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The impact of alcohol use and beliefs about its effects on gambling behaviours

What this research is about

Researchers have expressed concerns that drinking alcohol increases the chances of engaging in risky behaviours. This is especially true when it comes to risky behaviours such as gambling. Yet, a recent review of experimental studies found no significant effects of alcohol use on gambling.

Alcohol use and gambling behaviours often co-occur. There is some indirect evidence that raises the concern that drinking while gambling will cause more harm. Alcohol may have an influence on risk taking through its physiological effects on the body. It may also have an influence through alcohol expectancies, which refer to people's beliefs about the effects of alcohol.

This study evaluated the potential role of alcohol expectancies on gambling. The researchers compared the effects of alcohol use with two comparison groups. The first group was an alcohol-placebo group, in which the participants drank a non-alcoholic beverage that they believed contained alcohol. This eliminated physiological but not the expectancy effects. The second group was a no-alcohol control group, which eliminated both effects.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited 54 men from psychology classes and flyers posted at a university in the USA. Participants were at least 21 years old. They had gambled within the past year. They also reported consuming at least 3 alcohol drinks in one day in the past month. Participants reported that they had no medical reasons they could not consume alcohol. Finally, they scored less than 6 on the Brief Michigan Alcoholism Screening Test.

What you need to know

There is a need for evidence about the exact role of alcohol expectancies on gambling behaviour. Alcohol expectancies refer to beliefs that people have about the effects of alcohol use. This study looked at the effects of alcohol use and expectancies on gambling behaviour. The participants were adult men. They were placed into one of three conditions in which they either drank alcohol, an alcohol-placebo, or nonalcoholic beverages. The participants then played a simulated roulette game. The researchers found that both the alcohol and alcohol-placebo groups gambled more than the no-alcohol group in terms of number of spins. There were no differences across the groups on the total amount wagered and the amount of money remaining.

Of the 54 participants, 9 of them were excluded because of a possible alcohol use disorder. Three participants from the placebo-alcohol condition believed they did not receive any alcohol, and three participants from the no-alcohol condition thought they received alcohol. These six participants were also excluded from the study.

The final sample of this study included 39 men, with an average age of 24.9 years old. These participants gambled an average of 21.3 times in the past year. They also drank an average of 6.7 standard alcoholic beverages per week.

When the participants arrived at the laboratory, they took a breathalyzer test to ensure that they had zero blood alcohol concentration (BAC). They were then randomly assigned to one of the three conditions:

alcohol, alcohol placebo, and no alcohol. The alcohol-placebo drink had a trace amount of alcohol that was considered too low to influence behaviour.

Participants completed several measures while they finished their drink. They then waited for 20 minutes and completed a second breathalyzer test.

Participants were then led to a simulated casino created to be like a real-life gambling environment. Participants were given \$500 of imaginary currency to play a computer-based roulette game. Unknown to the participants, they all received the same win/loss pattern. Their gambling behaviours were recorded during play, including number of spins, amount wagered per spin, and money won or lost.

The researchers used the following measures:

- The South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS) is a 20-item questionnaire. The researchers used it to screen out people who might have a gambling disorder.
- The Blood Alcohol Concentrations (BACs) from the participants were determined from the breath samples.
- The Alcohol Consumption Scale was completed by the participants after the gambling session. The participants estimated how many ounces of alcohol they drank and rated their level of intoxication.

What the researchers found

The participants in the alcohol condition reached an average BAC of 0.082%. The participants in the alcohol-placebo condition reached an average BAC of 0.009%. The researchers compared the self-reported intoxication rating by those in the alcohol and placebo-alcohol conditions. There were significant differences between the two groups. Those in the alcohol group reported feeling significantly more intoxicated than those in the placebo group. Those in the alcohol group also believed they received more ounces of alcohol than the alcohol-placebo group.

The researchers compared gambling behaviours across the three groups, while taking into account SOGS scores. Both the alcohol and the alcohol-

placebo groups gambled more than the no-alcohol group in terms of number of spins. But no differences were found between the groups in terms of the amount of money remaining and the total amount wagered. The average wager per spin also did not differ across the groups.

How you can use this research

This research can be used to better understand the influence of alcohol and alcohol expectancies on gambling behaviours.

About the researchers

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