

research snapshot

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The role of loneliness in youth addictive behaviours: A cross-national study

What this research is about

Addictive behaviours are harmful to individuals as well as society as a whole. Adolescents and young adults are especially vulnerable to the harms of addictions. They are more prone to risky behaviours than older adults. As a result, they are more likely to engage in addictive behaviours, such as alcohol use and gambling.

Gambling has become popular among youth. Even though most countries prohibit underage gambling, many youths can easily gamble online. Internet gambling can be just as addictive as in-person gambling. As well, internet use itself can also become an addictive behaviour. People who use the internet excessively tend to have fewer face-to-face interactions, which can lead to feelings of loneliness. Loneliness, like addictions, can have negative effects on someone's mental health and general well-being.

This study looked at how loneliness is related to addictions in youth. The addictions focused on were alcohol use, internet use, and gambling. The researchers studied youths from three countries: The United States, Finland, and South Korea. They studied loneliness and addiction across different countries to see if there are cultural differences.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited participants from the three countries using Dynata (an online data collection provider). There were 1212 American, 1192 South Korean, and 1200 Finnish participants. All participants were 15–25 years old, and half were women.

Participants filled out a survey that asked demographic questions about their age and gender. It

What you need to know

Adolescents and young adults may be more vulnerable to addictive behaviours than older adults. Gambling, which can be very addictive, has become popular among youth. Additionally, excessive alcohol use and compulsive internet use may also be common among youth. Each of these addictions can be influenced by the same underlying causes, such as loneliness. This study looked at how loneliness is related to addictions in youths across three countries: the US, Finland, and South Korea. Participants (aged 15–25) from each country completed online surveys about loneliness and addictive behaviours.

There were differences across countries in the levels of loneliness, alcohol use, internet use, and gambling among youths. However, loneliness was linked to compulsive internet use in all three countries. In South Korea only, loneliness was also linked to excessive alcohol use and problem gambling. Thus, culture can affect how loneliness influences addictive behaviours in youths.

also asked whether they lived alone or with others. The survey included the 3-item Loneliness Scale. This asked participants how often they felt left out, isolated from others, or that they lacked companionship.

To measure their addictive behaviours, participants answered questions from three addiction questionnaires. First was the 3-item Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test-Consumption (AUDIT-C). The AUDIT-C measures hazardous drinking habits. Next was the South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS).

SOGS measures the frequency and intensity of gambling behaviour. Finally, participants filled out the Compulsive Internet Use Scale (CIUS). The CIUS measures internet use and its consequences to see if it is compulsive.

What the researchers found

The researchers found general differences across countries. For example, loneliness was higher in US youths than in Finnish and South Korean youths. Meanwhile, problem gambling and excessive alcohol use were highest in Finnish youths. Finally, compulsive internet use was highest in South Korean youths.

Loneliness was linked to compulsive internet use across all three countries. In South Korea, loneliness was also linked to excessive alcohol use and problem gambling. However, this was not the case in Finland or the US. In the US, living alone was linked to compulsive internet use and problem gambling. In South Korea, living alone was linked to excessive alcohol use.

Finally, across all three countries, young men were much more likely to experience problem gambling than young women. Older youths were more likely to engage in excessive alcohol use than younger youths. In Finland and South Korea only, younger youths were more likely to experience compulsive internet use.

How you can use this research

This research shows that there are cultural differences in how loneliness influences addictive behaviours in youths. However, in each country that was studied, loneliness was linked to at least one type of addictive behaviour. So, people working with youths should be aware of how loneliness can cause harm. Additionally, addiction treatments should try to find and address potential underlying causes for the addiction, such as loneliness.

About the researchers

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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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