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Unregulated gambling on social media platforms exacerbates risk of problem gambling in a large national sample

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Highlights:

- There are currently no policies in the United States that regulate gambling on social media platforms.
- Placing wagers and betting on social media platforms is common to those who gamble.
- Gambling on social media platforms is associated with a higher risk of problem gambling.

Abstract

The burgeoning online gambling industry has begun to use social media platforms as a new way to capture the interest of clientele. Betting directly on social media platforms is an illegal act in almost all of the United States; however, no studies have assessed how the frequency of engaging in this illegal form of gambling may be predictive of problematic gambling. The objective of this survey study was to determine the prevalence of gambling on social media and its relationship to problem gambling. A representative online national sample of 17,767 U.S. adults was collected in February 2025. Of these, 12,845 (72%) reported some lifetime gambling, and they were surveyed on a variety of gambling behaviors, including their direct participation in betting on social media websites. The survey also included an assessment of problem gambling using the Short-form South Oaks Gambling Scale. Nearly 24% of lifetime gamblers reported using social media platforms to place wagers, with 14% reporting having done so in the past year. Past-year direct gambling on social media was associated with greater relative odds of problematic gambling (aOR=2.3, CI:2.0- 2.7, p<.001) when sociodemographic variables were statistically considered. There were some distinctions between various social media platforms relating to the risk of problematic gambling, with TikTok showing the greatest relative risk (aOR=2.9, CI:2.2, 3.8, p<.001). Direct gambling on social platforms is common among those who gamble and is strongly associated with the increased odds of pathological gambling. More detailed information on the risks associated with each of the various social media platforms may be helpful for policy makers and regulators as they endeavor to limit the destructive consequences of online gambling.

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1. Introduction

The increased prevalence of advertisements for online gambling, which are commonly promoted on social media, has exacerbated gambling-related problems for those who already experience disordered gambling (Gainsbury et al., 2016). The increasing presence of online marketing, especially for sports betting, appears to target vulnerable youth (Guillou-Landreat et al., 2021; Rossi & Nairn, 2022) and normalizes it (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2018). Adult residents of the United States are estimated to spend an average of two hours per day on social media, while those under the age of 24 spend nearly three hours. The ubiquitous presence of online gambling advertising, through social media or other online platforms, is likely to inflate problems already associated with gambling. Beyond hosting online advertising, social media platforms may foster engagement patterns that parallel the reinforcement processes seen in gambling. Given this, there is potential for betting behavior and social media use to interact synergistically, exacerbating the problems associated with either form of compulsive behavior.

National data in the United States on online gambling is extremely limited. Some available state-level studies suggest between 20% and 51% of U.S. adults have gambled online (Nower, Volberg, & Caler, 2017). Over 37 million (11%) U.S. adults already engage in risky or problematic forms of gambling (Tran et al., 2024); so it is unsurprising, then, that these two behaviors have coalesced in the form of gambling directly on social media platforms. Direct social media gambling is deemed unlawful in the United States, and no published studies have elucidated the prevalence of gambling directly on social media and its conceivable association with problem gambling. This has created a blind spot for public health experts and has obstructed regulatory efforts.

The lack of literature on social media betting behaviors in the United States likely stems from the absence of recent national data on gambling. Unlike the federal government's monitoring of substance use (National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2024), the U.S. has not systematically surveyed gambling behaviors, their associations, or outcomes. Among the few repeated cross-sectional studies examining population-level trends across the U.S., a decline in the percentage of past-year gambling was observed between 1999 and 2013. This occurred despite stable rates of problem gambling during that same period (Welte et al., 2015). Notably, the second sample in 2013 coincided with a rapid spread of gambling laws nationwide and a liberalization within state laws for brick-and-mortar gambling activities (i.e., not digital). There remains a significant lack of large-scale U.S. surveys on gambling behaviors and outcomes following two major shifts: the expansion of digital infrastructure for social engagement and the 2018 repeal of the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act (PASPA), which greatly accelerated the growth of digital gambling opportunities.

The ability of regulators to accurately identify gambling opportunities on social media platforms is unclear. This is partly due to the nature of these platforms, which are heavily protected by advanced digital strategies. Prior social-media research has looked at the prevalence of advertisements and promotions for games, community forums about gambling, and links to problem gambling (James & Bradley, 2021). Notably, much of the existing literature on social media gambling has focused on populations outside the United States; a recent study reported that greater social media engagement is associated with more severe problematic gambling (Moravec et al., 2025).

To address these gaps in the literature, adult residents of the U.S. were recruited to create a nationally representative sample that is geographically and demographically diverse. The overall goal of this study was to improve understanding of how common gambling on social media is. Additionally, we aimed to clarify potential additional risks linked to this unregulated and illegal form of betting. Among those who reported engaging in any gambling activity in their lifetime, the prevalence of direct gambling on social media platforms was evaluated for each platform. In this effort, we aimed to determine whether different social media platforms pose varying risks related to problematic gambling.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design and Recruitment

This study was a cross-sectional survey and data for this study were collected for all 50 states in February of 2025. Research panels aggregated from Cint™ Digital-Insights Gathering Platform were leveraged to invite, recruit, and route participants to our Qualtrics™ survey landing page. All participants were 18 years old or older. We conducted a non-probability, purposive sampling technique in which we used multiple demographic quotas on Cint's recruitment dashboard (e.g., % reporting per state, % gender balance, etc.) to closely guide demographic and geographic sampling distributions. Post-hoc survey weighting was performed to adjust for sampling bias using an iterative raking technique. This was accomplished by calculating demographic

weights (binary gender, race, age, and education) relative to the expected proportions reported in the most recent U.S. Census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020), and then applying weights based upon the proportion of the survey sample, per state, relative to the proportions from the Census.

Participants received information statements immediately upon arrival on the Qualtrics™ landing page, prior to giving informed consent. A computer bot check was conducted right away, and participants who failed this check, or any of Qualtrics™'s FraudID or ReCaptcha score assessments, were excluded from the study. An attention check was also included during screening, and any respondents who missed it were excluded as well. Participants were paid between $1 and $4 USD for completing the survey. The exact payment method and amount are not specified by the research panels, but based on communications with the Cint staff assigned to our team, the average payment was roughly $2.00 USD. The survey took about 15 minutes to complete, and the study received prior ethics and human subjects safety approval from an Institutional Review Board (IRB#25-12-069-1928).

2.2 Measures

The survey included standard demographic questions on personal income, age, gender, race/ethnicity, and highest education achieved, based on the *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services* designations. Participants were asked shortly after beginning the survey, "*Have you ever bet on anything (i.e., gambled) in your lifetime? When we say "bet", we mean you provided money in exchange for potentially winning money*." Only those participants who indicated yes to this question received any further questions about gambling, betting, or wagering money.

Gambling Measures. The Short-form South Oaks Gambling Scale (SSOGS; Nelson & Oehlert, 2008) was used to assess problematic gambling on a 7-item scale. The scale includes questions regarding lying about gambling earnings, borrowing money to pay off gambling debt, an awareness of a gambling problem, and whether gambling has occurred more than they often intended. A cutoff score of 2 or higher was used as the threshold to indicate problematic gambling status (Strong et al., 2003).

The items that were used to assess the frequency of use for eleven common gambling types were derived from the National Survey on Gambling Attitudes and Gambling Experiences ("NGAGE 2.0 (2021)," n.d.) survey conducted by the National Council on Problem Gambling. The NGAGE is a comprehensive list of current gambling and gaming questions that are repeatedly assessed at the population level by academic researchers. Each form of gambling was presented in a matrixed question format in which all questions appeared simultaneously. Responses to each question were scaled as relative frequencies of occurrence; i.e., "*never, 1-3 times in my lifetime, at least once in the past year, but not monthly, 1-3 times a month, but not weekly,"* and *"weekly or more often*." The forms or types of betting included betting or wagering on gambling on ten different types of gaming: bingo, horse or dog races, pull-tabs or break-open tickets, raffles, sporting events/sports outcomes, daily fantasy sports, gambling virtually (not in-person) on card games (e.g., poker), gambling virtually on machine-type games (e.g., digital slot machines remotely), gambling at a casino on card games (e.g., poker), and gambling at a casino on machine-type games (e.g., slot machines).

Social Media Use Frequency. The survey included a variety of social media platforms and the frequency with which they typically interact with each platform. Response options included: "*daily, weekly, monthly, annually, less than annually*," and "never."

Direct Gambling on Social Media. Participants who reported gambling in their lifetime were asked, "Which of the following best describes your experiences betting, gambling, or wagering on an event or outcome using social media (e.g., placing bets through forums like Instagram)?" They were presented with the response options of: "*never, in my lifetime but not in past year, in past year but not past month,*" and "*in the past month*." Those who reported any lifetime experience directly gambling on social media, were then asked, "*Which of the following social media platforms have you most commonly used to gamble?*" and given the choices of Facebook, X/Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat.

2.3 Data Analysis

Two logistic regression models were used to predict the binary outcome of meeting criteria for problematic gambling based on the SSOGs to calculate adjusted odds ratios (aORs). In both models, the frequency of each of the ten gambling forms was included, along with age, income, gender, and highest education level, since each of these variables has previously been shown to be associated with problematic gambling (Allami et al., 2021; Tran et al., 2024). In Model 1, gambling on a social media platform in the past year was examined as a predictor of problematic gambling status, while controlling for the frequency of other

gambling forms and sociodemographic factors. Those who gambled but not on social media served as the comparison group for the aORs. In Model 2, to compare the relative risks of using each specific social-media platform for gambling, those who used these platforms for non-gambling purposes were used as the comparison group to obtain the aORs.

3. Results

3.1 Overall sample

A total of 22.008 individuals were recruited and completed the survey in February 2025. However, 4,161 were excluded due to missing the human attention check or one of the three bot checks and quality checks assessed by Qualtrics, leaving 17,847 participants included in the analysis. Of those 17,847, 12,845 (72%) reported lifetime gambling, and all future results are reported as a subset of this subsample of 12,845 participants. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1, detailing participant characteristics and trends in the central tendencies of key sociodemographic and gambling measures assessed in this study. Table 2 shows participant characteristics and trends of central tendencies for each of ten frequencies of gambling types. Table 3 displays the frequency of directly gambling on social media, and the platform on which one most commonly uses social media to gamble.

Table 1. Participant sociodemographic characteristics of the entire sample (N = 17,847) relative to the most recent U.S. Census Data.

Characteristic	Mean or %	SD or N	Census
Mean Age	49.6	18	39
Mean Income	$66,697	$54,118	$69,000
Gender			
Man	54.50%	7,003	50%
Woman	45.50%	5,842	50%
Race			
American Indian, Native American, or Alaskan Native	6%	753	1%
Asian	8%	989	6%
Black or African American	16%	2,061	14%
White	74%	9,514	76%
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	1%	101	< 1%
Other	8%	981	--
Hispanic ethnicity	14%	1,829	19%
Bachelor's Degree or Higher	41%	5,328	37.5%

Table 2. Gambling forms in the general sample.

Frequency of Gambling by Form	Never	1-3 Times in Lifetime	At least once in the past year, but not monthly	1-3 times a month, but not weekly	Weekly or more often
Bingo	40%	33%	15%	7%	5%
Horse/Dog Racing	57%	28%	9%	4%	2%
Pull Tabs	51%	23%	16%	7%	3%
Raffles	24%	40%	26%	7%	3%
Sports Betting	47%	19%	14%	10%	9%
Daily Fantasy Sports	68%	10%	8%	8%	6%
Virtual Cards	60%	14%	11%	8%	6%
Virtual Machines	53%	17%	14%	9%	7%
Casino Cards	41%	27%	19%	9%	5%
Casino Machines	23%	35%	26%	11%	5%

Table 3. Social media gambling characteristics.

Frequency of Gambling Directly on Social Media		
Never	77%	
Lifetime, but not in past year	9%	
In past year, but not past month	8%	
In past month	6%	
Gambling Directly on Social Media, by Platform	Of the entire sample	Of those who directly gambled on social media
X (Twitter)	4%	17%
Facebook	11%	46%
Instagram	5%	21%
TikTok	3%	13%
Snapchat	1%	4%

3.2 Logistic Regression Models

To identify the likelihood that participants met criteria for problem gambling (i.e., SSOGS > 2), a logistic regression was conducted to examine associations among (I) demographic variables (age, gender, education, and personal income), (II) the prevalence of the ten forms of gambling (e.g., bingo, horse/dog racing, etc.), and (III) the prevalence of direct social media gambling (Table 4). The overall regression model was statistically significant; $\chi2(45) = 4183$, $p < .0001$. The model explained 38% of the variance (Nagelkerke R2) in problem gambling status and correctly classified 82% of all cases (ROC AUC). As anticipated based on existing studies, younger age (aOR=0.98, CI:0.97-0.98, p<.001), identifying as a man (aOR=0.82 (0.75, 0.90), p<.01), lower levels of the highest education completed (aOR=0.97, CI:0.95-0.99, p<.01), and lower income (aOR=0.99, CI:0.99-0.99, p<.001) each were associated with greater relative odds of meeting criteria for problem gambling. Past-year direct gambling on social media was associated with greater relative odds of problematic gambling (aOR=2.3, CI:2.0- 2.7, p<.001). Every form of gambling prevalence demonstrated an overall significant positive relationship with problem gambling status (aORs=1.17-3.7; ps<.001) except for Daily Fantasy Sports betting (p =.120). The two highest statistically significant aORs for any frequency of gambling for any form were 1-3 times per month (aOR=1.94, CI:1.61-2.34, p<.001), and weekly or more virtual machine gambling (aOR=3.68, CI:2.88-4.70, p<.001).

A second logistic regression model used the same variables from the first model presented above and added frequency of use of each of the five main social media platforms (Table 5). Direct use of each social media platform for gambling was contrasted against the referent use for each social media platform for purposes other than gambling. The logistic regression model was statistically significant, $\chi2(54) = 4254$, $p < .0001$. The model explained 38% (Nagelkerke R2) of the variance in problem gambling status and correctly classified 83% of all cases (ROC AUC). Relative to lifetime gamblers who reported never directly gambling on social media, direct gambling on each of the social media platforms was associated with greater relative odds of meeting criteria for problematic gambling. This was the case for Facebook (aOR=2.1, CI:1.8, 2.4, p<.001), X (aOR=2.0, CI:1.6- 2.5, p<.001), Instagram (aOR=2.2, CI:1.8-2.8, p<.001), TikTok (aOR=2.9, CI:2.2, 3.8, p<.001), and Snapchat (aOR=2.2, CI:1.4- 3.4, p<.001). Relative to Model 1 (Table 4), the direction and establishment of statistical significance remained unchanged for the demographic variables and for each form of regulated gambling prevalence, except for horse/dog racing, which was no longer statistically significant (p=.07). The general frequency of social media use for purposes other than gambling failed to predict problematic gambling, with the exception of TikTok use, which was significantly and positively associated with odds of meeting criteria for problematic gambling (aOR=1.04, CI:1.01-1.07, p <.01).

Table 4. Results from Logistic Regression, model 1, in which past-year gambling was used as the referent class to contrast against direct social media gambling in the past year.

						95% Confidence Interval	
	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	aORs	Lower	Upper
Direct Gambling on Social Media in the Past Year	0.841	0.074	284.4	<.001	2.3	2.0	2.7
Demographic Variables							
Age	-0.028	0.001	16.5	<.001	1.0	1.0	1.0
Male Gender	0.194	0.047	9.3	<.001	0.8	0.8	0.9
Highest Education	-0.034	0.011	26.1	0.002	1.0	0.9	1.0
Personal Income	0	0	57.1	<.001	1.0	1.0	1.0
Bingo			30.9	<.001			
1-3 times in my lifetime	0.323	0.055	18.2	<.001	1.4	1.2	1.5
At least once in the past year, but not monthly	0.333	0.07	16.1	<.001	1.4	1.2	1.6
1-3 times a month, but not weekly	0.391	0.095	33.0	<.001	1.5	1.2	1.8
Weekly or more often	0.702	0.126	8.0	<.001	2.0	1.6	2.6
Horse/Dog Racing			3.1	0.04			
1-3 times in my lifetime	0.12	0.056	6.0	0.032	1.1	1.0	1.3
At least once in the past year, but not monthly	0.229	0.085	1.8	0.007	1.3	1.1	1.5
1-3 times a month, but not weekly	0.194	0.135	0.0	0.152	1.2	0.9	1.6
Weekly or more often	0.049	0.195	40.2	0.802	1.1	0.7	1.5
Pull Tabs			7.0	<.001			
1-3 times in my lifetime	0.159	0.058	11.0	0.006	1.2	1.0	1.3
At least once in the past year, but not monthly	0.251	0.067	35.4	<.001	1.3	1.1	1.5
1-3 times a month, but not weekly	0.578	0.097	0.1	<.001	1.8	1.5	2.2
Weekly or more often	0.048	0.162	12.2	0.769	1.0	0.8	1.4
Raffles			2.1	0.008			
1-3 times in my lifetime	-0.084	0.061	1.3	0.168	0.9	0.8	1.0
At least once in the past year, but not monthly	-0.066	0.068	4.3	0.333	0.9	0.8	1.1
1-3 times a month, but not weekly	0.255	0.105	1.0	0.015	1.3	1.1	1.6
Weekly or more often	-0.132	0.162	41.9	0.416	0.9	0.6	1.2
Sports Betting			6.2	<.001			
1-3 times in my lifetime	0.169	0.063	21.2	0.007	1.2	1.0	1.3
At least once in the past year, but not monthly	0.347	0.073	10.5	<.001	1.4	1.2	1.6
1-3 times a month, but not weekly	0.28	0.087	33.0	0.001	1.3	1.1	1.6
Weekly or more often	0.584	0.104	6.6	<.001	1.8	1.5	2.2
Daily Fantasy Sports Betting			0.0	0.12			
1-3 times in my lifetime	0.082	0.075	3.6	0.274	1.1	0.9	1.3
At least once in the past year, but not monthly	-0.117	0.087	0.2	0.178	0.9	0.8	1.1
1-3 times a month, but not weekly	0.002	0.1	3.3	0.986	1.0	0.8	1.2
Weekly or more often	-0.222	0.127	53.7	0.08	0.8	0.6	1.0
Virtual Card Games			46.5	<.001			
1-3 times in my lifetime	0.504	0.067	17.4	<.001	1.7	1.5	1.9
At least once in the past year, but not monthly	0.35	0.08	16.2	<.001	1.4	1.2	1.7
1-3 times a month, but not weekly	0.41	0.101	3.5	<.001	1.5	1.2	1.8
Weekly or more often	0.24	0.134	128.3	0.07	1.3	1.0	1.7
Virtual Machine Games			10.7	<.001			
1-3 times in my lifetime	0.24	0.066	32.1	<.001	1.3	1.1	1.4
At least once in the past year, but not monthly	0.46	0.073	47.3	<.001	1.6	1.4	1.8
1-3 times a month, but not weekly	0.66	0.095	107.0	<.001	1.9	1.6	2.3
Weekly or more often	1.30	0.125	16.9	<.001	3.7	2.9	4.7
Casino (In-Person) Card Games			6.0	<.001			
1-3 times in my lifetime	0.19	0.064	9.2	0.004	1.2	1.1	1.4

At least once in the past year, but not monthly	0.26	0.076	2.8	<.001	1.3	1.1	1.5
1-3 times a month, but not weekly	0.20	0.105	1.8	0.063	1.2	1.0	1.5
Weekly or more often	-0.19	0.158	130.0	0.24	0.8	0.6	1.1
Casino (In-Person) Machine Games			2.8	<.001			
1-3 times in my lifetime	-0.14	0.07	12.7	0.045	0.9	0.8	1.0
At least once in the past year, but not monthly	0.24	0.078	39.9	0.003	1.3	1.1	1.5
1-3 times a month, but not weekly	0.60	0.1	76.0	<.001	1.8	1.5	2.2
Weekly or more often	1.37	0.157	188.4	<.001	3.9	2.9	5.3

Table 5. Results from logistic regression, model 2, with general social media use as the referent class for direct gambling on social media.

						95% Confidence Interval	
	B	**S.E.**	**Wald**	**Sig.**	**aORs**	**Lower**	**Upper**
Direct Social Media Platform Gambling			174.1	<.001			
Facebook	0.72	0.077	87.9	<.001	2.1	1.8	2.4
X (Formerly Twitter)	0.682	0.124	30.4	<.001	2.0	1.6	2.5
Instagram	0.806	0.105	59.5	<.001	2.2	1.8	2.8
TikTok	1.066	0.143	55.8	<.001	2.9	2.2	3.8
Snapchat	0.791	0.214	13.6	<.001	2.2	1.4	3.4
General Social Media Use							
Frequency of Facebook Use	0.02	0.013	2.141	0.143	1.02	0.99	1.05
Frequency of X Use	0.01	0.013	0.368	0.544	1.01	0.98	1.03
Frequency of Instagram Use	-0.01	0.013	0.292	0.589	0.99	0.97	1.02
Frequency of TikTok Use	0.039	0.013	9.213	0.002	1.04	1.01	1.07
Frequency of Snapchat Use	-0.02	0.014	1.654	0.198	0.98	0.96	1.01
Demographic Variables							
Age	-0.03	0.002	219.8	<.001	1.0	1.0	0.98
Gender	0.22	0.049	19.5	<.001	0.8	0.7	0.89
Highest Education	-0.03	0.011	9.0	<.01	1.0	0.9	0.99
Personal Income	0	0	25.2	<.001	1.0	1.0	1.00
Bingo			54.0	<.001			
1-3 times in my lifetime	0.3	0.06	29.0	<.001	1.4	1.2	1.51
At least once in the past year, but not monthly	0.29	0.07	16.8	<.001	1.3	1.2	1.54
1-3 times a month, but not weekly	0.369	0.10	15.1	<.001	1.4	1.2	1.74
Weekly or more often	0.71	0.13	31.8	<.001	2.0	1.6	2.61
Horse/Dog Racing			8.5	0.1			
1-3 times in my lifetime	0.10	0.06	3.3	0.1	1.1	1.0	1.24
At least once in the past year, but not monthly	0.22	0.085	6.6	0.0	1.2	1.1	1.47
1-3 times a month, but not weekly	0.18	0.135	1.8	0.2	1.2	0.9	1.57
Weekly or more often	0.03	0.195	0.0	0.9	1.0	0.7	1.51
Pull Tabs			39.4	<.001			
1-3 times in my lifetime	0.15	0.06	6.8	0.0	1.2	1.0	1.31
At least once in the past year, but not monthly	0.219	0.067	10.6	0.0	1.2	1.1	1.42
1-3 times a month, but not weekly	0.575	0.097	34.8	<.001	1.8	1.5	2.15
Weekly or more often	0.059	0.162	0.1	0.7	1.1	0.8	1.46
Raffles			12.3	0.0			
1-3 times in my lifetime	-0.088	0.061	2.1	0.2	0.9	0.8	1.03
At least once in the past year, but not monthly	-0.071	0.068	1.1	0.3	0.9	0.8	1.07
1-3 times a month, but not weekly	0.22	0.105	4.4	0.0	1.2	1.0	1.53
Weekly or more often	-0.173	0.162	1.1	0.3	0.8	0.6	1.16
Sports Betting			37.1	<.001			
1-3 times in my lifetime	0.152	0.063	5.8	0.0	1.2	1.0	1.32

At least once in the past year, but not monthly	0.324	0.074	19.3	<.001	1.4	1.2	1.60
1-3 times a month, but not weekly	0.26	0.088	8.8	0.0	1.3	1.1	1.54
Weekly or more often	0.564	0.105	28.9	<.001	1.8	1.4	2.16
Daily Fantasy Sports Betting			6.5	0.2			
1-3 times in my lifetime	0.009	0.076	0.0	0.9	1.0	0.9	1.17
At least once in the past year, but not monthly	-0.167	0.088	3.6	0.1	0.8	0.7	1.01
1-3 times a month, but not weekly	-0.044	0.1	0.2	0.7	1.0	0.8	1.16
Weekly or more often	-0.232	0.127	3.3	0.1	0.8	0.6	1.02
Virtual Card Games			54.0	<.001			
1-3 times in my lifetime	0.462	0.068	46.9	<.001	1.6	1.4	1.81
At least once in the past year, but not monthly	0.334	0.081	17.2	<.001	1.4	1.2	1.64
1-3 times a month, but not weekly	0.407	0.101	16.4	<.001	1.5	1.2	1.83
Weekly or more often	0.251	0.134	3.5	0.1	1.3	1.0	1.67
Virtual Machine Games			125.3	<.001			
1-3 times in my lifetime	0.209	0.066	10.0	0.0	1.2	1.1	1.40
At least once in the past year, but not monthly	0.406	0.074	30.5	<.001	1.5	1.3	1.73
1-3 times a month, but not weekly	0.638	0.095	44.8	<.001	1.9	1.6	2.28
Weekly or more often	1.284	0.125	105.7	<.001	3.6	2.8	4.61
Casino (In-Person) Card Games			16.6	0.0			
1-3 times in my lifetime	0.154	0.064	5.7	0.0	1.2	1.0	1.32
At least once in the past year, but not monthly	0.23	0.076	9.1	0.0	1.3	1.1	1.46
1-3 times a month, but not weekly	0.176	0.105	2.8	0.1	1.2	1.0	1.47
Weekly or more often	-0.209	0.159	1.7	0.2	0.8	0.6	1.11
Casino (In-Person) Machine Games			128.7	<.001			
1-3 times in my lifetime	-0.115	0.071	2.6	0.1	0.9	0.8	1.03
At least once in the past year, but not monthly	0.277	0.078	12.5	<.001	1.3	1.1	1.54
1-3 times a month, but not weekly	0.632	0.1	39.6	<.001	1.9	1.5	2.29
Weekly or more often	1.376	0.158	75.8	<.001	4.0	2.9	5.40

4. Discussion

This study is the first to our knowledge to examine the prevalence of unregulated gambling activity directly on social media and whether such behavior adds additional risk for problem gambling beyond regulated forms. Although gambling directly on social media is prohibited by current federal and state laws, a measurable portion of U.S. gamblers also reported betting on social media, with 6% engaging in it in the past month and 14% in the past year.

Consistent with previous gambling prevalence studies, age, gender, education level, and income significantly predicted problem gambling in both models shown in Tables 4 and 5 (Allami et al., 2021; Tran et al., 2024). Importantly, including these demographic variables in the logistic regression models did not weaken the predictive link between social media gambling and problem gambling. The positive association between social media betting and problematic gambling remained strong even when many forms of gambling were included in the model (Table 4). This relationship was also confirmed when the regression model considered the frequency of general social media use (Table 5). These results demonstrate that the link between social media gambling and gambling problems is strong and not just due to demographic risk factors, overall gambling participation, or general social media activity.

In addition to this key finding about the risk of problematic gambling and social media gambling, differences across social media platforms were also identified. Among those who reported direct gambling on social media, Facebook was the most commonly used site, with nearly half of all social media gamblers using this platform (Table 3). Participants engaging in direct social media betting via TikTok showed the highest odds of meeting the criteria for problem gambling compared to those betting on other platforms. Additionally, the frequency of TikTok use for general purposes was found to be a statistically significant predictor of problem gambling, a relationship not observed for other social media sites (Table 5). Whether these findings related to

Facebook and TikTok are connected to specific interactive features of the platforms or other variables remains unclear but could be of interest to regulators and policymakers in the future.

5.1. Implications for theory and practice

Central to the issue of direct social media gambling is that its regulation mainly falls outside the jurisdiction of traditional gambling authorities. In the U.S., state laws govern gambling, but the inconsistent patchwork of regulation has created a fertile ground for illegal internet gambling venues—such as those that appear on social media—to emerge; the U.S. system is unusual in an era when many countries have a centralized standard for gambling regulation (Ukhova et al., 2024). While social media and broader internet platforms technically fall under federal oversight, effective digital governance, covering aspects like platform regulation, content moderation, and unregulated access to potentially addictive digital products, is limited due to inherent challenges (Rehman, 2024). As a result, gambling opportunities embedded within social media platforms operate in a regulatory vacuum, making it difficult for state-level regulators to detect or control them. Recent class-action lawsuits have focused on this issue, alleging that social media platforms may be liable for participating in offering and processing payments for social casinos and violating state gambling laws (Frankel, 2022). The gambling behaviors involved are driven by the neurophysiology of expected and unexpected rewards (Clark, Boileau, & Zack, 2019; Linnet et al., 2012). Therefore, similarities between the pathophysiology of problem gambling and psychomotor-stimulant abuse are reasonable to consider (Zack & Poulos, 2009). Social reinforcement likely plays a significant role in encouraging and sustaining drug use (Smith, 2021; Strickland & Smith, 2014), and social context also contributes to the initiation of gambling (Reith & Dobbie, 2011). As digital environments increasingly mirror these social and reward dynamics, online spaces may be evolving into settings that facilitate exposure and reinforcement. Social media, in particular, is a realm where expected rewards can exert considerable influence over online behaviors (Moretta et al., 2023), and the potential additive effect of these rewards on initiating and maintaining gambling behaviors is concerning. While our study cannot definitively determine social media's role in amplifying gambling-related reinforcement and pathophysiology, the current findings certainly suggest that this issue merits further experimental research.

5.2. Limitations and directions for future research

The sample included 12,845 participants who reported gambling at some point in their lives, and 3,083 of these reported directly using social media for gambling. This means that 24% of the gambling population reported betting on social media platforms, which is a substantial enough portion to offer meaningful insights into social media gambling behaviors. Our sample was also limited to individuals who enrolled in digital research panels. However, we applied post-hoc survey weighting to align our sample characteristics with population census data based on age, education, and gender, all of which are significantly related to both the prevalence of gambling and the severity of gambling problems. Additionally, before applying the survey weights, we found that 73% of all survey respondents from the general population reported lifetime gambling, consistent with previous probability samples (Kessler et al., 2008). This study focused on the frequency of any betting directly conducted on social media; it did not investigate the various forms of gambling occurring on these platforms. Future research should examine specific types of betting conducted directly on social media, as this information could be crucial for guiding future regulatory efforts.

All data were self-reported, and this was a cross-sectional study. Response options for assessing the frequency of social media use for all purposes were categorical (daily, weekly, monthly, annually, less than annually). In this context, increased frequency of general-purpose TikTok use emerged as a significant predictor of problem gambling, aligning with the finding from this study that direct gambling on TikTok showed the largest adjusted odds ratio for predicting problematic gambling status. Although self-reported hours of social media use per day can be difficult to measure accurately (Mahalingham, McEvoy, & Clarke, 2022), such measures in future research may help better understand how social media use for other purposes compares to gambling directly on each platform in terms of risk.

5. Conclusion & Practical Implications

The findings regarding the relative risk of problem gambling linked to social media betting highlight a need for more active monitoring of gambling features and opportunities on social media. The study shows that betting directly on social media is common among U.S. gamblers, despite its unregulated and illegal status. It also reveals that there are likely significant differences among various social media platforms related to the risk of developing gambling problems. Some platforms may be more lenient by design, due to policy gaps or

enforcement gaps, and may thus be higher-risk environments. At the same time, these platforms could also present strategic opportunities for public health messaging and harm-reduction efforts targeting vulnerable individuals. Future research on social media-based messages to prevent and intervene in both regulated and unregulated gambling activities is essential.

Statement of Researchers

Researchers' contribution rate statement:

Michael J. Sofis: Conceptualization, original writing, methodology, data curation, project administration and formal analyses

Mackenzie Slade: Conceptualization, original writing, editing, formal analyses

Ari P. Kirshenbaum: Conceptualization, original writing, editing, methodology

Conflict statement:

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest. Sofis and Kirshenbaum are employed by Advocates for Human Potential. Neither the company nor these employees has financial interests that directly benefit from the information contained within this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement:

The data supporting this study's findings are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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