

research snapshot

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Using a foreign language does not lead to more optimal gambling decisions

What this research is about

When gambling, people often rely on information that looks useful on intuition. Unclaimed prize information is one such type of information. In scratch card games, unclaimed prizes are the number of prizes that are available to be won. This information alone does not inform people about their chance of winning. For instance, knowing that there are ten unclaimed prizes is uninformative. One must also know how many cards still remain to calculate the payback percentage. Payback percentage is the portion of all wagered money that is returned to gamblers as prizes. Higher payback percentage means higher chance of winning.

Past research suggests that reasoning in a foreign language may help people rely less on their intuitions or be more willing to reflect. The researchers did three experiments to explore if people would rely less on unclaimed prize information when they gambled in a foreign language.

What the researchers did

Experiment 1

Participants were 111 people from Poland who could also speak English. The researchers randomly assigned them to complete the study in either their native (Polish) or foreign (English) language.

First, participants estimated their likelihood of winning a scratch card game. They also rated their excitement and urge to gamble. Next, participants played a scratch card game. There were three game versions with different colours (green, blue, and red). All three games had the same information on the cost to play and prizes, but they differed on the number of unclaimed prizes (low, medium, or high). For each

What you need to know

People often rely on intuitively appealing information when gambling. An example is unclaimed prize information. However, this information alone does not tell people about their chance of winning. The researchers explored if using a foreign language would help people rely less on unclaimed prize information when gambling. They did three experiments to test the effect of using a foreign language versus one's native language in a scratch card game. Overall, there was no evidence that using a foreign language helped people to make more optimal decisions: people tended to prefer scratch cards with a higher number of unclaimed prizes.

game, participants rated their likelihood of winning, excitement, and urge to gamble. Participants then imagined that they could purchase any or all of the scratch cards. They stated the number of cards they would like to buy for each game. Finally, participants completed the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) and reported their demographic information.

Experiment 2

Experiment 1 presented the prizes in numerical values, so it was possible that using a foreign language might not have conveyed any benefit. In Experiment 2, the researchers sought to address this concern. Participants were 154 undergraduate students from a university in Poland. Everything was the same as in Experiment 1 except that the prizes were written in vivid language and not in numerical values. For instance, the top prize was "a life changing vacation" instead of 1,000,000 PLN.

Experiment 3

In Experiment 3, the researchers explored if being able to calculate the payback percentage would make a difference. Participants were 144 Polish people. Everything was the same as in Experiment 1. The only exception was that participants were told the number of cards that remained in each game. Thus, they could calculate the payback percentage. The researchers set up games so that those with fewer unclaimed prizes had higher payback percentages.

What the researchers found

Experiment 1

Participants were biased by unclaimed prize information regardless of the language they used. They judged scratch cards with a higher number of unclaimed prizes as being more likely to win. Also, they felt more excited by, had a greater urge to play, and wanted to buy more scratch cards with a higher number of unclaimed prizes.

Experiment 2

Participants who used a foreign language rated their chance of winning higher than participants who used their native language. There was no other effect of language. Overall, participants felt more excited to play and wanted to buy more scratch cards with a higher number of unclaimed prizes.

Experiment 3

Participants felt more excited to play scratch cards with a high number of unclaimed prizes. Those who used their native language wanted to buy more scratch cards than those who used a foreign language. Overall, participants did not prefer scratch cards with fewer unclaimed prizes but higher payback percentages. This suggested that they were still biased by unclaimed prize information despite having more useful information to make their judgements.

How you can use this research

The findings of this study could be useful to gambling regulators, service providers, and researchers. For example, responsible gambling programs could help

people be more aware of their biases when gambling. Researchers could extend this study to other gambling contexts and different groups of gamblers.

About the researchers

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Citation

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Gambling Research Exchange (GREO) has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. GREO is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization that aims to eliminate harm from gambling. Our goal is to support evidence-informed decision making in safer gambling policies, standards, and practices. The work we do is intended for researchers, policy makers, gambling regulators and operators, and treatment and prevention service providers.

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