

# 'It's a tradition to go down to the pokies on your 18th birthday' – the normalisation of gambling for young women in Australia

Simone McCarthy,<sup>1</sup> Samantha Thomas,<sup>1,2</sup> Hannah Pitt,<sup>1</sup> Mike Daube,<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Cassidy<sup>4</sup>

Gambling is a global public health issue, causing significant harms for individuals, families and communities.<sup>1,2</sup> While gambling is traditionally considered to be a male-dominated activity, gambling participation rates for women have increased, with more women engaging in gambling than ever before.<sup>3</sup> Australian and international prevalence studies show that women have similar gambling participation rates to men.<sup>4,6</sup> Women account for 30.6% of Australia's annual gambling expenditure, with women spending similar amounts on lotteries, instant win lottery tickets ('scratchies') and electronic gambling machines ('pokies') as men.<sup>7</sup> However, this spend is overrepresented by those at risk of gambling harm.<sup>7,8</sup> The Victorian Population Gambling and Health Study 2018–2019 reported that of females who gamble, one in ten (10.2%) were at risk of gambling harm.<sup>4</sup> However, prevalence studies are unable to determine or explain the full impact of gambling on the lives of women, including how different forms of gambling may be normalised for different groups of women.

## Abstract

**Objective:** To understand the range of factors that may influence the normalisation of gambling for young women in Victoria, Australia.

**Methods:** In-depth qualitative telephone interviews with 45 women aged 18–34 years.

**Results:** Young women were exposed to gambling environments and some were gambling from an early age. Family members were the key facilitators of these activities. Once reaching the legal age of gambling, peers and boyfriends were instrumental in young women's gambling practices. Women attributed the normalisation of gambling to excessive marketing, feminised gambling environments, and the widespread availability of gambling in the community.

**Conclusions:** This study found several factors that influenced and encouraged young women to gamble, such as the feminisation of gambling products and environments, and determined that gambling is becoming a socio-culturally accepted activity for young women.

**Implications for public health:** Researchers and policymakers should be increasingly focused on how different forms of gambling may be normalised for young women. Attention should be given to how young women may become a target market for the gambling industry, and how to implement strategies aimed at preventing any future potential harm posed by these industries and their marketing tactics and products.

**Key words:** gambling, women, marketing, public health, commercial determinants, qualitative

There is emerging evidence that women's gambling patterns are changing; in particular, that younger women are shifting and diversifying their product choices towards skill-based forms of gambling.<sup>3,9</sup> While pokies, alongside lotteries and scratchies, continue

to be the most frequently used gambling product for women, McCarthy and colleagues found that young women who gamble are likely to gamble across several products, including sports and horse wagering.<sup>9</sup>

1. Institute for Health Transformation, School of Health and Social Development, Faculty of Health, Deakin University, Victoria

2. Addictions Research Group, University of South Wales, United Kingdom

3. Faculty of Health Sciences, Curtin University, Western Australia

4. Department of Anthropology, Goldsmiths, University of London, United Kingdom

**Correspondence to:** Ms Simone McCarthy, Institute for Health Transformation, School of Health and Social Development, Faculty of Health, Deakin University, Victoria; e-mail: snmccart@deakin.edu.au

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Research in this area has mostly focused on women's individual motivations for gambling. For example, women are motivated to attend gambling environments to be socially connected and to mitigate feelings of social isolation and loneliness.<sup>10,11</sup> However, there may be a range of socio-cultural, environmental and commercial determinants that influence women's gambling attitudes, product preferences, and perceptions of risks associated with gambling.<sup>3,12</sup> There is some evidence that gambling may be becoming more socially acceptable for women.<sup>13</sup> While engaging with gambling products can be a risk-taking behaviour, women may not perceive it as such. Risk is influenced by social dynamics, relationships and situations, and therefore social context and social norms can greatly influence decision-making processes.<sup>14</sup> As such, risk-taking behaviours that are embedded in social activities may be considered desirable, acceptable or normal.<sup>15</sup>

Little is known about how gambling may be normalised for women, including whether there are clear social norms or codes of conduct that guide or influence women's gambling behaviours in social contexts.<sup>16,17</sup> Thomas and colleagues define the normalisation of gambling as: "The interplay of socio-cultural, environmental, commercial and political processes which influence how different gambling activities and products are made available and accessible, encourage recent and regular use, and become an accepted part of everyday life for individuals, their families, and communities".<sup>18(p54)</sup>

Researchers argue that 'coercive consumption' industries such as tobacco, alcohol and gambling, follow a similar playbook of tactics to encourage consumption of their products.<sup>19-21</sup> As such, understanding the range of socio-cultural factors that shape women's gambling attitudes and behaviours, and how these factors interact with commercial determinants (such as marketing), is critical to developing measures, policies and interventions specifically aimed at preventing the harms posed by these industries.<sup>22</sup>

Recognising that different population sub-groups of women may have significant differences in their experiences with gambling,<sup>9</sup> this paper aims to understand the range of factors that may contribute to the normalisation of gambling for young women.

## Methods

This study was part of a broader qualitative study that explored the gambling attitudes and consumption behaviours of 18–34-year-old young women in Australia.<sup>23</sup> The broader study aimed to explore the factors that shape the gambling attitudes, consumption intentions and behaviours in young women living in Victoria, Australia, with a specific focus on how socio-cultural, environmental, and commercial determinants contributed to influencing these attitudes and behaviours. The analysis presented in this paper specifically examines the factors that may contribute to the normalisation of gambling for young women.

The study was guided by a Constructionist Grounded Theory (CGT) approach.<sup>24</sup> This approach assumes the existence of multiple realities that are embedded in larger networks, situations and relationships. It focused on the individual subjective experiences of participants to uncover the complexities of young women's gambling and generate theory from this data. Ethics approval was received from the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee [2017-271].

## Sampling and recruitment

To be eligible for the study, participants were required to be living in Australia and to have previously gambled at least once in the past 12 months. Potential participants were recruited from a range of sources, including posters placed around university campuses and on community noticeboards, commentary in national media, and through a community health organisation in regional Victoria. The study aimed initially to recruit 30 women to participate in the study. However, due to significant diversity in the experiences of participants, sampling continued until data saturation was reached (whereby no new themes or concepts emerged from the data). This resulted in a sample size of 45 young women. All participants received a \$50 grocery voucher for taking part in the study.

## Data collection

Telephone interviews (ranging from 38 to 75 minutes) were conducted between December 2017 and November 2018. The interview schedule included a range of open-ended questions that examined gambling product use and attendance at gambling

environments, gambling behaviour and motivations for gambling, early experiences of gambling, the normalisation and cultural acceptance of gambling in Australia, gambling promotions, and harm prevention strategies. Demographic information collected included postcode, which was used to identify Socioeconomic Indexes For Areas score for relative advantage and disadvantage (SEIFA).<sup>25</sup> The nine-item Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) was used to measure the risk of problem gambling.<sup>26</sup>

## Data interpretation

Interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription company with the data managed using QSR NVivo (QSR International version 12). Basic descriptive statistics were used to analyse socio-demographic and gambling data collected. The nine-item PGSI was used to measure for risk of problem gambling where PGSI scores were calculated and grouped into one of four categories: non-problem gambling (PGSI scores equal to 0), low-risk gambling (PGSI scores between 1 and 2), moderate risk gambling (PGSI scores between 3 and 7), or problem gambling (PGSI scores between 8 and 27).<sup>26</sup>

Interviews were read and re-read, with interpretation occurring in blocks of five interviews as they were conducted. An interpretive view of analysis was used to make sense of participants' experiences and meanings.<sup>24</sup> Focused coding techniques were used to sort, synthesise and compare the data and develop initial codes that were grounded in the data.<sup>24</sup> Initial thoughts and ideas directed further data collection, and the interview schedule was amended to further examine these concepts. The research team met regularly to discuss the data and themes that emerged, how this related to the existing literature base and what new information was emerging from the data. Initial codes were condensed into larger conceptual categories, which later formed the key themes of the study.

## Results

### Participant demographic characteristics

Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 34 years (mean 24.3 years, SD 4.1), with the majority aged 25 years or younger ( $n=31$ , 68.9%). Approximately two-thirds were studying at university ( $n=29$ , 64.5%), one-fifth worked

full time (n=9, 20.0%), and most were living in areas of high socioeconomic advantage (SEIFA score 8-10, n=27, 60.0%). Just under half scored as 'low risk' (n=22, 48.9%) and more than one-fifth at 'moderate risk' of gambling harm (n=12, 26.7%). Two were problem gamblers (4.4%) and nine scored as non-problem gamblers (20.0%).

Participants gambled on a range of products. The majority had gambled on three or more different gambling activities in the previous 12 months (n=29, 64.4%). After lotteries and instant lotteries (n=33, 73.3%), two-thirds reported betting on horse racing in the previous 12 months (n=29, 64.5%), followed by gambling on pokies (n= 26, 57.8%), betting on sports (n= 26, 57.8%), and gambling at the casino (n=22, 48.9%). Lotteries and scratchies were the most frequently used gambling products. Approximately one-fifth of women (n=10, 22.3%) bet on sport at least once a month. Betting regularly and across multiple products was associated with risk of gambling harm. For example, 90.0% (n=9) of women who bet on sports at least once a month and 93.1% (n=27) of women who gambled on three or more products were at risk of experiencing some level of gambling harm.

### Early experiences with gambling: family rituals, traditions and behaviours

Many participants were exposed to gambling from a young age. This included attending community gambling venues for family dinners and special occasions. Some described family members "disappearing to go play the pokies" after dinners at venues, while others discussed participating in informal gambling with their family before they were of legal gambling age. Many of these gambling activities were part of family traditions and rituals associated with betting on the Melbourne Cup horse race:

*We always had a sweep. I'm the youngest so I used to always organise it. Everyone would have to put \$5 or \$10 in and then they would pick out their horses. That's 100% a family tradition that I've always done, and I've always been kind of in charge of it.* – 23-year-old, low-risk gambler

For a few participants, gambling was an activity they would participate in with their fathers. For example, a 23-year-old moderate-risk gambler described attending community gambling venues as a child and her father placing bets on horse races that they would

watch together. Participants described how these early experiences shaped their knowledge of, and confidence with, gambling. For example, some described how they felt that casino card games were "easy and straightforward" because they had learnt to play these games with family members. Others described continuing the family rituals that they had learnt from their parents:

*Well, the pokies, I guess I've grown up with it. My parents frequently use them when we're at the club. Or if we go out for dinner at the pub, they will use them. I guess I've always just done that. I just [gamble on pokies] from them, I guess.* – 25-year-old, low-risk gambler

There were also rituals associated with gambling when participants turned 18 years old (the legal age for gambling). Participants described that their parents specifically gave them money for gambling, took them to gambling venues, or held their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday party in a gambling venue. One woman commented:

*I actually put \$20 in because my mum gave it to me. But then I ended up winning \$50, which is cool ... It's a tradition to go down to the pokies on your 18th birthday.* – 19-year-old, low-risk gambler

### Influence of peer attitudes and behaviours

Gambling was described as one way in which peer groups could be socially engaged with each other. Participants discussed how gambling at the casino, using pokies, and betting on sports and horses could all be done with other people as a shared experience. A few commented that while they engaged with a range of gambling products, they enjoyed and preferred gambling on products with or around other people:

*I probably have more fun at a casino because there is other people, rather than betting on sport.* – 20-year-old, low-risk gambler

However, gambling practices in social groups were highly gendered. For some, this involved attending events with their female friends where everyone would gamble. These women described downloading a betting app to bet on horse racing because their "friends were using it". Similar social rituals and dynamics occurred in mixed-gendered peer groups, where gambling environments provided activities to accommodate everyone's interests:

*The boys will be drinking somewhere and the girls will go and play the pokies together and then we'll meet back up.* – 25-year-old, low-risk gambler

The exception to gendered gambling practices related to gambling with partners. Some women were introduced to gambling by a male partner, with gambling becoming an activity they could do as a couple to spend time together:

*On my 18th birthday, my boyfriend and I would go and play the pokies. He taught me how to play the pokies.* – 25-year-old, moderate-risk gambler

Some participants stated that they felt pressured to conform to the social norms related to gambling in their social groups. In some environments, it was expected that everyone in the social group would gamble. Women felt the most pressure to gamble when their partner was gambling. Some felt that they would be excluded or feel different from their peer group if they did not gamble:

*No, it's not peer pressure, but social conformity. If everyone in that room was doing it ... I wasn't going to be the odd one out sort of thing.* – 20-year-old, moderate-risk gambler

### Feminised gambling environments

Participants described regularly attending casinos, horse racing events and community gambling venues. They observed that these environments were 'female-friendly' as they were associated either with glamour or with dressing up and having a night out. Women commented that the glamour and "occasion" of attending these venues and events meant that gambling was not seen as an unusual activity for women:

*If you're going to the races and you look sort of the part ... [betting] doesn't look out of sorts.* – 27-year-old, non-problem gambler

One factor that contributed to women's perceptions that gambling was a normal and socially accepted activity was the embedding of gambling in other social activities. For example, women often attended gambling venues to participate in other activities, including dining experiences, visiting nightclubs and drinking alcohol. Many who attended these venues also ended up gambling as a "harmless" way to pass the time or prolong the night:

*There was one occasion where I was at the casino and we were with some of my friends and we were waiting for other people to come. So, we just [gambled] to pass time.* – 20-year-old, low-risk gambler

Participants also described attending gambling venues because they were accessible and available at most times of

the day. Some commented that this meant that they gambled when they otherwise would not have gambled. For example, some stated that they went to the casino because it was open late and enabled peer groups to continue a night out when all other venues had closed.

**Changing social attitudes towards women's engagement in gambling**

Participants described a changing culture associated with gambling in Australia. They perceived that gambling was becoming more normalised for young women, even before they reached the legal age:

*More women are gambling now but also more young people are gambling now. Twenty years back I wouldn't have imagined gambling to be a big thing among teenagers. But I'm pretty sure when I was a teenager, which is like five or six years ago, I was gambling already here and there.* – 23-year-old, moderate-risk gambler

Some participants felt that gambling was typically portrayed as an entertainment opportunity with little consideration of the risk involved. Women attributed this to the excessive marketing and the widespread availability of gambling in the community. Some specifically stated that they had

signed up to betting accounts after seeing promotions for online gambling companies:

*That's how I even started the sports betting because it was on TV. Bonus bet, sign up today. Okay, that sounds good. So that's what got me in.* – 25-year-old, moderate-risk gambler

Along with incentives to gamble, participants believed that the availability and accessibility of gambling contributed to its normalisation. Some lived close to many community gambling venues that housed TABs and pokies. For others, online gambling apps provided endless opportunities to gamble at any time of the day, and removed the stigma associated with gambling:

*You'll sit around and all watch the footy, but you'll all be gambling because it's just more accessible. It's easy. Also, I think it's easier for females to go and seek it out on their own too, you know, if they have the app available. It's not like they're going up to someone at the pub and betting. They just do it from their phone.* – 21-year-old, moderate-risk gambler

**Discussion**

The aim of this study was to understand the range of factors that may influence or

encourage young women to gamble and to explore whether gambling is becoming a socio-culturally accepted activity for young women. Figure 1 illustrates the range of themes to emerge from the data collected in this study. The first row shows the indicators of normalisation for young women that emerged from this study. It shows that four key factors may contribute to the normalisation of gambling for young women: early exposure to gambling and gambling environments; the socio-cultural acceptance of gambling within social networks; the feminisation of gambling products and environments; and the changing societal attitudes towards women's engagement in gambling. The second row illustrates the subthemes that relate to each of the four key factors.

This study highlights gambling-specific factors that may occur at an early age and may contribute to young women: i) developing positive attitudes towards gambling; and ii) engaging in either formal or informal gambling before the legal age. First was the role of parental practices associated with gambling that created a perception for young women that gambling was a positive and valued social activity. Many women in this study, and particularly

Figure 1: The normalisation of gambling for young women in Australia.



those with some level of risk associated with their gambling behaviour, had regularly attended gambling environments and/or participated in either formal or informal gambling before the legal age of 18, with both mothers and fathers the key facilitators of these activities. This raises questions about how parents perceive the risks of exposing girls to gambling or gambling environments. While there are clear recommendations in other areas of public health, such as alcohol, that parents should avoid supplying or exposing children to harmful products,<sup>27</sup> there are few similar strategies that seek to warn parents of the risks associated with early exposure to gambling. This is despite research that has demonstrated that parental approval of gambling and parents' gambling behaviours may play a role in positively shaping young people's gambling attitudes and behaviours.<sup>28,29</sup> Further research aimed at understanding how girls are exposed to gambling before the legal age of 18, and parents' roles in this, will be important in developing prevention strategies that specifically seek to prevent the normalisation of gambling for girls and young women.<sup>22</sup>

This study also suggests that early exposure to gambling environments may play a role in normalising gambling for young women. This normalisation process may occur even if women are not directly exposed to, or engaging in, gambling. For example, many young women in this study, and particularly those who were classified as at risk of experiencing harm, described regularly attending gambling venues for family-based activities. While they were not directly exposed to gambling, young women were aware that gambling was part of the rituals and traditions that were associated with visiting these venues. This raises questions about whether parenting practices associated with taking girls to venues that contain gambling products may be building risky pathways to these products. Bestman and colleagues have previously argued that exposure to these environments at an early age leads young people to associate gambling with positive, fun and family-friendly environments, which influence children's intentions to engage in gambling when they were older.<sup>30</sup> The findings from this current study provide further evidence of the role that early exposure to gambling practices and environments may have in normalising gambling for young people, including girls, and reinforces calls for government policy

and regulation that aims to remove gambling from everyday family environments. We would argue that behaviours developed before gambling was heavily promoted and easily available may now be problematic for young women. For example, engaging young women in 'sweeps' as children might have been innocuous when horse racing was not as heavily promoted, and betting on such events was not so readily accessible via online platforms. While including children in gambling activities may have been part of family traditions and the culture of gambling in Australia in the past, the new environmental and commercial determinants associated with gambling, including the availability and the promotion of gambling products, have changed the gambling landscape.

Once reaching the legal age of gambling, both parents and peer groups became instrumental in endorsing gambling as a socially accepted behaviour for young women. For example, young women reported that parents or partners introduced them to formal gambling as part of the rituals associated with their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. However, it was young women's peers that had the most impact on young women's gambling behaviour. Peer groups have been identified as a key risk factor for women's consumption of unhealthy products,<sup>31,32</sup> with social norms associated with these products central to consumption practices.<sup>33-35</sup> Research in gambling has demonstrated that for young men, male peer groups play a central role in encouraging gambling as a regular social activity, and also in creating social pressure to gamble.<sup>36</sup> For young women, the influence of peer groups operated in different ways. For example, with their female friends, gambling was mostly an activity that was incidental to other leisure activities, such as having a night out with friends or attending horse racing events primarily for the fashion and glamour of the event. However, in these circumstances, young women stated that they felt pressured to gamble to fit in with their groups of female friends. Alternatively, with their boyfriends, gambling was a deliberate activity that was central to their relationship as a couple. This suggests that for young women, engagement in gambling may relate to a complex mix of social pressures and influences. While the current study demonstrated that male members of social networks play a clear role in the initiation and continuation of gambling, further research is needed to

understand whether male social networks may pressure young women to participate in gambling when they otherwise would not have.

Finally, this study also shows that there is an increasing feminisation of gambling products, environments and marketing that facilitates young women's acceptance of and engagement in gambling. This should not be a surprise for gambling researchers and policymakers, given the historical template from tobacco that showed how the tobacco industry aligned their products with the values and social practices of women to appeal to a new market.<sup>37</sup> Young women in this study often found gambling environments (such as casinos and horse racing events) appealing because of the glamour associated with the venue. Thus, the co-location of gambling with glamorous activities and events may be a significant risk factor in young women's gambling behaviours. Evidence shows that most gambling advertising targets men.<sup>38,39</sup> However, there is new evidence emerging that the gambling industry is featuring women in their advertisements on TV and on social media.<sup>40,41</sup> Marketing is an important tool for increasing the demand for products.<sup>21,42</sup> According to the Total Consumption Model, as gambling participation increases, rates of gambling harm will also increase.<sup>43</sup> Disrupting normalisation pathways and implementing comprehensive curbs on marketing are both important public health strategies to reduce demand for products and to prevent harm.

### Limitations

This study was limited by its lack of diversity in the sample. Most women were highly educated, employed and lived in areas of high socioeconomic advantage. The study did not collect information on ethnicity, income level or household composition. While this may limit the generalisability of results, the large qualitative sample size captured a diverse range of experiences with gambling. Future research should explore how experiences may vary based on background and socioeconomic status.

### Conclusion

This study demonstrates that there is a range of processes that may contribute to the normalisation of gambling in young women. While research and public health

interventions have focused on young men, this study signals that policymakers should be increasingly focused on young women as a group that is potentially at risk of engaging in regular gambling and experiencing gambling harm. This will include recognising that gambling normalisation for young women may start with early experiences and family and peer behaviours but ultimately is also influenced by structural and commercial factors, such as the availability of gambling in community settings, the nature and promotion of gambling products, and the alignment of gambling with leisure activities and environments that are valued by women.

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