



Gambling and older women

How risk is understood, negotiated, and downplayed

This research with 20 Australian women aged 55 and over who had been negatively impacted by pokies shows that gambling risk is shaped by social context, identity, and everyday life, not simply knowledge or individual choice.

How risk perceptions are shaped

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Early experiences

- Gambling introduced as harmless and social
- Seen as easy, safe, and entertainment-based
- Early wins reinforced positive perceptions

2

Social environments

- Venues seen as safe, welcoming spaces
- Opportunities for connection and belonging
- Accessible at all times, especially for women alone

3

Identity and meaning

- Gambling linked to being social and active
- Used to maintain independence and routine
- Can also be hidden to protect identity

Risk is not just about knowledge

Older women are often aware of gambling risks, but this did not prevent harm. Risk-taking was shaped by how women made sense of their lives, including social needs, emotional contexts, and personal circumstances.

- ✓ Risk is socially shaped
- ✓ Decisions are context dependent
- ✓ Perceived benefits can influence decision-making
- ✓ Risk is shaped by everyday circumstances

Why risks are overlooked

Machines designed to create excitement and engagement

Early wins reinforce continued play

Environments feel safe and familiar

Gambling framed as fun and normal

Risks become less visible over time

Why risk is tolerated

Women engaged in a process of risk negotiation, where the social and emotional benefits of gambling were prioritised over potential harms.

Social benefits

- Connection with staff
- Sense of belonging

Perceived control

- Belief in luck or strategy
- Misunderstanding machine design
- Feeling able to manage spending

Emotional coping

- Escape from stress or trauma
- Relief from loneliness
- Managing difficult life circumstances

Why current messaging fails

- Often focuses on individual responsibility rather than the broader factors that shape gambling.
- Can reinforce blame and stigma, making help-seeking more difficult.
- Does not reflect the social and emotional circumstances that influence women's gambling.
- Messaging is less effective when women do not see their own experiences reflected in the message.

These approaches do not address the broader determinants shaping behaviour.



BASED ON: McCarthy, S., Thomas, S., Pitt, H., Daube, M. and Cassidy, R., 2020. 'It's a tradition to go down to the pokies on your 18th birthday'—the normalisation of gambling for young women in Australia. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 44(5), pp.376-381.