

research snapshot

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A cross-cultural study examining psychological distress in excessive gambling

What this research is about

People who gamble excessively can do so for many reasons. Poor mental well-being can make it more likely for someone to gamble excessively. Mental well-being can include feelings of loneliness and a poor sense of mastery. Sense of mastery refers to the degree of control one feels they have over their life. Research has found that loneliness is more common in people who gamble excessively. A poor sense of mastery can result in psychological distress as well as excessive gambling. This might be because a high sense of mastery helps people cope better with negative life events.

The aim of this study was to assess whether psychological distress is a mediator between loneliness, sense of mastery, and excessive gambling. This would mean that psychological distress is a mechanism by which loneliness and a poor sense of mastery lead to excessive gambling. The researchers also wanted to know whether any cross-cultural differences would be observed in this relationship.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited 4816 young people aged 15–25 from Finland, the United States, South Korea, and Spain. Of the participants, 1200 were from Finland, 1212 were from the US, 1192 were from South Korea, and 1212 were from Spain. Participants were recruited to be representative of the general population and not because they gambled excessively.

Participants were asked to answer several questionnaires online. The South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS) was used to assess gambling severity. The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) was used to measure psychological distress and well-being. The

What you need to know

There are many possible factors that contribute to excessive gambling. This study was interested in the effects of loneliness, sense of mastery, and psychological distress on excessive gambling. The researchers hypothesized that psychological distress could be a mechanism by which loneliness and a low sense of mastery contribute to excessive gambling. They also wanted to know if this differed across four countries: South Korea, Spain, Finland, and the US. They surveyed 4816 people aged 15–25 in these countries. The researchers found that psychological distress was partially responsible for the effects of loneliness and low sense of mastery on excessive gambling. Low sense of mastery also independently predicted excessive gambling in all four countries. On the other hand, loneliness predicted excessive gambling in Spain and South Korea only.

Short Loneliness Scale was used to assess loneliness, which was defined as a lack of companionship, feelings of isolation and being left out. The Pearlin Mastery Scale was used to assess sense of mastery.

What the researchers found

There were some cross-country differences observed in terms of prevalence of excessive gambling. About two-thirds of the South Korean participants had a SOGS score of 0, indicating no problems associated with excessive gambling. About half of the Finnish and Spanish participants reported a SOGS score of 0. Finland had the highest rate of participants reporting at least one gambling problem on the SOGS. Spain had the highest rate of participants reporting excessive

gambling (scores of 4 or higher). There were no differences between the four countries for more severe excessive gambling (scores of 13 or higher). It was more common for younger participants compared to older participants to report a SOGS score of 0 in Finland, the US, and South Korea.

The researchers examined the effects of low sense of mastery, loneliness, and psychological distress on excessive gambling in two ways. In the first analyses, they looked at how a one-unit increase affected excessive gambling scores on the SOGS. They found that for every one-unit increase in low sense of mastery, SOGS scores increased by 31% in the US, 39% in Spain, 56% in Finland, and 110% in South Korea. Being male was associated with an increase in SOGS scores as well: 69% for Spanish participants, 81% for American participants, 101% for Finnish participants, and 185% for South Korean participants. Loneliness was associated with excessive gambling in South Korea and Spain only.

In the second analyses, the researchers examined if psychological distress mediated the effects of sense of mastery and loneliness on excessive gambling. They found that the effects of low sense of mastery and loneliness on excessive gambling were partially explained by psychological distress. Across all four countries, young people with either low sense of mastery or feelings of loneliness experienced more psychological distress, which in turn contributed to an increase in excessive gambling.

How you can use this research

This research can be useful for gambling researchers. It provides valuable information on contributors of excessive gambling across four diverse countries. It also sheds further light on how psychological distress, loneliness, and low sense of master contribute to excessive gambling. Researchers can add to this research area by designing studies that feature a longitudinal design. Other age groups, such as older adults, could also be considered in future research.

About the researchers

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Citation

Vuorinen, I., Oksanen, A., Savolainen, I., Sirola, A., Kaakinen, M., Paek, H. J., & Zych, I. (2021). The mediating role of psychological distress in excessive gambling among young people: A four-country study. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18, Article 6973.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18136973>

Study funding

This study was funded by the Finnish Foundation for Alcohol Studies. One of the authors, Ilkka Vuorinen, was supported by a grant from the Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation.

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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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