



Does screening for gambling participation affect the association between loot box spending and problem gambling?

What this research is about

Loot boxes are items in video games that offer randomized rewards. They can be earned through gameplay or purchased using real-world money. Paid loot boxes have been argued to be like gambling as people stake money for a chance to obtain a reward of higher value. Several studies have reported an association between loot box spending and problem gambling: people who spend more money on loot boxes also have a higher risk of problem gambling. Nearly all of these studies used a self-report scale, the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI), to assess the risk of problem gambling.

Some researchers recently proposed an alternative interpretation: people may see loot boxes as a form of gambling and refer to loot box-related harms when answering the PGSI. This is called the “broad interpretation hypothesis” wherein problematic loot box purchasing is seen as part of problem gambling. This hypothesis is possible as most studies on loot boxes and gambling did not provide a definition of gambling, nor listed what activities could count as gambling. Also, the PGSI was given to all participants regardless of whether they did or did not gamble.

In this study, the researchers tested whether screening or not screening for gambling participation would make a difference. The aim was to clarify whether a true association between loot box spending and problem gambling exists, or the broad interpretation hypothesis offers a better explanation.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited participants through Prolific, an online survey platform. Participants must be aged 18 or older and a resident in the UK. They

What you need to know

Several studies have found an association between loot box spending and problem gambling: people who spend more money on loot boxes are at higher risk of problem gambling. Recently, some researchers proposed an alternative interpretation: people may see loot boxes as a form of gambling and refer to loot box-related harms when being asked about gambling harms. This study tested this alternative interpretation. One group of participants were screened and given the problem gambling scale only when they reported gambling in the past year. Furthermore, they were instructed to not consider loot boxes as a form of gambling. The other group of participants were given the problem gambling scale regardless of whether they did or did not gamble. The researchers found that in both groups, people who spent more money on loot boxes had a higher risk of problem gambling. Thus, the alternative interpretation was not supported.

must also play video games at least occasionally. This study was advertised on Prolific as investigating the use of loot boxes and gambling behaviour. A total of 2,027 participants were included in the study. Among them, 1,022 were randomly assigned to the “screening” group. The other 1,055 participants were assigned to the “non-screening” group.

Participants in the screening group were first asked a screening question about gambling. The screening question instructed them to not consider purchasing loot boxes as a form of gambling. It provided participants with a list of gambling activities and asked if they had spent money on any of them in the past 12

months. Only those who answered “yes” to any of the listed gambling activities were asked to complete the PGSI. By contrast, all participants in the non-screening group were given the PGSI regardless of gambling participation. Participants in both groups were then given a definition of loot boxes and asked how much money they spent on loot boxes in the past month.

What the researchers found

Among the 2,027 participants, the proportions of men and women were roughly equal (50.2% vs. 49.8%, respectively). Participants were spread across the age groups, with one-third (28.8%) being below 30 years old. The average age was 37 years old. Most participants were White (88.1%) and employed full-time or part-time (72.4%). Almost one-third (27.1%) spent money on loot boxes in the past month. Most participants (80.9%) in the screening group gambled in the past year. Among them, 5.7% experienced problem gambling (PGSI scores of 8 or higher).

In both the screening and non-screening groups, people who spent more money on loot boxes had a higher risk of problem gambling. There was an effect of screening condition: the group of participants who were not screened reported more severe gambling problems. However, this did not change the finding that higher loot box spending was associated with problem gambling. This finding was observed even when participants were screened and told to not consider purchasing loot boxes as a form of gambling.

These results support the interpretation that there is a true association between loot box spending and problem gambling. While the results do not support the broad interpretation hypothesis, the researchers suggest that there is a broad interpretation effect: not screening for gambling participation may lead to the situation wherein some participants respond inaccurately to the PGSI by referring to loot box-related consequences. This could inflate the levels of problem gambling reported by the participants.

How you can use this research

This study can inform future research on loot boxes and other gambling-like products. It shows the importance of screening for gambling participation

and defining whether certain activities should be considered gambling.

About the researchers

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Citation

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