

How perceived benefits from gambling influence the relationship between risky gambling and harm

What this research is about

Gambling is a common recreational activity in Australia. It is closely tied to cultural activities as well as national public holidays. Given this, it is important to consider both the positive and negative aspects of gambling when evaluating its overall harms.

While many people do not face significant negative consequences from gambling, others experience problem gambling (PG) and considerable harms. This is particularly the case amongst people who gamble to escape or cope with negative emotions. Research has consistently found that people experiencing more severe PG face more financial, emotional, and relationship harms.

Some models explain PG through the lens of reinforcement and behavioural conditioning. When people gamble, they experience positive reinforcement (such as winning money), as well as negative reinforcement (such as reduced stress). Such reinforcement motivates them to continue gambling despite financial losses. There is limited research on the perceived benefits of gambling.

For some addictive behaviours (e.g., alcohol use), it has been found that people will often justify the negative aspects by focusing on the benefits that the behaviour provides. It is possible that people may justify continued gambling by emphasizing the benefits they derive from it while minimizing any negative effects. The purpose of this study was to assess how perceived benefits from gambling influence gambling risk, engagement, and harms. The researchers outlined two key research questions: (1) Does the effect of gambling severity on gambling

What you need to know

Gambling is a widespread recreational activity in Australia. Unfortunately, gambling can result in harms. Despite this, people report benefits from gambling. To date, little research has explored how perceived benefits from gambling influences gambling severity and harms. This study analyzed data from 1,474 adults living in Australia who were surveyed about gambling benefits, harms, engagement, and severity.

Overall, people who perceived more benefits from gambling were at higher risk for experiencing harms. Perceiving more benefits from gambling intensified the relationship between gambling and harms, but the effect was small. A stronger effect was observed among people with higher gambling risk and those who gambled infrequently. The findings can inform the development of interventions that target perceived gambling benefits.

harms differ based on the level of perceived benefits from gambling? (2) Does the effect of gambling engagement on gambling harms differ based on the level of perceived benefits from gambling?

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited adults living in Brisbane, Australia, through Qualtrics, an internet panel provider. Participants must have gambled in a land-based venue at least once in the previous six months. The questionnaire included the following measures:

- The Gambling Impacts Survey (GIS), which asks about gambling behaviours, impacts, help-seeking, and demographics.
- The Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) to estimate gambling severity.
- Six items from the GIS to calculate the cumulative benefits score (CBS). These six items were designed to capture perceived benefits from gambling.
- The Short Gambling Harm Screen – Gambling Impacts Version (SGHS -GISV) of the GIS was adapted to capture harms from gambling.
- The Gambling Related Cognitions scale – Illusions of Control subscale (GRC-IC) to measure illusions of control (i.e., false beliefs that one can control the outcomes of gambling games).

What the researchers found

A total of 1,474 participants were included in the analyses. The majority (68.7%) of participants were women. Over half were under 34 years of age (54.3%). Almost a quarter (24.8%) met the criteria for PG according to the PGSI. Participants with higher scores on the PGSI reported more gambling harms. Further, participants with higher CBS scores (i.e., perceived more benefits from gambling) had higher PGSI scores and experienced more harms.

People aged 55 years or older reported fewer gambling harms than other age groups. Similarly, people who were separated or divorced reported fewer harms, while those who were widowed reported more benefits from gambling. People with higher income reported more gambling harms. Lastly, men reported both more harms and benefits from gambling compared to women.

The researchers assessed the extent to which perceived gambling benefits impacted the relationship between gambling risk and harms. After demographic factors were accounted for, perceiving more benefits from gambling intensified the effect of gambling risk on harms. Finally, the influence of perceived benefits on the relationship between gambling engagement and harms was examined. People who gambled more frequently experienced more gambling harms. But the effect of perceived gambling benefits on this relationship was only observed in people who gambled infrequently; that

is, among people who gambled 1 to 2 times a month, those who perceived more benefits from gambling experienced more harms than those who perceived less benefits. Among people who gambled more frequently, gambling harms did not differ for people who perceived high or low gambling benefits.

How you can use this research

This study provides insights into the role of perceived benefits from gambling. The findings could be of interest to researchers and clinicians who want to develop interventions that focus on altering beliefs surrounding the benefits of gambling.

About the researchers

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