

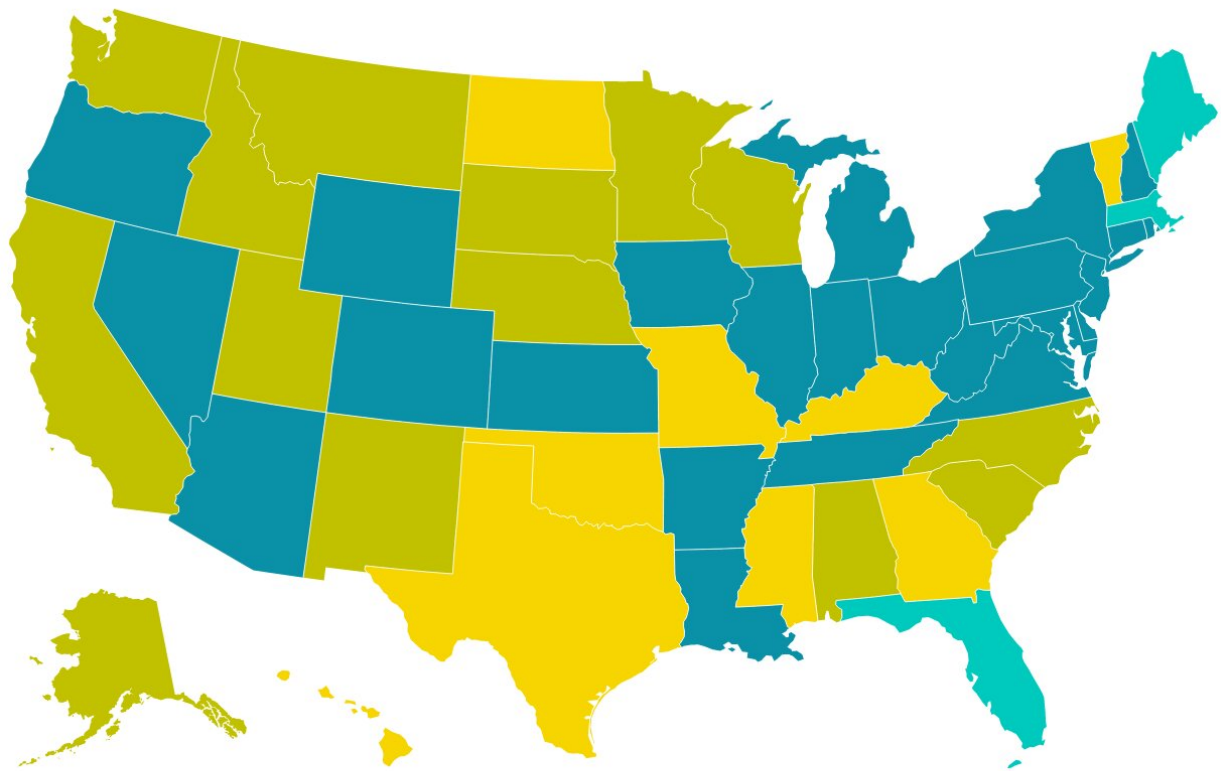
Sports betting apps' notifications and leaderboards encourage wagers—a psychologist explains why some people get hooked

February 7 2023, by Meredith K. Ginley

Mobile sports betting by state

It used to be necessary to physically go someplace to legally place a bet. But because of a 2018 Supreme Court decision to overturn a federal prohibition on sports betting in most states, nearly half of U.S. states allow sports betting via a mobile phone app.

 Active legislation or ballot initiative  Legal  Legal, not yet available  No legislation



Data as of January 31, 2023.

Map: The Conversation/CC-BY-ND • Source: American Gaming Association • Created with Datawrapper

Credit: The Conversation

Joe is a full-time college student who also works some nights as a security guard. He played basketball all through high school and loves to follow the sport. Tonight one of his favorite teams is playing and he's placed a US\$100 bet for them to win.

As he sits in his vehicle with one eye on the parking lot and one eye on his physics textbook, he listens to the game. His phone keeps vibrating. [A notification](#) from a sports wagering app asks if he'd like to place [a prop bet](#)—a sort of side bet unrelated to the specific outcomes of the game—for a specific player to make five rebounds tonight. He adds \$20 for this bet. His app buzzes again, now suggesting a prop bet for a certain player to make four three-point shots this game. The odds look good; he knows this player; he adds \$40 here.

The game continues and his app keeps pinging him about more bets. By the end of the game, Joe's team has won. He feels good about how well he knows basketball and his ability to pick a winning team and is buzzing from the thrill of chasing in-game bets. But he's actually down \$50 on the evening, as he lost most of his prop bets, and he's not done nearly enough of his physics homework. He settles in for a long night and tries to push away any thoughts about how much money he actually ended up losing. And I'm certain Joe will be back placing bets the next time his teams are playing.

Although Joe isn't a real person, and the specifics of a sports wagering app can vary from vendor to vendor and even from [state to state](#), this scenario illustrates the kind of game play many sports wagers report.

One estimate suggests there were around [19 million online sports bettors](#) in the U.S. in 2022; as more states gradually legalize these apps, the number of Joes out there is bound to rise.

I'm a licensed clinical psychologist who has [researched and treated gambling-related harm](#) for over a decade. I'm interested in how and why bettors like Joe seem able to focus on how they picked a winning team while discounting that they actually ended up in the red. Humans are built to like reward, pleasure and winning. Sports wagering apps bring these specific opportunities right to your smartphone for immediate enjoyment.

Gambling feels good in the heat of the moment

Several theories from neuroscience and psychology can point to why some people might be particularly primed to enjoy gambling.

[One prominent theory of learning](#) suggests people are [driven by two basic brain systems](#). One leads people to seek new, exciting and novel situations. A complementary system encourages them to apply caution, notice risk and keep themselves safe.

In action, these systems are a bit like the gas and the brake on a car—but imagine driving, as my great uncle used to, with both feet. Everyone has both pedals, but how sensitive you are to the brake or how much you crave more gas varies from person to person.

Think of how some people avoid airplanes entirely, while others board because of their excitement about the vacation on the other side, and still others willingly launch themselves out of the plane as skydivers. Sports wagering opportunities can be akin to that plane. One person's individual blend of desire for novelty and caution can lead them to hesitantly download an app while another person can't wait to make the jump.

Neuroscientists know that certain genes, [brain regions](#) and neurotransmitters, including dopamine, are part of this balancing act of risk and reward. The areas of the brain related to reward may function a bit differently in people who are more driven to engage in higher-risk activities.

For example, [when researchers show study participants](#) who are frequent gamblers [images of people gambling in casinos](#), their [brains may react](#) in a way similar to when they are [exposed to cues for natural rewards](#) like food or sex. These findings mirror what has been shown for how people's [brains react to cues](#) for [alcohol, cocaine and cigarettes](#).

Wagering apps amp up the attraction

Beyond the rewarding nature of gambling itself, there may be some structural aspects of sports wagering apps that make them particularly attractive—and, in turn, potentially create higher risk for some people.

For example, Joe really likes basketball, and he's confident about his skill in knowing how his team will play. Placing a bet on the game may make him more excited to watch a game he already enjoys. Each time his favorite teams play will be an automatic cue to place another bet. There's a natural pull to be [more engaged in activities you like and are good at](#). And when researchers told study participants they would either [just watch or also bet](#) on a [sporting event](#), it led to different activation in the brain, particularly in areas related to reward.

People are also more likely to participate in activities that are readily accessible and have low barriers to entry. Common advice you might hear if you want to decrease the amount of sugar in your diet is to clear sweets out of your pantry. Sure enough, you're [more likely to eat a cupcake on the counter](#) than one you have to go all the way to the store for.

In the same way, [proximity to gambling venues is a known risk factor](#) for problematic levels of gambling. Sports wagering apps essentially load a casino onto the phone in your pocket. The easy access—along with the novelty and excitement—likely increase the risk of potential harm.

And wagering apps are heavily "gamified" to feel more like an interactive video game and less like a staid banking app. Push notifications, free play, leaderboards and more can increase engagement and fun. But these features can also make users feel [more detached from the actual money](#) they're spending and make it harder to disengage if they become concerned about the cash or time spent on the app.

Hardening your defenses

Most people who gamble or bet on sports [don't experience any harm](#). Like Joe, they might lose a few bucks. But overall they may find the enjoyment gained by the thrill of deeper engagement with their team and the chance to win is within their budget. Spending on sports wagering can be like springing for movie tickets because of what's gained from seeing the content in a theater—there's an added dimension to the entertainment.

When I work with clients, I suggest setting spending limits or loss limits. Many apps offer responsible gaming tools that let users set deposit, loss and wagering limits. For people who are really concerned about their gambling, [blocking software](#) can be an option. The National Council on Problem Gambling's [responsibleplay.org](#) site provides additional strategies and resources.

I also remind clients that sports wagering companies are running a business designed to make money despite a user's ability to pick a [winning team](#). The apps are very skilled at tapping into what makes betting exciting and rewarding. Players can aim for a level of

expenditure that keeps it fun and low-risk. There's no need to become an app's best customer.

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