

Master Thesis

**Adolescents and the Loot Box phenomenon.
A study on the most controversial phenomemon in video games.**

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Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Writer's notes and greetings..... | 3 |
| Abstract | 4 |
| 1. Introduction | 5 |
| 1.2 Microtransactions | 7 |
| 1.3 In-game currencies | 8 |
| 1.4 Loot box emergence..... | 10 |
| 1.5 Research target group..... | 11 |
| 1.6 <i>Research question</i> | 13 |
| 1.7 Thesis structure..... | 14 |
| 2. Theoretical framework..... | 15 |
| 2.1 Research Criteria and selection | 15 |
| 2.1 Empirical phenomenology: A qualitative approach..... | 15 |
| 2.2. Existing research on adolescents experience of loot boxes..... | 17 |
| 2.3. gaming & internet community research | 19 |
| 2.5 Gambling & addiction studies on Loot Boxes..... | 22 |
| 2.5.1 Loot Box & Gambling in E-sports | 23 |
| 2.6. Health studies | 24 |
| 2.7. Parental control, school counselling and support arenas..... | 25 |
| 2.8. Loot box marketing | 26 |
| 2.9. Non-academic view of loot boxes..... | 27 |
| 2.10. Loot Boxes in Norway..... | 28 |
| 2.11. The Belgium change and the kinder egg argument | 29 |
| 3. Methodology | 30 |
| 3.1. Availability | 32 |
| 3.2. Reliability and validity | 32 |
| 3.3. Phenomenology & Qualitative methods..... | 32 |
| 3.4. Participant selection & Criteria | 33 |
| 3.5. Focus group structure | 34 |
| 3.6. Strengths and weaknesses..... | 34 |
| 3.6.1 Digital interviews | 35 |
| 3.6.2 Language and translation..... | 36 |
| 3.6.3 Gender Diversity | 36 |
| 3.6.4 Focus group execution..... | 36 |
| 3.6.5 Transcription of interviews..... | 37 |

| | |
|--|----|
| 4. Analysis..... | 37 |
| 4.1 Participants | 37 |
| 4.2 Loot box experience, purchasing history, games, and exposure | 38 |
| 4.3 The motivations among adolescents..... | 39 |
| 4.4 The social aspects of Loot Boxes | 41 |
| 4.5 Pay to win, free-to-play, and pay to play..... | 43 |
| 4.6. Gambling and addiction in Loot Boxes..... | 47 |
| 4.7. Loot box marketing | 48 |
| 4.8. The value of Loot Boxes | 51 |
| 4.9. Feeling shame and guilt..... | 52 |
| 4.10. Self-discipline, impulse & parental control..... | 53 |
| 4.11. Loot Box legislations and restrictions | 55 |
| Summarized analysis..... | 59 |
| 5. Discussion | 62 |
| 6. Conclusion..... | 70 |
| 7. Further research..... | 72 |
| References | 75 |
| 8. Interview guide..... | 80 |
| 9. Focus group interview one | 82 |
| 10. Focus group interview two..... | 93 |

Writer's notes and greetings.

Games have always played a big part in my life, from playing Pokemon on Gameboy Colour in the late 90s to writing an 80-page master thesis about its economic changes in the last decade. For me, video games are an escape from reality when needed. It is also something I see in the same way as a book or movie. I want to read every good book there is, watch every good movie and play every good game I can find. Just as stories from real life can make an impact, so can games. Sometimes with friends from all over the world, sometimes alone. Also, it keeps you in touch with whom you were growing up, and for me, I am still that young boy playing games whenever I spend hours upon hours with a console. Through video games, you can find friendships, love, inner peace and identity. You might not be a big fan of video games, but everyone should spend some of their free time playing something, it is healthy, and it will make you happy. For me, life is all about learning as much as you can, about as much as you can. So, regardless if you enjoy or find this thesis interesting or not, I hope it leaves you with some information you did not know before reading it. So if you learned something, then my goal of this thesis is complete.

I never in my wildest dreams thought I would someday write a master thesis having bipolar disorder, it is a road through hell, but this thesis is an achievement I would never have managed without the support and help from unique and lovely people along the way. I dedicate this thesis to the following people: My supervisor Kjetil Vaage Øie, thank you for all your patience and inspiring me to continue my studies after the bachelor degree, I do not praise those who have not earned it, but you certainly have. You are a great scholar and teacher. To Madelene Hammerseth, for making me never lose my faith or stray from the path. I admire you more than any other person I have met during my time in Volda. And my friend Madeleine Lykke Solend has patiently spent days helping me sort out errors and mistakes. And to everyone I have met during the last five years. I am grateful to all of you.

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Abstract

This thesis is an academic project on Loot Boxes, a relatively new phenomenon in video games where gamers can purchase randomized in-game content for real money. Loot Boxes have become a controversial phenomenon over the years as it has similarities with gambling and both legislators and researchers fear the impact it could have on consumers. Its controversy also lies in the number of young people who plays video games, and, in gambling-related research, younger audiences are seen as more fragile and at risk for developing negative habits.

In a rapidly expanding research field involving health, law, consumer and media studies, this thesis focused specifically on adolescents and how this group relates, use, and consumes the phenomenon. What motivates their usage? Do they loathe or enjoy the phenomenon? These are the types of questions which this thesis aims to answer. In order to gain new data, the thesis contributes with qualitative research by using focus groups. Two groups of four and five participants between the age of eighteen and twenty-four were asked about their experiences and relationship with the phenomenon. More than two hours of raw data were collected and were transcribed before being analysed in the thesis. The field has lacked qualitative research. The thesis uses existing research, which is mainly quantitative data. New research appearing in the last weeks before submitting this thesis indicates that the field is continuously covering gaps and will continue to be a rapidly evolving field of science. Changes to the role of Loot Boxes are inevitable in the future, and hopefully, the future of Loot Boxes will be based on science. Summarized, there are differences in the opinions of adolescents and researchers, participants were influenced by whether or not they were playing with friends, and as this was their primary motivation for purchasing in-game content and Loot Boxes, this motivation seems to be largely overlooked in existing research. After concluding the research questions the thesis supplements suggestions for further research that is needed on the phenomenon in future research.

“In the last decade, a heightened significance of virtual markets within the context of computer games occurred opening up novel opportunities for new forms of revenue” (Kordyaka & Hribersek, 2019, p. 1506)

1. Introduction

Over the last twenty years, the video game industry has undergone substantial changes in many different areas: distribution, framework, the arrival of new consoles, and overhauled financial models. From being sold exclusively in physical form two decades ago, most games are now purchasable through online services and platforms such as STEAM and Playstation Store (Zendle, Meyer, & Ballou, 2020). Most physical game shops now belong to the past, with some exceptions similar to the film industry; games are now primarily distributed digitally as physical purchases are now uncommon.

Changes in distribution are just one of many undergone modifications in the industry. Its expansion through technological advances has made gaming more versatile, and it is now more than just playing a game on a computer or a console. The number of consoles and their functions has changed into being more than just a console for games. A PlayStation can read DVDs, CDs and has inbuilt internet and streaming services. A console brings a broad spectre of possibilities, resulting in it being a device not solely for those playing games.

Another significant change in technological development is how users do not need to gather in a household to play with others. Technology has made it possible to play online with other players anywhere in the world (Brock & Johnson, 2021). Notably, the game genre of MMOG (Massive multiplayer online game) was early in developing games opting for online multiplayer gameplay (Corliss, 2011). The development of multiplayer games also gave console producers a new tool in earning money continuously from each customer by making the option to play online exclusive to customers who subscribe to a subscription-based service.

Each console platform now allows users to play games online and receive a few “free” games and unique discounts if paid for a subscription. A subscription period can be for one month and up to a year. For example, In 2021, a subscription for Sony’s Playstation+ service costs 40 dollars for a 12-month subscription.

As a result of the possibility to play online on a large scale, Some games have developed professional competitive scenes similar to physical sports in a sub-industry now called E-sports, with teams competing for big money prizes supported by large fan bases. Games such as Fortnite, League of legends & Counterstrike are some of the most successful games in the competitive gaming industry (Macey & Hamari, 2019; Brock & Johnson, 2021).

The rise of e-sport has created communities among gamers, leading to new ways to communicate with other gamers without playing themselves. As a result, some esports fans do not play the games shown but enjoy watching the professional game. Similar to physical sports such as football or hockey. The E-sport scene has also brought with it other industries, such as the marketing industry with the introduction of sponsorship and the betting industry (Macey & Hamari, 2019; Brock & Johnson, 2021). The possibilities within betting are similar to those within traditional sports betting (Gainsbury et al., 2017). As in football, consumers can bet money on the outcome of matches or how many goals each team will score. In first-person shooter games such as Counterstrike, consumers can place money on the number of kills a team will get during a game or the game’s outcome or tournament (Brock & Johnson, 2021).

In terms of financial interests, games now no longer solely depend on selling copies or charging money for a game. For example, none of the 115 million League of Legends players has paid money to play the game’s complete version. The game has generated more than 20 billion dollars since its release in 2009 through new income methods as purchases of in-game currencies, which can purchase Loot Boxes containing randomized in-game content (Perez, 2019). Games that charge money with a selling price also generate profit beyond the sale price with methods similar to free games, thereby profiting both from the selling price and income through in-game purchases, making priced video games more profitable per customer than previously regardless of the products asking price. The financial differences developed over the last ten to fifteen years are complex and have appeared for various reasons; however, the industries’ change of focus marks a new era in the video game industry.

Around ten years ago, the video game industry increasingly focused on ARPU, short for (Average revenue per customer). Electronic Arts, a titan in the gaming industry, behind titles such as FIFA and Star Wars Battlefront, expressed in 2013 new possibilities to earn seventy, eighty or ninety dollars from each customer instead of sixty dollars from the sale of the game (Handrahan, 2013). Methods to reach such goals included the urge to create new temptations for gamers, gambling-related activities, introducing a constant flow of updates and exploiting the ability to play anywhere made possible by technological progress.

Their COO at the time, Peter Moore, said that DLCs (short for: downloadable content) was the industry's future, which could increase annual revenue per user and change the way video games generate money. Story games and adventure games will often receive one or two additional DLCs making the game more extensive and contain new content; some games also continuously release new content regularly over many years. However, the most efficient way to increase annual revenue per user has been microtransactions and in-game currencies. In-game microtransactions have led to some companies being criticized for focusing mainly on maximising user spending instead of the number of physical copies sold (Lohse, 2020).

1.2 Microtransactions

The method for income in most free-to-play games comes from microtransactions and selling cosmetics for characters and in-game advertisements often used in mobile games. By purchasing microtransactions, users spend real-life money in exchange for in-game currency that can buy in-game content, often cosmetics and items that can boost a user's performance in a particular game, also known as pay-to-win (Brock & Johnson, 2021).

“These purchases may be purely aesthetic (cosmetic microtransactions) or confer in-game advantages (pay to win microtransactions)” (Zendle, Meyer, & Ballou, 2020, p. 1).

Microtransactions have slowly grown to be a standard part of games since its introduction to the gaming world around 2010. It is now found in most popular releases and especially in multiplayer games both on PC and consoles. “In many video games, developers have learned that by rewarding gamer engagement with virtual items, or loot, they may increase the amount of time and money gamers spend in the game” (Kelling & Tham, 2021). As a further development, games such as League of legends users can purchase additional downloadable content through microtransactions instead of directly purchasing items with real-life money.

One reason is that users quickly spend the in-game purchase currencies on content without calculating the price in real money (King & Delfabbro, 2019).

1.3 In-game currencies

The games mentioned earlier have opted to sell cosmetics within the game through microtransactions instead of opting for the pay to win approach, excluding any possibilities for players to purchase content that could improve their performance in-game. For the thesis, League of Legends is an example of a free-to-play MOBA game (Short for: Multiplayer Online Battle Arena) (Kordyaka & Hribersek, 2019), a genre where teams compete against each other in arena-based games. As it is a free game, it relies heavily on microtransactions and loot boxes. However, they have no game-enhancing purchasable items *“Surprisingly, a large part of purchases in LoL is comprised of virtual items with only hedonic meaning, which means that players cannot enhance their chance of winning games with the aid of virtual items”* (Kordyaka & Hribersek, 2019, p. 1506).

The game contains two types of in-game currencies. By containing two currencies, the developer gives users a possibility to purchase content through various methods; users are, to some degree, then not forced to spend money in order to obtain in-game cosmetics. As an example, the two currencies in League of legends are:

The first currency is Influence points, which users gain by playing the game and can be used to buy characters and cosmetics, though it will take time to gain a substantial amount. Not all cosmetic content in the game can be purchased with Influence points, making some content limited to players spending money using the second currency.

The second in currency is Riot Points, the game’s primary source of income (Kordyaka & Hribersek, 2019). Users can only obtain this currency through exchange with real money. A user can buy every item they can buy with Influence points with Riot points, so users can obtain it fast by purchasing Riot points if they do not want to spend much time playing to get a cosmetic. Riot points can, therefore, be a shortcut to obtaining cosmetics. Users can only buy some content exclusively with riot points. This content will often be things like exclusive cosmetics, bundles, or packs of unknown content, often referred to as a loot box, a phenomenon where users can purchase randomized content in a digital box.

Riot Games has not specified the user data in terms of demographics regarding purchasing loot boxes or microtransactions. The data gathered from League of legends thereby refers to

their whole userbase and not specifically younger users. It is nevertheless important to note that the demographics of users in League of legends shows that 37% of its users are between the age of 18-24 (Clement, 2021).

The method used by Riot Games for League of Legends is standard among some of the industry's most popular multiplayer games, such as FIFA, Hearthstone, Call of Duty, CS:GO & Dota. While the system allows users to balance in-game currencies, implementing in-game currencies is not without criticism. King & Delfabbro suggest that in-game currencies camouflage the real cost of items as users might not grasp how much real-life money their amount of in the game- currency is worth and purchased for. This viewpoint suggests that users could underestimate their habits and potentially spend less money on microtransactions if the currency in a game were real-life currencies such as dollars or euros, as players would get a clear picture of the actual price of virtual items. (King & Delfabbro, 2019).

Microtransactions are not limited to only free to play games. They are a part of most games that offer the possibility to play with other players in multiplayer mode, especially in mobile games. Examples of console games with microtransactions are FIFA, Call of Duty, and Star Wars Battlefront. These games are full price games though similar to the free to play games; they have content that is only purchasable through in-game purchases. However, there has been controversy surrounding the amount of in-game content that's only available through further purchases. The amount of content needing to be purchased has previously caused user backlash and accusations of companies' designing games to maximise profits on additional content.

The most notable example is surrounding the release of the game Star Wars Battlefront II (Perks, 2020; BBC, 2017). The Star Wars release did not only generate frustrations from users; lawmakers in Hawaii heavily criticised the game's predatory design sparking new debate towards Loot Box regulations in the US (Dwan, 2017).

“With the launch of Battlefront II, developed by Electronic Arts as an action-shooter video game based on Star Wars film franchise, there was an outpouring of resistance to their loot box monetization model” (Perks, 2020, p. 1014).

In some cases, the addition of microtransactions has led to fans feeling that companies release games prematurely and sell an unfinished product (Gordon, 2016). Some fans express that it is wrong to charge full price for a game with a large amount of additional content that could have been a part of the game when purchased (Perks, 2020); for example, Star Wars

Battlefront II had a release cost of sixty dollars despite having large parts of the in-game content unavailable unless additional spending was made (Kae, 2017). However, it is important to point out that it is not specified if the dissatisfaction has differed from different age groups. These articles refer to gamers in general as a whole, regardless of age or other criteria.

1.4 Loot box emergence.

While the increased usage of microtransactions and game design changes has caused some frustration with users, it is implementing loot boxes that have generated the most controversy surrounding the gaming industry in recent years. From several academic fields, its position in videogames has become more debated in recent years, and pressure from some areas might force the industry to adapt differently (Brock & Johnson, 2021). In recent years legislators and gambling researchers have called for new regulations which in various ways could change how the industry further develop their lucrative Phenomenon (Brock & Johnson, 2021).

A Loot Box is digital packs of randomised content purchasable through microtransactions. To make a comparison, a similar product before the introduction of Loot Boxes to videogames is buying packs of football cards or Pokémon cards, which were hugely popular in the 90s and early 21st century. The buyer would know the number of cards in each pack with Pokémon cards though they would not know which cards it would contain, thereby creating excitement and expectation when purchasing a package.

While microtransactions have been debated academically in terms of controversy, with games now designed to tempt users to spend money (Zendle, Meyer, & Ballou, 2020), loot boxes have gained more attention over the last few years regarding the potential adverse outcomes for users in various aspects.

Criticism of Loot Boxes has been voiced from different parts of society, such as academic actors within health studies, law studies (Lui, Thompson, & Carter, 2020), and psychological studies (Macey & Hamari, 2019). Some studies, such as the research “Role” of the Dice: An Exploratory Analysis of Gamer Perceptions and Interpretations of Loot box Advertising (Kelling & Tham, 2021) does, however, point to quick fixes pointed out by users who could make a big difference in the opinions of users. These fixes presented by users were suggestions for companies to present the odds of receiving good content and giving users an overview of their spending habits. Other researchers suggest changes in user data distribution

and availability, limiting the gaming companies access to various user data (Lelonek-Kuleta, Niewiadomaska, & Chwaszcz, 2020). In the form of spending overview and consumption habits, changes have been introduced to some major games and platforms after pressure from legislators and users. One of these games is FIFA, where users can now see their total spending and how much time they spend on a daily average (Kelling & Tham, 2021).

Being in the spotlight from many actors, Loot Box is by many considered a problem with the industry. Research points to substantial data suggesting negative results caused by Loot Boxes (Brady & Prentice, 2019). Researchers point to the risk of addiction and similarities to gambling addiction within the field of psychology, raising concern on how Loot Boxes could affect young players (Brady & Prentice, 2019).

Similar to the field of psychology, governments and lawmakers have raised concern about the potential financial fall pits for users who could develop economic issues due to overspending and unawareness of spending, particularly among young audiences (Lui, Thompson, & Carter, 2020).

While the rise of concern regarding consequences has generated research from various fields, there is little qualitative research on how users relate to the industry's accusations. While it is documented that users have a complicated relationship with its position in games, it is also a booming phenomenon in terms of usage. Users are still spending large sums of money despite its controversy. As a result, this thesis aims to understand better young users' relationships with Loot boxes and how they view the accusations made by lawmakers, academics, and their thoughts regarding the phenomenon as a whole. The reasoning behind having a young audience as a target group is due to several factors:

1.5 Research target group

With loot boxes being introduced around ten years ago, users born in the late '90s and early 21st century have grown up with loot boxes now being available and a part of the gaming culture for approximately half of their life. On the contrary older audiences are likely to have played more in the years before loot boxes' appearance. As a result, it is a possibility that younger audiences have a friendlier or more normalised relationship with the phenomenon than older generations.

Further, an essential factor is that a substantial amount of the previous research on loot box technology and gambling mechanisms in videogames focus on its implication on children and

younger audiences. Previous research on young target groups is found in several research fields, such as research on laws (Lui et al., 2020), health, and addiction.

Reasons could be that younger audiences are seen as easier to influence and that they could develop habits that could inflict their lives later (Zendle & Cairns, 2018; Hagedorn & Young, 2011). Countries like Norway and the UK have laws to protect young people from developing problematic gambling behaviour, while the Netherlands and Belgium have banned loot boxes entirely. However, substantial loopholes have made it possible for companies to bypass regulations, causing lawmakers to push for changes to remove potential loopholes in existing laws and create new legislation.

With loot boxes now being a tangible form of income for the gaming industry, implementing changes might result in a financially problematic situation for some companies that have relied heavily on the phenomenon, such as Electronic Arts and RIOT Games. It is nevertheless important to mention that there have been changes in the industry in loot boxes. EA has, after pressure from users, released the odds on their loot box packages. EA did in 2020 make it possible to see how likely users are to get rare content. As expected by many, the odds to get the best content are very slim, having the odds of rarest content as low as 2.4% (Murphy, 2020). Another change was the implemented overview of total spending in a game, giving users the possibility to know the magnitude of their spending.

There is little substantial academic research on the relationship with loot boxes from the adolescents' views, despite adolescents and children being the focal point in the academic fields. While there has been significant dissatisfaction towards individual cases regarding the technology, it is a need for further qualitative data to obtain insight into which role loot boxes have on adolescents.

Potentially valuable data includes its perspective on its role within games and to which extent it contributes negatively or positively to a gaming experience. Companies behind Loot Box games claim that loot boxes bring excitement to the game and gives the player a rush of adrenaline when opened, thereby being a positive experience. Nevertheless, it is mainly unknown if users share the thoughts the gaming companies claim, further evidence that more data is needed on the view of adolescents.

With the image of loot boxes in the media being to a large extent negatively focused, it is easy to conclude that the phenomenon is almost entirely negative in terms of its role for users.

However, with its popularity and increased usage, it is arguably ignorant to suggest that its appearance is only negative. With its popularity among players, it is likely that some gamers enjoy the phenomenon and want it to be a part of future games (Lohse, 2020).

Following the examples above, the thesis aims to understand adolescents' interactions and motivations and the phenomenon's role. The primary research question aims to bring an understanding of adolescents' perspective. Understanding its place in society and the gaming world could benefit further research and a more comprehensive understanding of younger audiences, benefitting both the market, legislators, and researchers. As a result of those factors, this thesis bases itself on these primary research questions:

1.6 Research question

How do adolescents use, experience, and relate to the loot box phenomenon? What role it plays in their gaming experience, and how do they relate to controversy and potential changes.

The purpose of the thesis is vital as the academic research on the phenomenon lacks qualitative data. The lack of qualitative data makes loot box research, in general, less accurate when discussing the phenomenon's role in the video game industry; new qualitative data could benefit future qualitative research on the phenomenon and research on loot box in general. The addition of new data provided by the thesis could also benefit academic research across several academic fields, including law, health and gambling research. Understanding the users and their relation with other users regarding their relationship with loot boxes could bridge gaps between user experiences and modern research. The thesis provided new qualitative data using the qualitative method Focus groups to investigate the research questions.

Focus groups, a method increasingly used in academic research since the 1950s, gave participants a platform to share ideas without the possibility of being overly moderated by the interviewer (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Further, semi-structured focus groups bring the possibility for participants to reflect on each other's thoughts. By sharing the interviewing experience, participants could become aware of opinions they would not have expressed in a one to one interview. Focus groups primarily consist of six to ten participants with one moderator (Chrzanowska, 2002). The moderator then presents topics and dilemmas before the

participants discuss the topic while the moderator documents the conversation for further analysis. The topic for the focus groups and how the interviews would proceed were presented to the group in advance, giving the participants some time to prepare and have an idea of the research process.

Participants in the research project were selected through connections in academia and by contacting a local gaming community. The participants meet specific criterias in regards to their relevance to the project. Criteria included experience and exposure to the phenomenon and being active gamers, and being born after 1996. Participants were asked about their preferred games as well as previous spending on loot boxes and microtransactions. The motivation behind the participants' selection was to make sure they were known with the topic and be relevant participants.

1.7 Thesis structure

First, the theoretical framework is divided into sub-chapters based on various factors such as; academic field, research method, purpose, and relevance to cover research on the loot box phenomenon in this thesis. The topics represented in these chapters will broadly match the discussion topics involved in the thesis's focus groups aiming to bring new insight to all sub-chapters represented in the theoretical framework. Further, the thesis presents in-depth its methodological approach, its usage and inspiration from phenomenology, and details surrounding the research project.

Continuing from methodology, The gathered data from the research project is presented in the analysis, bringing in-depth explanation and data from the two focus groups, enlightening the role of Loot Boxes in the gaming life of adolescents. These interviews both lasted around one hour and included a large variety of topics to cover this thesis's broad research questions. The analysis is shortly summarized before the discussion brings forth the new data against existing research to see differences and similarities between the new and existing research. The discussion, as with the analysis and theoretical framework, reflects on the role of the phenomenon in several academic fields, which are all relevant to the thesis questions as Loot Boxes is not only a phenomenon within one type of gaming studies but across many, such as health, law and addiction studies. Following the discussion, the thesis summarizes and concludes the research questions by detailing the data that backs up the conclusive answer. At last, there is a brief discussion on further research, both in terms of qualitative research on adolescents and Loot Box research in general.

2. Theoretical framework.

Research into the nature and impact of loot boxes on video gamers is underrepresented in gaming and advertising literature (Kelling & Tham, 2021, p. 2).

2.1 Research Criteria and selection

The research and literature gathered needed to be relevant directly or indirectly to the thesis research questions and academic field; often, we refer to such sources as primary and secondary sources (Everett & Furseth, 2012). A research paper had to either bring new data, supplement data, debate or analyse relevant information relevant to the thesis. During data gathering, the data gathered which proved irrelevant or had lacked reliable data were removed to ensure the quality of the framework for the research project. The thesis also avoids data and the usage of bachelor theses. It primarily bases itself on professional researchers and academics and some journalistic work and online articles to supplement some of the sub-categories within the theoretical framework.

The amount of research and data gathered for a thesis varies depending on what type of research one does (Everett & Furseth, 2012). One of the wanted outcomes when gathering data for this thesis has been to gather a substantial amount in each category where Loot Boxes are relevant. As Loot Boxes is a complex phenomenon, research needs to include findings from several fields as understanding the phenomenon as a whole is not possible by only researching Loot Boxes in one academic field alone.

2.1 Empirical phenomenology: A qualitative approach

The theoretical approach presented in this thesis through the research is empirical phenomenology. The phenomenology method is the study of phenomena, specifically how people experience, use, and approach a specific phenomenon. “It Aims at being practically useful for anyone doing qualitative studies and concerned about safeguarding the perspective of those studied” (Aspers, 2009). The thesis’s usage of focus group interviews shares the desire of empirical phenomenology to protect the participant’s views without the researcher disturbing participants’ viewpoints. While observing participants experiencing a phenomenon

over time is arguably the preferred method to conduct a phenomenological approach, focus groups still include the approach's key points by letting participants contribute with their viewpoints undisturbed by the researcher. In research of phenomena done with observation studies, it is also beneficial to follow up with other qualitative research (Aspers, 2009).

While research on loot boxes exists within several academic fields, few are done with empirical phenomenology. While research on loot boxes focuses on a phenomenon, it has primarily been researched through quantitative methods. The majority of research in this thesis uses media sociology to pursue the users' interactions with Loot Boxes. Arguably there is a lack of empirical research with qualitative approaches; as previously mentioned, there is a lack of qualitative data on user viewpoints and a deeper understanding of the userbase attitude among young users (Kelling & Tham, 2021). Nevertheless, there are academic journals that continuously contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon in various ways. An essential contributor to the field is the journal *Games and culture*; the journal publishes quarterly and covers topics such as socio-cultural, political and economic sides of the gaming industry. The journals' publications are primarily conducted with a media sociological approach that researches how people interact with new media.

Summarising how loot boxes are portrayed in modern research, it is an overwhelming scepticism and negativity pattern among researchers, particularly among health studies and research on similarities between gambling and loot boxes. Some researchers, such as David Zendle, have repeatedly reached conclusions suggesting that countries should apply regulations and bans to restrict Loot Boxes' role in modern video games. As a result, some findings might be seen as biased as the research covers many of the same patterns and methods, increasing the likelihood of reaching similar conclusions. Arguably the overwhelming use of quantitative research weakens the understanding of the phenomenon as a whole as it bases itself almost entirely on the researcher's findings from big data. The use of phenomenology in new research is needed to fill a lack of understanding of the users.

As loot boxes are a relatively new phenomenon, the research on the topic is also reasonably new, usually published within 2015 and 2021. Being a new phenomenon is arguably why there still lacks research on various aspects of loot boxes. Another consequence is the lack of various methods used in existing research (Kelling & Tham, 2021). Methods used are often

quite similar and share crucial patterns; some research might be considered biased due to the repeating patterns and conclusions.

Despite similarities in modern research, different methods have been used to map out loot boxes' implications. Considerable quantitative research has been conducted, giving the field data on user habits from a large scale perspective. An example of such research is the analysis: (Zendle, Petrovskaya, & Wardle, 2020). The research analyses data were showcasing Chinese users' habits and usage patterns while opening loot boxes. Results show the apparent differences between high-cost spenders and small-time spenders, referring to the big spenders as "whales."

While the analysis of Chinese user patterns showcased the differences among users, it fails to bring data on whether or not big spenders are problematic spenders or interact with other players in various ways than low spenders. In addition to the research on Chinese users' habits, the notion that heavy spending by a small group of players is presented in other research also claims that the heavy spending among a few players is one reason behind the increased focus on Loot Boxes (Lohse, 2020).

An example of the lack of qualitative data in existing research on loot boxes, the research on Chinese user habits points to some heavy spenders' habits. However, the research does not know whether the users are in a financial situation to spend large amounts of money on purpose with the financial possibility of doing so, or if the big spenders do not have financial stability and are therefore exposed to loot boxes as a negative factor. Nevertheless, the research openly questions its findings and specifies the missing data showcasing various user groups' situation.

2.2. Existing research on adolescents experience of loot boxes.

Existing research on the adolescent's interpretation of loot boxes is limited; some research is done in phenomenological approaches with qualitative methods, preferably with as little researcher interruption as possible. Essential research on the adolescents' views is the article "Role" of the Dice: An Exploratory Analysis of Gamer Perceptions and Interpretations of Loot Box Advertising (Kelling & Tham, 2021).

Its approach to the adolescent's view is similar to the approach used in this thesis, yet there are differences in research purpose and the research's academic field. Kelling & Tham's research states that there is a lack of qualitative data found on Loot Box advertisement,

supported by another researcher (Corliss, 2011). these assumptions strengthen the claim that Loot Box research lacks qualitative data across multiple academic fields.

Research into the nature and impact of loot boxes on video gamers is underrepresented in gaming and advertising literature (Kelling & Tham, 2021, p. 2).

Kelling & Tham's research results resemble those of studies done on other approaches to loot boxes, such as gambling studies, particularly the assumption that Loot Boxes are forced upon users in a way that could be experienced as predatory. Similar conclusions are found in other research articles (King & Delfabbro, 2019; Zendle, Meyer & Ballou, 2020; Macey & Hamari, 2019). Predatory marketing accusations have raised awareness in law studies and health studies as predatory marketing towards adolescents could lead to users feeling forced to spend money and developing problematic spending habits (Gong & Rodda, 2020).

The appearing and much needed special issue on the current state, present, and future of Loot Boxes and in-game monetization.

While there is new research appearing continuously on the topic of Loot Boxes, there has in, in the final weeks of this thesis been released new research of great significance, The Journal of Consumers Culture's special issue on gamblification of digital games (Brock & Johnson, 2021). The special issue does, to some degree, summarize where the field of Loot Box research is in 2021. The special issue elaborates on most of the discussion points and topics that emerged on Loot Boxes over the last ten years. Some of the importance behind the approach in the special issue is the understanding and discussion around the phenomenon being of academic interest in multiple fields such as health, law, addiction and consumer studies, so their goal is to address not only one specific part of Loot Boxes but its overall presence and role in gaming. As there has been a lack of similar contributors on the topic, the contribution of Brock & Johnson could be of crucial importance in the years to come. While the special issue does not have its primary focus on adolescents but gamers as a whole, it is still likely to be an essential contributor to the research on adolescents consumption of Loot Boxes in the future.

“Within gambling studies, we hope these studies will lead to a greater appreciation of the complexity of digital games and their (sometimes gamblified) monetisation methods” (Brock & Johnson, 2021, p. 7).

2.3. gaming & internet community research

In terms of how consumers users create online communities, *Consumer Roles in Brand Culture and Value co-creation in virtual communities* (Healy & McDonagh, 2013) researches how football fans have embraced the internet in terms of creating platforms online where fans can communicate without meeting physically (Healy & McDonagh, 2013). Like the rise of football communities online, gamers have embraced the possibility to create online communities, both for gaming in general, and individual forums for different games; examples are Reddit's gaming-forum which has more than 29.6 million members (Reddit, u.d.) and the forum for the game FIFA has more than 500 thousand members (Reddit, u.d.).

Healy & McDonagh's research on football communities on the internet shares several essential factors relevant to research on gaming communities that are essential in understanding communication among gamers.

First, the motivation or participating and being a part of online communities are shared; examples of mutual factors are; Loyalty, gamers active in online communities connected to a particular game often continuously play and stay a part of the community when newer editions are released, or the producers release new projects. FIFA, as mentioned previously have a sizeable online community; while the developers create a new version of the game each year, the community still uses the same online forum instead of creating new ones for each release.

‘Community is important to many fans and there is a shared sense of emotional ownership’ (Healy & McDonagh, 2013, p. 1529).

Consumers of Loot Boxes often use the internet forums to showcase or debate their purchases or the phenomenon in each game, the game mode FIFA Ultimate Team, which is one of the most extensive Loot Box game modes (Kelling & Tham, 2021) has its own forum on Reddit, in other games such as League of Legends and Call of Duty the main pages are used as forums for Loot Boxes. FIFA's game mode Ultimate Team also uses a trading site for their loot box items; users can then further sell and buy Loot they and other users have acquired through Loot Box purchases or gameplay (Kelling & Tham, 2021). Such research on the online community in gaming is often researching sites where people debate or interact with people they do not know, and there is a lack of data on whether people who know each other interact with each other on online forums.

2.4 Law studies regarding loot box regulations

While the thesis aims further to understand the use of Loot Boxes for adolescents, law studies are essential as the uncertainty of its impact on loot boxes could alter how users experience the phenomenon. Law studies often rely on quantitative data to conclude how problematic the phenomenon might seem, and data suggesting solid links between problematic spending habits and addiction are for lawmakers in pursuit of changing legislation affecting the gaming industry.

Law studies usually focus on regulations in a particular country as laws and regulations differ in each country. Since loot boxes' appearance, gaming companies have found ways to bypass laws and legislation with various loopholes (Lui, Thompson, & Carter, 2020). "*Currently, there are limited regulatory and/or consumer protection frameworks for video game monetisation schemes*" (King & Delfabbro, 2019, p . 166).

Some research claims that the continuous growth of loot boxes and the increased accusations of similarities with gambling has caused countries worldwide to investigate gambling legislation (Zendle, Meyer, & Over, 2019; Neely, 2021; Griffiths, 2019). Their research suggests that it is a common debate in politics worldwide though not many countries have made legislative changes directly towards loot boxes.

The controversy surrounding loot boxes is primarily its similarities with gambling, which has increased attention among lawmakers and politicians in countries like Singapore, United Kingdom, Belgium and China. As mentioned, law studies tend to rely on quantitative data to measure the accusations' seriousness on a wide scale. There is, therefore, naturally little research done in terms of phenomenology in research regarding legislations. Politicians tend to use numbers to support opinions instead of individual thoughts and experiences among users; the use of quantitative data is understandable. While the approaches differ from phenomenology and qualitative studies, law studies are essential as they are likely to alter the phenomenon's future, and the field is among the topics debated among participants in this thesis.

The article *Blurring Lines: Loot Boxes and Gambling in the Video Game Industry* (Lui, Thompson, & Carter, 2020) focuses on the UK's situation regarding its potential ban of loot boxes. In the UK, gambling laws aimed to protect children contain loopholes that gaming companies exploit; in their conclusion on the legal situation regarding Loot Boxes in the UK, The researchers see the fast development of the technology as a reason for laws be

challenging to alter (Lui, Thompson, & Carter, 2020). The UK situation is similar to the United States, where lawmakers and politicians monitor the development of loot boxes continuously, and the issues related to the phenomenon have been raised even to the federal level (Perks, 2020).

While their research points to legal systems' fragility in dealing with loot boxes, they advise against implementing Belgium and China methods, which they express as unsuccessful Loot Box changes. In those countries, Loot Boxes have been banned in Belgium, while in China, there is a different approach: the state monitors the companies and developers to ensure that the potential negative consequences are limited. Games that sell Loot Boxes in China must also be open about the odds of getting the various items (Zendle, Petrovskaya, & Wardle, 2020).

“Technological advances that outpace research and regulation in the video game industry have led to rushed, impractical, and short-sighted legislative frameworks seen in both Belgium and China” (Lui, Thompson, & Carter, 2020, p. 34).

However, it is essential to point out that the researchers still see Loot Boxes as a potentially harmful phenomenon and that especially younger audiences are at risk; they suggest the need for changes, though not through legislation. In addition to the research paper on legislation challenges in the UK, the article *“How Does Games Critique Impact Game Design Decisions? A Case Study of Monetization and Loot Boxes”* (Perks, 2020) supplements Lui, Thompson & Carter's opinion that legislative changes are complex and the pace of technological changes provides difficulties for legislators and politicians.

Further, it is essential to express that Perks' research is in journalism and not law; its focus lies in how critique impacts game design, its connection to law studies is the continuous increase of interest in the loot box phenomenon.

In his research, Perks sees the Loot Box as an essential example of in-game critique as it is one of the newer controversial parts of the industry, making it relevant for journalistic game studies as the phenomenon continues to be a growing part of the video game industry.

As presented previously, some researchers see legislative changes as failed and rushed, Perks in his research, he uses Singapore as an example where the legislation failed to cover various forms of loot boxes, thereby not fully reaching the purpose of the legislative change (Perks, 2020).

2.5 Gambling & addiction studies on Loot Boxes

“ they resemble virtual gambling machines inside video games ” (Lelonek-Kuleta, Niewiadomaska, & Chwaszcz, 2020, p. 383).

In research on loot box technology, gambling studies are the most researched and have been well documented, and in the last decade, scholars have documented similarities between loot boxes and problematic gambling (Macey & Hamari, 2019). Most of the other academic fields or aspects of loot box research relate heavily to gambling studies in some way. Similarities between gambling mechanisms and loot boxes have been the main controversial aspects of loot boxes from its beginning and are still the focal point of the public debate surrounding loot boxes (Lohse, 2020; Brady & Prentice, 2019; Kelling & Tham, 2021; Perks, 2020).

Health studies, documented in a separate chapter, build on the accusations of developing harmful health consequences resulting from purchasing loot boxes. Law studies directly involve gambling legislation (Lui, Thompson, & Carter, 2020), and how loot boxes are defined and viewed are essential in law studies on the phenomenon.

“Both when gambling and when paying to open a loot box, individuals stake something of value on the chance outcome of a random process, in the hopes of receiving something of greater value ” (Zendle, Petrovskaya, & Wardle, 2020, p. 2).

Its importance to the thesis lies in it being the mutual factor in related research on loot box technology. Methods and purpose differ, but most relate to the question of whether loot boxes are related to gambling or not. Further, the thesis aims to understand how adolescents view and use loot boxes and whether they experience and view loot box as gambling is, therefore, an essential part of the research which is to be done. Parts of the discussions raised in the research focus groups will be directly related to the accusations of addictive and predatory mechanisms within the phenomenon.

Gambling studies tend to use quantitative data in similar ways to law studies. However, various qualitative studies have been made to find factual data that could prove that loot boxes are problematic (Brady & Prentice, 2019; Zendle, Meyer, & Over, 2019).

Researchers from various fields have expressed a lack of research on Loot Boxes within their academic field. However, the argument made that there is a lack of researches on loot boxes in terms of gambling is questionable. Scholars studying loot boxes and gambling have made such a claim (Zendle & Cairns, 2018). However, Research done in other academic fields is often strongly related to whether or not loot boxes are gambling. Research within law and health studies often related to gambling, making gambling one of the arguably more researched parts of loot boxes. The recent special issue gamblification of digital games also claims that research on Loot Boxes is expanding rapidly in recent years (Brock & Johnson, 2021).

2.5.1 Loot Box & Gambling in E-sports

As games with Loot Boxes are among the most popular multiplayer games on both console and PC, it has increased popularity over the last decade with a rapidly growing professional scene. As adolescents make up a large part of the userbase in many of these games, its connection to gambling and development makes it an important topic as the role of professional players might be impacting how adolescents use and relate to these games and pro-players usage of Loot Boxes.

“Gambling specifically connected to e-Sports is a significant development, not only offering a new avenue for existing gambling products to be inserted into gaming media but also affording several novel experiences (e.g. skins and loot boxes)” (Macey & Hamari, 2019, p. 20).

Most of the highly popular video games containing loot boxes have a strong presence in the E-sports scene, with games such as FIFA, League of Legends and CS:GO having competitive leagues worldwide. (Macey & Hamari, 2019). As with traditional sport, the E-sport scene also includes gambling in traditional methods with betting on which team wins games and tournaments. Relatable to the studies on loot boxes on adolescents, the studies on gambling in e-sports shows similar vulnerability among young audiences (Macey & Hamari, 2019). Further, Macey & Hamari points to several similar developments with loot boxes; they have both similarly become popular in the same period and have received more scholarly attention in the last couple of years.

Findings in research on loot boxes have shown that some users habits are labelled as problematic behaviour. In the research on gambling In e-sports, more than 50% of survey participants showed signs of problematic behaviour in terms of addiction (Macey & Hamari, 2019).

2.6. Health studies

In terms of health studies, research on physical and mental health is covered in the same sub-chapter. Health studies on video games as a whole is a widely covered field; however, on the topic of loot boxes, it shares similarities with other academic fields, a shortage of scientific data. Furthermore, to some degree, research that focuses on other aspects of video games, its similarities with the issues related to Loot boxes shares resemblance. For example, the World health organization has acknowledged that video game disorder is a mental health condition (Lohse, 2020). Video game disorder then describes gaming addiction and gambling-related issues in e-sports suggests that Loot Boxes are not the only aspect of video games seen as problematic or addictive.

In terms of mental health, researchers point to users experiencing problems with self-regulating their behaviour when spending money that exceeds what they plan or want to spend initially (Gong & Rodda, 2020). Self-regulation is thought in health studies to be limited, and results show that users are more vulnerable to lose instinct, especially during the night. There is to the researcher's knowledge in this thesis little research on whether or not users spend more money during the night on loot boxes. However, it is common for young gamers to play games during the night, and large gaming events such as the gathering In Norway motivate gamers to play games as much as possible through the events period (Bjerke, 2019).

The motivation behind Gong & Rodda's research was to find strategies for limiting loot box consumption. By identifying patterns through analysing forums and gaming communities, their results point to both predatory monetization from companies: *"There was a sense of feeling exploited by developers where specific games made it extremely difficult to advance or be competitive without spending money"* (Gong & Rodda, 2020, p. 4).

Gong & Rodda are not alone in researching strategies for limiting loot box consumption or creating tactics for users to improve self-control in terms of spending. Multiple research projects have emerged in the last years with similar goals (Brady & Prentice, 2019; King & Delfabbro, 2019). Furthermore, relatable research on a different topic is the research focusing on behaviour patterns for internet gambling among adolescents through multiple provinces in Canada (Elton-Marshall et al., 2016). The research shows similar patterns to gambling-related research on Loot Boxes, relying on academic stats showing a more potent vulnerability to develop addictive behaviour and lack of control (Zendle & Cairns, 2018; Brady & Prentice,

2019). While these articles are essential in understanding how adolescents use and get affected by the phenomenon, some of the articles have mixed results regarding reaching their wanted outcome. As for Gong & Rodda, their analysis of a large variety of parental techniques to help parents take control and help adolescents and children with problematic spending habit had limited success. The most effective and promising methods were unrealistic for most parents and the gamers at risks, such as physical meeting with gaming counsellors to help those struggling. As Gong & Rodda concludes, there is not yet a market for these services.

2.7. Parental control, school counselling and support arenas

With research pointing to the possibility of young users lacking self-control overspending habits, and adolescents experiencing gambling-related habits, there has appeared an increased interest in methods and systems that could help those with an unhealthy usage of loot boxes (Gong & Rodda, 2020). Research on parental control and support systems is vital to the thesis as its purpose lies in understanding the adolescents' relationship with the phenomenon. Increased knowledge of young users' relationship with loot boxes could benefit further research on parental control and strategies, and it could also be important for education arenas where adolescents spend time.

While the research An Exploratory Study of Individual and Parental Techniques for Limiting Loot Box Consumption (Gong & Rodda, 2020) shares many of the thesis's goals and values, its methods to bring new data to the academic field is significantly different. The study applied a thematic analysis for a large set of websites to identify strategies that could help/increase parental control related to Loot Boxes. Their research contributes primarily to the academic field of mental health and does not use a phenomenological approach or direct interactions with participants using loot boxes. As mentioned earlier, the results of their thematic analysis resulted in mixed results in terms of how likely parents could make use of the most helpful strategies as they relied on counsellors or increased availability of professional help. Instead, parents were advised to create an environment at home, making it more difficult for adolescents and children to find ways to purchase Loot Boxes (Gong & Rodda, 2020).

The belief that problematic spending on loot boxes could cause families' problems and disturb personal life is backed by other researchers describing related problematic gambling as something that could cause severe negative implications on both the users family and

themselves (Zendle, Meyer, & Over, 2019). The implications mentioned are mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety, while users with problematic spending behaviour could face financial issues.

2.8. Loot box marketing

In terms of marketing, loot boxes tend to lean on the rarity of their potential content. Commonly, games has their loot boxes separated into various categories with different prices, the more expensive and lucrative packages are more used in commercials and ads than cheaper packages (Lelonek-Kuleta, Niewiadomaska, & Chwaszcz, 2020).

Two central research papers on loot boxes and marketing are; Psychological and Legal Aspects of Using Loot Boxes (Lelonek-Kuleta, Niewiadomaska, & Chwaszcz, 2020) and “Role” of the Dice: An Exploratory Analysis of Gamer Perceptions and Interpretations of Loot Box Advertising (Kelling & Tham, 2021). Both cite how Loot Boxes are advertising in methods that are seen as predatory by consumers. Results, particularly found in the focus group research conducted by Kelling & Tham, provide multiple opinions from consumers who overwhelmingly feel that Loot Boxes are being pushed upon users (Kelling & Tham, 2021).

Since the introduction of loot boxes around 2010, the exposure to loot boxes has gradually risen; one survey from 2018 reported that 78% of the participants had purchased Loot Boxes (Gong & Rodda, 2020). Their results are backed up by the sizeable nine-year analysis of the most played games on the platform STEAM, where players had increasingly encountered Loot Boxes in games, and it became more common each year (Zendle, Meyer, & Ballou, 2020). There is little doubt among the researchers that adolescents and gamers, in general, are more exposed to Loot Boxes than ever, its role financially is increasing in the industry (Macey & Hamari, 2019), and as a result, the increased exposure seems natural. As the exposure to Loot Boxes increases, there is likely to be increased exposure to Loot Box marketing if the phenomenon will continue to be a financial success.

The qualitative data gathered from Kelling & Tham provides an in-depth understanding of consumers relationship with Loot boxes and how consumers experience its advertising; nevertheless, the research only examines consumers relationship with the phenomenon in one particular game mode within one game. Their decision to focus on FIFA’s Ultimate team future is logical as it is one of the most popular game modes, and Loot Boxes are incredibly

essential in how the game mode is played.

The game is a modernized version of purchasing football cards, so even if companies removed the possibility to use real money in the game mode, the gambling-related method is still present.

“To create interest for packs throughout the season, EA features different promotions using limited-time offers, such as offering unique player cards that are available during the time of the promotion or offering packs that provide a higher chance of getting certain rare players” (Kelling & Tham, 2021, p. 2).

The example above shows how one game can continuously push loot boxes in consumers after its release; by providing new content regularly, the company will, for each update, provide a new advertisement, often for a limited time, to pressure consumers to spend money (Kelling & Tham, 2021). FIFA is also one of the games where players can sell and trade cards/content obtained through purchasing packs/boxes. Cards have a resale value, so if a user does not get the desired cards in the packs, one way could be to buy enough packs to stack up on sellable assets to purchase the contained they wished for in the card package.

In addition to traditional marketing, the video game industry has found new methods to promote loot boxes. One debated method has raised concern and controversy as companies give streamers and popular gamers free or cheap loot boxes to have it promoted/opened during streams (Teuton, 2019). Accusations have been made towards companies on making “better” loot boxes with rarer content to streamers, thereby potentially giving viewers a misleading view of the odds of getting good content through loot boxes (Viana, 2019). This phenomenon and usage in marketing have caught attention among researchers, and with adolescents being acknowledged as an at-risk audience, it is potentially an important part of adolescents interactions with Loot Boxes. On this topic, there is, however, a need for more concrete research on to which degree Loot Box opening on streams causes their audiences to purchase Loot Boxes or not.

2.9. Non-academic view of loot boxes.

While there has been an increased scholarly interest in Loot Boxes, the debate is often most visible in online and tabloid newspapers. Many websites cover news specifically in the industry of video games—focusing solely on gaming. Examples of popular gaming news

outlets are IGN which has operated in the Scandinavian countries since 2012, and in the UK since 2017 (IGN-Nordic, 2021).

Loot boxes' attention has increasingly been seen in tabloid newspapers; often, extreme cases or significant changes and events make the headlines. Common are articles with cases on children overspending with their parent's credit cards, such as the article: *Game over, kids empty their parents' bank account trying to buy Lionel Messi, but even that's not enough* (Miles, 2019).

There could be an argument that tabloid coverage of Loot Boxes is primarily negative as the potentially positive reactions to it might not be as newsworthy. This could arguably also be due to research on the topic being focus on uncovering negative aspects of the phenomenon and rarely potentially positive aspects of it. As it was easy to find articles that focus on the extreme and potentially harmful sides of Loot Boxes, one could argue that newspapers and outlets tend to be biased, and adolescents may have a completely different view of the phenomenon which, is little discussed in non-academic articles.

2.10. Loot Boxes in Norway

Similar to the other countries mentioned previously, the Norwegian government has investigated loot boxes and the usage of microtransactions through the Norwegian gaming and foundation authority; specifically, its correlation with gambling has been the focus of attention (Gjerde, 2018). In 2018 the government put together a group to map out Loot Boxes' role and its exposure to children (Fossum, 2018). Depending on the result, the government would consider whether or not a ban or age restriction is needed. As of April 2021, no such ban has been passed in Norway.

While the authorities have been passive in terms of saying firmly that loot boxes are gambling, they have expressed that there are similarities and that further investigation is needed before eventually creating new legislations (Gjerde, 2018). In addition to the comments by representatives from the Norwegian Gaming And Foundation authority, a leader from one of the leading tabloid newspapers voiced criticism towards the phenomenon and called for an age restriction, making it unavailable to children under the age of eighteen (Aftenposten, 2020). The opinion published by Aftenposten also features comments from Norwegian scholar Rune Mentzoni, who also suggests that restrictions are needed. Neither of

the comments or articles mentioned above has implemented qualitative research and is based on their own opinion. So in similarity with the majority of Loot Box research and media coverage, there is a lack of qualitative data used and a lack of inclusion of adolescents, which are often referred to as the “at-risk” audience.

2.11. The Belgium change and the kinder egg argument

In 2018 Belgium became the first country to ban loot boxes and had become an example of how countries could react to its controversy. Belgium has a gaming commission that recommends changes to the Belgian government regarding laws and regulations. As well as banning loot boxes, the gaming commission also recommended strong punishments with fines or jail for companies that refused to change their practices. As a response to the ban, EA filed a lawsuit against the new legislation. However, they withdrew their lawsuit and have adjusted their games according to the new laws. As a result of the law changes in Belgium, the case is often referred to as a gamechanger within the industry as it became the first country to implement strict restrictions. These changes have led other countries to use Belgium as an example to follow. Politicians in the US, Norway and the UK have said they could implement similar restrictions to Belgium. Belgium is, therefore, often mentioned in modern research across multiple academic fields.

It is essential to mention that microtransactions and in-game currencies are still legal in Belgium, thereby maintaining the possibility of companies gaining money apart from selling copies. All content that has been accused of similarities of gambling has been removed.

In the aftermath of the Belgium changes, the debate widened to other countries sparking debates in the UK where lawmakers accused gaming companies of exploiting loopholes in British laws. In particular, the research: *Blurring Lines: Loot Boxes and gambling in the Video Game Industry* (Lui, Thompson, & Carter, 2020) highlights the loopholes in the Gambling act 5, which aims to protect children and adolescents from gambling mechanisms in various forms and platforms. Among them, videogames. And the current debate towards a potential ban in the UK. The article explains how loot boxes challenge pre-existing laws in various countries by analysing their methods and motives.

“Legislation will likely take time to pass through channels, but will likely affect the video games industry as a whole, as other major games like FIFA 18, Overwatch, League of Legends, and more include loot box or loot box-like elements” (Dwan, 2017).

While the industry has been under intense criticism for its inclusion of loot boxes and its potentially harmful effects on users, companies have since its introduction repeatedly compared the phenomenon to non-controversial products for children. EA's prime example, which was used as a response in the aftermath of the nationwide ban in Belgium, compares Loot Boxes and Kinder egg, the Chocolate egg containing an unknown toy inside made for children (Zendle, Petrovskaya, & Wardle, 2020). The argument bases itself on the assumption that Loot Boxes are no more addicting than opening Kinder-eggs as they (according to EA) have similarities. In what might be an attempt to make them more comparable, many games have their Loot Boxes in the form of eggs, either in appearance or in the name. For example, League of Legends.

3. Methodology

As a method, the qualitative method of focus groups was chosen to collect data on adolescents. As a qualitative method, it has the ability to obtain data that would be difficult to get with other methods (Østbye et al., 2013). Focus groups are common within the theoretical approach of phenomenology (Aspers, 2009) and have been increasingly popular since the 1950s (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Using focus groups gives the project a good opportunity to understand the participants' viewpoints. Focus groups are not as structured as typical qualitative interviews and usually contain between six to ten participants and one moderator. In this case, there are nine participants in total, separated into groups of four and five participants. The role of the moderator in a focus group is different from its role in a traditional interview, and when having a focus group, the moderator has the task of creating an atmosphere where a group conversation feels natural and have an open atmosphere (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The overall goal is to make the foundation for a good conversation. If done correctly, the interview is done without much interference, which is the desired procedure. It is also essential to understand that the desired outcome is not necessarily for the participants to reach an agreement of any kind, it is about hearing their opinions, and there are no right or wrong answers presented by the moderator. It is also a valuable method to explore new fields or phenomena (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

As mentioned previously, the field lacks an understanding of adolescents on the topic of Loot Boxes. Focus groups are used to bring forth many different views on different topics presented to the groups (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). When choosing a method for this thesis, one of the ideas behind the choice of method was to understand motives and preferences,

which according to Kvale & Brinkmann, often is a reason to use focus groups. When looking back at the research questions, they are all based on understanding and seeing the motivations and reasoning behind the participants' choices. As the phenomenon of this thesis is a product, the method of focus groups seems a natural choice to gain the desired outcome.

As it is a qualitative method, the interviewer, in this case, the researcher, must know the topic being discussed, be neutral, honest and friendly with the persons interviewed. Negative or unprofessional behaviour from the interviewer could, among many things, make participants uncomfortable or nervous. In terms of professionalism, the questions should not guide participants towards a specific opinion or result that suits the interviewer's views and opinions.

“in recent years, interest has grown in the use of focus groups across a diversity of contexts, including health research and community settings, to explore a wide range of issues” (Colucci, 2007, p. 1422).

In addition to situation observation, focus groups are one of the preferred researched methods within phenomenology (Aspers, 2009). The motivation behind using this qualitative method lies in being a more observant interviewer, interfering with the participants much less than one to one interviews. As the thesis aims to understand interactions and usage of loot boxes, one to one interviews would have risks in guiding the participants towards the interviewer's views (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015)

In cases where the interviewer has a relation with a participant, focus groups can make the relationship less of a distracting factor as there is less direct communication between the two, as the communication primarily takes part between participants, the desired goal is that the view of the interviewer does not inflict the opinions of the participants. Nevertheless, there are potential possibilities in which the interviewer could negatively impact the outcome of the focus groups. Such possibilities could have guiding questions, where the questions are likely to generate the response supporting the interviewers' viewpoint or result in a personally desired outcome.

At last, using focus groups relieved pressure on participants as the interview did not solely rely on them individually. Being a part of a group gave participants time to reflect and take time to reflect on opinions. Not all participants had things to say on all topics as some were more relevant to some participants and not so much for others.

This study on the view of adolescents used two focus groups with four and five participants in each. Both interviews lasted one hour and debated Loot Boxes through different topics, Health, motives, addiction, marketing and legislations, which were all topics presented through existing research. Participants were between the age of eighteen and twenty-four and were all based in the region Møre & Romsdal in western Norway. Approximately half the participants were students, and all students were men. The original plan for the research was also to include two one-on-one interviews. However, these were concluded to be unnecessary after data from focus groups were analysed. Both the participants and research viewed the topic as well covered, and few opinions were left unanswered.

3.1. Availability

In terms of availability of the sources and research referred to in this thesis, most of the research is gathered through databases accessible through the College library; these sites, such as SAGE Premier, are not accessible without subscription or paying for research individually. Through Google Scholar, some research has been found, which is a helpful tool to find free access research articles.

In terms of the potential availability of the data created through the interviews in this thesis, they could be available at request; however, the raw files, the video recording will be deleted by the end of June 2021. The available data will, therefore, only be the translated and the written version of the interviews.

3.2. Reliability and validity

Reliability is often a crucial part of quantitative research to express if the sources and data are trustworthy (Everett & Furseth, 2012). Reliability is also needed when using existing research as unreliable data and research could impact the quality of the thesis. The majority of research in this thesis is gathered from trustworthy databases such as SAGE Premier, Researchgate, and Taylor & Francis. In a few cases, the thesis also referred to newspaper articles that could be less trustworthy. However, numbers and statistics in this thesis have not been gathered from sources that were not a research article from periodicals or institutions.

3.3. Phenomenology & Qualitative methods

As previously mentioned, the thesis uses a phenomenological approach to gather new data on adolescent interactions and view of loot boxes. Qualitative methods do have ethical risks, and in particular, the relation between the interviewer and the participant can be unethical (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

According to Kvale & Brinkmann, there are ethical challenges in all parts of a qualitative interview process. They list several challenges linked to seven different phases of the interview process; among these, we find: 1) The research theme can be based not only on scientific interest but also take into consideration the situation of the participants' situation in the research. 2) The researcher needs the acceptance of informants with data usage, and the participants must agree on the terms of the research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015, p. 96)

3.4. Participant selection & Criteria

When recruiting participants for the research, an inquiry was sent to the E-sport organization Volda E-sports. The ideal scenario for the focus groups was to find users in the same community to address the part of the interest in how users interact and communicate around loot boxes. By having consumers from most similar communities, they are likely to understand each other's opinions and viewpoints while also familiar with the phenomenon in mutual games.

There is no personal connection between the participants from the E-sports organization and the researcher, which removes the likeliness of the relationship between users and interviewer to impact the research negatively.

The second group gathered for the focus interviews was a combination of students from Volda University College, and some were associates of students. Two of the participants knew the interviewer before taking part in the research project.

The participants' criteria were that they had to be between sixteen and twenty-four years old, they agreed to the usage and recording of their conversation and agreed to how the data from their participation would be put to use. The participants needed to have purchased loot boxes more than once and have a good understanding of the phenomenon, and understood the purpose of the research they took part in.

In terms of privacy and exposure, the participants will be anonymous and will be given aliases instead of using their real name. Their age and some information regarding their connection to video games (for example, which games they play) will be used. The information used is not

private enough that their identity could be exposed from those reading the thesis. In advance of the interviews, the participants were sent the interview procedure and information regarding recording the interview; all participants had to agree to the terms to participate in the interviews.

Recruiting participants for the research project proved to be difficult due to several factors. COVID made physical meetings impossible, and communication beforehand was done through e-mail and social media. From the various gaming communities approached, there were not enough participants from a single community, making the focus groups mixtures of participants from various gaming communities. One disadvantage of having groups of participants from mixed backgrounds is that some would feel less comfortable participating in group interviews with people they did not have a relationship with. As a result, some participants were hesitant to participate, and convincing some participants was time-consuming and led to postponed interviews.

In the focus groups, some participants in each group knew each other in advance; a disadvantage would be that the last participant could have difficulties taking part in the discussion to the same degree as the other participants. This was particularly the case in the group that involved participants from the E-sports organisation and the participant who did not know any other participants in advance.

3.5. Focus group structure

The focus groups were set up to last between 45 and 60 minutes each. The interview was set to be semi-structured with a set of questions to debate, and participants were advised to participate to some degree on each question/point to get a diverse debate and a broad debate. In advance, the number of questions/situations presented were set to last more than 60 minutes, and this was to make sure the interview produced enough valuable data if some of the questions resulted in data that had little relevance or usage for the analysis of the thesis.

3.6. Strengths and weaknesses

As with most methods, the solutions used in this thesis had various strengths and weaknesses, affecting the overall process and result. However, there were no critical obstacles that put the thesis at risk of cancellation or being incomplete. However, some inconveniences such as digital interviews could have contributed positively in ways that physical interviews could

not have, so it is essential to mention that obstacles were not necessarily negatively impacting the final product. From an overall perspective, the continuous challenge was the unknown impacts of Covid-19 on the process and especially how the research project would take place. Planning was a challenge due to the uncertainties. However, there was a continuous dialogue with the participants to ensure that the interviews would take place in some form. While this was more a challenge than a concrete weakness in terms of methods, it is mentioned as a potential disturbance of the planned usage of certain methods as many of the following examples were consequences of the ongoing pandemic.

3.6.1 Digital interviews

Due to the ongoing pandemic, the interviews which were initially set to take place physically were after agreement with participants moved to a digital platform. The usage of a digital platform could have made the interviews less fluent, and there was a risk of connection issues which was for a short period experienced in both groups. For a short period in group one, the participant James lost his connection for a few minutes, and the discussion continued without his presence. The same happened in group two when the participant Kim disconnected for a few minutes, similar to the situation in group one, and the interview continued while the participant was disconnected. The decision to continue the interviews with the participant being absent was to not stop the flow of the interview and the state in which the discussion was.

In group one, some participants decided to be on video while recording, while the participants in group two all participated without video. This decision did not change how the interviews were done nor the quality and flow of the interview. The length of the interviews lasted almost identically the same length and in the same manner.

Originally the thesis was supposed to contain both two focus groups and two one-on-one interviews. The idea was to use one-on-one interviews after the focus groups to bridge potential gaps on topics if some of the participants' views were vague or lacked clear answers. However, as the focus group interviews lasted longer than ideally planned and turned out more detailed and in-depth than first anticipated, there was less need for the one-on-one interviews, which was agreed on with the participants set to take part in the one-on-one interviews as neither parts felt there was enough additional questions or gaps left to do more interviews than the focus groups.

3.6.2 Language and translation

Despite being an English-written thesis, both the focus-group interviews were done in Norwegian. The analysis and answers gathered from interviews were archived in Norwegian and translated to English when used in the thesis. Therefore, the results gathered and the raw data are less accessible and potentially less valuable for non-Norwegians, especially regarding potential resources for further research.

Having the interviews done in their primary Language does have its benefits. They will be able to reflect on their answers without worrying about how it sounds or should be expressed in English; thus, the answers are more likely to be more reflective and precise than if they would complete the interviews in English.

3.6.3 Gender Diversity

The majority of gamers are men; however, not having any female participants in the research means that the research can not point out differences between sexes on the opinion and usage of loot boxes. In a preferable scenario, the research would have at minimum two or more female participants. This limitation means that there is room for further research on the topic, focusing on gender differences. There is a possibility that general differences in habits between sexes could impact how they view the phenomenon differently. This issue was also found in the most similar existing research (Kelling & Tham, 2021).

The participants are all Norwegian, and there is little cultural difference between the participants. As a result, a similar research could have resulted in different answers and data from interviews. The thesis thereby represents the opinions and habits of Norwegian users.

3.6.4 Focus group execution.

As hoped, the group interviews were methodologically a success. The aim behind the chosen method was to avoid the influence of the interviewer. Throughout the two hours of gathered material, the participants could keep the conversations ongoing without much interruption from the Interviewer or the technical assistant. When taking part, both mainly were used to explain a question further if there was uncertainty about how the question was formulated. As there was a set amount of topics to go through, the participant would sometimes be stopped and told to move on to the next topic to keep the time frame.

3.6.5 Transcription of interviews

The transcription of both interviews has been modified in some ways. Noises that were part of the conversations were not included, the interviews are written almost identically to the video recording, and in those cases where something is slightly changed. It has just been done to clarify the sentence and make it easier to read. There have in no way been done any changes which changed the meaning or expression of the opinions voiced in the focus groups. If there is doubt over the transcription, the raw files are still accessible.

4. Analysis

The focus group interviews both lasted around one hour each. To mostly debate the same topics, the groups were asked the same questions with a few exceptions. The interviews aimed to cover the research questions as thoroughly as possible. Some topics were discussed longer than others, slightly based on the relevance of the topic and the quality of the ongoing conversation between participants. The interview guide and list of topics were all based heavily on the research questions of the thesis, which, as previously mentioned, were as followed:

How do adolescents use, experience, and relate to the loot box phenomenon? What role it plays in their gaming experience, and how do they relate to controversy and potential changes.

In order to cover the various research questions, the interviews were divided into three parts to make sure the interviews did not stray too much from the original topics and make sure that there was data to cover each of the research questions. In the analysis, the order of topics discussed is not structured in the same order as the topics are listed in the interview guide. Some answers gained on a topic were in some cases also relevant in more than one part of the analysis, and there was no significant reason to have a completely similar order.

4.1 Participants

The research project had nine participants divided into two focus groups of four and five participants. They were ranging from the age of eighteen to twenty-four. The participants in focus group one had the smallest difference in age difference with the youngest being 21 and the oldest 24, while group two under participants under the age of 20. (William, 19, Kim, 18).

Focus group one consisted of five participants; these participants knew some of each other and were recruited from the same gaming community connected to Volda University College, explaining the close variety in age. In addition to being referred to as aliases, age and gender are the only personal information deemed relevant due to the research method and sample size; data such as work, education, and relationships are not included in the research.

In focus group two, three participants were recruited from a regional e-sport organization (Kim, Elias, Sam), while the fourth participant (William) was a sibling from a master-student at Volda University College.

Focus group one consisted of the following participants:

"James" age 24.

"Peter" age 22.

"Matthew" age 21.

"Chris" age 23.

"Andrew" age 22.

Focus group two consisted of the following participants:

"William" age 19.

"Sam" age 22.

"Kim" age 18.

"Elias" age 23.

4.2 Loot box experience, purchasing history, games, and exposure

The research questions aimed to get a clear picture of how adolescents view, interact and use Loot Boxes, the first part of the interview was about gathering information regarding which games they had played, how they had encountered Loot Boxes and interacted with the phenomenon in the past. As the opening questions aimed to uncover whether their habits changed between playing alone or playing with a friend, the participants were further asked about such differences.

At the beginning of each interview, the participants elaborated on their experiences with loot boxes and which games they played. All participants had played games with loot boxes, and eight out of nine participants had purchased loot boxes, with participant James from group one being the exception and with a strong attitude towards the phenomenon. *“Well, I hate loot boxes. I just think it is completely stupid. I have encountered it in Team Fortress, Apex Legends and Warzone, But I have actually never purchased a loot box” (James).*

There was a wide variety of games where the participants had encountered loot boxes. Participants from focus group one had all encountered loot boxes in APEX Legends, which was the game they all had in common. The other games where the participants had purchased loot boxes were:

APEX Legends (Andrew, Chris, James, Matthew, Peter), Team Fortress (Peter, Matthew, James), Overwatch (Peter), DOTA (Peter), Counterstrike (Chris, Andrew), Call of Duty Mobile (Peter, Matthew), Warzone (James), League of Legends (William, Elias, Kim, Chris), FIFA (Chris, William, Kim)

All of the games where the participants purchased loot boxes were multiplayer games. Some purchases were made in single-player games, though these items were not loot-boxes, but rather loot boxes and content that changed the pace in progressing or completing missions. Overwhelmingly, the loot boxes were purchased in free-to-play games

4.3 The motivations among adolescents

As the thesis aims to gain information on the motivation behind purchasing loot boxes, both focus groups listed several motivations behind their Loot-box purchases. The interview focused on how the participants get motivated to purchase loot boxes. To better understand the participants' motivations, the participants were asked about their habits in games they have played with friends versus the games they played alone. Social pressure and identity were central to Loot Boxes' role in their gaming community and the participants on an individual level.

One reason voiced in both participant groups was the wish to support the free-to-play game developers and producers; to some degree, participants described purchasing some loot boxes as voluntary payment for the game. *“In free-to-play games, you feel like it is more legit. You want to support them and help the creators” (Kim).* Participants saw the usage of loot boxes as the primary income for the developers behind free-to-play games, and thereby, they did not

necessarily see the purchase of loot boxes as just something for themselves but also something that kept the game going forward. *“For me, I’d much rather spend money in free-to-play games; with free to play, that is sort of their main source of income, so it is a way to support them. They are more honest producers”* (Elias). While the opinions on whether or not they were satisfied with their investments varied, their will to support free-to-play developers were described as something positive. Regarding purchasing Loot Boxes in free-to-play games, the participant did not indicate that the phenomenon existed in such games due to greed.

However, the primary motivation for purchasing loot boxes was the wish to appear cool or exclusive in a game *“The reasons I have purchased it in League of Legends is that I wanted the characters to look cool, and the feeling of having a lot of skins, so it is a bit of a collectors-project”* (Sam). Loot boxes could contain content that was not obtainable in other ways, giving the users a possibility to get content that many other players did not have. This content was seen as more valuable, and having rarer content was seen as exciting. *“When Loot Boxes became a thing, it was cool to try to get stuff that had a bit more value than the usual skins you could purchase, so it was exciting”* (William).

Creating a collection was also expressed in the first group where the participant Chris says his first purchases were motivated by the possibility to get something cool and different. Furthermore, the excitement was higher depending on the rarity of the content. *“It was cool to have some of the rarest skins, so that is where it began”* (Chris).

In terms of collecting skins, and purchasing Loot Boxes, the participants in group one primarily focused on the games APEX Legends and CS:GO while the participants in group two primarily used League of Legends as an example of games where cosmetics played a considerable part of the games. The games where the participants purchased loot boxes and collected skins were all free-to-play games, which can be seen as natural as their attitude towards free-to-play developers was positive.

One different motivation behind the purchases of loot boxes was the possibility of selling Loot over third-party sites for real money. This system does not exist for most of the games mentioned by the participants; however, they described the market for Loot as something crucial to the game CS: GO, where rare content could be sold for large amounts of money up to more than one hundred thousand dollars. The content sold on such sites could not improve

the performance in the game, so similar to APEX Legends and League of Legends, the content being sold is purely cosmetic and for collections.

One participant had experienced the extremity of such a market personally selling items obtained in a loot box, which is now valued much higher after being sold. *‘It is crazy; a few years back, I sold a super-rare skin in CS:GO and now it is worth like 60-70 thousand dollars. It really sucks’* (Chris).

When describing the reasons behind purchasing loot boxes, the participants also reflected on whether or not the actual act of opening Loot Boxes was something enjoyable and what exactly made it special. One participant described the feeling of opening a Loot Box as a rush, the feeling of not knowing what he could get was something that motivated him to purchase Loot Boxes.

‘When I played DOTA, I purchased a lot of Loot Boxes, and I just loved the feeling of opening a Loot Box. I loved the excitement. I loved it. You never knew what you would get, and it was just something I really enjoyed’
(Peter).

Experiencing the colours and animation was mentioned and the overall design of the Loot Box experience. The participants did also point to the impression that the visual aspects of opening a Loot Box could be more influential on younger audiences.

4.4 The social aspects of Loot Boxes

‘It was all about having the most skins and the most content. So you spent a lot of money on Loot Boxes and skins so that you would have more than your friends’ (William).

Regarding which role loot boxes play in the gaming experience of adolescents, A majority of the participants expressed strongly that playing with friends was a motivation for buying loot boxes and that their interest in Loot Boxes and cosmetics was reduced in games they played with people they did not know. *‘It is in the games that I play with friends that I buy Loot Boxes, and I mostly only play games that my friends play’* (Chris).

On the contrary, one participant (Peter) from group one expressed the opposite, that he enjoyed also spending money while not playing with friends, and that there was some

satisfaction in showing random people that you have cool skins, and that might give them the impression that you are good in the game. *“ For me, it is not about showing off to friends; it is more to show random people ”* (Peter). He also explained how there might be some shame showing to friends that you purchase loot boxes, but what random people think of you did not matter in the same way.

Summarized, the opinions on purchasing Loot Boxes in games with friends, the motivation in games with friends was to have a collection and identity in games, while with randoms, it could give the impression that the user is good.

“ I think I have an inner need that I want to show the random people I play with online that I have cool skins, and maybe they get the impression that: hey, that guy is good. In the end, it is just skins, but I think there is something in it. That you want to be seen as ‘better’ in some way. ” (Peter)

While playing with friends made it more likely that participants purchased loot boxes, most did not feel pressure from friends, in particular, to spend money on skins. One participant (Kim) was part of a group of friends who focused on the opposite, playing without purchasing loot boxes, thereby making not spending money a cool thing.

However, one participant mentioned that there, to some degree, could be social pressure to have skins since they could get questions on whether they had a particular skin or not. However, he concluded that this pressure and such questions were more common when he was younger, suggesting that the social pressure reduced with age. (Sam)

One example of how the potential pressure to have skins were reduced was the possibility to get Loot Boxes in some games through gameplay and not necessarily using money. This method gave all players the possibility to get at least some skins without using money. *“ In APEX Legends, you can actually get Loot Boxes for free when you play the game, sometimes just by playing and sometimes through events. So you do not need to spend money to get the boxes ”* (Matthew).

“ Those boxes are similar to the ones you can purchase for money. There are a few boxes and stuff that you have to pay for, but most of the content is possible to get without paying. So for example, APEX is a great example of how to do it ” (Peter)

Further, participants mentioned that as games had existed for an extended period, the amount of rare content had increased, and there was a lot of different rare content, which overall made rare content less exclusive than in the early years of a game (Kim).

Notably, the participants from group one who had a minimal history of purchasing Loot Boxes viewed Loot Boxes gained by playing as something cooler than the Loot boxes purchased, and no other participants expressed that free Loot Boxes was better or worse than the paid Loot Boxes.

Furthermore, the participants from group two strongly suggested that the social pressure to purchase Loot Boxes was reduced when they grew older and had been a more significant factor in their teens than when they considered themselves adults.

‘I think it is good that we do not focus so much on cosmetics and Loot Boxes anymore when we play with friends. I guess in some cases; people could feel bullied if they did not have the same content or any good content in games so that they could not flash or show off stuff in the same ways that others could. So for us now it is more friendly in a way for everyone, regardless if they had spent money on Loot Boxes or not’ (Kim).

As Kim from group two mentioned, to some, not having skins might be a style or goal in itself. Participants from both groups mentioned that three-time world champion ‘‘faker’’ in the game League of Legends never used skins, not even the legendary skins made in honour of his achievements, which Chris from group one described the case of skins just being cosmetics and no indication of skills.

As a further example of the difference in social pressure, a participant from group two, Kim, referred to a situation where his cousins at eight and ten years had spent money on Loot Boxes because they felt that they performed better in the game they had skins. Suggesting that the pressure to collect skins are still more present among the younger generations, as it was when the participants themselves were younger and experienced more social pressure to have skins and purchase Loot Boxes.

4.5 Pay to win, free-to-play, and pay to play.

In the history of Loot Box, pay to win Loot Boxes have primarily been associated with mobile games; the participants were asked about their relationship with such Loot Boxes to

understand potential differences in relationships with different types of Loot Boxes. Furthermore, if they had clear differences between the two, what were the reasons.

In both focus groups, the participants clarified their lack of interest and motivation to pay for pay-to-win Loot Boxes; *“ I Think I would lose interest in games where you can pay to win. It is not the same joy when you do not have the same chances ” (Elias).*

However, in focus group one, the participants Matthew and Peter had both purchased performance-enhancing loot boxes in the Mobile version of the game Call of Duty. However, they both expressed regret over these purchases, and the three remaining participants (Chris, Andrew, James) were surprised that anyone had purchased pay to win loot boxes. *“I have spent so much on Call of Duty mobile. Most pointless purchases I have ever done” (Matthew).*

Peter also brought up Team fortress had a loot box which he argued to some degree was pay to win as it contained weapons, meaning that users could acquire weapons faster than those who did not pay, though the weapons were not limited to only paying users, and therefore not a necessarily a pay-to-win loot box.

The same possibility existed in League of Legends, where users could purchase characters quicker by purchasing Riot points or through Loot Boxes. This option means that new players, in particular, can, if willing to invest, could collect characters fast. None of the members in the second group had purchased pay to win loot boxes, but in terms of mobile games, two more participants had spent money to speed up progress in a single-player game, Fallout Shelter (Andrew, Chris).

One case discussed in group two separated itself from the other methods accused of being pay to win. Hearthstone is a free-to-play multiplayer card game where users collect cards from packs and play with each other. The participant William described the game as a camouflaged pay-to-win game due to the difficulty it takes to get the same chances as those who spend money.

All cards and packs are possible to obtain through playing the game. However, the game continuously releases new packs of cards at a tempo that makes it nearly impossible for users to get all the cards from one expansion before the next is launched. In that way, to have most cards, you would have to spend money not to fall behind as new cards would be released faster than you could collect those already in the game.

“ They add new cards and content so often that there is no way that you can get all of them in time, so if you actually want to have a decent amount of cards to play with. You will have to buy packs and boxes ” (William).

William also highlighted the change made in hearthstone where you previously would always get cards you did not already have, while you can now get the same cards multiple times, making collecting all cards significantly more challenging, and for most, unachievable without investing money into Loot Boxes/packs.

As previously mentioned, the participants expressed positivity towards the possibilities of obtaining free Loot Boxes. However, the system still received some criticism from some participants, particularly CS:GO and League of Legends, as in these games, the player needs to acquire two items to get the content from the Loot Box. In these games, the items are Keys and Boxes, and you need both. As a result, players can end up with more keys than boxes or the other way around. Some players could feel pressure to purchase either additional keys or boxes in those situations to get a similar amount of both items.

“ For example, in CS:GO, they give you parts of the content for free. But you have to buy some of the parts to actually open the box. You can get “keys” by playing the game, but they are useless unless you buy boxes as well, So that is one way they try to force you to spend money ” (William).

On the contrary to the participants from group two’s suspicion towards some forms of in-game rewards, participants from group one praised the possibilities to obtain free loot boxes as a possibility to give all users an opportunity to collect skins, regardless of their financial investment in the game.

In some online games, versions of online access passes are needed to play competitively and participate in leagues. Games such as the free-to-play Rocket League is one of the games where passes are required to access all the game modes. As participants have various experiences and opinions on the different methods companies use to gain money, they were asked how they relate and experience the system of in-game passes.

While free-to-play Loot Boxes was seen as positive by participants, another method to generate money from gamers was viewed with scepticism and negativity. Participants described the Usage of monthly payments just to be allowed access to certain parts of games

or simply the possibility to play the game as a method from companies to pressure users towards continuously spending money not to lose their progress or investments in a game. “*With the game SMASH, you had to pay for memberships, and you had to pay for passes in order to play, and you paid for the game as well, so it felt like such a scam. You had to continuously pay so much to play it*” (Kim).

Participants viewed membership and season passes as methods for developers to force people to keep playing since the content they had purchased within the game would be lost if they stopped paying.

“Also, in those games, you just sort of borrow from the game because if you do not continuously pay, then you will not be able to use the content that you have purchased. So it is just yours for a limited time, or only when you pay for the game. It is a dirty way to make money and to keep people playing and paying every year” (Elias).

Among the participants, there was a clear difference in the relationship to loot boxes in free to play in contrast to purchased games. The feeling of purchasing an unfinished product was mentioned “*In games like Star Wars and FIFA, you have paid for the entire game, but at the same time, you do not get the whole game. So it is like they sell you an unfinished product, which is dirty business*” (William). Participants questioned developers' motivation to solely make money instead of producing a quality game, leaving participants with a bad feeling towards the people behind the game.

Boycotting by simply refusing to buy Loot boxes and in-game purchases in purchased games were mentioned as a standpoint, as the game was paid for. There was no wish to contribute with more money for content they felt should have been part of the game from the beginning. “*I do not support the system where you will have to spend money on loot boxes when you have already paid for the game, I will not bother to spend money on loot boxes in these games*” (Andrew).

Contrary to the attitude towards developers behind free to play games where the participants expressed willingness to support by purchasing loot boxes, there was overwhelming negativity towards Loot Boxes in purchasable games. “*I feel that in games that are free to play, that you do not pay for at all, it is more acceptable with loot boxes than in games that cost money also contains loot boxes, I do not like that*” (Chris).

While the participants mostly played games that were free to play instead of purchased games, they also had the impression that free to play games were, in general, more popular (Chris).

4.6. Gambling and addiction in Loot Boxes

To better understand the role of Loot Boxes in the gaming life of the participants, the question on addiction was brought up to discuss their thoughts about developing an addiction, the factors that could be addictive, and whether or not they considered their habits as addictive. Furthermore, the participants elaborated on whether or not some audiences were more vulnerable to addiction than others. Also, as the Participant William stated, it is simply just more fun than buying a product that's not random.

You get the rush, so it is easy to get addicted to it. It is the feeling of the unknown. (Peter).

Whether or not the participants viewed Loot Boxes as something that could be addictive, there was a collective opinion that Loot Boxes could, in some cases, or for some, be addictive. The phenomenon itself had mechanisms that could trigger addictive behaviour, though the participants did not see themselves being addicted to Loot Boxes. They could understand how other people can be addicted. *'I know that those of my friends who still play CS:GO still buy a lot of loot boxes, so maybe a bit addicting for some, at least they keep buying it'* (Sam).

On what exactly it is about Loot Boxes that make it addictive, the participants lists several reasons that could play a factor. One factor is how the Loot Boxes' opening is designed and the experienced is set up to be. *'It is a more fun experience than just purchasing a product directly with microtransactions'* (William).

Participants from both groups mentioned the excitement created by the colours, sound and animations when opening Loot Boxes. In group one, Peter said he loved the feeling and excitement while opening a loot box, while William from group two expressed that he felt Loot Boxes would be more addictive for children as there is a lot of flashing colours and attempts to trigger the feeling of excitement which might be more addictive to children.

Being a significant theme within existing research on Loot Boxes, the participants were asked whether they viewed Loot Boxes as gambling. Some participants described it as gambling, and particularly the games where you could bet the content on third party sites, such as the

game CS:GO. *‘‘ I think it is gambling; it varies a bit, especially in games like CS:GO, which is sort of set up like betting site, its so similar to slot machines. You invest money without knowing the outcome’’ (Elias).*

While others defined it as semi-gambling, referring to the number of similarities Loot Boxes shared with traditional gambling and slot machines. *‘‘ I can see the resemblance, because you bet your own money to get something cool and unknown, but you do not always end up with something that you feel have value. So you never really make anything for it. You will always lose money’’ (Peter).*

The main argument for Loot Boxes being gambling was that it contains betting something of value on the chance of random outcome. However, one opinion on why Loot Boxes were not entirely comparable was that with Loot Boxes, you always get some content, even if it is just virtual and has no real-world value, users cannot be left with anything in the same way that you can with gambling. *‘‘ Maybe you have better odds with Loot Boxes because you get something, you can lose everything in a casino, while Loot Boxes will give you something virtual, even if you do not like it’’ (Kim).*

The participants further drew similarities with gambling, in that some audiences might be more at risk than others and that younger users were more at risk than older users. There were also similarities to gambling regulations when possible changes were discussed, suggesting that similar measures could be put in place regarding Loot Boxes.

4.7. Loot box marketing

In terms of how the participants were exposed to loot boxing, there was a collective experience of loot boxes being marketed primarily within the games they played. The participants agreed that the primary exposure to loot box marketing was on the opening-screen once the user would open the game. This means that users will be aware or notified of offers and purchasing possibilities without looking for them. If the game offered limited offers, those ads would be the ones most visible to the players.

On this topic, the difference between free-to-play games and purchased games was again brought up in terms of acceptance. As free-to-play games depend on in-game purchases, participants viewed in-game ads and offers as something that made sense in terms of how the developers make money. *‘‘ I understand why they do it in free-to-play games, though,*

because that is the way they make money. So for games like APEX Legends, I really understand them. They need us to buy Loot Boxes'' (Peter).

As Loot Boxes have been a financial success in the gaming industry, the participants were asked about the various forms of advertising and marketing of Loot Boxes. The aim behind this topic was to gain an understanding of how they view Loot box marketing as well as questions on marketing ethics, which in some cases have been questioned.

When asked if Loot Box marketing and advertising could be experienced as predatory, there was a general agreement that it was so. One example is how games give parts of the Loot Boxes for free and then present offers on the parts you miss to open a "free" box. This was primarily in CS:GO and League of Legends, while other games were mentioned in terms of predatory marketing.

Some games structure around continuously release limited offers only available for a short time. However, as the participants pointed out, there is always something new and exclusive being released, so there is always something on sale for a limited duration. *'' Especially FIFA, you have a limited chance to get some cards & packs. So you get the idea that you have to buy it now. But then something new comes all the time. There is always something that is only available for a limited time. So it keeps you wanting to spend money since you feel it is your only chance'' (William).*

League of legends was also mentioned as an example of tricking people into continuously spending money by only allowing players to get certain "legacy" skins for a very short period, putting pressure on the players to spend money. *''They are only available for a short period of time, so the few times when you can get them, you are more likely to spend money'' (Chris).*

The rarer the content was, the more expensive it would be, as an example mentioned by one participant in group one. The game APEX sometimes releases "once in a lifetime" skins priced way higher than regular content. When such items were available, they would be marketed aggressively (Peter).

As the thesis aims to cover how adolescents relate and interact with loot boxes, they were asked about their experience and opinions on the marketing phenomenon of sponsored streamers opening Loot Boxes live. The participants reflected on both controversy and their

own experiences. Exposure to Loot Boxes is a natural part of how the phenomenon affects their gaming life and whether it changes their habits and usage of Loot Boxes.

‘‘So they pay streamers to sell their products to the streamer’s audience. It is definitely shady in my opinion. But from a business standpoint, they know the audience is quite young, it is not cool, but understandable’’ (Chris).

One marketing method, in particular, is rare outside the world of video games—the use of streamers to draw attention to in-game products and Loot Boxes. In terms of Loot boxes, gaming companies would sponsor or gift streamers free Loot boxes if they used their stream to open the boxes live. Notoriously FIFA has been well known for this marketing method, giving streamers the game’s version of Loot Boxes within the game mode Ultimate team where users put together a team from opening packs of player cards.

The method has been a topic of controversy as streamers often have a young audience, and there have been accusations of streamers receiving better content to increase the attraction of Loot Boxes.

The participants were all familiar with the marketing technique; however, concern regarding whom it would reach was the main controversy. According to the participants, even younger audiences was the audience that could be the most affected by watching streamers opening Loot boxes. *‘‘ it is a clever way of advertising, they know that young people watch streamers, so I think it will affect younger audiences a lot more than older audiences’’ (Peter).*

In addition to its consequences for even younger audiences, the participants questioned whether or not the Loot Boxes gifted to streamers had the same odds as those available for purchase. There was a clear notion among the participants that streamers opening Loot Boxes gave a fake impression of how easy it is to get good content and therefore misleading their audiences. *‘‘ viewers will see that the streamers get better content than they will get. So, it does not give a clear picture of how it actually is’’ (Peter).* Overall, participants described the method as manipulative if the case was genuine that the Loot boxes was rigged to give a misleading view of the odds.

While participants widely agreed that streamers opening boxes on stream could have a more considerable impact on children. One participant from group one clarified that he had purchased loot boxes a few times right after seeing it being done on stream, so his purchases were directly motivated by the Loot Box opening on stream.

4.8. The value of Loot Boxes

As Loot Boxes were a popular phenomenon among participants, they were further asked how they viewed the actual value of a Loot Box. Value, in this analysis, is the personal value it has to each player as well as their general opinion on what a Loot Box is worth and whether or not Loot Boxes has value in real money.

The participants acknowledged the games where the participants could sell Loot Box content for real money through third party sites to be the only way cosmetics and content actually had real value in terms of real money. The example pointed out by group one with the game CS:GO is one of the most common games where this market exists, and in particular, the example presented by Chris in focus group one showcased how a virtual item purchased could end up earning users more money than they have spent on the Loot Box that initially contained the item.

One of the main arguments on the actual value of Loot Boxes in group two was the thought of comparing real money to the amount they had spent on Loot Boxes. How many hours of work would they have to do to reach the amount of money they have spent. Especially those of the participants who had spent a substantial amount of money used that argument to see the value, or rather lack of value, of the content they had purchased. The participants mentioned earlier that they viewed the items purchased in games that required passes or continuous payments as the Loot Box content had the most negligible value as they were only available through constantly investing in the game.

One example of recovering some losses was selling accounts with large amounts of skins or content attached. However, participants quickly pointed to the large gap between money potentially earned from selling an account to the amount spent on an account.

“ someone that I know checked their spendings, and it was more than fourteen thousand kroner, and he thought he had spent around three-four thousand. So it is easy to lose track of just how much. He sold his account, but he did not get more than a thousand kroner for it. So in a way, he had lost thirteen thousand kroner. So that is a lot ” (Sam).

4.9. Feeling shame and guilt

To understand which role Loot Boxes plays for the participants regarding their finances and confidence, participants were asked how they feel about their spending on Loot Boxes and their habits. While participants enjoyed Loot Boxes, the feelings experienced afterwards would differ significantly for some. The participants also expressed that the guilt was more significant if they had spent much money on Loot Boxes. While participants from group one reflected on feeling shame when playing with friends. The most common negative association with their own purchases were their possibility to have spent the money elsewhere. The participants, particularly in group two, expressed that one of the main reasons behind feeling guilt was the frustration around how the Loot Boxes lose all value once they stopped playing the game.

“If you purchase Loot Boxes for a thousand kroner, you should think about how much work you have to do in real life to make that money. And now I do not play 90% of the games where I have purchased Loot Boxes, so for me. It is just gone, all of it” (Chris).

Regarding how adolescents relate to loot boxes, some participants in focus group one expressed a desire to hide purchasing loot boxes for friends and sometimes say that they had gotten the loot box content for free either through gameplay or events. *“Often I do not really want to say to my friends that I have spent money on loot boxes” (Peter)*. Peter’s expression of guilt was shared by another participant describing the act of buying loot boxes as something embarrassing (Matthew).

There were clear connections between the number of loot boxes purchased and the lack of openness towards others about their spendings on the topic of guilt. Participants said that they sometimes purchase more than one when they purchase Loot Boxes, which they themselves expressed as negative.

“It is quite embarrassing, sometimes when I have played APEX Legends, I have told my that I have won or received free Loot Boxes while I have, in reality, purchased like five or six Loot Boxes” (Peter).

4.10. Self-discipline, impulse & parental control.

To understand adolescents experience and relation to Loot Boxes, it is important to understand how their relationship and thoughts on the phenomenon changes throughout its usage. The questions were asked to understand how participants see Loot Box from when they are motivated to buy it to the period afterwards.

On the topic of self-discipline, the participants were asked questions regarding their impulse control, planning ahead, and the aftermath of buying Loot Boxes. Further, participants reflected on the overall control of their spending. Understanding which role self-discipline plays in their relationship to Loot Boxes closely relate to their possibility to feel guilt and investigate how and when the participants' purchases Loot Boxes and, more importantly, how they reflect on their habits in terms of discipline.

As mentioned, games sometimes give out free parts of Loot Boxes, where you need to buy some parts themselves in order to get a complete box. Participants mentioned this as something they did as a response when they noticed they missed a part. These parts are cheaper than Loot Boxes, but participants mentioned that one of the reasons why users lose track of how much money they spend is partly due to the number of small purchases they make.

“ it tempts you to buy boxes if you have keys and the other way around. Because they know that you have a part of to open the box, so they give some of it, but not all of it” (William).

“100% on impulse. I never plan it. It is the same when you are at the supermarket and buys a lottery ticket. You never plan it; you just do it” (Peter).

All participants in both focus groups expressed that they never planned to purchase Loot Boxes; there was no difference between those who had spent thousands of kroner on Loot Boxes and those who had only purchased Loot boxes a few times. When they purchased Loot Boxes, participants were more likely to purchase Loot Boxes at night.

As Peter compared it to lottery tickets, a similarity was the number of Loot Boxes purchased at once. Participants from both groups stated that it was easy to purchase Loot Boxes often as the prices were not high, but it became more expensive over time as there were many small

transactions instead of few large transactions. The participants did not purchase any content until they saw the content when they were playing. As mentioned with Loot Box marketing earlier, Loot Boxes were almost always advertised within the game, which the participants also reflect on how they become aware and purchase new content.

“ Sometimes, new content and Loot Boxes are on discount, so then you purchase it, but always spontaneously, I never plan it” (Elias).

One suggestion raised in group two regarding impulse control was to make the steps needed to buy a Loot Box longer, that the player had more time to reflect over whether or not they really wanted to purchase a Box (Sam).

In order to understand how adolescents use and relate to Loot Boxes throughout their youth, the participants were asked about possible restrictions and changes that could be made to make Loot Boxes less controversial. However, the discussion did point to several flaws with the current restrictions, and the participants had a large variety of methods to purchase Loot Boxes before they turned eighteen.

A common factor among the participants' habits was that their spending went unnoticed by parents without their consent or knowledge. Participants that had spent money on Loot boxes used a variety of different methods to do so. Some participants had purchased Paysafe cards that could be used in-games; these cards were purchasable in video game stores and gas stations. Since the participants could not use their VISA electronic cards to purchase Loot Boxes due to card restrictions, Paysafe cards were a way to cheat the age restrictions and worked a solution for under eighteens to purchase loot boxes.

“I used to go down to the shop to buy Paysafe cards so that I did not have to ask my parents about using their cards. So when I got money for my birthday, I went to the shop and purchased Paysafe cards” (Erlend).

One creative method used by one participant was to pay for content in mobile games by putting the cost on the phone bill, which meant that his parents had to pay. One participant also mentioned that it could be like the pressure to wear the right clothes at school (Elias). Furthermore, that children and users identify with their characters in-game. However, the participants were clear on the opinion that parents needed to be more involved and pay more attention to games with in-game purchases and Loot Boxes.

‘‘ I sort of want it away, but I do not mind having it around either, apart from the serious cases like with my cousins who spent three thousand kroner with their parent's credit card in one day. So I guess situations like that might be one of the reasons why it could be banned’’ (Sam).

4.11. Loot Box legislations and restrictions

As there has been continuous attention towards Loot Boxes from countries, the participants were asked to reflect on Belgium's action to ban Loot Boxes as they deemed the phenomenon as gambling. As the thesis aims to understand the participant's views on Loot Boxes, their viewpoint on the phenomenon's controversy and relevance is essential. The legal actions taken by Belgium is highly debated in recent years, and adolescents view could benefit further research and understanding of the relationship between adolescents and Loot Boxes.

As the legislative changes in Belgium were explained to the groups, participants in both groups quickly pointed out a method to avoid the ‘‘issue’’ by installing VPN (Virtual private network), making your connection private. Thereby, those who had purchased a VPN service would not be affected by the legislative ban and could continue to use the game as it is used in other countries.

‘‘ can't you just use a VPN to fix the problem? Sounds like an easy way to fix the issue for gamers that want to buy loot boxes’’ (Matthew). ‘‘ If people have VPN, Then it is easy to bypass. And it is a bit much. Also, now maybe it is a bit too late. It is already a big part of gaming’’ (Kim).

To further understand the adolescent's viewpoint on Loot Boxes role with gambling laws and legislations, the participants were encouraged to reflect on which challenges could appear if Loot Boxes were potentially banned. The challenges listed by participants were both possible implications on their own usage of Loot Boxes and games possibility to adapt quickly. The participant listed the difficulties for companies to create and maintain free-to-play games as one of the more significant consequences of a potential Loot Box ban. As many free to play games rely on Loot Boxes, the participants feared that a ban would lead to more games costing money instead of having in-game purchases, which means that bans would, in the opinion of the participants, hurt those that have good reasons for selling Loot Boxes instead of the companies that also make money from game sales.

'I think if you banned Loot Boxes, it could have a lot of negative impacts on gaming developers. At least for developers on free-to-play games like Fortnite and League of Legends. If they ban it, then these games will struggle, and they will have to charge money for the game'' (Peter).

Further, participants mentioned the potential increase in ads as a possible result of Loot Box bans, and there was also a fear of developers placing ads within games with great controversy appeared in some purchasable sports games such as the basketball game NBA. There is a common method of marketing in new media and gaming platforms where users will have to view short video ads before getting access to a game or, for example, a stream on TWITCH, the world's largest streaming website. As the method is used often on free-to-play mobile games, the participants feared that this practice also could be implemented in the popular free-to-play games.

'' if they ban it, I am sure the amount of ads everywhere in games would increase a lot. It could be terrible; a bit like on YouTube where you have to watch and skip ads in order to see a video. It is annoying'' (Matthew).

Participants also expressed that a ban on Loot Boxes would affect free-to-play developers than for games that cost money, fearing that a ban would hit the developers who were not motivated by greed. However, the participants did not further go into specific suggestions for how Loot Boxes in a purchased game could be restricted while the features in free-to-play games could continue as usual.

Further, as participants expressed both negative and positive sides of Loot Boxes and its role in games, they were asked about how Loot Boxes could become less controversial and if they had suggestions on potential restrictions or changes the companies could implement to keep Loot Boxes a part of gaming in the future. As previous parts of the interview aimed to understand which role Loot Boxes have played, this question aims to understand how they want to experience Loot Boxes in the future.

In the discussions around potential restrictions, the conversations quickly turned to compare Loot Boxes to betting, where participants had experienced restrictions to help users spend less money in short periods. Suggestions from participants in both groups were to restrict the number of Loot Boxes one could buy within a period and praised the system put in place by some betting companies, saying that some system similar could be positive. *'Betting sites in Norway has systems to restrict your habits and investments; you can put in a cap for how*

much money can bet each week or month. And then you cant change it before a long period of time'' (Matthew).

As participants discussed earlier in the interview process, the possibility for parental control had its flaws, but it was nevertheless mentioned as a restriction that could have improvements and were likely to play a role in the future of Loot Boxes. However, the participant James doubted the interest and willingness of parents to restrict their kid's possibilities to purchase Loot Boxes. Parents role were further discussed and participant James that said that it requires increased attention and effort from parents in order for restrictions to work.

'' Parents need to pay attention as well. Most kids do not use accounts with parental control; parents need to be more connected and have more knowledge on how games and gaming companies work. Only parents that invest time into it will make decisions that will restrict the potential negative outcomes for children'' (Chris).

From an overall perspective, participants were positive towards changes and restrictions and felt that Loot Boxes could benefit from some changes, which could make Loot Boxes less controversial and problematic for heavy spenders. *'' I think restrictions could make people have a healthier relationship to Loot Boxes'' (Peter).* However, some participants point to Peter's history of heavy spending as not particularly problematic as he was in a financial situation where he could afford it. Peter did, however, point to that restrictions could have saved him money, which he preferably would have spent elsewhere.

One argument which occurred in group two was that arguably, bans and legislative changes would punish those who have a healthy relationship to loot boxes, while it is just a small portion of players that are likely to be addicted and losing control over their spending. A further suggestion was that the system and potential changes should focus on helping those with an unhealthy usage of Loot Boxes, not all gamers.

'' Some have the money and enjoy using it on Loot Boxes, so banning it because it is a problem for a few means it removes something that a lot of people enjoy. We know what we do with our money. And what we are buying. But of course, some do not, and that's a shame'' (Elias).

According to participants from both groups, the most effective method to prevent overspending was to have their total amount of money spent shown on the screen on their

console and in games. According to the participants, users would be much more aware of their investments in games and that they would easily have a healthy relationship to the phenomenon. *“ I might have restricted my habits more if I knew at all times how much I have spent on Loot Boxes. It would remind me of how much I have invested. So an overview would probably reduce the amount of Loot Boxes that are purchased” (Peter)*. Other participants in his group supported his opinion, and Chris suggested that any overview would change things. In group two, similar opinions were shared on the importance of implementing an overview of game time and spending.

“ The most important thing is to make it visible how much money you spend and how many Loot Boxes you actually purchase. We need to see the facts about the uses of Loot Boxes. It would give people a better view of their habits—especially those who use too much and lose control” (Kim).

The final topic debated among the focus groups was their view on a potential ban in Norway and whether they supported a potential ban. Previously the participants discussed legislative changes and possibilities for gaming in general, but their view on its role in Norway is important to understand how they view its role in their home country.

When asked if Loot Boxes should be banned, there was a mixed set of responses. Those who had purchased a lot of Loot Boxes were against a legislative ban. However, the participants that had not purchased many Loot Boxes were more friendly to the idea. There was also a more negative response towards a ban in group one, while group two seemed more open to the possibility.

“ A ban could make it easier for some, and maybe it fades over time. But some also enjoy it so. It would be good for some and bad for some” (Elias).

However, the clear pattern in their answers was that banning it would be removing something that's fun for many but damaging for a few. An opinion expressed in group one also called for friends and family to interact more with those having negative effects from Loot Boxes before pointing out that it is a fun phenomenon for most. There was also the support about the negative experiences of Loot Boxes were not substantial enough to protect a ban.

“It is not a problem for all gamers. They need help, but a ban is not the answer. The few addicts should not be the cause of something that is good for almost everyone, to be banned” (James).

Summarized analysis

Overall, the interview covered a wide variety of topics on how adolescents relate, use and experience Loot Boxes. There were significant differences between participants in terms of purchase history as some had not spent money while some had spent around fifteen thousand kroner and more. On the topics where participants reflected Loot Boxes' role in video games, their opinion varied drastically depending on whether it was a free-to-play game or a prized game. With free-to-play games, the participants saw Loot Boxes as a way to support developers, while Loot Boxes in purchased games were seen as greed, and in some cases, participants felt they did not receive the whole game when purchased, thereby feeling pressured to spend additional money within the game.

Regarding their money habits with Loot Boxes, there was a clear pattern on how they spent money. As one Loot Box isolated was not seen as expensive, it often occurred that participants that purchased Loot Boxes purchased Loot Boxes quite often, but in small quantities at the time. This was one reason behind their belief that most people do not have an accurate overview and understanding of how much money they have spent on Loot Boxes. The participants expressed that purchasing many small purchases made users underestimate their spending over time.

The participants described Loot Boxes' attractiveness as several factors, and some participants described the animations and visuals as one factor. Another main factor was the feeling of purchasing something unknown, which created a feeling of excitement. Along with purchasing skins in general, Loot Boxes was seen as a method to create a collection of content, which had various importance for participants, though those who had purchased the most Loot Boxes saw creating a big collection as significant importance. Some, to show off to friends, while others saw it as a tool to give the impression that they were skilful for random players.

Participants in group one did praise some free-to-play games for the possibility to obtain free Loot Boxes, which they thought could reduce the pressure to spend money, giving everyone a possibility to have cosmetic content. However, some participant saw a backside to the system as games tended to give out one of several parts needed to gain a free Loot Box. Some saw this as a method to make players purchase the missing pieces.

In terms of pay-to-win games where Loot Boxes could enhance one's ability in a game, only two participants had purchased Loot Boxes, and those games were on mobile. However, participants also viewed Hearthstone as partly pay-to-win as they needed to spend money to keep up getting new cards before new expansions were launched.

When discussing Loot Boxes' role in a social setting with friends, participants said they did not feel pressured to purchase Loot Boxes from friends. However, they did point to Loot Boxes and skins being a more significant factor in gaming when they were younger and that its role had reduced as they got older. Some participants mentioned pro players without skins as a motivation for some to not purchase Loot Boxes and a potential contributor to reducing the pressure to spend money.

In terms of Loot Box marketing, the advertisement in free-to-play games was seen as something necessary for the game to make money, and the participants did express an understanding of its part of the game. Like their opinions on having Loot Boxes in purchasable games, the participants were negative to having advertisement in such games and did not see the developers having the same need for the income to create and maintain a game.

To some degree, participants experienced the marketing techniques as predatory or controversial. Games often promoted limited edition content which the participants felt could push players to spend money before the opportunity disappeared. Further, participants were asked about the usage of games sponsoring streamers to open Loot Boxes. The participants viewed the method as misleading for viewers and unethical, questioning both the odds for good content in the box gifted to streamers and suggesting that even younger audiences could be affected by watching streamers, making the method ethically questionable. Among the participants, there was also one who had purchased Loot Boxes right after watching an Unboxing stream, as he said that when you see the excitement experienced by someone else, you get tempted to do the same.

On the topic of their own spending and history of Loot Boxes, the participants said they never planned to purchase Loot Boxes and that all purchases were purchased on impulse. Most participants also expressed often feeling regret in the period afterwards if the content from the Loot Boxes did not live up to their expectations. However, some participants said that receiving poor content from a loot box could make some purchase more in the pursuit of good content, while others could lose motivation and only purchase one.

In terms of addiction, participants said that there were factors about Loot Boxes that were addictive, such as the feeling of excitement. The level of joy received from opening Loot Boxes seemed to vary from some participants to others, as some saw it as a significant factor of their purchases while others purchased Loot Boxes for the content, not the experience itself. The participants saw children as a more at risk userbase in terms of becoming addictive and expressed that while adults have money to spend, they rarely spend enough for it to become a financial problem. However, the participants did point out that it could be a problem for some and, in particular so-called “whales” which is the term used for extreme spenders. None of the participants viewed themselves as addicts, and while some were annoyed with the amount of money spent, none of them viewed their relationship with Loot Boxes as problematic.

As Loot Boxes have been accused of being gambling, the participants saw similarities between Loot Boxes and gambling. However, most participants viewed the phenomenon as something that had resemblances while not being pure gambling. The arguments pro-gambling was the possible addiction and unhealthy overspending by some. However, with loot boxes, the user would always get some sort of content, while with traditional forms of gambling, a player could lose all their investments, which is not possible with loot boxes.

The participants further discussed what precisely the value of Loot Box was. In some cases, games had third party sites which offered players the possibility to purchase and sell content gained in Loot Boxes for real-life money. In these games, participants saw Loot as something that could have value. Nevertheless, in most cases, the participants viewed Loot Boxes and in-game purchases as something that only had value for a while until the moment you stopped playing the game. Participants said that there were possibilities for some to sell their account. However, accounts were of low value compared to the money invested in them, which meant selling with a significant loss for many.

Participants described various possibilities for those under eighteen to purchase Loot Boxes despite not having a required credit card when elaborating on potential restrictions. Some used to purchase Paysafe cards with cash while others had spent content on which were placed on the phone bill. The common factor in the methods used was that the parents did not know about their purchases or spending.

Participants viewed purchasing Loot Boxes as something easy for those who are under the age of eighteen. They encouraged parents and those close to children to spend more attention on

what they are playing and take responsibility. There was a sense among the participants that parents do not do enough to control their children's habits.

In terms of changes that could make Loot Boxes less controversial, the participants called for systems that gave users a better overview of their habits and history of transactions. They earlier suggested that the low price of each Loot Box could result in users underestimate their overall spending and that an overview would make people more aware of their purchases. Consoles and games today often have parental control available. Nevertheless, participants were under the impression that few parents bothered to install or use parental controlled users on their consoles, thereby not using the potential restrictions put in place to protect children.

Changes that were most supported and mentioned by participants were changes already put in place by some betting companies, which was the possibility to impellent limits on how many purchases or how much money one could invest over some time. The participant viewed this method as a good way to stop people from purchasing out of control and protect those at risk of addiction.

As Loot Boxes have been under pressure from politicians and governments, the participants debated on whether Loot Boxes should be illegal or not. The participants viewed potential bans as problematic for the free-to-play industry while it could be positive against purchasable games. There was also a strong feeling among the participants that it would be easy for players to bypass legislation and bans by using digital tools to hide their positioning. However, the main argument against bans was the impression that Loot Boxes were not a negative phenomenon despite its controversy. Participants viewed it as something many enjoy, and while it could be problematic, participants viewed a ban as something that would mean going too far.

5. Discussion

In this thesis, its goal is to clarify the opinions and relationship between adolescents and Loot Boxes which is important for several reasons. As existing research focuses on understanding the risk and technicalities of the phenomenon Loot Boxes, this thesis supplements the understanding of its users. Furthermore, according to researchers, adolescents are the most vulnerable users in terms of being exposed to the potential harm caused by Loot Boxes (Zendle, Meyer, & Over, 2019; Griffiths, 2019) which made them the chosen target group for this thesis. According to existing researchers, adolescents and younger audiences have an issue with estimating the costs and value of a virtual currency (Zendle, Meyer, & Over, 2019).

Further, adolescents and younger audiences create habits faster based on repeated stimuli than adults (Lelonek-Kuleta, Niewiadomska, & Chwaszcz, 2020). Based on such findings, qualitative data from adolescents will bring a further understanding of how and why adolescents are affected by Loot Boxes.

The research questions aim to understand further the role Loot Boxes plays in the gaming experience among adolescents. To conclude such a matter, it is essential to acknowledge that research on Loot Boxes is still limited, though it has in recent years increased massively (Brock & Johnson, 2021). Furthermore, as the phenomenon is increasingly a vital financial factor among video games, it will likely continue being a relevant matter in various academic fields such as law, health, addiction and gaming studies. Further, with limited research on Loot Boxes, there exists even less research specifically researching the role and usage among adolescents (Zendle, Meyer, & Over, 2019).

To discuss the role it plays in the life of adolescents. One must consider the research done on gamers in general regarding Loot Boxes and its controversy and not just the limited research on adolescents. As previously mentioned, there is some research on the view of adolescents, examples being the focus group research where FIFA users discussed predatory Loot Box marketing (Kelling & Tham, 2021) and the research on the motivation behind purchases for adolescents (Zendle, Meyer, & Over, 2019). In similarity with the research done for this thesis, the theoretical approach of phenomenology used focus groups to investigate how the users viewed the Loot Box marketing. In addition to having similar methods, the results showed the same views on Loot Box marketing, mainly using limited edition packs and continuously pushing content that appears exclusive and often high priced.

To some surprise, the two hours of focus group interviews point to clear differences between existing research and adolescents' views regarding their overall view of Loot Boxes. Or more accurately, a lack of understanding of adolescents' usage of loot Boxes from an academic view, the lack of understanding of adolescents usage is also mentioned briefly in existing research (Zendle, Meyer, & Over, 2019).

While not explicitly referring to the view of adolescents. A new special issue supported the assumption that ‘‘the voice of consumer-focused research has been missing from these debates’’ (Brock & Johnson, 2021). While there has been an increase in research on Loot Boxes, this gap in available research indicates a need for significant more research.

Furthermore, while there is an increasing amount of research, the research needs to be more

different and not clustered towards just a few aspects of the phenomenon. As mentioned by Brock & Johnson, there is more and more research coming. However, the overwhelming usage of quantitative data has to be evened out by more qualitative data, and more in-depth research on more narrow aspects of the phenomenon is sorely missed.

As legislators could likely base their decisions on academic research, the lack of qualitative research means the results of potential changes could prove unfortunate. Understandably, legislators and those who are largely unfamiliar with the gaming industry will turn to numbers and statistics when making decisions that affect the industry. While statistics do point to strong links between heavy usage and negative consequences (Brady & Prentice, 2019; Lohse, 2020; Perks, 2020; Zendle & Cairns, 2018). Legislators will, at this time, have little knowledge of the opinions of users and, in particular, adolescents. The lack of data on adolescents is concerning because existing research often focuses on that audience when researching the risk of addiction and other harmful aspects.

The lack of qualitative data on adolescents was one of the main reasons behind the thesis, importance of understanding how adolescents use and interact with Loot Boxes would benefit not only new research but also legislators and those that will rely on research to implement changes for the industry. Such data could also benefit the developers as they will possibly obtain a more robust understanding of how a significant part of their user base think about and use their product.

First, in terms of how Loot Boxes appeared throughout the adolescents gaming history, the participants from the focus groups expressed that Loot Boxes had become a part of their gaming life increasingly over time. These experiences fit the data gathered from the analysis of the 463 most played games on the platform STEAM (Zendle, Meyer, & Ballou, 2020), where the collected data showed that the players of these games increasingly experienced encountering Loot Boxes now than earlier.

In terms of how Loot Boxes are viewed and used among adolescents, there was little existing research. However, the existing research did include data on users' habits, the extensive analysis of CSGO Loot Box openings in China (Zendle, Petrovskaya, & Wardle, 2020.) Their analysis has similarity with the research project, a vast difference in the amount of money spent on Loot Boxes. However, it is important to notice that the game analysed was the game CS:GO; as mentioned in focus group one, CS:GO is one of the few games which has third party market sites where Loot can be sold for real money (Chris p.30), this, according to the

participant Chris, makes it closer to gambling than other games as it stakes content which could result in profit. Zendle, Petrovskaya & Wardle, in their research to uncover the spending habits of Chinese users, discuss the role of ‘‘whales’’, the top spenders on Loot Boxes. Their reflection over their research and included literature points to some research suggesting a correlation between heavy spending and problematic spending.

Nevertheless, they point to that little data proves that these high spenders have a problematic spending habit. As a reflection on their own research Zendle, Petrovskaya & Wardle concludes: ‘‘*Significant further work is necessary to determine the extent to which these results generalise beyond a Chinese context*’’ (Zendle, Petrovskaya & Wardle, 2020).

On the topic of heavy spenders, more researchers supports the assumption that the role of ‘‘whales’’ and heavy spenders, in general, could be one of the contributing factors to the increased focus on Loot Boxes (Lohse, 2020). The topic of whales was briefly mentioned in the focus groups; however, the participants had the impression that heavy spenders simply had better finances and had the financial capacity to spend a large amount of money without it being problematic. Concluding the opinions of participants and the results from the Chinese analysis, there is uncertainty on whether heavy spenders are problematic spenders, and one must not automatically assume that ‘‘whales’’ are problematic spenders. There is also no clear definition of how high the spending must be in order to be labelled as a ‘‘whale’’. Some of the participants from the focus groups had spent more than fifteen thousand kroner on Loot Boxes, yet they did not see themselves as ‘‘whales’’ nor as problematic spenders.

While some research suggests that a ban would be the right way to handle the phenomenon, articles support the focus group participants' view, instead focusing on potential changes and restrictions instead of legislative changes (Neely, 2021; King & King & Delfabbro, 2019).

On the topic of differences in adolescents view on Loot Boxes in purchased games versus Free-to-play games. There is, to our knowledge, no previous research that reflects on the differences between the two in adolescents' opinion. This is arguably problematic due to several factors. First of all, the participants from both focus group showed an overwhelmingly more supportive attitude towards the inclusion of Loot Boxes in free-to-play games (Elias, p.29). Motivations in existing research point to the experience of opening Loot Boxes and gambling-like mechanisms to be the motivation behind purchases (Zendle, Meyer, & Over, 2019). Nevertheless, the research results from this thesis also indicate that adolescents also purchased Loot Boxes as a method to support developers behind free-to-play games. While

there is a lack of research on the opinions of Loot Boxes exclusively in free-to-play games, The research on Freemium (free-to-play, in mobile games) concluded that there was natural that free games had increased monetization and inclusion of Loot Boxes were easier to justify (Neely, 2021), a view which was supported widely amongst the participants.

On what drives adolescents to purchase Loot Boxes, both participants and researchers focused on how adolescents react when opening a Loot Box, both physically and mentally. First, the was a shared view from both researchers and participants that the younger the user was, the stronger the reactions to opening a loot box would be. Participants pointed to the use of colours and animations to build expectations, while researchers have pointed to younger audiences reacting stronger to colour, sounds and built up emotions than adults ((Zendle, Meyer, & Over,2019). As one of the main argument of Loot Boxes being gambling, the similarities in feeling a rush when an opening was voiced by both participants (Peter) and researchers (Brady & Prentice, 2019; Neely, 2021). Researchers suspect that this feeling of rush is similar to the feeling experienced by adolescents and users when playing slot machines, which is seen by some as basically sharing the exact ground mechanisms. (Zendle & Cairns, 2018; William).

‘‘For some players, the act of opening the Loot Box itself may have strong psychological appeal. This appeal may relate to the audio-visual cues associated with the Loot Box, such as the as the sound effects, the suspenseful animation of the box opening, and/or colorful light or other graphical effects that emanate from the Loot Box’’ ((King & Delfabbro, 2019, p. 172).

On the motivations behind why adolescents buy Loot Boxes, potential reasons mentioned by researchers are escaping stress, excitement, raising money, coping with adverse moods, a sense of inquiry and competitiveness (Zendle, Meyer, & Over, 2019; Brady & Prentice, 2019). Some of these potential motivations were mentioned in the focus groups, such as the excitement experienced (Peter) while opening a Loot Box, strengthening the argument that it is a proper motivation among adolescents. However, it should be noted that while the experience of a rush as motivation is one of the most mentioned motivations in research, the participants were more focused on the goal to build a collection of in-game content. At least, the desire to build a collection was mentioned and discussed before the feeling of opening a Loot Box when asked about their motivations for purchasing Boxes. Overall, most of the

motivations behind purchasing Loot Boxes among the adolescents were related to playing with friends. As previously mentioned, only one participant preferred to purchase Loot Boxes in games where he played alone (Peter). The other participants were quite clear that they had little interest in purchasing content unless they could show off or use it while playing with friends. Clearly, the social aspects were crucial in how the adolescents interacted with Loot Boxes. As mentioned by a participant, he would stop playing a game if his friends stopped playing it, making it a crucial factor in his gaming life (Chris).

In terms of marketing research and how gamers are exposed to Loot Box marketing, researchers conclude that the increased monetization of Video Games is both predatory and aggressive (King & Delfabbro, 2019; Kelling & Tham, 2021). The participants from the research project had a similar experience, especially the advertising and promotions of limited edition content. According to the participants, such marketing was experienced in the games such as League of Legends, APEX Legends and FIFA.

‘especially FIFA, You have a limited chance to get some cards & packs. So you get the idea that you have to buy it now’ (William).

In addition to limited edition content which was only available for a short time, the participants felt some pressure to purchase smaller parts of a Loot Box, giving the participants an impression that the games took advantage of giving players some parts for free, to pressure for the purchases of the remaining parts needed. The participants had also experienced the limited edition content being more expensive and more aggressively advertised than regular content (Peter).

The usage of streamers as a marketing tool from gaming developers was one topic that the participants heavily criticized. The adolescents viewed the method as dodgy and had an overwhelming feeling that the odds of packages opened on stream were better than those they could purchase themselves. The use of streamers and its overall role in terms of marketing Loot Boxes have been researched and criticized by academics for the same reasons as participants mentioned, being transparency and the odds of Loot Boxes (Lohse, 2020; Johnson & Woodcock, 2019). The use of streamers is almost unheard of in other businesses than video games, and it is the suspected foul play of changing the odds for good content that saw the procedure as something overwhelmingly negative. Participants were sure that viewers were tricked into believing they had better odds than they had in reality, and the usage of streamers seemed to decrease their view of companies honesty *‘ Viewers will see that*

streamers get better content than they will get. So it does not give a clear picture of how it actually is'' (Peter). As discussed in research (Johnson & Woodcock, 2019; King & Delfabbro, 2019) gamers could feel the urge to purchase more if they see others with a more favourable outcome of Loot Boxes than themselves. ' ' Observing other players spending and opening of Loot Boxes with favourable outcomes may provoke counterfactual comparisons (e.g. ' If only I had spent more... ') that sustain players spending. ' ' (King & Delfabbro, 2018,p. 1967).

The gamblification of digital games, being both the name of the newly released special issue on Loot Boxes and a general term describing Loot Boxes controversial similarities with gambling, is the most prominent topic academically in terms of Loot Box research (Brady & Prentice, 2019; Kelling & Tham, 2021; Perks, 2020). As mentioned previously, there is little research on adolescents' views on this subject, which was one reason for its inclusion in this thesis's research project. Several academic fields provide research on Loot Boxes similarities with gambling, among them the law studies investigating the legislative possibilities and understanding of already existing laws and to which degree Loot Boxes could be labelled under their definition of gambling (Lui, Thompson, & Carter, 2020).

' 'Based on the few studies carried out to date,the findings are very consistent that there is an association between problem gambling and loot box buying among both adolescents and adults (and that the association may be even stronger among adolescents) ' ' (Griffiths, 2019, p. 65).

Difficulties of legislative changes: In terms of how adolescents viewed Loot Boxes potential inclusion in existing gambling legislation or being central in the creation of new ones. The participants shared some researchers' view, which was that legislative changes take a long time to implement. Furthermore, while Loot Boxes also vary in form, usage and design, Both researchers and the adolescents from the project viewed legislative changes as flawed, primarily due to two main reasons. First, gaming companies can implement changes to exploit loop-hopes in laws much faster than the other way around, making researchers sceptical to bans, as companies are likely to find ways to work around them (Lui, Thompson, & Carter, 2020; Perks, 2020). Examples of this are the implemented ban in Singapore, which only covers a small portion of different Loot Boxes, making it easy for companies to adapt. As for the viewpoints of adolescents on how they relate and see legislative changes, there was not only the opinion that companies had the upper hand over legislative changes. There was also a

broad assumption that users also had tools available that could easily bypass bans, and severe changes within a country, specifically the usage of VPN, were mentioned as a quick-fix for gamers still wanting to buy Loot Boxes.

While researchers have been looking for more robust tools for parental control to limit the possibility for problematic spending among children and adolescents (Gong & Rodda, 2020; King & Delfabbro, 2019), the participants had a somewhat different focus on the topic of parental control. First, the participants listed various tools that are already implemented in games and consoles to limit unfortunate outcomes, such as having parental control already in place in some games and on some consoles such as PlayStation and XBOX. Increased parental control was suggested as a solution by King & Delfabbro. However, the focus groups stood firm on the opinion that parental control is likely useless if parents do not take increased responsibility and do not put time and effort into using the parental control tools available today. Thereby suggests that developers and consol-creators cannot do everything themselves and need stronger interactions and parents' involvement (James).

In terms of what can be done in the home of younger audiences to limit the usage of Loot Boxes, in the research on possible parental techniques to gain better control over Loot Box spendings, they expressed that many of the strategies which were looked into were challenging as they relied on restructuring the child's environment (Gong & Rodda, 2020). However, they and the participants encouraged parents to use the parental control possibilities on consoles, one other possibility mentioned was creating financial blocks by contacting their bank to deny transactions for specific purposes. Their study on parental techniques did favour the solution of using professional support and gaming counsellors. However, they seemed this solution as unlikely as there is minimal interest in such an approach (Gong & Rodda, 2020).

Overall, what is evident when discussing previous research and the work towards an understanding of adolescents Loot Box usage is the gap in research on the role of close relations and playing along with friends. Both quantitative and qualitative data could represent adolescents, yet there is apparent when discussing previous research that this part of Loot Box research is missing. Answers brought forward by the focus groups tell us how playing as a part of a group played a strong impact in their decision to purchase Loot Boxes as many research articles showed, motivation purchase Loot Boxes could be anything for the rush of opening the box or the desire to purchase unknown content (Brady & Prentice, 2019; King & Delfabbro, 2019; Zendle, Meyer, & Over, 2019). However, these articles do not reflect on why the adolescents purchase Loot Boxes in the games they chose to purchase Loot Boxes.

Research on adolescents' purchases of Loot Boxes in games they played alone is likely to bring different data than research on Loot Box habits among those who played in groups together. The importance of the gaming environment of adolescents are overlooked, and as a consequence, gives an unclear picture of their opinions and habits.

6. Conclusion

A conclusive opinion based on the experience gained from the interviews and previous research manifests that Loot Boxes is a complicated phenomenon (Neely, 2021). The challenge primarily lies in the lack of qualitative data across all the research fields covering the Loot Box phenomenon. However, with the data gathered and the implementation of previous research. A conclusion to the thesis research questions is due.

How do adolescents use, experience, and relate to the loot box phenomenon? What role it plays in their gaming experience, and how do they relate to controversy and potential changes.

To the first question presented, adolescents who play video games often buy Loot Boxes. Among the adolescents who participated in the research project, eight out of nine had purchased Loot Boxes, varying from purchasing just a few to some spending more than ten thousand kroner, and they all saw motivations and understood why users would buy Boxes. The conclusion, which the focus groups mostly reveal, is that adolescents use and relate to Loot Boxes differently in games they play with friends than games they play alone. Just one participant preferred purchasing Loot Boxes when he played alone, which stood out significantly compared to the other participants. Some stopped playing the games altogether once their friends stopped playing games, and the feeling of being a part of a community was a motivation for playing the games themselves.

Furthermore, having collections of Loot Boxes and content that they could ‘‘show off’’ to their friends was a motivation for them to buy Loot Boxes. They experienced Loot Box content to be the normality. To their experience, the adolescents rarely expressed players without any hedonic content.

Adolescents experience Loot Boxes in several positive and negative ways. Their experience and opinion on the phenomenon vary mainly on the financial model of the game they played. Almost all the money the participants had spent was spent on free-to-play games, reflecting the existing research which, with a large majority, researched the usage of Loot Boxes in free-

to-play games. The research on adolescents view on marketing shared the view of participants on predatory marketing and how Loot Boxes were used in purchasable games. Their view on purchasable games with Loot Boxes was overwhelmingly negative. The backlashes that have occurred towards purchased games have also shown the anger from userbases towards usage of Loot Boxes. Adolescents from existing research (Kelling & Tham, 2021) and the focus group experienced the inclusion of Loot Boxes as greed and implemented it as a way to maximize profit. Adolescents also experienced that purchased games with Loot Boxes often placed a lot of the essential content in Loot Boxes, which resulted in heavy criticism and anger both from users in general and the participants from this research.

So what role do Loot Boxes play in their gaming experience? The short answer is, it varies. For some adolescents, Loot Boxes played a big part in how they experience gaming on a daily basis. Both existing research and the experience of some participants show that they purchased Loot Boxes regularly and enjoyed the excitement and the things it brought to their gaming life. To some, it brought the game surprises on a regular basis, and there was also the continuous addition of new content to the Loot Boxes, so for some, it was always an attraction to buy more boxes. Adolescents both in research and thesis said that they encountered Loot Boxes regularly, and it was seen as just a normal part of gaming in this day and age. While adolescents seem OK with encountering Loot Boxes in games, they still view and experience the phenomenon as something of a controversy, at least in terms of pressure, marketing and sometimes which role it has within the game. While there to some degree, lacked additional research to back up the opinions of the opinion of the focus groups, the adolescents viewed Loot Boxes as positive, as a central part of the income from free-to-play games adolescents enjoy games where they themselves can choose how much money they want to invest in the game, this is arguably backed up by the considerable amount of players in the most popular free-to-play games as both Fortnite and League of Legends have registered more than 100 million monthly users. Large parts of their audiences are adolescents.

So how do adolescents respond and relate to the controversy surrounding Loot Boxes? Some parts of Loot Boxes were seen as highly controversial, and adolescents are a large part of the audiences that watches streamers. Furthermore, as it in several games has been typical for companies to pay streamers to open Loot Boxes. This practice was heavily criticized in the focus groups. Primarily two reasons were said to be negative/Controversial. First, the uncertainty of odds in the content opened. Second, adolescents and researchers both concluded that younger audiences were more at risk and easier to manipulate.

There is a need for further research on how addictive adolescents see Loot Boxes in terms of addiction. Those represented in this thesis does, however, see the resemblance but viewed the phenomenon as something that would only be harmful to a small percentage of buyers.

Adolescents understand why the phenomenon is controversial. The question is more if it is controversial enough to make them distance themselves from the practice. Bans were seen as problematic, and there were too many tools available for both players and developers to find ways to bypass potential legislations.

On the topic of potential changes to the Loot Box phenomenon in the future, adolescents are more supportive of non-legislative changes to the phenomenon. The research for this thesis and results from Kelling & Tham's focus groups were conclusive in their support of having an overview of their spending, both on consoles and within each game. None of the participants knew how they had spent in total, and there was clearly expressed that they felt seeing the numbers behind both their spending and the odds of the Loot Boxes would give gamers a better understanding and control of their relationship to Loot Boxes. Some changes like this have been implemented; FIFA now shows how much you play and spend on the game. Limits to how much one could spend during a period of time seemed as a wanted solution.

Whether or not adolescents want Loot Boxes to be banned, the answer is mostly no, and the negative aspects do not make it ban-worthy, nor are there possibilities that make it easily done. For adolescents, the future of video games contains Loot Boxes, though probably with some changes and limits. Honesty and openness from developers is the key for a healthy relationship to adolescents. Furthermore, for research, adolescents need to be concluded to give more data to back up and confirm the opinions and impressions from adolescents. However, as the industry changes rapidly and with the evolvement of financial models, the view of adolescents might change with time. As controversial as the phenomenon may seem, it would likely stay legal for the time being if it were up to adolescents. What the future holds is still unknown. Nevertheless, the future for adolescents and Loot Boxes is exciting, unclear, and a crucial part of future research within video game studies.

7. Further research

While research on the topics of loot boxes, microtransaction, consumer behaviour and gamblification is increasing and gaining more focus academically, there is still a need for further research on how adolescents view, interact and relate to the Loot Box phenomenon, as the results from the research showed, there is a wide variety in opinions and different relations

with Loot Boxes. There has been an overwhelming presence of quantitative data in existing research and a lack of in-depth qualitative research. As younger audiences are central in the discussions around Loot Boxes, there is surprisingly little research focusing solely on younger audiences and their interactions. As adolescents view adolescents in some cases differed significantly from views of academics, there is a need for a broader understanding of this audience. While some researchers used focus groups and brought data on the view of adolescents (Kelling & Tham, 2021), this research focuses on its role in the field of marketing. There is a need for more qualitative data on the different academic fields that take an interest in the phenomenon. These fields include law, mental and physical health studies, Addiction studies and behaviour studies.

Whilst this thesis brings new data on the understanding of adolescents, there is a need for more extensive research projects on this topic as the thesis covers the view of only nine users. There is also a need to research different groups of adolescents on criteria such as Gender, country and amongst both older and younger audiences as this thesis covers only the experiences of men in a particular age group within a small geographic region.

A significant gap in Loot Box research is its lack of data on the experience and relation between adolescents and Loot Boxes, as this thesis has primarily relied on quantitative data and researchers assumptions in research in a qualitative research project. More research on the phenomenon is needed through qualitative data, which would greatly benefit understanding how Loot Boxes is used. There are differences in views on free-to-play versus purchased games on topics regarding Loot Boxes, where there is a strong need for new research. The research showed clear differences, yet there is no similar research on the topic, which is arguably problematic. For further research on the views and relationship between adolescents and Loot Boxes, the importance of whom they play with and which games they form personal bonds with other players is crucial. The lack of understanding adolescents is problematic if legislative changes are made, as an understanding of its affected audience should be important to those who have the power to implement changes.

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(attachments)

Interview guide (Norwegian)

Focus Group interview one

Focus group interview two

8. Interview guide

45- 60 minutter: 3 hoved-temaer, Ca 15-20 min per tema.

Fokusgruppe-intervju, 4 og 5 deltakere

Anonymisert.

Semi-strukturert intervju, hver person oppfordres til å bidra med ideer/meninger om hvert tema/spørsmål. Ved korte besvarelser vil det bli suplementert oppfølgingsspørsmål

Intervju

del en: Egne erfaringer/ bruk av loot-boxes. Rolle, motivasjon, press.

- Kort om egne kjøp/bruk av loot boxes, hvilke spill spille dere som inneholder loot boxes?
- I hvilke spill har dere kjøpt loot boxes og hvorfor? Er det kosmetisk/hedonisk innhold eller innhold som kan påvirke spillet (pay to win)?
- Er det mer sannsynlig at dere bruker penger når man spiller med venner? For eksempel lagspill: League of legends, Dota, CS:GO etc.
- Er det forventet at man bruker skins/har brukt penger på microtransactioner eller loot boxes?
- Er det lavere terskel for å bruke penger innad i spill som er gratis enn spill som koster penger? For eksempel League of legends vs Star wars battlefront II.
- Har dere oversikt over eget forbruk?
- Spontankjøper dere loot boxes eller planlegger dere kjøp?

Del to: Helse, gambling, selvkontroll, anklager

- Opplever dere Loot boxes som avhengighetsskapende?
- Opplever dere markedsføring av Loot boxes som 'agressivt'?
- Fører tilbud på begrenset tid til kjøpspress?
- Er unge mer utsatt enn eldre?
- Er det problematisk at selskaper sponser streamere for å åpne loot boxes på stream?

- Hva syntes dere om hvordan loot boxes anklages for å være gambling? Argumenter for/mot.
- Er noen grupper mennesker mer utsatt for å ha et problem forhold til loot boxes?
- Tror dere spillere har oversikt/kontroll over sitt eget forbruk på loot boxes?

Del tre: Forbud, lovverk, regulering, veien videre for loot boxes.

- Hva kan være problematisk med å forby Loot boxes?
- Burde det innføres restriksjoner? Iåsfall hvilke?
- Hva er tanker rundt den belgiske løsningen?
- Hva er tankene rundt FIFAs oppmykning?
- Burde Norge forby loot boxes?

9. Focus group interview one

Focus group interview. Group one: recorded 25.04.2021 ca 19:10-20:10

Interviewer: Simen Langeland Volda University College

Platform Discord group meeting on PC/MAC.

Recorded with OBS Studio.

Participants:

Peter 22

Andrew, 22

Matthew, 21

Chris, 23

James 24

Interview part one – Motivation, experience, background, the basic of loot boxes.

Interviewer: welcome to the focus group interview, this interview will last between 45 and 60 minutes and its designed to be a conversation/ Discussion between you five. So I will continuously present you with questions or topics to discuss, and then elaborate as much as possible. Its ideal if most contribute to some degree in each topic you will go through. If possible, I will speak as little as possibly and only intervene if we need to change subject due to the time schedule to be able to go through all the topics within the timeframe. If the conversation around a topic sort of ends, I will guide you onto the next part of the interview or give follow-up questions.

Interviewer: ready?

(all participants): Yes.

Interviewer: So first off, you start by telling which games you play that contains loot boxes, and your own history & loot box purchases, if you've only purchased it a few times, many times or not at all.

Peter: I can begin, I've purchased and been in touch with loot boxes in a lot of games. At the moment the only game where im buying loot boxes is the game APEX Legends, but I've purchased loot boxes in the game Team Fortress, which was the game where I first started buying loot boxes. I've also purchased loot boxes in DOTA and a bit on Call of Duty, so through the years its been quite a lot.

Andrew: The first time I encountered loot boxes was in the game Counterstrike where I purchased a loot box key, however, when I used it I didn't get any good content, so that sort of put me of the hunger to by more. I am also playing a lot of APEX Legends but I've managed to not purchase any loot boxes there yet.

Peter: I have to say, you have a pretty strong will and self-control if you haven't spent any money at APEX Legends, That's impressive.

Chris: First game I played that had loot boxes was probably CS:GO, where they had some really cool skins, this was during high school and I'd just started working outside of school and started making my own money. So then I could purchase keys and boxes. So, that's how it went

Peter: So, did you sort of try to get a big collection?

Chris: yeah I guess so.

Chris: It was cool to have some of the rarest skins, so that's where it began. Now I don't really play that much video games. I play a bit of APEX on PlayStation, and I've purchased a few loot boxes there, maybe two or three. But now when you level up, you get loot boxes sometimes. And then I sometimes buy something extra, which I think is kind of stupid of me.

James: Well, I hate loot boxes, I just think its completely stupid. I've encountered it in Team Fortress, APEX Legends and Warzone, but I've actually never purchased a loot box.

Peter & Chris: Wait, really?

James: yeah. Guess its kind of weird.

Interviewer: So, the next question is if those of you who have purchased loot boxes have purchased loot boxes that contain cosmetics and hedonic content or if it's been loot boxes containing items that can affect your gameplay, so-called pay to win loot boxes.

James: Wait, there are loot Boxes that are pay to win?

Interviewer: yes, however it seems more common in mobile games.

James: ah yes I see.

Peter: Oh wait, then I can actually add that I've purchased loot boxes in Call of Duty Mobile.

Chris, James & Andrew: Wait, are actually serious? You've spent money on loot boxes in Call of Duty mobile?

Matthew: I'm also so guilty there, without a doubt. Definitely spent money as well on Loot Boxes inn Call of duty on mobile.

Peter: Yeah both me and Matthew have spent some money there, but I've also purchased "pay to win" loot boxes in both Call of Duty Mobile and Team fortress where you could purchase loot boxes which contained different weapons.

Chris: I also feel that games that are free to play, that you don't pay for at all, its more acceptable with loot boxes instead of games that costs money but also contains loot boxes, I don't like that.

In most free to play games on computers its all about cosmetics though, at least in Counterstrike and League of Legends its all skins. Though in League of legends, the player

“Faker” which was the best player in the world never used a skin in his games. And he was a world champion and never used skins, so its just cosmetics really.

Peter: Yeah, but you get it so that you can look as cool as possible, So in almost all games its just about cosmetics really. You want to be unique, you want to be one of the few that has the rare skins, I just remembered that I’ve also purchased boxes in Overwatch as well. But its mostly because I want my characters to look cool. I think I have an inner need that I want to show the random people I play with online that I have cool skins, and maybe they get the impression that: hey, that guy is good. But in the end its just skins, but I think there’s something in it. That you want to be seen as “better” in some way.

Andrew: You what’s cooler? If you don’t buy any yourself, but you get them in other ways. Either as gifts or through playing.

Peter: yeah, that’s possible, also there are some that just purchase loot boxes to get skins which they can sell later, a bit like you Chris, a proper businessman.

Chris: It’s crazy, a few years back, i sold a super-rare skin in CS and now its worth like 60-70k Dollars. It really sucks.

Interviewer: Do you spend more money on loot boxes in games that you play with friends? Or do you spend the same amount or more in games where you play with random people?

Matthew: I quite sure I spend more money on it when its with friends, but I could also definitely spend money on loot boxes in games where I only play with Randoms, but definitely more in games where I play with friends, then its more fun to show of.

Peter: For me it’s the complete opposite. I usually spend more alone by myself when I just play alone at night. That’s when I purchases the most loot-boxes. Often, I don’t really want to say to my friends that I’ve spent money on loot boxes.

Matthew: yeah it’s kind of embarrassing really.

Peter: yeah, its quite embarrassing, sometimes when I’ve played APEX, I’ve told friends that I’ve won or received free boxes while I have in reality purchased like 4-5 loot boxes. I might get judged if I tell people that I just purchased loot boxes. But for me Its not about showing off to friends, its more to show random people.

Chris: I’m more in agreement with Matthew, its in the games that I play with friends that I buy loot boxes. I mostly only play games that my friends play. So if my friends stops playing a game and switcher over to some other game. Then I will follow and continue playing the new game. So, both gaming and loot boxes goes hand in hand with playing with friends for my part.

Andrew: Though, I have been tempted to buy loot boxes quite a lot of times in APEX, I’ll have to admit that.

Peter: I honestly don’t believe that you haven’t purchased anything on APEX

Andrew: Honestly haven’t!

Matthew: I've spent so much on Call of Duty mobile, most pointless purchases I've ever done.

Andrew: But I've purchased content in Fallout Shelters!

Chris: Same here

Interviewer: So next up, when you play with friends, is it expected that you spend money on loot boxes and have skins? Is there any pressure?

Peter: No, not at all, don't think its like that at all, you don't expect that your friends have skin or have spent money on microtransactions.

Matthew: In APEX you can actually get loot boxes for free when you play the game, sometimes just by playing and sometimes through events. So you don't need to spend money to get the boxes.

Peter: And those boxes are similar to the once you can purchase for money. There are a few boxes and stuff that you have to pay for, but most of the content is possible to get without paying. So Apex is a great example of how to do it.

Chris: Yeah absolutely.

Peter: So just play the game and you can get loot boxes for free. Its great

Interviewer: Are you more likely to purchase loot boxes in free to play games compared to games where you pay a full price for the game?

Andrew: So, I don't support the "system" where you will have to spend money on loot boxes when you've already paid for the game, I wont bother to spend money on loot boxes in these games.

Peter: I think Chris also mentioned something like it in the beginning, that it just feels more right to spend money in free to play games. Its just more justified.

Chris: yeah at least if it's a game that you really enjoy, because then you feel that you support the developers, so you feel it goes to a good cause. Giving money in games that you've paid for doesn't feel good and I don't like it ether.

Peter: but you might do it sometimes in games that you've already paid for. At least for me in the game Overwatch. So I purchased some content, but that's mostly just becoused I loved the game so.

Matthew: I've purchased money on Rocket League a few times. But not a lot, so just a few times.

James: Absolutely less tempting to buy loot boxes in a purchased game, because inn a free to play game you have to buy quite a lot of loot boxes just get to the same price as a full priced game.

Chris: Back to league of legends, I feel that free to play games are way more popular than games that you must purchase. The games are so popular that its more likely that young people have the games, and then spend money on it.

Interviewer: Have you ever used skin-trading sites where you sell/buy content that you have gained in loot boxes

James: It was massively popular in the games CS where some things were really expensive for loot box content. Not sure if it's the same now, but it was a huge thing a few years ago.

Chris: yeah, but the creators have received a lot of unwanted attention towards the system, so its absolutely controversial. There are a lot of loot box sites which are made by other companies where you can purchase modified loot boxes where you will have better chances of good content than if you purchase the loot boxes directly from the game. So its popular, On CS you can use their "marketsite" and purchase and sell the content you want, so they have a big market. Some items have been sold for up to 100k dollars.

Peter: Yeah the prices can be crazy, In fortnite, that is so relevant these days, where users sell their accounts, and it's the same for me, I have a lot of rare skins from loot boxes from the very beginning of the game

Matthew: in the beginning of Fortnite I spent so much money, probably around 2000kr in the first few weeks. Sort of lost control, haven't spent that much on APEX but it's increasing.

Peter: On Team fortress, that's the only place where I've seen the markets where you can trade items. But it's not the same as in CS:GO. But it's somewhat similar.

Chris: In Team Fortress they also had their own currency, so they had a currency that changed value, so at some points the in game currency had a large value, but sometimes it had a lesser value, in the same way as real money.

Interviewer: To those of you that have purchased loot boxes, Do you have control of how much money you've spent on loot boxes:

Peter: not at all, but I guess its quite a lot of money throughout the years, since I've played a lot of games and I pay these small items and boxes quite often. So in total it's a huge amount, you remember the times where you've spent like 2000kr on one transaction, but you don't remember the huge amount of times where you've purchased small amount of content and loot boxes.

Matthew: no control, but I remember in the early period of the COVID I spent a lot of money on loot boxes, but I don't know how much

Andrew: Haven't purchased a lot, but I have no idea. But not a lot.

Matthew: it's crazy how much we have spent

Chris: Not sure at all how much. But in total I'm quite sure it's more than 15 000kr. But I'm definitely sure that you have spent more money than me Peter.

Interviewer: When you purchase loot boxes: is it planned or is it on impulse?

Peter: 100% impulse. I never plan it, it's the same when you're at a supermarket and buy a lottery ticket. You never plan it, you just do it.

Everyone: Same here. Always on impulse.

Interview part two: Health, controversy, gambling, self-control, marketing

Interviewer: So, do you feel like loot boxes is something that is addictive?

Andrew: Yeah, I would say so, it's a bit like Peter said about buying lottery, and afterwards you often regret that you purchased it. But it's so similar to gambling and lottery.

Peter: yeah there's definitely some chance of it being addictive, when I played DOTA I purchased a lot of loot boxes and I just loved the feeling of opening loot box, I loved the excitement, I loved it. You never knew what you would get, and it was just something I really really enjoyed.

Chris: so definitely addictive for Peter

Chris: Definitely, it can be very addictive for some, it just so easy to get addictive to these things.

Peter: you get the rush, so its easy to get addicted to it. It's the feeling of the unknown.

Matthew: And when its limited content then its more addictive, because you feel like you have to try and get it.

James: Wouldn't say that example is gambling, but its definitely something addictive.

Chris: If you purchase loot boxes for a thousand kroners, you should think about how much work you have to do in real life to make that money. And now I don't play 90% of the games where I've purchased loot boxes, so for me now its just gone, all of it.

Interviewer: Do you feel that loot boxes are marketed predatory, that they push users to purchase the loot boxes?

Matthew: Yeah, if you open Fortninte, the first thing thing you see is limited loot boxes and content, so you just see it all the time when you open a game.

Andrew: I feel it's the same in most games now really

Peter: I understand why they do it in free to play games though, because that's the way they make money. So for games like APEX I really understand them. They need us to buy loot boxes.

Chris: And its up to people to buy it. No one forces us to buy it, but they really encourage us to buy it

Peter: I don't think I've seen loot boxes being advertised outside of games, maybe just a little bit on a few console deals, but that's something different. But you can get in game currency in some games included when you buy a console like a new PlayStation.

Peter: In APEX there has been a few collection events, where they release a few “once in a lifetime” boxes, which are so much more expensive, but they are pretty cool, and it's all about gathering the limited content. So they are on purpose a lot more expensive, so that's sometimes aggressive marketing.

Chris: Same with League of Legends, sometimes they make legacy content, so it's more expensive and they are only available for a short period of time, so the few times when you can get them, you are more likely to spend more money. Because they pressure you to spend money in that timeframe.

Interviewer: Are younger people more exposed to the negative aspects of loot boxes than adults?

James: No, it comes down to money, when you are older you have more to spend on loot boxes. However I'm not a child now so I'm not sure how available their parents' money are. But I think adults are more likely to experience the negative sides of it.

Peter: I purchased loot boxes when I was 14 in Team Fortress and DOTA, and I think I've had the same relationship to it since. I have more access to money now, but I still think I spend the same amount now.

All (Argument on how Peter managed to use money in games when he was 14)

Chris: When I was younger I didn't spend my own money, I remember on phone games I could order in-game content on the mobile bill, so my parents had to pay, which of course wasn't good.

Interviewer: Some games sponsor streamers to open loot boxes live. In some cases the boxes they've received have had better chances of rare content, what's your thoughts on sponsoring streamers as marketing?

James: It's a bit like betting sites being sponsored by celebrities and sports personalities.

Matthew: I think it hits a younger audience, they are more exposed to doing impulsive purchases, so it's sneaky.

Peter: So, watching people open loot boxes, there is something addictive about that as well. You know that feeling that the streamer experiences, and you feel the excitement of opening the box. You love the excitement of seeing a box being opened, so I understand why people watch it. It's the moment when you open a box, the sound, the colours, the surprise. That's the addictive thing about it.

Matthew: That's the same in APEX. It's really fun to witness the process when you open the box. It's exciting and fun. You get a good feeling of excitement when you open it.

Peter: It's a clever way of advertising, they know that young people watch streamers. So, I think it will affect younger audiences a lot more than older audiences. So it can definitely affect them negatively. They will see that the streamers get better content than they will get. So, it doesn't give a clear picture of how it actually is.

Matthew: then they will maybe share the excitement with friends or parents. Showing them what they got in the loot box.

Chris: So they pay streamers to sell their products to the streamers audience. Its definitely shady in my opinion. But from a business standpoint but when you know that the audience is quite young, its not cool. But understandable.

James: yeah its an easy manipulative audience. But some adults watch it as well.

Peter: yeah I've watched a few streams where they've been opening packs, and then purchased a few myself in games straight after. So you can be motivated to purchase some loot boxes yourself afterwards.

Interviewer: So what do you think about the accusations about loot boxes being gambling?

Peter: I can see the resemblance, because you bet your own money to get something cool and unknown, but you don't always end up with something that you feel have value. So you never really make anything from it. You will always lose money

Chris: And sometimes, you might not like the content you want, so you can get disappointed and feel annoyed that you spent money. But if you do get some good content on the first box, then you will continue and purchase more.

Peter: so I can see the accusation, but its not really what I associate with gambling. Because I see gambling as something where you place money in hope of getting a larger sum than what you placed inn.

Chris: CS is the only game that has something of that kind, Where they have the raffle where you can get increased amount than what you spent. So that's gambling. I think the connection with gambling is the feeling of betting money on something unknown and you don't know what you will get. You purchase an experience and content.

James: So they sort of trick you into spending money, but at least you get something, in some way.

Peter: you will get something, but its not necessarily what you want. You bet your money on something, so yeah, it's a type of gambling I'd say. And games will show you what you can potentially win. They tease the best content you can get.

Matthew: you wont get the rarest content. You usually just get stuff of less value, And I speak from experience. You'd have to spend so much money on boxes to get the best content from the loot boxes.

Interview Part three: regulations, bans, legislations and the future of loot boxes.

Interviewer: So the last part is about the future of loot boxes, legislations and bans.

Interviewer: What can be problematic about potentially banning loot boxes?

Chris: I think in the future, there will be so much more loot boxes. They know they can get some much money on it and companies will continue to push it.

James: the only way to ban it is through new legislations, and if I remember correctly, they didn't manage to ban it last time they tried it in Norway. So its difficult to get it under the gambling laws. I cant see it happening anytime soon ether. It's a grey zone. So I think the future for microtransactions is big.

Chris: I just don't hope they start advertising it on TV, like betting companies to with famous people on advertisements. I hate it.

Peter: I think if you banned loot boxes, it could have a lot of negative impacts on gaming developers. At least developers on games that are free to play like Fortnite and league of legends. If they ban it then these games will struggle, and they will have to charge money for the game.

Matthew: If they ban it, I'm sure the amount of adds everywhere in games would increase a lot. It could be terrible, a bit like on YouTube where you have to watch and skip adds in order to see a video. Its annoying.

Peter: It would be interesting to see what would happen if they banned it. It could have some positive effects as well. Maybe some people focused more on the gameplay and not the loot boxes.

Interviewer: Should there be implemented any restrictions to loot boxes?

Peter: it could be very smart to limit the amount of loot boxes you can buy during a time period. And maybe get a better system to make age-restrictions. But I feel like people always find a way to trick a system.

James: I feel like then the parents have to play a part, and in a lot of situation I doubt parents will bother to do anything. So not sure how effective it would be.

Peter: I think restrictions could make people have a healthier relationship to loot boxes. Maybe better than my relationship and usage of loot boxes.

James: but you haven't had any financial issue, so maybe your situation isn't the same.

Peter: But I've spent way to much money. And its money I could have saved up. So in that way its definitely a problem.

Matthew: Those money could be saved to buy a flat or something. Lot of better alternatives than buying loot boxes.

Matthew: betting sites in Norway has systems to restrict your habits and investments, you can put in a cap for how much money you can bet each week or month. And then you can't change it before a long period of time.

Peter: I think there should be systems where you can place restrictions for yourself. That's the best solution.

Matthew: So, when I'm playing Lotto, I can only spend 500 kroner a month. Something like that.

Andrew: I did the same, but at that time It was easy to adjust the restrictions so. Hopefully it's a better system. Especially for those that are addiction to loot boxes or gambling in general.

Interviewer: So, a lot of countries have tried implementing restrictions on loot boxes, but technology changes so fast, that its said that it's very easy for companies to adapt to changes in legislations. However, In Belgium loot boxes are banned. What are your thoughts on such a restriction?

James/Peter: So you cant purchase loot boxes, the system is removed?

Matthew: Can you use a VPN to fix the problem? Sounds like an easy way to fix the issue for gamers that want to buy loot boxes.

James: it's a step in the right direction, and it could be a good way to restrict loot boxes I guess.

Peter: I don't its completely wrong to ban it. It's something positive as well for some games. I love it, so removing it from games would be removing something that a lot of players enjoy.

James: it wouldn't affect me, so I'm more for making it illegal.

Peter: I would miss it, I enjoy buying loot boxes. And I will continue to buy it.

Interviewer: in some games, you can now see how much money and time you've spent on a game. So you have a clearer overview as well as putting restrictions on how much you should play and spend on the game. So that has been a way for the companies to make their games less controversial. What are your thoughts on these adaptations? And are there more ways to make loot boxes less controversial?

James: it's a good way to do it, to see how much you have spent.

Chris/Peter: In parental control its easier to restrict spending and controversy for young audiences. So consoles and games have to have some sort of parental control available. They are forced to do so. If it works, that's another discussion.

Chris: Parents need to pay attention as well. Most kids don't use accounts with parental control, Parents need to be more connected and have more knowledge of how games and companies work. Only the parents that invest time into it will make decisions that restrict the negative outcomes for children.

James: If its about restrictions for adults, then its just about placing restrictions on how much money you can invest.

Chris: Maybe you can do it through your bank, so that the credit cards can't be used on in-game purchases.

James: I wouldn't involve banks. It should just be up to the gaming and console companies. Especially showing the amount of money you have spent is a good idea.

Peter: I might have restricted my habits more if i knew at all times how much I have spent on loot boxes. It would remind of how much I've invested. So an overview would probably reduce the amount of loot boxes that's purchased.

Chris: something similar is my bank system where I can see how much ive spent in the cafeteria at work, when I saw how much spent, I stopped eating there. So something like that, just in gaming.

Peter: any sort of overview would be great. If users could see it and be reminded often about how much they spend. That would change things.

Interviewer: So, last question. Should loot boxes be illegal/banned in Norway?

Peter: in my opinion, no. I think loot boxes, with all its catches and negative aspects. It's a lot of joy for a lot of people, and I enjoy it a lot. And I'd say most people have control and just think it's a cool concept. So I want to keep it for all the good stuff it does for some developers as well, which could result in them making better games.

James: Some of the games that have loot boxes aren't really that high quality games compared to a lot of single-player games. So I doubt a lot of it goes into developing the game. Games like Fortnite and APEX are quite cheap to make I think.

Chris: I want it to be legal as well. I don't feel that it affects me a lot, so I don't think the negative aspects of it are enough of a argument to ban it. There are people with issues, but that's probably just a few that has serious issues. And for those, make some restrictions in games. Not a complete ban.

James: And people around those who have issues need to interact and help them. But its not a problem for all gamers. They need help, but a ban isn't the answer. The few addicts shouldn't be the cause of something that's good for almost everyone to be banned.

Interview finished. 1 hour and 5 minutes total.

10. Focus group interview two

Focus group interview. Group two: recorded 27.04.2021 ca 19:20-20:20

Interviewer: Simen Langeland Volda University College

Platform Discord group meeting on PC/MAC.

Recorded with OBS Studio.

Participants:

- W- William 19
- Sam 22
- Kim 18
- Elias 23

Interview part one – Motivation, experience, background, the basic of loot boxes.

Interviewer: So first, question is which games you play that has loot boxes in them, and tell a bit about your own usage of loot boxes if any.

Elias: I think I've just played League of legends and RuneScape, those are the games that I've spent money on. And I think League of legends is the game where I've purchased the most loot boxes, but not a lot. However, memberships and season passes in other games have cost me a decent amount of money. I spend money on things in online games if its needed in order to play. But not much apart from that.

Kim: I don't purchase that much loot boxes, but I've purchased a lot of fighters pass, which are parts of the games I play the most. Though in games that I play where I see people

purchasing loot boxes, it doesn't give them advantages, so like, it doesn't have any value in that way, in terms of gameplay. It's just about making your characters look cool, which is a nice thing. Makes you feel cool.

Sam: The reasons I've purchased it in League of Legends is that I wanted the characters to look cool, and the feeling of having a lot of skins. So it's a bit of a collectors-project. But I regret buying a lot of them. It's at least a few thousand kroner. So I could have used it on something else today. But I don't buy Loot Boxes now, I don't bother with League of Legends anymore so. And it's a waste of money, Doesn't give me anything other than looking a bit cooler.

Elias: Well that's how they make money so.

William: Well, I was younger I spent way too much money on skins and loot boxes. And especially in League of Legends. And when loot boxes became a thing it was cool to try to get stuff that had a bit more value than the usual skins you could purchase, so it was exciting. But I've spent way too much.

Interviewer: Next, the money you've spent on loot boxes and microtransactions, is it just for cosmetic content or has any of it been pay to win? Like in popular mobile games, anything that improves your "skills" in games?

Kim: Well, let's take Overwatch as an example, the game has a lot of loot boxes but it's in no way pay to win. It's just about cosmetics. But in League of Legends, you can purchase characters in a quick way by buying loot boxes or microtransactions. But it's not that normal, you can get all of them by just playing the game. Doesn't really give you an advantage.

Elias: I think I'd lose interest in games where you can pay to win. It's not the same joy when you don't have the same chances.

William: I've played a lot of Hearthstone which could arguably be classed as pay to win, you can get all the cards through playing. But they add new cards and content so often that there is no way that you can get all of them in time, so if you actually want to have a decent amount of cards to play with. You will have to buy packs and boxes. So in that way, it's sort of pay to win. Just well camouflaged. You can't become really good at it without using money. That's why they release new cards and content before you can get the chance to get all of them through playing.

William: Earlier, you would get cards you didn't have from before, but now you can stack up on cards. So you don't necessarily get anything new either.

Interviewer: Are you more likely to spend money on loot boxes in games that you play with friends or do you spend the same amount on games where you play with Randoms.

Sam: I think I buy the most in games I play with friends, I guess to some degree there's a pressure to have skins. Where you got the answer on whether you had a certain skin or not. So it was more something me and friends talked about earlier. But I've never purchased content in games where I don't play with friends. I doubt ever will either.

Elias: There's just not the same reasons to do it. In games where you play with friends you have more of an identity or role. So it doesn't feel the same with Randoms. With friends its more like you flex or show off the content that you have.

William: its only fun when you can tell off your friends about that you have stuff that they don't have. So its not the same motivation to spend money on loot boxes in games where I don't play with friends.

Interviewer: when you play with friends, is there an expectation that you should have purchased loot boxes or skins? Or is there no expectations to have skins?

Kim: I think Sam had a good point about it earlier. A few years ago it was more "rare" to have good content and exclusive from loot boxes. So then most people had it and purchased boxes. While now its in a lot of games possible to get boxes without paying money. So now its more common to see players without skin. So that has changed

Elias: I remember it was easier or more common for me to buy loot boxes a few years ago, I used to go to the shop and buy these paysafe cards that I could use on loot boxes, I don't do that in the same way anymore. So that was in games where I just played with friends, I still have skins and something get new stuff. But a lot of it is things I get for free through playing the game and not just buying loot boxes. But my spending have been reduced over time

William: I think for younger people its more a cool thing to acquire things. You don't show off skins and talk about it inn the same ways.

Elias: Now you talk more about gameplay with friends and not so much about the loot boxes, skins and cosmetics

Kim: I think that its good that we don't focus so much on cosmetics and loot boxes anymore when we play with friends. I guess in some cases some people could feel bullied if they didn't have the same content or any good content in games, so that they couldn't flash or show off stuff in the same ways that others could. So for us now its more friendly in a way for everyone, regardless if you have spent money on loot boxes or not.

Interviewer: Are you more likely and more comfortable about spending money on loot boxes and cosmetics on free to play games or games that you've payed for in advance?

Elias: Well, Star Wars Battlefront II was massively expensive when it arrived at the market, and it lacked so much content, so if you wanted most of the content you had to use so much additional money. For me I'd much rather spend money in free to play games. With free to play, that's sort of their main source of income, so it's a way to support them. They are more honest producers.

Kim: yeah, so in free to play games you feel like its more legit. You want to support them and help the creators. So its something different for sure

William: In games like Star Wars and FIFA you have payed for the entire game, but at the same time you don't get the whole game. So its like they sell you an unfinished product. Which is dirty business

Kim: Its terrible, was the same with the game SMASH where you had to pay a lot for memberships, and you had to pay for passes that you needed to play, and you paid for the game. So it felt like such a scam. You had to continuously pay so much money to play it.

Erlend: Also, in those games you just sort of borrow it from the games because if you don't continuously pay, then you wont be able to use your content that you've purchased. So its yours for a limited time, or only when you pay for the game. It's a dirty way to make money and to keep people playing and paying every year.

Kim: So after all, it's a lot better to purchase content in free to play than in games that you've already paid for. And especially the games where you have to continuously pay for seasons and passes to keep playing.

Interviewer: Do you have an overview of how much money you've spent on loot boxes and microtransactions?

Elias: In loot boxes its just a few thousand, but memberships that are required in a few games that cost money has been way worse. That's where I've spent most money, especially in Runescape. I've paid for some of these memberships in 10-15 years. So that's probably a lot of money.

Elias: On league of legends you there are some websites where you can check how much money you have spent. The site is not administrated by league of legends. But I think the game itself now has a method for users to check their spendings so.

Kim: I'd say I have a pretty good overview of how much ive spent on loot boxes, because the Nintendo Wii shop shows how much you've spent and on what you've spent. So that has given me a chance to see an overview:

William: overall, with all the games I've played, im not sure how much money I've spent at all. But it's a lot. I've purchased a lot of times over a long period of many years. And a lot of small transactions makes a lot of money in the long run. A few hundred here and a few hundred there. So in the end there's a lot of money wasted on loot boxes.

Elias: you don't realise that you spend a lot of money since you don't pay a lot for each loot box or transaction. So you get a feeling that its not that much. But it also makes you do it a lot of time.

William: you don't want to spend 600 kroners on half of game.

Elias: With free to play games, when you buy loot boxes, you feel like you don't spend that much money on the game, because you didn't pay for the game itself.

William: I've spent a lot over the years on league of legends. But I stopped when they implemented some changes this year.

Interviewer: When you buy loot boxes, do you do so spontaneously or is it planned in advance?

all: Spontaneously.

William: when something is released and I see it in-game, then I buy it. But I never plan it.

Elias: sometimes new content and loot boxes are on discount, so then you purchase it, but spontaneously. I never plan it.

William: And you enjoy opening the packs, seeing the colors, the sound effects and the excitement.

Elias: It's a bit like a casino, they want you to spend more and more when you are doing it (the game).

Interviewer: Do you experience loot boxes as something that can be addictive?

William: it's a more fun experience than just purchasing a product directly with microtransactions. So its more fun.

Kim: They want you to get that addictive feeling, they design it to make you want more. And the effects and effort they have put into the experience you get when you open the boxes is crazy, its so complex and well done. So, its not weird that people like the experience and get tempted to do it more. They want to sell their in-game products, so they push it.

Sam: You get the excitement when you don't know what you get. So, I think it can be

William: especially for younger audiences, when you see the flashing colours and you see all the effects. That's what you want to experience, and I can see how people get addicted, especially in games like CS and Rocket League. Its similar to gambling in terms of what they want users to feel.

Sam: I know those of my friends that still play CS still buy a lot of loot boxes, so maybe it's a bit addicting for some. At least they keep buying it.

Interviewer: Do you think that loot boxes are marketed predatory and pushed upon users?

Kim: yeah, I'd definitely say so.

William: For example, in CS they give you parts of the content for free. But you have to buy some of it to actually open the box. You can get "keys" by playing the game, but they are useless unless you buy boxes as well. So that's one way they try to force you to spend money. So that you don't feel like the keys gets wasted. It's the same with League of Legends

William: Often you can get advertisement for loot boxes when you enter the game, so you spend some money here and some money there. So continuously you keep buying them. It tempts you to buy boxes if you have keys, and the other way around. Because you know that you have a part of what you need to open the box. So they give you some of it, but not all of it.

Interviewer: sometimes they have limited offers, in terms of certain time-periods where you can buy some content. Do you feel that such content is advertised aggressively?

William: Especially FIFA, You have a limited chance to get some cards & Packs. So you get the idea that you have to buy it now. But then something new comes all the time, there is always something that's available for a limited time. So it keeps you wanting to spend money since you feel its your only chance.

Elias: maybe not pressure, but you see it a lot more now than earlier.

William: I think its mostly pressure when there is limited skins, loot boxes and game passes. That you miss out if you don't buy it at that moment. You want the rare content. So its easy spend money on it, because you want something that a lot of people wont have.

William: if you compare the amount of money you spend to how much it would transelete into hours of work. That's when you feel that its wasted money.

Interviewer: Are younger audiences more exposes to the accused negative aspects of loot boxes?

Kim: One thing for sure is that younger players get more excited by the colors, expectations, and cinematics around loot boxes. They can easily get more carried away than adults. So the graphics and hype is more exciting for young people for sure. They respond stronger to it. I think for adults its more about the content than the feeling you get. Young people might not be aware of their reaction to the opening of loot boxes. Adults have more self-control and discipline, So it might be easier for adults to stop. So yes.

William: Younger audienes doesn't have the same understanding and relationship to money, so they don't compare it to the same things that adults will do. Adults have a lot of expenses, children doesn't. So they don't think about money the same way. So that's definitely a factor, they might lose the understanding of value when they purchase loot boxes, how much they have actually spent.

Erlend: I used to go down to the shop to buy paysafe cards so that I didn't have to ask my parents about using their cards. So when I got money for my birthday I went to the shop and purchased paysafe cards. That way, my parents would never know, and I could still buy loot boxes, despite not having a credit card that works with games.

William: It's a bit harder for kids now that a lot of consoles have parental control, so that's one method to keep children a bit more protected from buying a lot of content.

Sam: Same here, so when I spent money on loot boxes, my parents didn't know what I spent money on. My cousins at 8 and 10 play Fortnite and they manage to trick their parents and spend more than 3000 kroners during one day. So that's definitely an example of how kids don't see money and virtual currency in the same ways as adults. They can quickly spend a lot of money that's not theirs. When I've played with them they always say that they are good because they have cool skins. So for them its allready about looking cool, even when they are just around 10 years old. So I can imagine that there is some pressure.

Elias: I think it's a bit like pressure to wear the right clothes at school. You sort of identify with how you look in the game. So maybe there is a comparison there

Kim: quite strange, but we actually did the opposite, everyone said it was cool to not buy skins so when we were really young, none of us did it in my group of friends. So I guess that was something really clever. And a bit unusual.

William: for me growing up it was opposite again, it was all about having the most skins and the most content. So you spent a lot of money on loot boxes and skins, so that you would have more than your friends.

Interviewer: Some games pay streamers to stream when they open loot boxes, what's your thoughts on this method?

Sam: I have seen it becoming a lot more common, and I've seen a lot of streamers do it. Not in League of Legends though. CS had a lot of it, so streamers had a huge amount of boxes and spent hours opening it, with huge excitement.

Elias: I always got a bad feeling about it. Like, often they got a lot better content than you would get as a normal player. So I feel it could be quite corrupt or shady, if they trick people into believing that the odds are way better than they are. So players won't necessarily have the same odds as the streamers. i

Kim: The entire method about giving streamers loot boxes to open on stream is unethical, it's sort of an extreme way to market it, and you lose respect and trust in the companies that does it. At least for me.

Elias: It definitely shows that money is what truly matters for them.

Interviewer: What do you think about the accusations of loot boxes being straight up gambling?

Elias: Yes I think it's just gambling, it varies a bit but especially in games like CS:GO where it's sort of lined up as a betting site, it's so similar to slot machines. You invest money without knowing the exact outcome.

Kim: It's quite similar. The mechanics and idea behind it is quite similar, so the accusations definitely makes sense.

Sam: and some young people can't control themselves, of course it's the same for some adults, but younger people are more at risk.

William: I think the games that doesn't have market sites are less controversial. In CS you can bet and sell content, which makes it more like real casino. So some of the games that sell loot boxes are a bit better if they don't have trading sites.

Kim: Maybe you have better odds with loot boxes, because you get something, in casino you can lose everything, while loot boxes gives you something virtual, even if you don't like it.

William: but everything loses value once you stop playing the game.

Kim: it's gradually becoming more and more gambling, it's a bit toxic, but that's how they make money. So, you kind of get used to it. All in all I'd say it's some sort of semi-gambling.

Interviewer: Do you think most people have an overview of how much money they have spent on loot boxes?

Elias: I think the average gamer doesn't have a good overview really.

William: There's just too many small transactions and purchases. So people lose control of how much it is in total.

Elias: I think people underestimate how much they spend. They think they are doing better than they are.

Sam: Some that I know checked their spendings and it was more than 14 000 kroner and he thought he had spent 3-4000. So it's easy to lose track of just how much. He sold his account, but he didn't get more than 1000kr for it. So in a way he lost 13 000 kroner. So that's a lot.

Elias: As William said, when you stop playing a game, the stuff you have purchased and the loot boxes you've had doesn't have any value at all anymore. It's just gone.

Interviewer: So now over to the last part of the interview, about laws and legislations and potential bans.

Interviewer: So, what do you see as problematic about banning loot boxes?

William: There's so easy for the companies to swap loot boxes to something similar, they can just tweak a few small things to make the legislations useless.

Elias: It's difficult to ban, they can try, but the companies will likely manage to adapt quite fast, and still make money.

Elias: And some have money and enjoy using it on loot boxes, so banning it because it's a problem for a few means it removes something that a lot of people enjoys. We know what we do with our money and what we are buying. But of course, some don't, and that's a shame.

Sam: If you know the system, then it's not so bad. I usually compare it to how much money I make at work. And then I think how many hours of work does this loot box cost? So that's my method. It has some disadvantages, but for me, that's not enough to ban it.

Elias: Some games would cost a lot more, so that's one negative side effect if it got banned. So that's a bummer.

William: Some games try to make loot boxes into something more acceptable with some events. Like League of Legends have events where the content they sell goes to charity.

Interviewer: Should there be any restrictions to how loot boxes are today?

Elias: Maybe, but I'm not sure how they can do it. I think the biggest issue is that it's too easy for those under 18.

Kim: The most important thing is to make it visible how much money you spend and how many loot boxes you actually purchase. We need to see the facts about the uses of loot

boxes. It would give people a better view of their habits. Especially those who use too much and lose control.

Sam: Maybe implement some changes within games and have a longer way before you can purchase loot boxes. Make it more difficult to bypass the different restrictions they have now. It's too easy to cheat the system.

William: League of Legends had restrictions on how many loot boxes you could purchase every 24 hours. So that's one way to do it. But I'm quite sure that the restriction is gone now. But something like that could work. It's at least better than nothing.

Elias: In some games there are some huge spenders though, so-called whales, that spend so much more money than everyone else. So those people would be heavily affected by restrictions. Which I guess could be good if they actually have issues. However if they actually want to spend that money on loot boxes. They should be able to do it.

Interviewer: In some countries, for example in Belgium, loot boxes are now banned. What do you think about a ban like that?

Kim: If people have VPN then it's easy to bypass. And it's a bit much, also now maybe it's a bit too late. It's already a big part of gaming so.

Sam: Maybe remove parts of the technology bit by bit. But removing it overnight wouldn't be good for anyone.

Elias: I don't think the government should intervene in absolutely everything. Loot boxes might be problematic for some. But it's a bit much to ban it.

William: It's something that's problematic for children, however I think it's just too easy to cheat the system, also they would remove a way for developers to make money, so that would definitely change things. It's a bit too much.

Elias: Maybe they could implement taxes on content like Loot Boxes, but I don't know. It's too easy to just ban it.

Interviewer: Some games have implemented changes to make it less controversial, such as FIFA that has made it possible to see how many Loot Boxes you've purchased, or how much money or time you've spent on the game. What do you think about changes like that? And are there similar changes that could make loot boxes more legit?

William: Just make it more visible how big the odds for rare content are. Don't give people false hope about their chances to get the best content in loot boxes. We need to see what chances we have to get each thing.

Kim: You feel there's a lot of lies from gaming companies about the odds of getting the best content in loot boxes. So having the odds would make it more legit. Users should be able to see the actual numbers.

William: they trick you into believing you have higher odds. That's one thing that has to change.

Interviewer: A quick question to wrap it up. Should loot boxes be banned in Norway?

Elias: if yes, it could make it easier for some, and maybe it fades over time. But some also enjoy it so. It would be good for some and bad for some.

Sam: I sort of want it away, But I don't mind having it around ether, apart from the serious cases like with my cousins who spent 3000 kroners with their parents card in one day. So I guess situations like that might be one of the reasons why it could be banned.

William: Its mixed feeling for me, if possible there should be some system for those who have issues with it. But for those who enjoy the concept and have a healthy relationship to it should be able to enjoy it.