

Profiles of adolescent gamblers: Exploring the interplay of cognitive, personality, and emotional factors in problem gambling

Friday, September 12, 2025 5:40 PM (10 minutes)

Gambling literature lacks person-centered studies examining the combined effect of different psychological characteristics in capturing adolescents vulnerable to problem gambling. This study investigated how cognitive factors, individual differences, and emotional distress interact to shape distinct psychological profiles among adolescent gamblers. The purpose was to identify which configurations of variables jointly increase the risk for problem gambling and which may serve as protective factors. A Latent Profile Analysis was conducted on Italian adolescents involved in gambling behaviors (N=541; Mage=16.67, SDage=1.27; 39% female). The analysis included cognitive variables (probabilistic reasoning, financial literacy, and gambling-related distortions), individual differences (self-control, sensation seeking, boredom proneness, financial behavior, and materialism), and emotional distress. ANOVAs and chi-square tests were subsequently performed to examine profile differences in problem gambling (frequency, severity, and craving). Three profiles emerged. Profile 1 (34.8%) showed high self-control, and low levels of all other variables. Profile 2 (25.9%) was characterized by high cognitive distortions, low self-control, and elevated levels of sensation seeking, boredom proneness, emotional distress, and materialism. Profile 3 (39.3%) had the best probabilistic reasoning skills, financial literacy above the mean, and average scores on remaining variables. While gambling frequency did not differ between profiles, Profile 2 reported greater gambling severity and craving. The risk for problem gambling appears highest when cognitive biases, maladaptive traits, and emotional distress co-occur. Two distinct protective profiles also emerged: one characterized by high self-control, and the other by high probabilistic reasoning financial literacy. These insights can inform the design of more nuanced and tailored interventions.

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Session Classification: Reasoning and abstract cognition

Track Classification: Reasoning and abstract cognition