

Understanding non-suicidal self-injury patterns among people who gamble online

What this research is about

Gambling is now widely available around the world. The growth in gambling participation is driven by the increasing acceptance of gambling as a normal leisure activity and the ease of access with online gambling. Unfortunately, gambling is linked to numerous harms, especially among people experiencing problem gambling (PG) and gambling disorder (GD). Gambling harms may include relationship concerns, financial issues, mental health challenges, and suicidal thoughts and attempts.

One harm that is associated with gambling, but has received far less attention, is non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI). NSSI occurs when a person deliberately harms themselves without the intention to die. Several behaviours are commonly seen in NSSI, including cutting, burning, or hitting oneself. Globally, the prevalence estimates of NSSI range from approximately 11% to 34%, with rates increasing in recent years. A two-factor model has been proposed to explain NSSI. First, NSSI serves an intrapersonal function, such as to help regulate emotion. Second, NSSI serves an interpersonal function, such as to communicate distress to others.

Evidence indicates that PG and NSSI share traits like poor emotion regulation and impulsivity (i.e., a tendency to act rashly without thinking of the consequence). Both can function as coping strategies, providing short-term relief from emotional distress. The present study further examined the relationship between gambling and NSSI. The aims included (1) identifying the prevalence of NSSI among people who gamble online; (2) exploring the demographic and

What you need to know

The present study examined the relationship between non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) and gambling. A total of 1,047 adults who were living in the UK and had gambled online in the past year completed an online survey. It was found that people experiencing moderate-risk gambling and problem gambling were more likely to engage in NSSI. But the risk of NSSI was also elevated among people with low-risk gambling compared to people who were not experiencing problem gambling. Several predictors of engaging in NSSI were identified. Emotional distress and insomnia emerged as the strongest predictors of NSSI. Younger age was also associated with a higher likelihood of NSSI.

psychological factors associated with NSSI; (3) exploring the predictors of frequently engaging in NSSI; and (4) identifying different groups of people based on their self-injury patterns, and assessing how these groups vary in gambling severity.

What the researchers did

An online survey was conducted, comprising 1,047 adults living in the UK who were at least 18 years old. To be included in the study, participants had to report online gambling in the past 12 months. The survey contained several measures, including the Inventory of Statements About Self-injury (ISAS) to assess NSSI, the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-9), the Athens Insomnia Scale (AIS), the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI), and the short-form Revised Barratt Impulsiveness Scale.

What the researchers found

The average age of participants was 39.6 years. About 50% of participants identified as men, 49.6% as women, and 0.4% as other or preferred not to answer. Based on the PGSI, 21.6% of participants had moderate-risk gambling and 16% experienced PG. Three in five (64.0%) reported NSSI in their lifetime.

First, NSSI behaviours were assessed according to PGSI categories. People experiencing moderate-risk gambling and PG were more likely to engage in NSSI. But several NSSI behaviours were also more likely in people with low-risk gambling compared to people without problem gambling. The most common behaviours were hitting oneself, pinching, pulling hair, and interfering with wound healing.

Next, the researchers identified subgroups of participants based on their self-injury patterns. Three groups emerged: (1) 'low/no self-injury' (61.6%), (2) 'moderate engagement/occasional self-injury' (23.2%), and (3) 'high engagement/multi-method self-injury' (15.2%). The high and moderate engagement groups reported higher PGSI scores, suggesting more severe problem gambling. These two groups also reported greater emotional distress (depression and anxiety), as well as higher levels of insomnia and impulsivity. No meaningful sex differences between groups were found.

Finally, predictors of group membership were examined. Younger age was associated with a higher likelihood of being in the groups of moderate and high engagement in NSSI. However, insomnia and emotional distress were the strongest predictors of risk of NSSI. Gambling severity and impulsivity were no longer predictive of risk of NSSI after taking into account insomnia and emotional distress.

How you can use this research

The findings suggest that people with more severe PG are more likely to self-injure. The risk of NSSI is elevated even among people with low-risk gambling. The findings can inform interventions.

About the researchers

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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](#).

