What this research is about

Gambling is a common activity among adolescents and young adults. Some adolescents may see gambling as a rite of passage into adulthood. This can be very dangerous as gambling at an early age increases the risk for developing gambling problems in older adulthood. Negative financial and personal consequences from gambling may continue into adulthood. For these reasons, several studies have investigated young adults’ gambling patterns and behaviours. However, research has yet to combine young adults’ gambling patterns with their motivations to gamble. Moreover, it is clear that focusing on gambling behaviours in isolation is inadequate. This is because gambling is often comorbid with other issues and mental health concerns. Thus, this study seeks to examine not only how young adults gamble, but also why they gamble. Specifically, it aims to uncover the profiles or subtypes of young adult gamblers.

What the researchers did

Participants were 496 undergraduate students (43.1% males) from a university in Winnipeg, Canada. They were between 18 to 25 years old, and had gambled at least once in the previous year. A survey was administered when they were enrolled in one of two introductory courses from Fall 2014 to Fall 2015.

To identify patterns of gambling, the survey asked participants how often they spent money on different gambling activities (e.g., lotteries, casino, poker,). The Rutgers Alcohol Problem Index (RAPI) was used to assess alcohol-related problems. Participants were also asked if they had used illegal drugs in the past year, and whether they used alcohol or drug when gambling. To assess risk for problematic gambling, the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) was included. The Gambling Motives Questionnaire (GMQ-F) was used to assess four gambling motivations: 1) enhancement (for fun and excitement); 2) coping (to cope with stress and negative emotions); 3) sociality (for social reasons); and 4) financial gain (to win money). In addition, the survey asked about mental health issues, including depression and anxiety. It also included questions about self-esteem, life satisfaction, social isolation, and impulsivity (e.g., acting rashly without planning ahead). The researchers used latent class analysis (LCA) to determine the number of subtypes of gamblers.

What you need to know

The present study examined young adults’ gambling patterns and motives. Results revealed four subtypes of gamblers: casual, skill-interactive, chance-passive, and extensive gamblers. The four classes showed differences in their gambling patterns and motives. For instance, there were more males who were skill-interactive gamblers and extensive gamblers, and more females who were chance-passive gamblers. Extensive gamblers had the greatest proportion of problem gamblers. Both extensive and chance-passive gamblers were more likely to use alcohol or drug when gambling compared to casual gamblers. Chance-passive gamblers were more likely to have depression, anxiety and low self-esteem compared to casual gamblers. This study suggests that intervention providers should address the differences between specific subtypes of young adult gamblers to create better intervention programs.

Exploring subtypes of gamblers among Canadian university students

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What the researchers found

The researchers found four classes or subtypes of gamblers. Class 1, the “casual gamblers”, preferred more easily accessible forms of gambling (e.g., scratch tickets, casino slots) and gambled less often than other classes. Class 2, the “skill-interactive”, preferred skill and strategy oriented games (e.g., poker, bowling, pool). Class 3, the “chance-passive”, preferred games of chance and luck (e.g., lottery, bingo, instant win tickets). Class 4, the “extensive gamblers”, participated in a wide variety of gambling activities, including both games of chance and skill. Their most common activities were raffle tickets, table games, and slots.

There were more males in class 2 (skill-interactive) and class 4 (extensive gamblers). There were more females in class 3 (chance-passive). Class 4 included the most problem gamblers. On alcohol/drug use, class 3 and class 4 were more likely to use alcohol or drug when gambling compared to class 1 (casual gamblers). They were also more likely to remember big wins and to chase losses compared to class 1. In terms of gambling motives, they were more likely to gamble for enhancement, sociality, and coping compared to class 1. Participants in Class 2 were more likely to gamble for enhancement and coping than class 1. Participants in Class 3 were more likely to gamble for financial motive than Class 1.

On mental health, class 3 scored higher on anxiety and depression and lower on self esteem than class 1. Class 4 scored higher on impulsivity than class 1. Class 1 and 2 did not show any differences in mental health.

How you can use this research

Gambling intervention providers, clinicians, and service providers may use this research to create more targeted interventions for young adults. Knowing the different classes of gamblers may help to facilitate better treatments. For example, male skill-based gamblers should be encouraged to re-focus and seek excitement in other activities, and to develop better coping strategies. Interventions for female chance-based gamblers should address issues such as low self-esteem and depression. Future studies should replicate this study in other samples, and compare the results to adult gamblers.

About the researchers

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Citation


Keywords

Latent class analysis, GMQ-F, self-esteem, college students, gendered gambling

Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (GREO)

Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (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 responsible 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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