

Purchasing loot boxes in video games associated with problem gambling risk, says study

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Gamers who buy "loot boxes" are up to two times more likely to gamble, shows new research published today in the journal *Addiction Research &*

Theory.

They are also more likely to have a [gambling](#) problem compared with the gamers who don't purchase these virtual treasure chests, according to the findings based on more than 1,600 adults in Canada.

The authors say the results cast doubt on the theory that [psychological factors](#) create the link between gambling and loot boxes—banned by some countries including Belgium and discussed for legislation in many others worldwide.

Their study demonstrates that the association between these video game features and gambling exists even when childhood neglect, depression and other known [risk factors](#) for gambling are taken into account.

The authors say their findings have potential implications for policymakers and for healthcare. They are calling for more research into the benefit of harm minimization features, with some [online platforms](#) having already implemented these—such as telling players the odds of winning when they buy a loot box.

"Findings indicate that loot box purchasing represents an important marker of risk for gambling and problem gambling among people who play video games," says Sophie Coelho, a Ph.D. student at York University, Toronto.

"The persistent associations we observed between loot box purchasing and gambling may provide preliminary support for the role of loot boxes as a 'gateway' to gambling and eventually problem gambling. Loot boxes may prime people to gamble and increase susceptibility to problem gambling."

Designed to grab the player's attention, loot boxes are typically

purchased using real-world money, and contain random assortment of virtual objects such as weapons or new characters, and are largely unregulated unlike [online gambling](#).

Evidence already exists of the link between loot box purchasing and gambling and problem gambling. What is still unknown is if this occurs because of known psychological risk factors for gambling.

For this study, the authors analyzed past year loot box purchases among 1,189 students at five Canadian universities, and 499 adults recruited from an online crowdsourcing platform and an online polling/survey site. Aged 18 and above, all participants completed an online questionnaire about their [video gaming](#) and addictive behaviors, their mental health and other issues.

The study took into account a larger number of psychological risk factors for gambling than previous research. These included [emotional distress](#), the tendency to act rashly when upset, and adverse childhood experiences including abuse and neglect.

Results showed that a similar proportion (17%) of the students and community participants bought loot boxes with an average spend of \$90.63 and \$240.94, respectively. The majority identified as male in both participant groups.

Over a quarter (28%) of students who bought loot boxes reported past-year gambling compared with 19% of non-purchasers. More than half (57%) of the community adults who purchased them had gambled and 38% of non-purchasers.

Students who reported riskier loot box purchasing habits (e.g., buying more loot boxes) were more likely to have a worse gambling habit. However, this was not the case for the community participants, which

the researchers attribute to a small sample size.

Of all the psychological risk factors, [adverse childhood experiences](#) were most consistently associated with an increased likelihood of past-year gambling and greater problem gambling.

The authors say this may suggest that people with troubled upbringings have a "heightened vulnerability" to developing gambling problems. They add, "This may be compounded by engaging with gambling-like features embedded in video games, such as [loot boxes](#)."

Although the scientific team did adjust "for a large range of transdiagnostic psychological variables," they state that one of the limitations of their study is that they did not account for every single psychological, sociodemographic, or gaming- or gambling-related confounder of associations between loot box purchasing and gambling—of which some "undoubtedly exist."

More information: Sophie G. Coelho et al, Loot box purchasing is associated with gambling and problem gambling when controlling for known psychological risk factors of gambling, *Addiction Research & Theory* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/16066359.2022.2141717](https://doi.org/10.1080/16066359.2022.2141717)

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