

research snapshot

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Trait self-control and situational factors that influence adherence to gambling limits

What this research is about

Setting limits can help people to reduce their gambling. People can set limits on how much money or time they spend gambling. However, factors, such as daily stress and resisting other temptations (e.g., smoking), might make it harder for people to adhere to their gambling limits. Also, individual differences, such as trait self-control, may influence someone's ability to adhere to gambling limits. Trait self-control is a stable characteristic seen in situations where a person must use willpower to avoid acting on their urges. People with high trait self-control are often better at avoiding unwanted behaviours.

The researchers examined how situational demands, including coping with temptations and daily stress/tension, are linked to gambling limit violations. The researchers also examined the role of trait self-control in the relationship between situational demands and ability to adhere to gambling limits.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited a sample of Canadian adults. They did this by using online advertisements, local newspapers, and flyers posted around local universities and community centers. Participants were at least 18 years and gambled at least once a week. Participants also had to have set a goal to reduce gambling. A total of 103 people met these criteria and gambled at least once during the data collection.

Participants completed a baseline survey. The survey included the following measures: (1) demographics; (2) whether and how participants set gambling limits in the past 6 months; (3) trait self-control (Self-Control Scale - Brief); and (4) gambling behaviour in the last 4 weeks (Gambling Timeline Followback questionnaire).

What you need to know

Setting limits for gambling can help people reduce their gambling. Some situational factors (e.g., daily stress and resisting other temptations), might make it harder to adhere to gambling limits. This study examined how coping with temptations, daily stress/tension, and trait self-control are linked to gambling limit violations. A total of 103 Canadian adults completed a baseline survey and a daily diary for 21 days. The diary measured their gambling behaviour and daily stress/tension. The researchers found that participants were more likely to ignore their limits when they engaged in riskier gambling (i.e., playing slots) and had more negative emotional responses. Participants were also more likely to ignore their limits when temptations in other areas were high. Trait self-control influenced the strength of the relationship between daily stress/tension and limit violations. Participants with lower trait self-control were more likely to violate their limits if they experienced low stress. But, participants with higher trait self-control were more likely to ignore their limits on days where they had higher stress.

After completing this baseline survey, participants completed a web-based daily survey ("daily diary") each afternoon for 21 days. Participants answered questions about 1) their gambling urges (Gambling Urge Scale); (2) daily stressors; (3) temptations other than gambling (e.g., food temptations, smoking, drinking, using marijuana and other drugs, and other urges); (4) gambling engagement during the previous day; and (5) whether they set and followed limits for the previous day's gambling.

What the researchers found

Participants were between 19 and 67 years old. On average, participants were 35 years. Almost half identified as men (49%). Most were White (57%). Participants completed 1,764 daily diary entries. On average, participants completed 16 days of entries.

At baseline, participants gambled an average of 213 minutes per week in the past 30 days. Most participants set limits, including limiting time spent gambling (62%), choosing a specific type of gambling (60%), and only gambling on specific days (47%). Over 42% of participants said that they decided to stop gambling at some point within the past 6 months.

Participants gambled on 32% of the days that they completed the daily diaries. They set limits on about 63% of the days that they gambled. Most limit violations involved exceeding monetary limits (76%). On days when participants set but did not follow their limits, or when they did not set limits at all, participants (1) spent more time gambling; (2) lost more money; and (3) had greater gambling urges and temptations compared to days that they set and followed their limits. Also, on the days that limits were set and not followed, participants had lower positive feelings (less happy and excited) and greater negative feelings (e.g., greater sadness and anxiety).

A total of 87 participants set limits on at least one day that they gambled. Participants were more likely to not follow their limits on days when they experienced greater temptations in other domains (e.g., smoking). They were more likely to follow their limits when they had a stronger than normal urge to gamble. Gambling limit violations were not linked to stressors and tension experienced earlier in the day.

Participants were more likely to ignore their limits when they engaged in riskier gambling (i.e., playing slots) and had more negative emotional responses. Gambling at home was more frequent when participants set and maintained their limits. Gambling at a casino was more frequent when participants set but did not follow their limits.

People with higher self-control were less likely to violate their gambling limits than those with lower

self-control. Participants with lower trait self-control were more likely to violate their limits if they experienced low stress/tension. But, participants with higher trait self-control were more likely to ignore their limits on days where they had higher stress.

How you can use this research

Practitioners and researchers can use this research to develop strategies to best support limit setting.

About the researchers

Sunghwan Yi is affiliated with the Department of Marketing and Consumer Studies at the University of Guelph in Guelph, Ontario, Canada. **Abby Goldstein** and **Sasha A. Haefner** are affiliated with the Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development at the University of Toronto in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. **Hai Luo** is affiliated with the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. For more information about this study, please contact Sunghwan Yi at svi@uoguelph.ca.

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