

# research snapshot

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## Gamblers prefer slot machines with free-spins bonus features, but not necessarily because of the “freeness”

### What this research is about

Modern slot machines are much more complex than older slot machines. Machines today have structural features that may encourage people to continue gambling, such as light, sound and bonus features. One common structural feature is the free-spins bonus feature, which gives players several free spins without taking money from their balance. During this bonus mode, players may win more often than they would during regular play. However, after the free spins are over, the machine decreases the chance of winning to balance out the higher winning rate during free-spins mode. Research shows that gamblers prefer to play on slot machines that offer free-spins bonus features than machines without these features. The research team did three experiments to investigate whether university students would prefer to play on a slot machine with free-spins features over a machine without free-spins. They also explored whether the participants bet more money on slot machines with free-spins.

### What the researcher did

The research team recruited 32 first-year psychology students for each of the three experiments. In each experiment, the researchers asked participants to complete the South Oaks Gambling Screen. This questionnaire was used to identify problem gamblers and those at risk of problem gambling. Of the 96 participants across all three experiments, only one participant was at risk of problem gambling.

The team used a computer program to generate slot machine simulations. In all three experiments, participants were first asked to play 100 spins on each of two slot machines. One slot machine offered free-spins, and the other was used as a control and did not offer free

### What you need to know

Past research has shown that gamblers prefer playing on slot machines that have free-spins bonus features. These structural features of slot machines may promote problem gambling. In this study, the research team did three experiments to investigate how free-spins bonus features might affect preference and bet size. In Experiment 1, participants did not prefer playing on a simple free-spins machine with static image and text more than a control machine without free spins. Experiment 2 and 3 found that participants preferred playing on a free-spins machine with additional bonus features. These included animated image and text, music and higher rate of winning during free-spins mode. In particular, participants still preferred the slot machine with these bonus features even when the spins were no longer free in Experiment 3. The free-spins bonus features did have an effect on the amount of money participants bet.

spins. Participants were then allowed to switch between machines during the second phase. They played for 300 spins or for 45 minutes, whichever came first. Preference was determined by comparing the number of spins made on each machine during the second phase.

In Experiment 1, the researchers set up a simple free-spins slot machine. When participants won the free spins, the screen displayed a static image and text stating “Congratulations! You have won 5 free spins!” for 3 seconds. The return-to-player percentages (RTP) were held at 87% for both the free-spins and control machines. The RTP indicates how much players win back from their bet.

In Experiment 2, the research team included additional bonus features normally found in gambling environments. These included an animated image and text about winning free spins, music, and money won during free spins being added to the balance. There was also a higher rate of winning during free-spins mode. This was advertised to participants with a message saying “Win chance multiplied!”

In Experiment 3, the free-spins machine had all of the same bonus features as it did in Experiment 2. However, the free-spins were no longer free, and spins would take money from participants’ balance during the bonus mode.

### What the researcher found

In Experiment 1, participants did not show a preference for the slot machine that offered free-spins over the control machine. Return-to-player percentages (RTP), which were the percentages that participants won back from their bet, also did not affect preference.

In Experiment 2, almost all participants preferred to play on the slot machine that had free spins. Thus, additional features, such as higher win rate, music, and animated text, might have made the free-spins machine more appealing to participants. But RTP did not affect participant preference.

Experiment 3 revealed that participants preferred the slot machine that had the bonus features even though the free-spins were not free. RTP had an effect on preference. Participants preferred the bonus machine more if they also had a higher RTP on it. Overall, players preferred slot machines with free-spins bonus features, but not necessarily because the spins were free. The free-spins bonus features did not have an effect on bet size.

### How you can use this research

Researchers can use this study to further examine slot machine features that encourage players to keep gambling. Understanding the effects of these features on gambling behaviour can help prevent or reduce problem gambling. Researchers should also investigate under which conditions return-to-player percentages influence gambling behaviour.

### About the Researcher

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### Keywords

Gambling, slot machines, free spins, bonus features, EGMs

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