

Loot Boxes, Gambling, and Problem Gambling Among Young People: Results from a Cross-Sectional Online Survey

Aims

The aim of this study is to:

- Explore the association between loot box purchase and problem gambling among those 16–24 years of age.
- Examine the extent to which any evident association is accounted for by shared sociodemographic, economic or personality traits such as impulsivity.
- Explore if any observed relationship between loot box purchase and problem gambling is explained by engagement in other gambling activities to test the gambling involvement hypothesis.

Key Findings

- Respondents who purchased loot boxes were more likely to be younger and were disproportionately more likely to be male than those who had not.
- Young adults who purchased loot boxes were more likely to be gamblers and experience problem gambling than others.
- The odds of problem gambling were 11.4 times higher among those who purchased loot boxes with their own money.
- This relationship reduced but remained significant when gambling participation, impulsivity and sociodemographic factors were taken into account.
- The purchase of loot boxes was highly associated with problem gambling, the strength of this association being of similar magnitude to gambling online on casino games or slots.
- Young adults purchasing loot boxes within video games should be considered a high-risk group for the experience of gambling problems.

Policy Context

The results from this study have implications for policy makers, who should recognise the high degree of overlap between gaming and gambling behaviors, especially among those who use microtransactions like loot boxes within video games. This evidence suggests that this group of young people may be vulnerable to the experience of gambling problems.

In Britain, as elsewhere, there are no regulatory restrictions on loot boxes: no age restrictions, no codes of conduct, and they are not subject to any kind of product-based regulation over stakes or prizes or nature of the offering. In many jurisdictions, regulation of products varies based on their demonstrated level of harmfulness – typically measured by an activity's association with problem gambling. This study demonstrates, for the first time, that the purchase of loot boxes is associated with elevated rates of problem gambling among young people even after higher levels of gambling consumption are taken into account. Data need to be triangulated with other studies and replicated among other age groups, among people

recruited using different sampling designs, and in different jurisdictions. However, these results suggest that the purchase of loot boxes among those 16–24 years of age may rank as a more “harmful” form of gambling that needs appropriate regulatory attention.

Methodology

Cross-sectional data were analysed from wave 1 of the Emerging Adults Gambling Survey, an online survey of 3,549 people, aged 16-24. The study used a non-probability panel and the results are, therefore, not generalisable. Data were collected between June and August 2019. The survey asked about gambling, gaming, social media, and health-related behaviors. Data were weighted to reflect the age, sex, and regional profile of Great Britain. Measures include past-year purchase of loot boxes, engagement in 17 different forms of gambling (weekly, yearly, and weekly spend), and problem gambling status. Other covariates included impulsivity and sociodemographic status.

Background

Recent years have seen an emerging trend of gambling-like features being embedded in different contexts. This is especially so within video games and is, arguably, best exemplified by the growth of loot boxes within video games. An emerging evidence base has demonstrated an association between the purchase of loot boxes and problem gambling, with these findings repeated across time and space despite studies using different methodologies. However, the majority of these studies simply look at the association between loot box purchasing and problem gambling, and do not take into account the broader gambling or gaming behaviors of these people. Little is known about their relationship to gambling and problem gambling among those most likely to engage: young people. This article examines the relationship between the purchase of loot boxes, gambling behavior, and problem gambling among young people ages 16-24.

Source Wardle, H., & Zendle, D. (2021). Loot boxes, gambling, and problem gambling among young people: Results from a cross-sectional online survey. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*, 24(4), 267–274.

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