



From Pre-teens to Young Adults:
Online Gambling and Gaming Across Key Developmental Stages (11-24) in the Maltese context

DEFINING THE CONTEXT

- 2 year term on UN Security Council with February 2023 Presidency focused on protection of children in conflict zones one of the three themes adopted during its term.
- Resolution 2764 – Authored by Malta with over 100 states co-sponsoring – addressed gaps in child protection - adopted on the 20th December 2024.
- Presidency of Council of Europe – 25th May 2025 – 25th November 2025.
- 3 Ministerial Conferences – 2 of which devoted to the young – Protection of Children and Youth Empowerment.
- Policy event (1 of 3) to include youth training sessions on peace education and peace building.

Children's Policy Framework 2024-2030

National Priority 1: improving child well being

Measure 1.2.21.3 Raise awareness and strengthen prevention programmes on **behavioural addictions (such as gaming and gambling)**, and on substance abuse (such as alcohol, tobacco, cannabis and other drugs), and their adverse consequences.

Measure 1.2.21.5 Extend invitations to Caritas, Oasi and Aġenzija Sedqa during parents' days or scheduled meetings for specific year groups. Facilitate discussions on sensitive topics, such as substance use and **behavioural addictions** and inform about the prevention programmes that will be implemented




The Target Group?

TSI Project targets wide range of age groups:

- Children
- Adolescents
- Young people

Significance of age in relation to risk behaviours (Sampson & Laub, 2016)

- **Adolescence** is a critical juncture in the adoption of behaviors that are relevant to health (Lara-Torre, 2008; Sirard & others, 2008).
 - Many of the behaviors that are linked to poor health habits in adults begin during adolescence.
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Risk Trajectories

- commence during the early adolescent years - substance use, crime (Sampson & Laub, 2016; White et al., 2005; Farrington, Jonkman and Groeger-Roth, 2020)
- may escalate in early emerging adulthood (Andrews and Westling, 2016; Arnett, 2016) and
- Early onset = serious consequences (Griffin et al., 2000)
- Late modernity – pervasive presence of digital technology

Explaining the Link



Biological → brain development: synaptic plasticity and pruning, myelination (frontal lobe), increased dopaminergic activity



Psychological → Search for identity (experimentation and moratorium); cognitive development



Social → increased social connection; peer influence; anxiety sensitivity

Gambling and Gaming Trajectories

- **Onset** in late childhood/early adolescence
 - High **prevalence** rates in adolescence and emerging adulthood (Chambers & Potenza 2003)
 - **“Spontaneous Quitting”** (Grant 2008)
 - **Persistence** (Gentile et al., 2011)
- ✓ study of “pathological video game use” : 84% of boys initially labeled as “pathological gamers” remained in this category two years later.

Maltese Data

- **School-based Surveys:**

- ESPAD 15 /16-year-olds
- Health Behaviour in School-aged Children 11, 13, 15-year-olds

- **NGOs**

Responsible Gaming Foundation

- A 2022 study on gambling/gaming behaviours amongst Maltese & non-Maltese citizens aged 18+

ESPAD 2019

Social media

- 91% school day - 97% non-school day.
- High percentage of students used social media for **4 or more hours in the last 7 days** - 38% on a school day and 68% on a non-school day.
- **A higher percentage of girls** than boys used social media for 4 or more hours on a school day and on a non-school day

Gaming

- Past 30 days - 66% reported gaming on a school day and 78% reported gaming on a non-school day.
- 13 % reported gaming for 4 or more hours on school day/ 30% on a non school day in last month
- Boys spent more hours gaming than girls.

Gambling

- 14% of students reported gambling money in the preceding year - higher for boys than girls (17% vs. 12%).

HBSC Study - 11, 13 and 15 year olds

- **Problematic Social Media Use (SMU):**
 - high prevalence of problematic SMU at 18%, placing Malta among the top three countries (Romania at 22% and Bulgaria 17%).
 - more frequent among girls, mirroring global trends.
- **Intensity of Social Media Use:**
 - Maltese adolescents had one of the lowest prevalence rates of non-active SMU (8%), indicating high engagement levels with social media.
- **Gaming Patterns:**
 - Malta had the highest prevalence of adolescents at risk for problematic gaming (19%), a significant contrast to the average and notably higher than countries like the Netherlands (5%).
 - Problematic gaming was more pronounced among boys.
- **Gender Differences:**
 - Girls showed higher rates of problematic SMU, while boys were more prone to problematic gaming.



Problematic Internet Use 18-30 (2015)

- N = 1507
- PIU - **0.8%**
- Younger cohorts - those aged between 18-21 years
- Males



2017 study 13-16 year olds

- N = 869
- Engagement with internet for entertainment purposes
- PIEUSA – Problematic Internet Entertainment Use Scale for Adolescents



PIEUSA Classification - The Maltese Islands (aged 13-16 years)

Percentiles	Score	Counts	%	Classification
0-14th	30-69	121	13.9	Occasional
15th-79th	70-130	569	65.5	Habitual
80th-94th	131-158	134	15.4	At risk
95 th +	159-210	45	5.2	Problematic
Total		869	100.0	

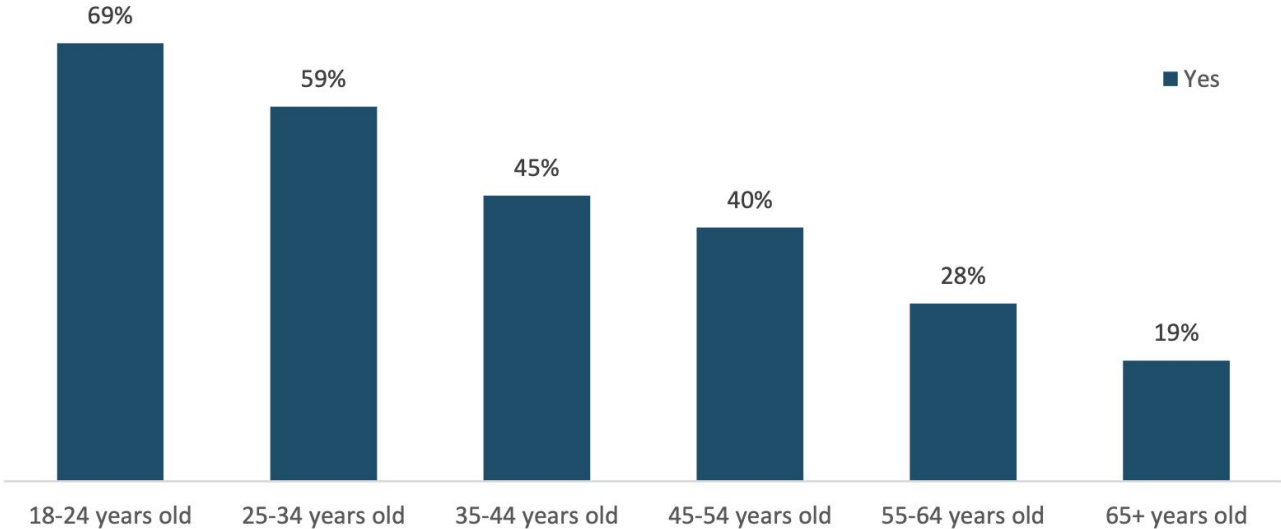
Responsible Gaming Foundation (2022)

- N= 1520
- Age= 18 years and over
- 45.9% engaged in gambling, estimating 211,278 individuals participating across various gaming sectors.
- **Men** (56.9%) gambled more than women (43.1%).
- 41% of **young adults (18-25 years)** gambled in last year
- 12.8% in remote gambling.

Take action: National Survey Report (2022)

Government of Malta and Responsible Gaming Foundation

Chart 1: Q101. Did you play any virtual games (not for money making) on a computer, mobile, tablet or other gaming console in the last year?





Socio-cultural context

- Online gambling and gaming in Malta regarded as an **economic matter** not social/health issue. Malta's economy benefits significantly from online gambling
- **Maltese Gaming Dominance:** Major hub for online gambling, influencing local socio-economic dynamics.
- High **volume of websites and online transactions** (Bonello & Griffiths, 2017; Williams, Wood & Parke, 2012; Wood & Williams, 2007).
- **Unique digital landscape** influences adolescent behavior
- Need for **tailored approaches** to improve digital literacy and mental health support.

Priority Areas

Younger cohorts

Focus on digital wellbeing and digital balance

Robust age-specific policies

Involvement of key stakeholders

Key Stakeholders

Industry

Regulator

NGOs

Academia

Government

Persons with
lived
experience

School and family-based intervention for gambling and online gaming



Family

- Maltese family remains important domain for social control/bonding

Schools

- Increasing awareness, correcting misconceptions and delaying age of onset
- Digital/media literacy and critical thinking (Derevensky & Gilbeau, 2019)
- Integrating Gambling Awareness into Curriculum



Thank you!!!