

Examining drivers of chasing behaviour when gambling among Italian adolescents

What this research is about

Chasing losses is when a person keeps gambling because they want to win back the money they have lost. But this usually leads to even more gambling, giving rise to a cycle that brings about serious harms.

Previous research has noted that there are two interrelated mechanisms linked to addiction. These mechanisms are craving and dysfunctional decision making. Craving is presented as a strong urge to continue gambling. Poor decision making during experimental tasks has been observed in people with problem gambling, though the evidence is mixed. Other factors that can influence gambling behaviours are alcohol use and decision making styles. The latter refers to the habitual response patterns that people use when making choices.

Gambling is common among adolescents. Previous research has found that the rates of problem and pathological gambling often are higher among adolescents than adults. It is important to understand the mechanisms and factors that influence gambling behaviours in adolescents. The purpose of this study was to examine the connections between chasing behaviour, craving, affective decision making (when making choices in a task involving risk and uncertainty), decision making styles, alcohol use, and gambling severity among Italian adolescents.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited 272 adolescents aged 14–19 years from public high schools in Southern Italy.

Participants completed a computerized task (ChasIT) to assess chasing behaviour. This task had two phases with 30 trials each. In each trial,

What you need to know

The purpose of this study was to examine the connections between chasing behaviour, craving, affective decision making, decision making styles, alcohol use, and gambling severity among Italian adolescents. The researchers recruited 272 adolescents aged 14–19 years from public high schools in Southern Italy for an experimental study. The findings highlight gambling craving, alcohol use, and decision making styles as important factors that are linked to chasing behaviour in adolescents. Specifically, gambling craving and alcohol use were found to predict chasing behaviour. In contrast, adolescents who had a dependent decision making style were less likely to chase losses.

participants won €1 if the card they drew was higher than the house's card; otherwise, they lost €1. Participants were randomly assigned to either a control or loss condition. Those in the control condition retained their full initial budget after the first phase, while those in the loss condition lost all their money plus €2. Participants could choose to stop gambling (non-chasing) or continue into the second phase. For participants in the loss condition, they could continue gambling on credit in the second phase (borrowing against potential future winnings).

Participants also completed a computerized task to assess affective decision making (Iowa Gambling Task, IGT). In this task, they selected cards from four decks. Two decks were disadvantageous because they offered larger immediate gains but resulted in larger losses in the long term. Selecting these two decks more often indicated deficits in decision making.

In addition, participants completed a survey that included the following measures:

- The South Oaks Gambling Screen-Revised for Adolescents (SOGS-RA).
- The Gambling Craving Scale.
- The General Decision-Making Style scale.
- The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test.

What the researchers found

Participant characteristics: Almost half of the participants were male (45%). Most of the participants had non-problem gambling (76.5%) according to the SOGS-RA. About 15.1% had problem gambling and 8.5% had probable pathological gambling. Participants reported gambling more often to win money and out of curiosity. Participants who reported winning money as the main reason they gambled showed higher chasing persistence (gambled on more trials during the second phase of the ChasIT).

Males were more likely to have higher levels of gambling problems, craving, alcohol use, and chasing persistence than females.

Predictors of chasing behaviour: Craving was the strongest predictor of chasing initiation (decision to continue gambling) and persistence (gambling on more trials). Higher levels of alcohol use were linked to higher levels of chasing persistence.

Adolescents who had a dependent decision making style (showing a preference for seeking advice or support from others) were less likely to engage in chasing behaviour and had lower chasing persistence. This suggests that a dependent decision making style may be protective against maladaptive gambling behaviours.

The researchers did not find any significant differences in chasing initiation or chasing persistence between participants in the control and loss conditions of the ChasIT task. Participants' performance on the IGT was also not linked to chasing initiation or persistence. Furthermore, gambling severity did not predict whether participants would continue or stop gambling, nor did it predict chasing persistence. These findings suggest that chasing losses is a behavioural

mechanism within gambling disorder that is distinct from gambling severity and decisionmaking deficits.

How you can use this research

This research can inform research and clinical practice. Practitioners may want to tailor treatments and interventions to address why some people are more vulnerable to chasing behaviour.

About the researchers

Marina Cosenza, Maria Ciccarelli, Mariagiulia Sacco, and Giovanna Nigro are affiliated with the Department of Psychology at the University of Campania Luigi Vanvitelli in Caserta, Italy. **Barbara Pizzini** is affiliated with Giustino Fortunato University in Benevento, Italy. For more information about this study, please contact Marina Cosenza at marina.cosenza@unicampania.it.

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