

A review of the association between gambling motives and problem gambling severity

What this research is about

Gambling motives are the reasons why people gamble. Various measures have been developed to examine gambling motives. These measures are mainly based on two theoretical frameworks. Some measures are grounded in operational conditioning. This framework suggests that both positive reinforcement (e.g., gambling to gain money) and negative reinforcement (e.g., gambling to cope with negative emotions) influence gambling behaviour. Other measures are grounded in self-determination theory, which proposes that people are driven by their fundamental needs for autonomy (i.e., to feel in control), competence (i.e., to master skills and achieve desired outcomes), and relatedness (i.e., to feel connected with others).

While there have been reviews on how different gambling motives may be related to problem gambling severity, their findings have not been synthesized across all validated measures. There have also been inconsistent findings. The purpose of this systematic review and meta-analysis was to examine the association between gambling motives and problem gambling severity.

What the researchers did

The researchers followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) and the Meta-analysis Of Observational Studies in Epidemiology (MOOSE) guidelines. The researchers included studies that met these criteria:

- Quantitative research that used validated multi-item measures of gambling motives and problem gambling severity. Studies that examined

What you need to know

This systematic review and meta-analysis examined how different gambling motives are related to problem gambling severity. Across 63 studies, nearly all gambling motives were linked to problem gambling severity, especially motives related to coping with negative emotions and escaping distress. Positive reinforcement motives, such as enhancement and financial gain, were also linked to problem gambling severity. Social motives showed a smaller but still significant association. The findings suggest that problem gambling is associated with multiple motives.

gambling behaviour, but not problem gambling severity, were excluded.

- Participants were mainly adults (average age over 18 years).
- Provided an estimate of the link between a gambling motive and problem gambling severity.
- Peer-reviewed original research published in English.

The researchers searched Medline, Embase, and PsycInfo databases. They also performed a manual search of two journals (*Gambling Research* and *International Gambling Studies*). Their search covered January 1993 to February 2025.

What the researchers found

In total, 6,702 records were identified through database searching. After removing duplicates and screening, 63 studies published in 66 articles were included in the review. These articles were published

from 2004 onwards. A total of 53 studies across 54 articles were included in the meta-analysis. The other 10 studies across 12 articles were narratively summarized, as their gambling motive measures had fewer than four estimates per subscale.

A total of 16 gambling motive measures were used across the studies. The most frequently used measures were the Gambling Motives Questionnaire (GMQ; 33%) and the Gambling Motives Questionnaire-Financial (GMQ-F; 23%).

All subscales of each gambling motive measure were statistically associated with problem gambling severity, except for the “Intrinsic Motivation Toward Knowledge” subscale of the Gambling Motivation Scale. This means that all gambling motives, other than gambling for the pleasure of acquiring new product knowledge, were linked with problem gambling severity.

Across several measures, similar motives were consistently related to problem gambling severity. Motives reflecting negative reinforcement, such as gambling to cope with negative emotions, and obsessive passion were most strongly linked to problem gambling severity. Motives reflecting positive reinforcement, such as enhancement and financial gain, and harmonious passion were also linked to problem gambling severity. Social motives also had a small but significant association with problem gambling severity.

The researchers planned to conduct subgroup analyses to explore the influence of participant and study characteristics. But there were not enough data to run analyses based on gender (male vs. female), study design (cross-sectional vs. longitudinal), sample type (clinical vs. community), or sampling type (convenience vs. population-representative). Therefore, the researchers only examined the influence of problem gambling severity measures, and they did not find evidence that the measure used affected the findings.

Sample size, however, might help explain why the results varied across studies for some gambling motives. Studies with larger sample sizes showed a stronger association of social motives measured using the GMQ/GMQ-F with problem gambling severity, but a weaker association of positive

reinforcement motives measured using the Gambling Functional Assessment (GFA) or GFA-Revised. The researchers cautioned that these findings should be considered exploratory and that more research is needed.

How you can use this research

The findings may help support more tailored prevention and treatment approaches that address specific gambling motives.

About the researchers

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Citation

Dias, S. E., Dowling, N. A., Hawker, C. O., Rodda, S. N., Gandhi, M. N., & Merkouris, S. S. (2026). The association between gambling motives and problem gambling severity: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Current Addiction Reports*, 13, 25. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40429-026-00731-5>

Study Funding

Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions. This study received no direct funding.

About Greo Evidence Insights

Greo Evidence Insights is an independent, non-profit organization specializing in research, knowledge mobilization, and evaluation in the health and well-being sectors. Greo transforms research and insights into actionable strategies to prevent and reduce harm related to gambling, gaming, technology use, and substance use. To learn more about funding for Research Snapshots visit [our website](https://www.greo.org.au).

