Associations of traditional gambling, betting in video games, and financial trading with problem gambling and related harms in young adults

What this research is about

Gambling is a common recreational activity worldwide. However, people who gamble may be at risk for problem gambling (PG), which is linked to serious harms such as mental health concerns, substance use, and even suicide. Harms can also occur in people who gamble at a lower-risk level and are often exacerbated with financial debts.

Young people are not only attracted to online gambling, but also to other forms of digital spending with potential financial risk. Digital platforms such as video games, social media, and financial investment apps often include gambling-like features. These gambling-like features have been linked with a higher risk for PG. In addition, high-risk speculative trading activities resemble gambling, and frequent participation can lead to financial, psychological, and social harms.

No studies have yet investigated the extent to which video game betting and financial trading activities, together with gambling, is associated with gambling-related harms. The aim of this study was to examine how recent participation in these activities might be associated with PG and gambling-related harms in young adults.

What you need to know

This study examined involvement in gambling, video game-related betting, and financial trading activities among 1,018 young adults in Spain. It was found that all forms of video game-related betting, except for purchasing loot boxes, and cryptocurrency and commodity trading were associated with more severe gambling, alongside horse race betting, sports betting, casino games, and slot machines. eSports betting and commodity trading were also predictors of gambling-related harms. The findings provide insights into the role of emerging digital spending activities in gambling-related harms among young adults.

What the researchers did

Participants were young adults aged 18 to 34 years old living in Spain. They were recruited through an online panel for a randomized controlled trial evaluating a brief online intervention for problem gambling and financial trading in young adults. The researchers only used baseline data collected from young adults who reported gambling, along with video game betting or financial trading in the past 60 days. Data were collected between December 2024 and January 2025. The sample comprised 1,018 young adults, of whom 56% were women. The average age was around 29 years old.

The baseline survey asked about the following:

- Problem gambling in the past 12 months, measured using the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI).
- Harms experienced due to gambling in the past 12 months, measured using the Short Gambling Screen Harm Screen (SGHS).

- Participation in 8 gambling activities in the past 60 days and main mode of gambling (land-based, online, or both).
- Participation in 4 video game-related betting activities (e.g., eSports betting, skin betting) and 8 financial trading activities in the past 60 days (e.g., foreign exchange, stock markets).

What the researchers found

The most prevalent forms of gambling were lotteries (87.9%), bingo (19%), and sports betting (18.2%). Cryptocurrency trading (13.1%) and stock market trading (10.4%) were also prevalent. Most people (66.8%) were involved in gambling only. Almost one in five (18.2%) combined gambling with financial trading, 7.2% combined gambling with video game betting, and 7.9% were involved in all three. Around 11.8% engaged in these activities every 2 weeks, 18.8% weekly, and 5.6% more than once a week. Around 11.2% met the criteria for PG (PGSI scores of 8 or higher). Most people (68.5%) reported no harms from gambling, while 5.7% reported 6 or more harms.

Engaging in high-risk financial trading activities was associated with the highest proportion of people experiencing PG, with a range between 61.4% and 69.4% across different activities. For video game-related betting, PG rates were 60.3% for betting during live streaming, 58.5% for eSports betting, 53.8% for skin betting, and 46.2% for purchasing loot boxes. For gambling, horse race betting had the highest rate of PG (64.4%), followed by betting on contests (59.6%) and card games (53.4%).

After taking into account involvement (frequency and number of activities) and sociodemographic factors, horse race betting, slot machines, casino games, and sports betting were the gambling activities linked to more severe gambling. Importantly, video game-related betting activities, except for purchasing loot boxes, and commodity and cryptocurrency trading were linked to a two- to threefold greater likelihood of higher gambling severity, comparable to traditional high-risk gambling activities. Regarding gambling harms, only eSports betting and commodity trading were significant predictors. By contrast, lotteries were associated with less severe gambling and gambling-related harms.

How you can use this research

The findings contribute to a growing understanding of how digital spending activities are linked to problem gambling and harms. The findings can inform researchers, clinicians, and policy makers concerned with preventing gambling harms.

About the researchers

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