

The WAGER, Vol. 30(4) - Immerse yourself: Untangling the motivations behind escapism in gambling and gaming

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Growing evidence suggests that gambling and gaming are closely intertwined. Many gambling products are becoming increasingly [gamified](#), while gambling and gambling-adjacent features and mechanics within modern [video games](#) have received increased attention. [Escapism](#), or using entertainment to escape from everyday life, is a common motivation for problematic [gambling](#) and [gaming](#). This week, The WAGER reviews a [study by Hannu Jouhki and colleagues](#) that assessed how basic psychological needs affect the relationship between escapism and problematic gambling and gaming.

What were the research questions?

Which psychological needs are associated with motivations to gamble or play video games to escape daily life? To what extent do psychological needs influence the relationship between escapism and experiencing problems with video games or gambling?

What did the researchers do?

The researchers analyzed [longitudinal survey data](#) from 1,095 Finnish adults. Participants were assessed for [problem gambling](#), [problem gaming](#), and escapism (e.g., how often they gamed or gambled to avoid real-life social encounters or situations). They also reported their levels of frustration in achieving the [psychological needs](#) of *autonomy* (control of their decisions), *competence* (ability to complete tasks) and *relatedness* (meaningful relationships with others) in their daily life. Accounting for demographics (e.g., gender, income) and personality (e.g., impulsivity, openness), the researchers used [random effects count modeling](#) to understand: (1) the effects of psychological needs on escapism, and (2) the effects of escapism and psychological needs on problem gambling and gaming, including [moderation](#) effects.

What did they find?

Participants who felt greater frustration with autonomy and competence (but not relatedness) were more likely to report increased levels of gambling or gaming to escape. Other predictors of escapism included younger age, impulsivity, and having a significant other experiencing gambling problems (see Figure). Those who indicated increased levels of escapism were more likely to also report increased levels of problematic gambling and/or gaming. The relationship between escapism and problem gambling was stronger for those reporting increased competence frustration, while the relationship between escapism and problem gaming was stronger for those with increased competence and autonomy frustration.

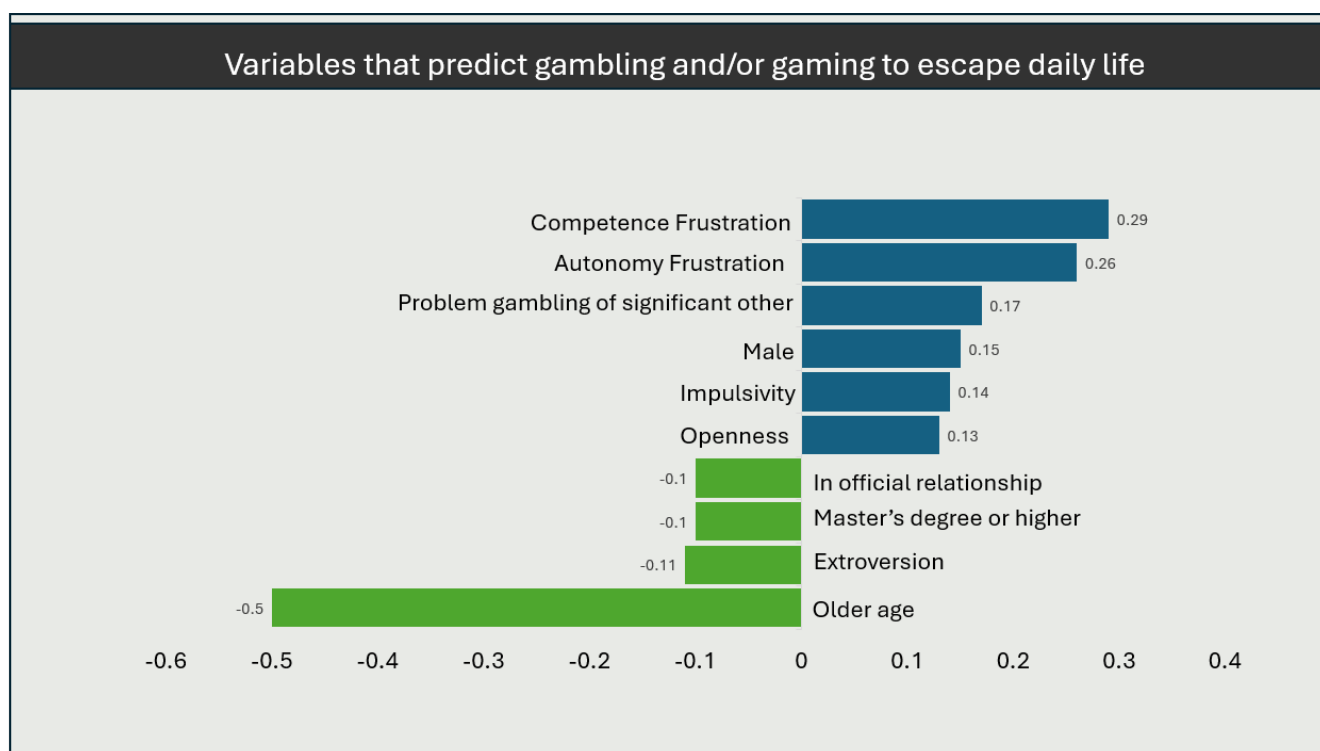


Figure. Variables that [significantly](#) predict gambling and/or gaming to escape daily life among Finnish adults (N = 1095). The numbers at the end of each bar are standardized [coefficients](#) from a random effects negative binomial regression model. Positive numbers (in blue) represent variables associated with increased gambling and/or gaming to escape (e.g., competence frustration) while negative numbers (in green) represent variables associated with decreased escapism (e.g., older age). The larger the number, the larger the effect the variable has on escapism.

Why do the findings matter?

People who have trouble living life on their own terms (autonomy frustration) or handling life's challenges (competence frustration) might be more likely to

gamble or play video games to escape. Those experiencing competence frustration, in particular, could be at greater risk of this escapism translating into problematic gambling and gaming. [Cognitive behavioral therapy](#) (CBT) may help individuals reduce competence frustrations by helping them understand and evaluate these feelings. Broader society changes, like [universal basic income](#), might also reduce competence frustrations by relieving the pressure to continually perform and be productive to just get by. By reducing competence frustration in diverse ways, we can perhaps begin to thrive in the real world and feel less need to escape from it.

Every study has limitations. What are the limitations in this study?

This study took place in a single country, Finland. It is unclear if we would [see the same findings](#) were this study to be replicated in other countries. The study also excluded youth, a sizable demographic in the video game community for whom [gamblified gaming](#) can often lead to problems.

For more information:

Do you think you or someone you know has a gambling problem? Visit the [National Council on Problem Gambling](#) for screening tools and resources. For additional resources, including gambling and self-help tools, visit our [Addiction Resources](#) page.

— Timothy Edson, Ph.D.

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