducted without any discrimination or value judgement that views one type as somehow inferior than the other when it is not.

Finally, as there *will* be increasing involvement of and collaboration with the industry, conflicts of interest become unavoidable. What must be done is simply to make transparent and complete disclosures. For example, this debate series has involved authors that have been given data access by the industry and authors involved with NGOs that advocate in favour of specific interests. Regardless of whether that might be viewed as antiindustry, proindustry, or 'neutral,' all such potential conflicts of interest should be disclosed to allow readers to better contextualise the arguments made in favour or against academics' collaborations with the industry.

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Conflict of interest

L.Y.X. has contributed to research projects that were enabled by data access provided by the video game industry. L.Y.X. was employed by LiveMe, then a subsidiary of Cheetah Mobile (NYSE:CMCM), as an in-house counsel intern from July to August 2019 in Beijing, People's Republic of China. L.Y.X. was not involved with the monetisation of video games by Cheetah Mobile or its subsidiaries. L.Y.X. undertook a brief period of voluntary work experience at Wiggin LLP (Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA) number: 420659) in London, England in

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August 2022. L.Y.X. has met and discussed policy, regulation, and enforcement with the Belgian Gaming Commission [Belgische Kansspelcommissie] (June 2022), the Danish Competition and Consumer Authority [Konkurrence- og Forbrugerstyrelsen] (August 2022) and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) of the UK Government (August 2022). L.Y.X. has been invited to provide advice to the DCMS on the technical working group for loot boxes and the Video Games Research Framework. L.Y.X. was the recipient of two AFSG (Academic Forum for the Study of Gambling) Postgraduate Research Support Grants that were derived from 'regulatory settlements applied for socially responsible purposes' received by the UK Gambling Commission and administered by Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (GREO) (March 2022 and January 2023). L.Y.X. has accepted funding to publish academic papers open access from GREO that was received by the UK Gambling Commission as above (October, November, and December 2022). L.Y.X. has accepted conference travel and attendance grants from the Socio-Legal Studies Association (February 2022), the Current Advances in Gambling Research Conference Organising Committee with support from GREO (February 2022), the International Relations Office of The Jagiellonian University (Uniwersytet Jagielloński), the Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange (NAWA; Narodowa Agencja Wymiany Akademickiej) and the Republic of Poland (Rzeczpospolita Polska) with co-financing from the European Social Fund of the European Commission of the European Union under the Knowledge Education Development Operational Programme (May 2022), and the Society for the Study of Addiction (November 2022). L.Y.X. was supported by academic scholarships awarded by The Honourable Society of Lincoln's Inn and The City Law School, City, University of London.

Ethical information

No ethical approval was required for this article.

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