

Gaming addiction: Warning signs you shouldn't ignore

What starts as harmless weekend betting is quietly turning into a daily compulsion for many Ugandans, as easy mobile access, big wins, and the lure of quick money pull players deeper into a cycle that is hard to break and even harder to admit.

BY DAPHINE NAKABIRI

Allan Kabanda, a 43-year-old staunch Manchester United fan, traces his betting journey back to 2014, a time when his team's frequent losses left him frustrated. In search of a win, he turned to a friend known for consistently getting his betting slips right.

"He helped me place my odds, and I got all 12 matches right on that long slip. I saw him as my saviour, and that is how my gambling habit started," he recalls.

Gaming, commonly referred to as betting and gambling, has existed in Uganda for more than six decades. In the 1960s, lotteries were the dominant form. Today, digital technology has reshaped the landscape.

According to the Uganda Communications Commission, the country has more than 20 million smartphone users, about 18.5 million active mobile internet subscriptions, and approximately 36.3 million mobile money accounts, factors that have made gaming more accessible than ever.

Dennis Mudene Ngabirano, the chief executive officer of the National Lotteries and Gaming Regulatory Board, says participation has shifted decisively on-

line. The Board's data shows that 93 percent of gaming activity now takes place on digital platforms, driven by mobile connectivity, digital payments, and convenience.

The shift has fuelled participation in online crash games and sports betting, especially around competitions such as the English Premier League and the UEFA Champions League.

"Gaming is no longer a destination-based activity. It is embedded in everyday digital life, accessible at any time and from anywhere," Ngabirano says.

He adds that many players now maintain multiple accounts across platforms, increasing both frequency and ease of participation.

When a win becomes a habit

While gaming remains a form of entertainment, many participants increasingly view it as a source of income or a solution to financial challenges. This perception is often reinforced by familiarity with sports, creating a false sense of confidence in predicting outcomes.

"The real risk lies in patterns of participation; how often individuals play, how much they stake, and what motivates them," Mr Ngabirano explains.

This shift has increased harmful behaviours such as repetitive play without breaks, chasing losses, and spending beyond personal limits.

For Kabanda, what started as occasional weekend betting became a daily routine. He moved from weekend matches to the Champions League, and eventually to any available sport, driven by the urge to keep playing.

"I think gaming pulls you in. In 2016, I got around Shs8m, and I knew I had

found a harmless source of income," he says.

Experts describe this as a gradual shift from control to compulsion.

Ivan Musenero, an occupational therapist at the Kampala Youth Rehabilitation and Skilling Foundation, says gaming stops being pleasurable once control is lost.

"Entertainment is supposed to bring pleasure and connection, but when someone cannot control the urge to keep playing, it becomes a disorder," he explains.

The transition is often subtle, making it easy to ignore in the early stages as a social activity slowly turns into a behavioural pattern.

Signs of gaming addiction

Gaming addiction manifests in three dimensions: financial, social, and behavioural.

Financially, individuals lose control over money. They borrow excessively, accumulate unexplained debts, and in extreme cases face legal consequences. Musenero cites a patient who accumulated Shs500m in debt and is now facing trial.

For Arison Pounds, a 27-year-old local artist, the pattern began in 2011 during his Senior Four vacation. He sold belongings and diverted tuition money to betting. As Kabanda's habit deepened, he abandoned work and sold personal property, including his Uber car, to sustain it.

Socially, relationships begin to strain. Individuals become irritable, prioritise betting over people, and turn defensive when questioned. Over time, they withdraw from friends, partners, and family.

Ahmed Jude Masika, a 29-year-old

THE BOARD'S ROLE

The National Lotteries and Gaming Regulatory Board continues to collaborate with the Ministry of Health and organisations such as GamCare Uganda, Safe Places, Kampala Youth Recovery Foundation, Butabika National Referral Hospital, and community-level actors to run awareness campaigns and provide counselling and rehabilitation services.

The initiative also targets outreach in schools and higher institutions, alongside monitoring to ensure operators support players in setting limits on time, stakes, and deposits. "We are working to normalise help-seeking behaviour by reducing stigma and expanding access to counselling services, including a self-check quiz on the Board's website," Ngabirano says.

former DJ, was introduced to gaming through clients. Watching them work sparked his interest, and he soon began betting regularly. As his involvement deepened, he became unable to support his wife and child. The strain led them to leave and relocate to Juba.

Behaviourally, addiction appears as compulsive patterns. Individuals move from casual betting to constant play, often chasing losses by increasing stakes after losing. Over time, focus shifts almost entirely to games, odds, and the next opportunity to bet.

As control fades, individuals gamble with whatever resources they can access.

"It gets to a point where someone cannot do without betting. If you struggle to spend even two days without gaming, then you need to recognise there is a problem and seek help," Musenero says.

Kabanda admits this was his reality. Losing brought frustration, while winning only pushed him to continue.

Responsible gaming and support

Responsible gaming is central to the Board's mandate. Under Section 3 of the Lotteries and Gaming Act, Cap 33, it is required to protect citizens from adverse effects.

Ngabirano says sustainable growth of the sector depends on strong player protection and harm prevention. The Board's role extends beyond licensing to safeguarding player welfare.

"Gaming can be addictive and psychologically harmful if not approached responsibly. It is critical to know when to play and when to walk away," he says.

However, addiction to certain online habits, including gaming, is often normalised. This leads many to overlook risks and delay seeking help.

"By the time most people reach us, the damage is already significant," Musenero notes.

He emphasises that family support plays a crucial role in recovery. When individuals feel supported rather than judged, they are more likely to engage in treatment and rebuild their lives.

Where to get help

Despite the risks, support is available. For Masika, the turning point came when he felt overwhelmed. He noticed a toll-free number, 0800285800, written on a wall in a betting outlet restroom. After calling, he was connected to a counsellor who guided him through recovery support. Today, he describes himself as reformed and now engaged in gaming only occasionally and with control.

Similarly, Evans Kansime, a 32-year-old who owned a small bar in Kampala and had a boda boda on loan, saw his turning point come after repeatedly channelling all his earnings into betting.

As losses mounted, his relationships broke down and he faced judgment from friends. He eventually opened up to a friend, who advised him to seek help from the Kampala Youth Rehabilitation and Skilling Foundation. He now focuses on rebuilding his life.

Musenero explains that recovery is a structured process involving initial screening, and assessment to determine the extent of harm.

"We assess severity to decide whether someone needs inpatient or outpatient care," he says.

Patients are enrolled in tailored programmes, including group therapy sessions where individuals share experiences and learn from one another. They are also taught financial management skills, followed by relapse prevention and long-term follow-ups.

What starts as casual betting can quickly spiral into financial loss, strained relationships, and loss of control over daily life. PHOTO/FILE

