

Profiles of problem online gaming and gambling in first-year university students

What this research is about

Online gaming and gambling are common pastimes among young adults. For some people, these pastimes can become a problem and interfere with daily life. Research suggests that factors like difficulties with emotional regulation and a tendency to act impulsively can contribute to these problems. However, not everyone experiences problem gaming and gambling in the same way.

In this study, the researchers looked at whether first-year university students who reported symptoms of problematic online gaming or problem gambling could be grouped into distinct clusters based on their sociodemographic and psychological characteristics. They also compared these profiles to students without any symptoms.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited 273 first-year undergraduate psychology students from the Autonomous University of Barcelona in Spain. Data collection occurred May 2024 to February 2025.

Participants completed questionnaires that assessed their sociodemographic characteristics, problematic social media and internet use, problematic online gaming and problem gambling symptoms based on the DSM-5 criteria, mental health, impulsive tendency, and distorted beliefs related to gambling.

In total, 100 participants reported at least one symptom related to problematic online gaming or problem gambling. The remaining 173 participants without symptoms served as a control group for comparison.

What you need to know

In this study, the researchers identified the sociodemographic and psychological profiles of young adults with symptoms of problematic online gaming or problem gambling. They then compared these profiles to young adults without any symptoms. The researchers surveyed 273 first-year undergraduate psychology students in Barcelona, Spain. A total of 100 participants reported at least one symptom of problematic online gaming or problem gambling.

There were two distinct clusters of participants with symptoms of problematic online gaming or problem gambling. One of the clusters showed greater emotional regulation difficulties, psychological distress, impulsive tendency, and distorted beliefs related to gambling. Compared to participants without any symptoms, both clusters generally reported greater psychological difficulties, impulsive tendency, and distorted beliefs related to gambling. The findings can be used to identify and support young adults who may be at risk for problematic online gaming or problem gambling.

What the researchers found

The researchers identified two clusters with symptoms of problematic online gaming or problem gambling. The first cluster comprised 34% of participants with symptoms, and the second included the remaining 66%. The researchers first compared these two clusters to each other.

The first cluster had more women and was slightly younger than the second. Compared to the second cluster, participants in the first cluster had more severe symptoms of problematic online gaming and problem gambling, greater psychological distress, more mental health symptoms, greater difficulties with emotional dysregulation, greater impulsive tendency, and more distorted beliefs related to gambling (e.g., belief that one could control gambling outcomes). There were no significant differences between the two clusters in social media and internet use overall. Psychological distress and mental health symptoms were the factors that most strongly differentiated between the two clusters.

The researchers then compared the two clusters to the control group without any symptoms of problematic online gaming or problem gambling. Compared to the control group, both clusters had more men than women. Participants in the second cluster were older than the control group.

Compared to the control group, both clusters had more distorted beliefs related to gambling, greater emotional regulation difficulties, greater psychological distress, and more mental health problems. But social media use and sensation seeking did not differ between participants with and without symptoms. Sensation seeking is a specific domain of impulsiveness and refers to a tendency to seek out novel and exciting experiences.

How you can use this research

Educators and clinicians can use the findings to identify and support young adults at risk for problematic online gaming or problem gambling.

About the researchers

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Citation

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