

Longing for the Game: Nostalgia for Gambling Predicts Relapse Among People Living with a Gambling Disorder

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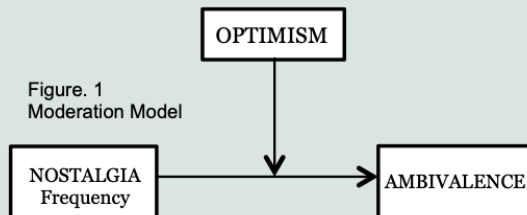
Introduction

Nostalgia (i.e., sentimental longing) for the life one lived before addiction motivates behaviour change among people living with a gambling disorder (Wohl et al., 2018).

Yet to be explored is whether nostalgia has deleterious consequences for those in recovery when the nostalgizing is focused on the addictive behaviour (e.g., the rush they experienced while gambling). In the current research, we hypothesized that such nostalgizing (the extent and frequency) among people in recovery for a gambling disorder would predict relapse. **(H1)**.

Additionally, we hypothesized that nostalgia for gambling will be positively correlated with ambivalence about recovery **(H2)**, because the pull of the past (gambling) will undermine the recovery process.

Lastly, we hypothesized that the pull of the past (facilitated by nostalgia) yields ambivalence among those who are optimistic about their recovery **(H3)**. This is because nostalgizing about the past may conflict with the optimistic push toward a future without gambling problems.



Methods

Participants in recovery from a gambling disorder ($n = 192$) were recruited using MTurk CloudResearch.

Relapse: Relapse was measured using a single item (*“Have you ever relapsed?”*) with yes and no response options.

Nostalgia: Four items (adapted from Kim and Wohl, 2015) assessed the extent to which people feel nostalgic for gambling ($\alpha = .83$; e.g., *Do you feel nostalgic for the ability to escape into gambling?*). Additionally, we created three items to assess the frequency with which participants felt nostalgia for gambling ($\alpha = .89$; e.g., *“How often do you feel nostalgic about gambling?”*).

Optimism. Five items (adapted from Cheung et al., 2013) assessed optimism about recovery ($\alpha = .84$; e.g. *How I am handling my recovery makes me feel optimistic about the future*)

Ambivalence. Two items were used to assess feelings of ambivalence by asking participants to indicate their positive and negative feelings about recovery (see *MIN score* for analyzing ambivalence in Leunissen, Wildschut, Sedikides, & Routledge, 2020).

Results & Discussion

As predicted, both the extent to which people felt nostalgic for gambling and the frequency with which people experienced nostalgia was associated with relapse, $r = .28, p = .009$ and $r = .24, p = .018$. However, only the extent to which people felt nostalgic reached traditional levels of significance. Thus, the pull toward the past addictive behaviour can undermine the recovery process.

We also found that both the extent to which participants felt nostalgia and the frequency with which they experienced nostalgia was significantly associated ambivalence about their recovery, $r = .32, p < 0.01$ and $r = .35, p < 0.01$, respectively. These results shed some light on why nostalgia may undermine recovery – the past makes people more ambivalent about their recovery process. Put differently, longing for the addictive behaviour may heighten negative feelings about their recovery.

Results & Discussion cont.

Lastly, we tested the hypothesized moderation model (see Figure 1) using PROCESS v 3.5 (Model 1; Hayes, 2017). There was a main effect of nostalgia, $b = .32, t(187) = 4.34, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [.17, .46]$ as well as optimism, $b = -.29, t(187) = -2.29, p = .02, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.55, -.05]$. These main effects were qualified by a significant interaction, $b = .23, t(187) = 2.88, p = .004, 95\% \text{ CI } [.07, .39]$ (see Figure 1).

Results from simple slope analyses revealed that there was no relation between nostalgia and ambivalence at 1SD below the mean of optimism, $b = .13, p = .25, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.09, .34]$, but was significant at 1SD above the mean of optimism, $b = .51, p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [.33, .69]$.

Thus, people who both long for the past and have hope for the future feel ambivalent about their their recovery path.

Implications

Ambivalence is a common obstacle for those in recovery from a gambling disorder, due to the coexistence of pleasurable and painful consequences of addiction (Toneatto, 2005).

Here we demonstrated that the experience of nostalgia for gambling a) is related to relapse outcomes and b) contributes to ambivalence about recovery. Additionally, our results indicate that ambivalence is a product of experiencing both gambling related nostalgia and optimism about recovery.

Treatment providers may focus on building optimism, and minimizing the impact of addiction-related nostalgia to help resolve ambivalence about the recovery process and prevent relapse.