

Relationship Between Gambling Addiction and Gambling Advertisements: Role of Legal and Illegal Gambling Sites in Gambling Disorder

Kumar Bağımlılığı ve Kumar Reklamları İlişkisi: Yasal Olan ve Olmayan Kumar Sitelerinin Kumar Oynama Bozukluğundaki Rolü

Elif Aktan Mutlu¹, Eda Nur Küçük¹, Beyza Ayçanur Akkuş¹

¹Ankara Etilk City Hospital, Ankara

To the Editor,

Gambling addiction, particularly within digital ecosystems, has demonstrated a sustained upward trajectory at both global and national levels, thereby constituting an increasingly salient public health challenge. National surveillance data from Turkey indicate a marked escalation in gambling initiation since the 2019–2020 period, with prevalence exceeding 10% among individuals aged 15 years and older (Yeşilay 2025). Converging evidence from university-based samples further delineates a mean onset age for problematic gambling behavior of approximately 21 years (İncekara and Taş 2022). At the neurobiological level, gambling disorder is increasingly conceptualized as a condition characterized by dysregulation within reward-processing networks that substantially overlap with those implicated in substance-related and addictive disorders. In particular, aberrant functioning of the mesocorticolimbic dopamine pathway has been posited as a central neural substrate underlying maladaptive gambling behaviors (Clark et al. 2019). Such mechanistic convergence has informed its reclassification within contemporary diagnostic nosologies alongside substance use and addictive disorders.

Within the Turkish legislative framework, addiction prevention policies explicitly mandate the protection of younger populations from harmful behaviors, including alcohol and drug use, criminal activity, and gambling. This policy orientation has translated into stringent, operationalized restrictions governing the advertising and promotion of tobacco products and alcoholic beverages. By contrast, regulatory provisions addressing gambling and online betting advertisements remain comparatively underdeveloped. This regulatory asymmetry permits the persistent visibility of gambling-related content across digital platforms, thereby potentially amplifying exposure among individuals who are disproportionately vulnerable to risk-taking and addictive behaviors. Empirical evidence from the United States underscores the rapid proliferation of sports betting advertisements across diverse media channels, with targeted messaging frequently directed toward populations at elevated risk for problematic gambling. The strategic deployment of narratives emphasizing “easy winning,” “excitement,” and “opportunity” may contribute to the normalization of gambling behavior while attenuating the perceived salience of associated harms (Shatley et al., 2021).

In our clinical observations, approximately 76% of male patients aged 20–74 years reported that their initial engagement with gambling occurred via legally advertised platforms, followed by a subsequent transition to illegal sites. This trajectory suggests that exposure to legal gambling advertisements may function as a

Address for Correspondence: Elif Aktan Mutlu, Ankara Etilk City Hospital Department of Psychiatry, Ankara, Türkiye

e-mail: aktanazer@hotmail.com

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gateway mechanism, whereby initiation is facilitated and subsequent progression toward more hazardous and less regulated gambling environments is reinforced.

Taken together, these observations underscore the contention that the pervasive visibility of legal digital gambling platforms may play a contributory role not only in the initiation of gambling behaviors but also in the perpetuation and escalation of gambling-related pathology. Accordingly, as mental health professionals, we submit that the development of more robust regulatory frameworks governing online gambling advertising is warranted, alongside the systematic strengthening of monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.

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