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EXAMINING THE MODERATING ROLE OF SELF-ESTEEM IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GAMBLING BEHAVIOR AND DEPRESSION AMONG UNDERGRADUATES

Okechukwu Christian **Onuoha**[1, 2]*, Ifenna Fortunatus **Nnorom**[1, 3], Chiamaka Vivian **Okeke**[1, 4], Chukwudi Daniel **Nwosu** [2,5]

[1]Department of Psychology, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka

[2]Centre for Counseling and Career Development, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka

[3]Synapse Services: Centre for Psychological Medicine, Awka

[4]Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abuja, Nigeria

[5]Department of Psychology, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Corresponding author: Okechukwu Christian **Onuoha;** Department of Psychology, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka. Email: okechukwuonuoha564@yahoo.com; https://orcid.org/0009-0001-7227-6247

Abstracts

This study investigated the moderating role of self-esteem in the relationship between gambling behavior and depression among undergraduate students. A total of 281 undergraduates from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, participated in the research. The participants were aged between 19 and 27 years, with a mean age of 22.6 years and a standard deviation of 2.08. Data were collected using the 10-item Self-Esteem Scale, the Depression subscale of the DASS, and the 9-item gambling disorder criteria from the DSM-V. Moderated regression analysis was employed for data evaluation. The findings supported the first hypothesis, revealing that gambling behavior significantly predicted depression among undergraduates ($\beta = .33$, $t = 3.049$, $p < .05$). Additionally, a significant negative relationship was observed between gambling behavior and self-esteem ($\beta = -.21$, $t = -2.564$, $p < .05$), confirming the second hypothesis and indicating that self-esteem negatively predicted gambling behavior. Furthermore, the third hypothesis was also confirmed, showing that self-esteem moderated the relationship between gambling behavior and depression ($\beta = -.14$, $t = -1.750$, $p < .05$). These results underscore the critical role of self-esteem in mitigating the mental health risks associated with gambling behavior. Based on these findings, it is recommended that university psychologists and therapists develop targeted educational programs to inform undergraduates about the adverse effects of gambling on their mental well-being and to promote interventions that bolster self-esteem as a protective factor against gambling-related depression.

Keywords: Gambling behavior, Depression, Self-Esteem, Undergraduates

Author biographies

Onuoha O. C; Department of Psychology, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka & [2]Centre for Counseling and Career Development, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka

Onuoha Okechukwu Christian is a Clinical Psychologist working with Centre for Counseling and Career Development of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. He is a licensed Clinical Psychologist, Substance addiction Counselor, and a researcher; with interest in addictive behaviors, clinical trials, and promotion of psychological wellbeing. He has publish numerous studies, both in clinical, and forensic psychology in reputable journals, both in International and local out-let, and has written a book chapter. Onuoha O. C. is passionate in reducing maladaptive behaviors, and improving mental wellbeing through psychotherapy, and publication of research findings. Email: okechukwuonuoha564@yahoo.com

Nnorom I. F; Department of Psychology, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka & Synapse Services: Centre for Psychological Medicine, Awka

Nnorom Ifenna Fortunatus is a clinical psychologist at Synapse Services: Center for Psychological Medicine, Awka, Anambra State. He obtained his M.Sc in Clinical Psychology from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. His interests and strengths cuts across management of mental illnesses, and addictive behaviours; and has published articles in a reputable journal; Email: ifennaf@gmail.com

Okeke C. V; Department of Psychology, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka & Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abuja, Nigeria

Okeke Chiamaka Vivian is an M.Sc student in the department of Psychology, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. She majored in Forensic Psychology, with research interest in finding associations between psychological factors, maladaptation, criminality, and psychological wellbeing. Email: kammamartins@gmail.com

Nwosu C. D; Centre for Counseling and Career Development, Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka & Department of Psychology, University of Nigeria, Nsukka

Nwosu Chukwudi Daniel is a counseling psychologist and research assistant at the Center for Counseling and Career Development of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anamba state, Nigeria. He has deep commitment to supporting mental well-being and guiding individuals in their personal and professional growth, specializes in helping students and clients navigate emotional and career-related challenges through evidence-based counseling practices. He is dedicated to fostering a supportive environment that promotes mental health awareness and career development. Email: daniel.nwosu.182518@unn.edu.ng

Introduction

Gambling is a learned behavior with a high propensity for addiction, often progressing to pathological levels. It typically evolves from non-gambling to occasional gambling and can graduate into problematic gambling, characterized by adverse consequences. The progression may begin with free trials, transition to regular gambling, and culminate in excessive gambling, mirroring other addictive behaviors (Obi-Nwosu et al., 2024). Adverse outcomes of gambling among undergraduates include poor academic performance, financial loss often involving tuition or academic funds and sleep deprivation caused by extended gambling sessions. These consequences exacerbate stress, potentially leading to depressive symptoms and high dropout rates (Obi-Nwosu et al., 2024). Gambling-related stressors may contribute to severe depression, suicidal ideation, and a decline in overall mental health (Tobih et al., 2024).

Self-esteem, defined as an individual's overall evaluation of self-worth, plays a crucial role in regulating emotional responses to life events. It influences one’s ability to cope with adversities, such as gambling-induced stress and depression. Self-esteem might act as a moderating factor, potentially mitigating the detrimental relationship between gambling behavior and depression

(Onuoha et al., 2024). This study explores the interplay between gambling behavior, depression, and self-esteem among undergraduates, with a particular focus on the moderating role of self-esteem. Gambling, as defined by the American Psychological Association (2024), involves staking valuables on uncertain outcomes, with the anticipation of gaining greater rewards. While gambling can offer temporary pleasure, it often leads to compulsive behavior marked by persistent wagering despite adverse consequences.

In recent years, legalized gambling has expanded globally, including in Nigeria. A sport betting, in particular, has gained immense popularity, with platforms like Nairabet, Bet9ja, and Betking dominating the market. Promotional activities, such as free prediction games promising substantial rewards, lure individuals into gambling, often leading to addiction and significant financial losses. Undergraduates, drawn by the allure of quick financial gains, frequently engage in gambling. However, losses—especially when academic funds are staked—can trigger depressive symptoms. Such emotional distress compounds the academic and social stress inherent in university life, potentially leading to dropout, truancy, and even suicidal ideation (Obi-Nwosu et al., 2024). Depression, a common psychological disorder, significantly contributes to the global disease burden. Characterized by negative emotions, feelings of worthlessness, and hopelessness, depression disrupts mood, behavior, and cognitive functioning (Onuoha et al., 2021). Among undergraduates, depression associated with gambling often stems from financial losses and the inability to meet academic expectations. Such experiences exacerbate existing stressors, leading to debilitating mental health challenges. According to the DSM-5 (2013), symptoms of depression include persistent sadness, loss of interest in activities, significant weight changes, sleep disturbances, psychomotor agitation, and recurrent suicidal thoughts. These symptoms align closely with the emotional outcomes reported by undergraduates engaging in gambling behavior.

Self-esteem is a key psychological construct that influences an individual's emotional resilience and response to stressors. As defined by Rosenberg (1965), self-esteem reflects one's positive evaluation of self-worth. High self-esteem enables individuals to cope effectively with challenges, maintain emotional stability, and navigate interpersonal relationships. Conversely, low self-esteem is associated with feelings of inadequacy, emotional instability, and susceptibility to depression (Ha, 2006). Self-esteem is not static; it develops over time and is influenced by social interactions and personal experiences. High self-esteem equips individuals with the confidence to face adversities and the ability to mitigate the impact of negative life events. In the context of gambling, self-esteem may serve as a protective factor, buffering against the psychological toll of financial losses and addiction-related stress.

Statement of the Problem

Gambling among undergraduates has emerged as a significant concern, with students reported to experience gambling disorders at rates three times higher than the general population (Gose, 2000). The rise of online gambling platforms, accessible through smartphones, has further fueled this trend. Students frequently engage in gambling from the comfort of their hostels, often unaware of the potential consequences. The financial and emotional toll of gambling on undergraduates is profound. Losses incurred from gambling funds intended for academic purposes can lead to depressive symptoms, complicating the students' ability to meet academic and personal expectations. Despite extensive research on gambling behavior and depression, the moderating role of self-esteem in this relationship remains underexplored, particularly in the Nigerian context. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the extent to which self-esteem influences the relationship between gambling behavior and depression among undergraduates. By identifying

this moderating role, the research aims to provide insights that could inform interventions and strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of gambling on mental health and academic outcomes.

Theoretical Framework/ Empirical Review

This study is grounded in Ellis's Rational Emotive Behavior Theory (1957), which posits that emotional distress is not directly caused by adverse events but by the individual's beliefs about those events. In the context of gambling, depressive symptoms stem not solely from financial losses but from the gambler's perception of self-worth and the value of the lost assets. High self-esteem can act as a buffer, mitigating the negative emotions associated with gambling losses and fostering resilience against depressive symptoms.

Numerous studies have established a link between gambling behavior and depression. For instance, Momper et al. (2010) and Steliana (2012) found that gambling behavior significantly predicts depressive symptoms. Additionally, research by Petry et al. (2005) and Volberg et al. (1997) revealed that problematic gamblers often exhibit low self-esteem compared to non-gamblers. The moderating role of self-esteem has also been explored in related contexts. For example, Onuoha et al. (2024) demonstrated that self-esteem buffers the impact of occupational stress on depressive symptoms. These findings highlight the potential of self-esteem as a mitigating factor in the gambling-depression nexus, warranting further investigation in the undergraduate population.

Hypotheses

To guide the study, the following hypotheses were proposed:

1. Gambling behavior will positively and significantly predict depression among undergraduates.
2. Gambling behavior will negatively and significantly predict self-esteem among undergraduates.
3. Self-esteem will moderate the relationship between gambling behavior and depression among undergraduates.

This research aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on gambling behavior, depression, and self-esteem, providing a basis for interventions targeted at improving the mental health and academic success of undergraduates. By addressing the identified gaps, the study seeks to foster a deeper understanding of the psychological factors influencing gambling behavior and its consequences.

Methods

Study Design

This study employed a survey research design with a correlational approach to explore the moderating role of self-esteem on the relationship between gambling behavior and depression among undergraduates. The statistical tool used for data analysis was moderated regression, conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21.

Participants

The participants for this study were 281 undergraduates drawn from Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria. Their ages ranged from 19 to 27 years, with a mean age of 22.60 and a standard deviation of 2.08. Among the participants, 81 were from the Economics Department, 70 from the

Guidance and Counselling Department, 70 from the Accounting Department, and 60 from the Civil Engineering Department. Gender distribution included 172 females and 109 males. Regarding religious affiliation, 264 participants identified as Christians, 4 as Muslims, while 13 did not disclose their religious affiliation.

Instruments

Three instruments were used for data collection:

1. **Self-Esteem Scale**: A 10-item scale developed by Rosenberg (1965) and adapted for Nigerian populations by Sabboh and Bultseva (2023).
2. **Depression Sub-scale of DASS-21**: Developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995) and previously used in Nigerian undergraduate studies such as Tibi et al. (2022) and Obi-Nwosu et al. (2024).
3. **Gambling Disorder Criteria**: A 9-item scale as outlined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2013).

Inclusion Criteria

Participants had to meet the following criteria:

1. Be an undergraduate of Nnamdi Azikiwe University.
2. Be a student of one of the selected departments.
3. Be willing to participate and sign an informed consent form.

Procedure

The researchers randomly selected four faculties Social Sciences, Education, Management Sciences, and Engineering out of nine faculties on the Awka campus of Nnamdi Azikiwe University. Using simple random sampling, an introduction letter was obtained from the Head of the Department (H.O.D) of Psychology to formally introduce the researchers to the H.O.Ds of the

selected departments: Economics, Guidance and Counselling, Accounting, and Civil Engineering. Convenient sampling was used to select these departments, and purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants based on the inclusion criteria. After obtaining consent, questionnaires were administered to participants in their lecture halls during regular school days. Out of 300 distributed questionnaires, 292 were returned, with 281 properly completed and coded for analysis using SPSS.

Statistics

This study utilized a correlational research design to investigate relationships between gambling behavior, self-esteem, and depression. Moderated regression analysis was conducted using SPSS version 21 to test the hypotheses and explore the moderating role of self-esteem.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the following ethical guidelines:

1. Participants had to be 18 years or older and sign a consent form.
2. No participant was exposed to harmful stimuli during the study.
3. Deceptive practices were not employed to influence responses.
4. Anonymity was ensured by excluding personal information from the study.

Result

Table 1: Moderated regression table for the role of self-esteem on gambling behavior, and depression

Variable	R^2	Df1(df2)	F	β	SE	T	LLCI	ULCI
Model 1	.560	3(277)	3.06					

Depression	.33	.108	3.049	.1171	.5437
Self-esteem	-.21	.083	-2.564	-.0498	-.3790
SelfE*GamB	-.14	.020	-1.750	-.0022	-.0381

Note: significant at .05 level of significance, SelfE=Self-esteem, and GamB=gambling behavior

The results presented in **Table 1** indicated that gambling behavior significantly predicts depression, as evidenced by ($\beta = .33$, $t = 3.049$, $p < .05$). Therefore, the first hypothesis was supported. This indicates that an increase in gambling behavior by one unit is associated with an increase in depression by .33 units. Furthermore, **Table 1** showed a negative and significant relationship between gambling behavior and self-esteem, with ($\beta = -.21$, $t = -2.564$, $p < .05$). This suggests that for every additional unit of gambling behavior, self-esteem decreases by .21 units. The second hypothesis was also supported based on this finding. Lastly, the analysis revealed a negative but significant interaction effect between self-esteem and gambling behavior, as indicated by ($\beta = -.14$, $t = -1.750$, $p < .05$). This finding supports the third hypothesis, showing that self-esteem serves as a moderator in the relationship between gambling behavior and depression.

Discussion

This study explored the moderating role of self-esteem on the relationship between gambling behavior and depression among undergraduates. The results from three hypotheses tested using moderated regression statistics were all confirmed. The first hypothesis indicated a significant relationship between gambling behavior and depression. This finding suggests that undergraduates who engage in gambling are at a heightened risk of developing depressive symptoms. As gambling

behavior increases, the likelihood of experiencing depressive symptoms and potential clinical depression also rises. This is consistent with previous research by Hronis et al. (2021), which highlighted an association between gambling and depression. However, it is important to note that depression could sometimes precede problematic gambling, creating a complex interplay where each condition may influence the other【Hronis et al., 2021】. The second hypothesis revealed a negative and significant relationship between gambling behavior and self-esteem ($\beta = -.21$, $t = -2.564$, $p < .05$). This implies that as gambling behavior intensifies, self-esteem diminishes. This finding aligns with previous studies such as those by Volberg et al. (1997) and Choi and Kim (2021), which found that problem gamblers tend to have lower self-esteem compared to non-gamblers. Additionally, Petry et al. (2005) and Cunningham-Williams et al. (1998) reported elevated rates of both major depression and lower self-esteem among pathological gamblers, emphasizing the psychological toll of gambling behavior on self-perception【Volberg et al., 1997; Choi & Kim, 2021; Petry et al., 2005; Cunningham-Williams et al., 1998】.

The third hypothesis was also confirmed, demonstrating that self-esteem significantly moderates the relationship between gambling behavior and depression. This suggests that an increase in self-esteem can buffer the detrimental effects of gambling behavior, thereby reducing the risk of developing depression. This outcome aligns with previous findings by Onuoha et al. (2024), who reported that self-esteem can moderate the impact of occupational stress on depressive symptoms【Onuoha et al., 2024】. The study underscores the importance of enhancing self-esteem as a psychological intervention to mitigate the adverse effects of gambling behavior on depression among undergraduates.

Implications of the Study

1. **Theoretical Contributions**: The findings of this study provide empirical support for the theoretical framework of Ellis's rational emotive behavior theory, which posits that self-esteem can influence the manifestation of depressive symptoms during negative life events 【Ellis, 1957】.
2. **Practical Implications**: The results suggest that interventions aimed at enhancing self-esteem could play a crucial role in reducing the risk of depression associated with gambling behavior among undergraduates. This is particularly important for university-based mental health services, which should integrate self-esteem building exercises into their therapeutic approaches.
3. **Educational Implications**: The findings highlight the need for educational programs focused on the risks associated with gambling, including its potential to diminish self-esteem and contribute to depression. These programs should be developed to raise awareness among students about the dangers of gambling and provide them with strategies to maintain healthy self-esteem.

Limitations of the Study This study used a survey method which relies on self-report data, making it susceptible to social desirability bias and recall bias. While the participants were assured of their anonymity to encourage honest reporting, this method still lacks the ability to establish causality. Additionally, the study's cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer changes in gambling behavior and depression over time.

Conclusion

This study examined the moderating role of self-esteem on the relationship between gambling behavior and depression among undergraduates. Three hypotheses were proposed and tested, all

of which were confirmed, and highlighting the significant role that self-esteem plays in mitigating the adverse effects of gambling behavior on depressive symptoms. Enhancing self-esteem through targeted interventions could serve as an effective strategy to reduce the risk of depression in university students engaging in gambling behaviors.

Recommendations

1. **For University Counselors and Psychologists**: There should be a focus on developing interventions that enhance self-esteem to buffer the negative effects of gambling on mental health. This can be done through skill-building workshops and targeted counseling sessions.
2. **Policy Implications**: Educational institutions should implement preventive measures against gambling behaviors among students, such as awareness campaigns and the development of accessible support systems for those at risk.
3. **Future Research Directions**: Future studies should utilize longitudinal designs to examine the causal relationship between gambling behavior, self-esteem, and depression over time. Moreover, qualitative research can provide deeper insights into the personal experiences of students regarding gambling behavior and its mental health implications.

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