

Convenient consumption: a critical qualitative inquiry into the gambling practices of younger women in Australia

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Summary

There are a range of stereotypes and assumptions associated with women's gambling behaviours. While researchers have demonstrated that the practices associated with women's gambling are changing and becoming increasingly normalized, there is a limited understanding of how younger women ascribe meanings to these practices. This study explored the gambling practices of younger women. Forty-one women (20–40 years) participated in qualitative telephone interviews. Participants were asked open-ended questions about personal engagement in gambling, including experiences of gambling, gambling engagement, and experiences with different gambling products and environments. Data interpretation was guided by reflexive thematic analysis. Three themes were constructed from the data: (i) gambling infrastructures, including both products and the embedding of gambling in community environments, contributed to the convenient and regular consumption of gambling, with gambling easy to access and engage with; (ii) social networks and intergenerational gambling practices impacted the perceived social value and competencies related to gambling; and (iii) technology facilitated new gambling practices, routinizing gambling behaviours through automation and building perceived competencies with a range of gambling products. Gambling regulation and public health responses to gambling often focus on either individual behaviours or product characteristics. This study suggests that this focus is too narrow and excludes important influences on younger women's gambling practices, which include the infrastructure that supports the provision and consumption of gambling products. Public health research, policy and practice must consider the full range of determinants that may contribute to the initiation and continuation of gambling in younger women.

Lay summary

Younger women's engagement with gambling is changing. While there has been a significant focus on the gambling behaviours of men, very little research has investigated how women engage in different forms of gambling. We conducted in-depth telephone interviews with $n = 41$ women (20–40 years) in Australia about their personal engagement in gambling, their experiences of gambling, their motivations to gamble, and their engagement with different gambling products and environments. First, we found that the embedding of gambling in community environments (e.g. lotteries at shopping centres) meant that gambling was easy to access and engage with. This led to the convenient and regular consumption of some gambling products. Second, existing social practices among participants' social networks (including friends and family members) contributed to women feeling that gambling had social value, and that they had the skills to successfully participate in different forms of gambling. Finally, new technologies created routine gambling behaviours. For example, women automated the purchase of lottery tickets or used apps to help to build complex bets on activities such as sports. We conclude that public health and health promotion research, policy and practice must consider the unique factors that may influence the gambling behaviours of younger women.

Keywords: gambling, women, qualitative, social practices, public health

INTRODUCTION

Gambling has become an increasingly normalized activity for women (McCarthy et al., 2020). Women's gambling participation rates have increased over time and are now broadly comparable to those of men (Abbott et al., 2014; Rockloff et al., 2020). There are various reasons for these increases, including the feminization of gambling environments, the perception of gambling venues as safe spaces for women who may be vulnerable or lonely (McCarthy et al., 2021b, 2022a), the glamour associated with culturally embedded gambling events (such as horse racing) (McCarthy et al., 2020), and the marketing or branding of gambling products that target female audience segments (Thomas et al., 2020). Women's receptivity to, and engagement with, different forms of gambling is also changing (McCarthy et al., 2018). In part, this may be because these forms of gambling are deliberately aligned with and marketed alongside recreational activities such as sports, that have become increasingly valued by younger women (Thomas et al., 2020). Additional social factors which may also motivate younger women to engage in newer forms of gambling include peer influences and the gambling behaviours of partners who are already engaged with newer gambling technologies (McCarthy et al., 2020). Researchers have highlighted the range of sociocultural, environmental and commercial determinants that may influence and normalize gambling for women and contribute to gambling-related harm, and have critiqued the dominant individualized paradigms (most often from the psychological sciences) that have dominated gambling research about women (see McCarthy et al., 2019; Palmer du Preez et al., 2021). Research that has used broader sociocultural and public health approaches has demonstrated that a range of factors may contribute to the social construction of gambling for different subgroups of women in their everyday lives (Cox et al., 2021). This includes differences in gambling preferences, product engagement and conceptualizations of gambling harm between different subgroups of women, with older women more likely to gamble alone on one gambling product, and younger women engaging in multiple forms of gambling as part of their social activities with friends (see McCarthy et al., 2018). As Palmer du Preez et al. (2021, p. 333) argue, there is a need for research that examines both the particular and collective issues that women face in relation to gambling, including the range of factors that may form the sociocultural backdrop to their gambling practices and experiences of gambling harm. While such research has started to be produced in relation to the gambling practices of older women (McCarthy et al., 2021b; 2022a), there has been much less research examining younger women's gambling practices, including how gambling may be embedded in their everyday lives.

Practice theories have been influential in public health investigations of the consumption of unhealthy commodity products (Gordon and Reith, 2019). There has been a particular focus in empirical research on three 'building blocks' of practices (Shove et al., 2012): *materials* (objects or infrastructure required for the practice—in this case, the gambling venue or technology that enables participation in gambling); *meanings* (the symbolic significance of participation in the practice, e.g. the social norms associated with gambling and the social value associated with engaging in the gambling activities); and *competence* (how individuals develop understanding and knowledge about the practice, e.g. the perceived skills required to participate in different forms of gambling). The social practice lens proposed by Shove et al. (2012) focuses on individuals as 'carriers' of the practice (young women engaging in the practice of gambling), rather than individualized 'agents' for behaviour change. However, the utility of practice theories in examining gambling extends far beyond these three building blocks. For example, the application of practice theory to alcohol has supported increasingly nuanced and contextualized understandings of young people's consumption practices, and the role of 'performance' in risk-taking behaviours (including the gender differences in performances associated with intoxicated drinking) (Hennell et al., 2020). Warde (2005) argues that the consumption practices of different products relate to how the practice is organized within and between groups, including the conventions that govern that practice (p. 137). Rather than being the outcome of personal choice, Warde (2005) goes on to argue that the trajectories of practices are 'conditional upon the institutional arrangements characteristic of time, space and social context' (p. 139).

Practice theories help to shift the focus from the characteristics of individuals, to broader factors that influence engagement with the product, including the processes by which these practices become habitual and routinized (Shove et al., 2012). This is useful given that gambling research relating to women has overwhelmingly focused on the individual determinants of their (problem) gambling behaviours, and has largely ignored the sociocultural, environmental, commercial and political determinants of women's gambling (McCarthy et al., 2021a; Palmer Du Preez et al., 2019, 2021). Frost et al. (2020) observe that practice theories are useful for studies which seek to understand how to develop interventions with different population subgroups. They do so by helping to explore the interconnected elements between different types of practices (e.g. the embedding of gambling in other everyday activities), and how practices may be 'reproduced, maintained, stabilised, challenged and surpassed' (Frost et al., 2020, p. 3).

While the practices associated with women's gambling may be changing, there is limited understanding of how younger women ascribe meanings to these practices in the context of their own lives (McCarthy *et al.*, 2020, 2021b). The aim of this paper was to contribute to conceptual understandings of the practices associated with younger women's gambling. Data interpretation was guided by three research questions:

1. How does gambling infrastructure (including both products and environments) influence how younger women access and engage in gambling?
2. How do younger women make meaning of gambling in relation to sociocultural values?
3. How do young women acquire the range of perceived competencies required to participate in different forms of gambling?

We then used the analytical narrative from participants' responses to discuss how practices are constructed in the everyday lives of research participants and are useful in understanding the range of factors that may influence young women's gambling. The study then discusses areas for potential preventive action and policy reform.

METHOD

Approach

The data presented in this paper were part of a broader study of the normalization of gambling for younger women in Australia. To date, one other paper has been published from this data, regarding women's perceptions of the strategies that may be used to counter the normalization of gambling and gambling-related harm (McCarthy *et al.*, 2022b). The authors took a critical qualitative approach to inquiry which acknowledges the role of power, inequality, and injustice in health and social issues (Charmaz, 2017; Jacobson and Mustafa, 2019). This is particularly important in public health approaches to gambling, which van Schalkwyk *et al.* (2021, p. e614) describe as being based on 'collective action to advance the public good by promoting health, equity, and social justice'. While traditional qualitative methodologies aim to interpret the world, critical qualitative inquiry aims to change the world (Denzin, 2017). For the present study, this meant putting the voices of women at the centre of inquiry in order to reveal opportunities for social change, activism and policy reform (Denzin, 2017).

Sampling and recruitment

Women aged between 18 (the legal age for gambling in Australia) and 40 years (used as an arbitrary cut-off

between younger and middle-age/older women), who self-reported that they had gambled at least once in the previous 12 months, were eligible to participate in the study. A range of convenience, purposive and snowball techniques were used to invite participation in the study. These included distributing recruitment notices on social media sites and to participants from previous studies who were interested in receiving information about future projects, and asking women who participated in the study to share information with other women in their social networks. Purposive sampling strategies (Patton, 1990), mostly through higher education social media groups, were also utilized to recruit younger women to the study. All interested participants received a Plain Language Statement about the study and were able to ask questions about participation before providing consent. Participants were provided with a \$50 grocery voucher as a token of appreciation for their time. Ethical approval was received by the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee [2019-534].

Data collection

Semi-structured telephone interviews, lasting approximately 1 hour, were conducted between July and December 2020. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission, were professionally transcribed and then reviewed for accuracy. The interview schedule collected basic socio-demographic information (age, postcode, employment status, occupation, relationship status, highest level of schooling and current living situation), as well as structured questions about their gambling participation. This included the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) which is a nine-item scale that provides an indication of gambling risk according to one of four groups: non-problem gambling (score 0), low-risk gambling (1–2), moderate-risk gambling (3–7) or problem gambling (8–27) (Ferris and Wynne, 2001). Participants were then asked open-ended questions about personal engagement in gambling, including experiences of gambling, motivations to gamble, and engagement with different gambling products and environments. These questions provided a basis for the co-creation of data through a discussion about gambling practices and the meanings and experiences women had with these practices. Data collection was discontinued when it was determined that the depth of data collected across the interviews provided enough 'information power' to elucidate the broad overall aims of the study and to answer the research questions (Malterud *et al.*, 2016).

Data interpretation

Data interpretation was guided by a constructionist paradigm, exploring how women assigned meaning

to different gambling experiences based on the socio-cultural and historical contexts of their own lives (Charmaz, 2006). Braun and Clarke's six steps to reflective thematic analysis were utilized as an inductive, iterative process of data interpretation (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2022). Following this process, the data were coded to the research questions, with the researchers considering a range of analytic inputs (including socio-demographic and gambling characteristics, and engagement and experiences with gambling) when developing the analytic meaning and subsequent narrative for this paper. To ensure reflexivity, the authors regularly considered and discussed the key themes that related to the data, including how sub-themes and themes could be explained by theoretical concepts and the broader research literature, as well as allowing new conceptualizations to be developed from the data. This process was also used in the development of the model that was constructed from the data, with regular written and in-person feedback loops enabling the research team to provide comments and reflections. The quotes presented in this paper are used to enhance the trustworthiness of the data, illustrate key categories and ensure that participants' voices were directly represented in the presentation of the results (Williams and Morrow, 2009). We have provided data about age and PGSI score after each quote to provide some basic descriptive information about the socio-demographic characteristics and gambling risk behaviours of the participant.

RESULTS

Socio-demographic and gambling characteristics

A total of $n = 41$ women, aged 20–40 years old (mean = 30.3 years, SD = 5.98), participated in the study. Most participants lived in Victoria ($n = 24$, 58.5%) or New South Wales ($n = 16$, 39%), and were typically in a relationship ($n = 25$, 61%). Participants identified with a range of ethnic backgrounds, including Anglo-Australian, Irish, East Asian, Indian, Indigenous, Sri Lankan, Thai, Middle Eastern, Serbian and Maltese. Most participants ($n = 29$, 70.7%) reported some level of gambling problem on the PGSI, and were classified in terms of low-risk ($n = 16$), moderate-risk ($n = 8$) or problem gambling ($n = 5$), with a range of scores from 0 to 15. They had gambled on a diverse range of products in the previous 12 months, including poker machines, lotteries, online wagering, horse wagering, instant lotteries, keno, casino table games, land-based sports betting and bingo.

Three themes were constructed from the data.

The role of gambling infrastructure in the convenient consumption of gambling products

The gambling practices of many participants were influenced by the accessibility and availability of gambling materials in community and online settings. When considering the consumption of gambling products, this included the accessibility of products and the infrastructures (including environments and technologies) that enabled engagement with these products. These two elements of gambling infrastructure facilitated what we have termed the 'convenient consumption' of gambling and influenced the consumption trajectories of gambling practices. Participants provided many examples of elements of infrastructure that contributed to the embedding of gambling in community settings. The most pervasive example of this was the embedding of lottery outlets in retail settings and community spaces, which contributed to a perception that you could buy lottery products 'anywhere', and that because of this, lotteries were normalized as part of everyday life. For example, participants described how lotteries were conveniently placed in retail outlets within shopping centres, newsagents (which contain a range of services including news and post office services), or were adjacent to local supermarkets:

There's a Tattersalls outlet in every shopping centre or newsagent. –Participant 9, 35 years old, PGSI 0

This widespread provision of lottery infrastructure within everyday spaces and social contexts contributed to participants engaging in incidental gambling practices. It also facilitated the reproduction, maintenance and stabilization of lottery product consumption—for example, how the convenient location of lottery outlets routinized the purchase of lottery products, so that the consumption of lotteries became a normalized part of other essential social practices:

...getting a Tatts ticket, it's almost like part of the grocery shopping for some families. –Participant 6, 35 years old, PGSI 0

A number of participants commented that lottery products could also be purchased online. For example, one participant noted that the availability of online lotteries had effectively removed the stigma associated with engaging in lotteries for those who 'may be too embarrassed to buy a Tattsлото ticket at the shops'. Other participants emphasized the ease with which lottery products could be accessed through online platforms, and the contribution this made to more frequent engagement with these products. As discussed later in the paper, elements of this theme intersect with

additional findings relating to the role of technology in also facilitating the purchase of these products.

The convenient consumption of gambling products also included the embedding of gambling products within entertainment and leisure spaces. Importantly, many of these environments were situated within local communities. The co-location of gambling activities with non-gambling ‘family friendly’ activities contributed to a perception that gambling was ‘part of daily life’. For example, while describing her engagement with poker machines at her ‘local pokie venue’, one participant described how she engaged in these because ‘they were there and they were local’. Other participants spoke about gambling being embedded within broader entertainment complexes, in which young adults could drink, gamble and go to nightclubs with their friends:

Turning 18 and legally being allowed at the (casino) was huge... everyone wanted to go so we would go over there, predominantly go out there to go to the club but we would often start earlier and go into the casino because there’s a gaming section and just use the machines. But like I said I never, I would mainly just sit and have a drink but a lot of my friends would use the machines. – Participant 28, 38 years old, PGSI 0

Community clubs and hotels provided affordable meals and a range of activities that appealed to all members of the family, irrespective of age. Rather than the regular and routinized patterns of behaviour that were associated with lotteries, engagement in the gambling products at these venues was more incidental. Consumption practices were influenced by simply being in these environments; for example, some participants stated that they engaged in gambling at the venue because they were already there doing something else, like going for a meal, and then participating in gambling:

We go to the local pubs or something like that. You have dinner or have (a) drink with friends, you meet up with friends and then sort of have a drink and then you’re like “Oh, I might just pop over there and just like put a few notes in the pokies”. –Participant 18, 38 years old, PGSI 0

The role of social networks in the perceived social value and competencies with gambling

The second theme was constructed from the data related to the influence of social networks on the social value and perceived competencies related to gambling. For many participants, social networks were integral

to the meanings that they constructed about gambling. Gambling was an activity that connected participants with a range of different social groups and ages—including peers, partners and older family members. Gambling was clearly framed as a social activity with participants often repeatedly stressing that gambling was not an activity that they would engage in by themselves and was highly influenced by their networks: ‘... if it was up to me, I wouldn’t be that interested” and “I don’t want to go by myself’. Some participants framed their gambling in terms of reluctant participation—whereby they were not overly interested in gambling per se, but participated because it was an integral part of their social world:

(My ex-partner’s) family were very big into gambling and they’d go to Crown Casino and spend a lot of money. [...] So I’d be at Crown a lot with them. It was more through boredom than anything that I’d just sit on the pokies, I don’t enjoy them, but I’d sit there because I was there. [...] With the mates as well, it was a big culture to go and bet on horses and whatever. –Participant 31, 35 years old, PGSI 1

Others emphasized that they only started to gamble because their friendship group or partners were engaged in gambling:

A contributor to that was because of the friends that I have that want to (gamble). And then I joined. It was awesome to go together. [...] I tend to go with this group of people because we have a good time. –Participant 23, 25 years old, PGSI 3

Participants constructed different meanings according to their relationships with different members of their social networks. One of the clearest examples of the social value of gambling is related to gambling as an activity that connected generations within the family, including children with their parents and grandparents. Participants explained that gambling was inclusive across the generations, because it was an activity that older members of the family enjoyed and had a level of competency with. Participants also had a degree of familiarity with these practices as they were aware of, or had participated in, their parents’ or grandparents’ gambling from a young age. There was subsequently a range of routinized gambling practices with older members of the family unit that built strong emotional attachments to gambling. For example, the following participant was sentimental in describing the role of gambling in her relationship with her grandfather. After being introduced to poker machine gambling by her grandfather, they would gamble together

on a weekly basis. The participant continued to gamble as a way of feeling connected to her grandfather after he died. This was the start of her addiction to gambling:

It was my 18th birthday. Prior to being 18, I'd been given scratchies and stuff like that as birthday presents, but I never really thought too much of it. When I turned 18 on the day of my 18th birthday my grandpa took me into the pokies for the first time and it started from there. [...] When I was at uni, for example, I would take him out to lunch and we would spend one afternoon a week together gambling. We were very close and then when he died about 15 years ago I used that as a way of feeling connected to him I guess while he was gone. And my addiction sort of went up and up and up from there. – Participant 3, 39 years old, PGSI 15

In relation to perceived social value, some participants described that gambling facilitated feelings of belonging and inclusion in social groups. Others stated that they gambled with friends because gambling was 'casual and normalized' within these groups. The meaning and value of gambling with friends are related to the social connection and fun experiences that it created. Gambling in social groups often went hand in hand with other practices, such as the consumption of alcohol:

It was a social thing. Again, going to the pub or the RSL with your friends. Generally, I was with people who would be like, "Well, let's go and," as they would say, "Have a slap". They were like, "Come on, we're having a drink. Let's just go, and why not? We'll put some money in the pokie machine". So it became a social thing where we'd all go and get machines next to each other. –Participant 30, 34 years old, PGSI 0

Gambling with friends also created pathways to forms of gambling that participants would not otherwise engage in. For example, the following participant emphasized that while she would never gamble alone on table games, there was a fun element to the social nature of engaging in this form of gambling with her friends:

It would be a mixture, but mostly the tables. [...] The reason I would go is I would never actually go by myself. I would always go in a social aspect. So I have a group of friends that I would go with, so I would never actually go by myself. So that's why the table is obviously a bit more fun, we do go in groups and we play together. –Participant 23, 25 years old, PGSI 3

Gambling in social networks not only had social value for participants, but also played a central role in building knowledge about different forms of gambling. For some participants, competencies with gambling were built through a range of historical and family traditions, with participants socialized into gambling practices. For example, some participants described childhood experiences of watching family members gamble on a range of products, including horse racing, lotteries, instant lotteries and poker machines. Gambling with mothers and grandmothers appeared to have the most influence on direct experiences with gambling for participants when they were children. For example, the following participant described actively engaging with a range of gambling products with her grandmother:

My Nan used to bet on the horses. I would have been around 12 and I used to actually be the one who would call up and place her bets for her. We would go out for dinner and things like that, there would be a poker machine in the food area almost and I would sometimes sit on her lap and she would put money in the machine and we would press the button together. I probably would have been younger than 12, maybe even six, seven. – Participant 28, 38 years old, PGSI 0

Others described how the gambling practices of the female members of their family contributed to reproducing these practices as adults. For example, the following participant spoke about how she had gone to bingo with her mother and grandmother as a child, and continued to play as an adult:

Like I grew up and my mum and my nanna always loved to go to bingo. So – and as a kid I used to go with them. So yeah, I just – I just decided to go to bingo because my mum was like why don't you play bingo? So that's what I did. –Participant 1, 28 years old, PGSI 2

For other participants, competencies with gambling came later in life, through a range of new relationships. For example, one participant described that although she had had experience with participating in workplace horse race sweeps, she was introduced to going to the races and betting as a social event with friends:

It's a social thing. I was introduced to horseracing by a friend of mine, but before then I still used to place a bet on (Melbourne) Cup Day as part of (workplace) sweepstake(s) and those kinds of things. So the concept itself of betting on the horses

was introduced to me sort of socially and then actually going to the races was introduced by a friend a little bit later on. –Participant 40, 22 years old, PGSI 2

However, it is important to note that for a few participants, gambling was a solitary activity, and others varied gambling with friends and gambling on their own. Solitary gambling practices were often extensions of previous social gambling practices. For example, one participant had started betting on sports with her partner. When the relationship ended, she continued to bet on sports on her own, noting that her new partner did not gamble. Others had different motivations for betting on their own, with the following participant describing that her gambling practices had shifted from being a social activity to being one that she participated in by herself:

It's no longer a special occasion, it's more frequent and it's more to try and make money instead of just part of an experience, like a day with people. It's gone from a social thing to I do it by myself. –Participant 32, 27 years old, PGSI 8

The impact of technology on facilitating new gambling practices, routinizing behaviours and building competencies

Technology played a significant role in disrupting existing and traditional gambling practices, particularly related to the performative aspects of gambling, and in building new competencies with a range of gambling products. While social networks and feelings of familiarity with gambling environments created a perception of competency within groups, technology had a very clear role in perceived personal competencies—including the perception that products were easy to engage with. Participants described how technological advancements made it easier for individuals to engage in gambling. This included online platforms, which meant that money could be easily deposited to purchase gambling products. The role of technology was most commonly discussed in creating an ability to routinize gambling activities. Technology meant that participants' engagement with some forms of gambling could be maintained simply by logging into a website occasionally to top up their gambling account with more money:

I only play the lottery, technically every day... I don't even have the app on my phone... I log into the website once a month maybe, and just see if I need to chuck money in. –Participant 33, 35 years old, PGSI 0

These automated technologies enabled participants to routinize their gambling practices, and also created more regular engagement through automated transactions. Technology also changed gambling practices, surpassing and disrupting the traditional 'face-to-face' consumption of these products. This included the performative element of filling in gambling 'slips' or checking whether there had been wins or losses associated with engagement with these products. Technology allowed participants to fully automate their consumption of lottery products through online subscription options, almost completely removing their active participation in expenditure and consumption. These automated mechanisms facilitated ongoing, regular engagement with lotteries, without individuals having to actively engage in the purchase or consumption of the product. For example, one participant had been gifted a ticket on her 18th birthday, and then created a subscription for the same pre-selected numbers which had been automatically purchased every day of the week for 6 years since. She described this as something that she could 'set and forget'.

There was also a perception that some forms of gambling were easier to engage with because they were 'automatic'. For example, some participants preferred to engage with poker machines rather than other 'face-to-face' forms of gambling such as table games, because the automated nature of these machines created a perception that they were simple and easy to use as compared to other forms of gambling:

I mostly do the machines because they're automatic, and then my partner would do all the other sort of type of gambling that's available at Crown. The only reason why I don't do it, is I don't know how to play. [...] I don't even know what (table games) are called. –Participant 15, 37 years old, PGSI 1

Online gambling technology also made it easier for participants to engage in, and build complex gambling options (e.g. placing bets across multiple sporting events). However, although these new technologies appeared to make it easier to build customized gambling products, they also facilitated the risks associated with the types of gambling markets participants engaged in:

It comes up in the (app) bet slip automatically. It increases your odds massively. But it's riskier. –Participant 32, 27 years old, PGSI 8

Technology disrupted traditional ways of engaging with the product, enabling participants to consume more of the product at once, and created a perception that this in turn increased their chances of winning.

For example, the following participant described how Programmable Electronic Ticket machines changed her consumption behaviours associated with bingo, and enabled her to purchase more bingo tickets:

You can still play like bingo with like paper and stuff. But what they do now is ... there is a max out limit. So you can only play a certain amount of books. So on most nights, the most you can spend is \$150. But what you do is it gives you a machine and it plays it for yourself but you just have to call out bingo so you have to watch it rather than paper. So for instance you buy 24 books, they give you another 24 for free. So you're playing 48 books, opposed to someone who is playing six paper books which is the most they can play if that makes sense.
-Participant 1, 28 years old, PGSI 2

However, not all participants preferred using new automated technologies in their gambling practices. For many, the active engagement in the products and the perceived performances and competencies associated with the product were a core aspect of their gambling practices. The following participant reported that she spent around \$100 every fortnight on 'scratchies', and spent around 45 minutes in each gambling episode, scratching off each of the tickets that she had purchased at home while her child was sleeping:

I think it's just seeking out something more exciting in the day. Just a break away from reality really... I think because they last a while, especially the big ones so it gives you more time, more time for your money. -Participant 14, 36 years old, PGSI 3

DISCUSSION

This study provides new information about how young women access and engage in gambling, the meanings that they ascribe to gambling and how competencies with different forms of gambling are constructed. The following discussion explores participants' accounts of their gambling experiences in light of the aims of the study and practice theory. Given that this study uses a critical qualitative approach to inquiry, we provide particular focus in this discussion about opportunities for policy reform. Gambling involves engaging with a potentially harmful product that places the person and others at risk of diverse forms of harm (harm capturing more than the presence of disease). Based on public health emphases on prevention and the precautionary principle, gambling practices enable researchers to identify points of potential preventive action.

The current study shows that for younger women, highly available gambling products are experienced

as embedded in broader social infrastructure (such as shopping centres or entertainment complexes), as well as in family-friendly venues (as previously proposed by Bestman et al., 2016). This physical integration has an important influence on women's gambling practices. The present study highlights that a broad range of gambling products are embedded in social infrastructure, from lotteries to poker machines, thus making them a part of the everyday lives of some participants. Gambling regulation and public health responses to gambling often focus on either individual behaviours or product characteristics, and there has been far less focus on the environments or spaces in which products are made available. This study provides evidence to support commentary from other researchers (e.g. Cox et al., 2021; McCarthy et al., 2018; Palmer du Preez et al., 2021) that this focus is too narrow and excludes important influences on younger women's gambling practices. Importantly, this study shows the need to consider the role of infrastructure (both in the community and online via rapidly changing technologies) that supports and even encourages the provision and consumption of these gambling products, and how these may contribute to gambling practices across different population subgroups of women.

The embedding of gambling products in community environments contributed to the convenient consumption of these products. Perceived gambling competencies were an outcome of interactions with the product itself, as well as feelings of familiarity and comfort with the environment, and the perceived social value of the environment in which the product was offered. The findings highlight that gambling products have become pervasive and are embedded in contexts far beyond the limits of dedicated gambling spaces such as casinos. They also demonstrate that by embedding gambling products in local environments, including local retail and hospitality venues, as well as online environments, traditional barriers and sources of stigma for women to participate are removed. This is compounded by the strategic alignment of gambling with popular cultural activities such as sports and alcohol consumption. Adams and Rossen (2012, p. 1054) argue that public policy should 'move beyond the addicted consumer and to develop overarching frameworks for addressing challenges in the wider gambling environment'. The findings from this study suggest that policy-makers should consider the potential impact of the co-location of gambling (including gambling marketing) and non-gambling products within venues, as well as the appropriateness of venue locations when considering the normalizing impact they may have in embedding gambling activities in everyday life.

Gambling was described as an activity that was characterized by a range of shared competencies and

meanings across different social groups and contexts. Importantly, the social value of gambling was described in relation to peer networks, as well as in terms of maintaining intergenerational connections (e.g. with older relatives). These intergenerational patterns of gambling and apparent influences of gambling with older relatives (including grandmothers and mothers) on the future gambling practices of younger women were particularly striking. When considered in the context of maintaining connections between family members, grandparents and parents may be unaware of the potential negative impact of normalizing gambling for younger female family members. This lack of recognition may also be due to the lack of public awareness of the risks associated with gambling for younger women, relative to those for men. However, the present study suggests clear consumption trajectories for some younger women based on early family engagement in gambling, which was often facilitated by older female family members. Such trajectories may be compounded in situations where older women see gambling as having a positive impact on their own lives—for example, a way to relieve boredom and loneliness—but fail to consider the potential negative impact it may have on younger female family members.

New technologies were influential on the gambling practices of younger women. While there has been a predominant focus on the influences of such technologies on the gambling behaviour of young men (Deans *et al.*, 2016; McGee, 2020), our results show that these technologies may also have significant impacts on the gambling practices of younger women. Most notable was the way in which new technologies created ‘frictionless’ (such as set and forget) forms of gambling, in which women were able to engage in more regular or higher intensity forms of gambling. Many of these frictionless forms of technology that were described by younger women may also be tools that they utilize in other aspects of their lives, including for purposes of financial transactions, purchasing products or services online, or topping up public transport accounts. The technological features that they are encountering in gambling, which facilitate, automate and routinize gambling also contribute to a perception of competence that influences their gambling practices. Young women, and the wider population, should be recognized as vulnerable to the technological advances of gambling products. The prevailing focus of the existing literature on young men and their use of mobile gambling technologies may reflect stereotypes about who is ‘at risk’ of the harms from gambling technologies, including the newer types of technologies or functions that may create newer dimensions of risk for other groups (McGee, 2020; Nyemcsok *et al.*, 2022). While there has been a focus on marketing in the gambling

literature, public health researchers and policy-makers also need to monitor the range of industry strategies that may facilitate and encourage women to engage in gambling, and that may embed gambling in their everyday lives. This will be important in ensuring that younger women (and others) are protected from any risks that may ensue from such strategies (McCarthy *et al.*, 2022a; van Schalkwyk *et al.*, 2021).

New technologies also disrupted younger women’s existing gambling practices in a number of ways. First, these new technologies appeared to be removing barriers for younger women to engage in both diverse and higher intensity forms of gambling. Technology made gambling participation easy and automated, including for gambling forms such as sport betting which have until now been largely framed as a male-dominated gambling activity (McCarthy *et al.*, 2020). Current public education campaigns relating to new technologies have almost exclusively focused on risks associated with mobile phone gambling and are targeted at men. However, this study demonstrated that technology was central to other forms of gambling that have been considered ‘soft’ or less harmful, such as lotteries and bingo, and also enabled women to engage easily in gambling activities that have been more strongly linked to young men’s gambling behaviour, such as sports betting. Second, these new technologies have also challenged assumptions in the practice literature that performance is central to consumption practices (Hennell *et al.*, 2020). Technology may remove some performative practices associated with gambling for young women, thus challenging gambling industry and government framing of gambling as a largely social form of entertainment. This study provides new information about how technologies may also convert some forms of gambling from social to solitary practices, which creates new risks that need to be recognized and mitigated.

Finally, practice theories, which move beyond basic applications of the three building blocks of meanings, materials and competencies (Shove *et al.*, 2012) to consider how practices are constructed in everyday life, are useful in understanding the range of factors that may influence young women’s gambling. As Ally *et al.* (2016) argue, using practice approaches enables public health researchers to overcome traditional models of prevention that mostly focus on individual-level behaviour change towards an examination of how a range of micro- and macro-level factors may contribute to consumption behaviours. This is particularly important in understanding how the rapid development of new gambling technologies may influence perceived competencies and meanings associated with gambling for women, particularly in creating routinized and frictionless gambling practices.

This is particularly important in gambling, in which government policies have been largely focused on individual responsibility paradigms (Marko *et al.*, 2022). Practice theories provide an important framework for considering how and why gambling practices may vary across different population subgroups of women, and whether health and social inequalities may be linked to women's gambling (Meier *et al.*, 2018). There is still limited qualitative research in the field of gambling, and even less that explores why there may be differences in practices across population subgroups. This is problematic because dominant responses to gambling have been based on reductionist and positivist paradigms that do not account for the nuances and complexities in people's gambling behaviours (Marko *et al.*, 2022; Palmer du Preez *et al.*, 2021). Qualitative research has the potential to provide new and more detailed insights into how younger women's gambling practices are reproduced across generations and within peer groups (Casey, 2020; Morrison and Wilson, 2015), how practices are interconnected, and how new strategies developed by the gambling industry may influence and facilitate new gambling practices (McCarthy *et al.*, 2020). Public health approaches should be responsive to the experiences and needs of women, understanding how experiences may change over time and vary between different population subgroups.

Limitations

Most participants were located in metropolitan areas, with only a small number in regional or rural locations. Despite multiple attempts to recruit 18–19 year olds, we were not successful in engaging these young women in the study. Around three-quarters of the sample were experiencing some level of risk. Those who are more regular gamblers (and more likely to experience gambling risk) are perhaps more inclined to volunteer for such studies, even if they are personally unaware of the risks associated with their gambling.

CONCLUSION

There are opportunities for public health researchers, policy-makers and practitioners to consider the unique factors that may influence the gambling practices of younger women. As has been noted by other researchers, this includes focusing on the range of social, environmental and structural determinants that may contribute to the gambling practices of young women, including how technology may contribute to gambling becoming increasingly embedded, routinized and ritualized in their everyday lives. This study demonstrates that younger women's gambling practices are characterized by a range of factors that may influence their

gambling behaviours. Critical qualitative approaches to inquiry will enable researchers to specifically consider the existing and emerging factors that may influence younger women's gambling, the challenges that are created by new technologies, and the appropriate public health policies that may be needed to prevent harm.

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