

research snapshot

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Loot boxes and gambling among youths have different risk and protective factors

What this research is about

Loot boxes are virtual items in video games that contain random prizes or rewards. Loot boxes can be purchased with real money. Gamers do not know what they will get if they purchase a loot box. There have been calls to prevent youths from buying loot boxes, as it has been argued they are a form of gambling.

Loot boxes first appeared in a major Western game in 2010. Yet, studies on loot boxes are new, with the first studies on loot boxes being published in 2018. These studies generally suggest a connection between loot boxes and gambling. A few studies show that adults who spend more money on loot boxes gamble more frequently and have more severe gambling problems.

Currently, the nature of the relationship between gambling and loot boxes is largely unexplored. For example, it is not known if loot boxes and gambling share similar or different risk factors. Furthermore, most studies on loot boxes and gambling have focused on adults. Little is known about youth who buy loot boxes and other downloadable content (other in-game items). The present research addressed these research questions.

What the researcher did

The researcher analyzed data from the Delaware School Survey (DSS). The DSS happens each year for public and public-charter school students in Delaware in the 5th, 8th, and 11th grades. The researcher looked at responses from grade 8 and 11 students from the 2018 and 2019 surveys. The 2018 survey included questions on gambling, and the 2019 survey included questions on loot boxes and other downloadable

What you need to know

Loot boxes are virtual items that contain other random virtual items. Loot boxes can be purchased with money and it has been suggested that they are like gambling. This research looked at if loot boxes and gambling share similar risk and protective factors in grade 8 and 11 students. A total of 24.9% of grade 8 and 17.0% of grade 11 students reported purchasing loot boxes. Betting on games of skill was the most common form of gambling.

Overall, gender was the only factor common to both purchasing loot boxes and gambling. Females were less likely to buy loot boxes and gamble than males. Many risk factors for gambling were similar to previous research. For example, victimization and substance use were associated with gambling behaviours. But, few of the examined factors were associated with purchasing loot boxes. Being bullied was associated with purchasing more loot boxes for both Grade 8 and 11 students. The results suggest that gambling and loot boxes have different risk and protective factors.

content. In total, there were 13,042 students from 678 classrooms.

In the 2018 survey, participants were asked how often they gambled on both games of chance (e.g., bingo, dice games) and games of skill (e.g., betting on challenges, sports teams) in the past year. In the 2019 survey, participants were asked how often they purchased loot boxes and other downloaded content in the past year.

Many protective and risk factors were measured in both surveys. These included gender, race/ethnicity, and grades. Participants were also asked about their relationship with their parents. They were asked about how often they were bullied at school or in the neighbourhood, and how often they were victimized (being hit by an adult or another teenager). Lastly, participants were asked about depression, anxiety, and substance use.

The researcher compared the risk and protective factors for gambling and for purchasing loot boxes and other downloadable content. The researcher ran separate analyses for Grade 8 and Grade 11 students.

What the researcher found

About one-third of students did not play video games in the past year. Among the 8th grade students, 24.9% reported having purchased loot boxes and 37.5% reported purchasing other downloadable content. For the 11th grade students, 17.0% had purchased loot boxes and 29.6% reported purchasing other downloadable content.

Overall, betting on challenges was the most common form of gambling reported. Dice games were the least common form. Gambling on games of skill was more common than games of chance.

For both Grade 8 and 11 students, females were less likely to gamble than males. A stronger relationship with parents was associated with less gambling only for grade 8 students. Victimization and substance use, such as drinking alcohol, were significantly associated with gambling behaviours.

Gender was the only factor consistently associated with buying loot boxes and other downloadable content. Female gamers were less likely to buy either in comparison to male gamers. Being bullied was associated with buying loot boxes for both Grade 8 and 11 students. Depression and anxiety were associated with purchasing downloadable content for both groups of students.

In summary, the results suggest that buying loot boxes and gambling do not share similar risk and protective factors.

How you can use this research

Policy-makers and regulators could use this research to inform decisions on regulating loot boxes.

Researchers could use this research to examine if other risk and protective factors may be common to gambling and loot boxes.

About the researchers

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About Gambling Research Exchange (GREO)

Gambling Research Exchange (GREO) has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. GREO is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization that aims to eliminate harm from gambling. Our goal is to support evidence-informed decision making in safer gambling policies, standards, and practices. The work we do is intended for researchers, policy makers, gambling regulators and operators, and treatment and prevention service providers.

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