

Playing to Escape: Examining Escapism in Gamblers and Gamers

Erika Puiras,¹ Shayna Cummings,¹ & Dwight Mazmanian¹

¹ Department of Psychology, Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada

Abstract

This study examines negative and positive escapism in gamblers, gamers, and individuals who gamble and game. University students ($N = 387$) completed a battery of online questionnaires that included a demographic information scale, measures of the frequency and type of activity (i.e., gambling, gaming), and modified escapism scales that assessed both positive and negative escapism. Participants included 134 (34.9%) individuals who both gamble and game, 91 (23.7%) exclusive gamblers, 82 (21.4%) exclusive gamers, and 76 (19.8%) individuals who did not engage in either activity. The majority of the participants were female (74.2%). One-way analyses of variance revealed that both negative and positive escapism scores were significantly higher in gamers than in gamblers. Furthermore, individuals who both gamble and game had higher escapism scores associated with participating in gaming activities rather than gambling activities. This result suggests that individuals who play games have different motives to play than do individuals who gamble. Differences in motivation for game play may help in understanding the distinction between gamblers and gamers. As a practical implication, this distinction could be particularly relevant, given the recent blurring of boundaries between the two industries. Other practical and theoretical implications include the development of modified escapism measures for gamblers, as well as further support for the theoretical conceptualization of escapism as negative or positive.

Keywords: Gambling, game-bling, escapism, gaming

Résumé

Cette étude porte sur la quête d'évasion, négative ou positive, chez les adeptes des jeux de hasard, des jeux vidéo ou des deux activités à la fois. Des étudiants universitaires ($N = 387$) ont répondu à une batterie de questionnaires en ligne, qui comportaient une échelle de données démographiques, des mesures de la fréquence et du genre d'activité (à savoir, jeux de hasard ou jeux vidéo) ainsi que des échelles

destinées à évaluer le caractère tant positif que négatif du désir d'évasion. Sur ce nombre, 134 (34,9 %) pratiquaient les deux activités; 91 (23,7 %), les jeux de hasard uniquement; 82 (21,4 %), les jeux vidéo seulement; enfin, 76 (19,8 %) ne pratiquaient ni l'une ni l'autre. Une majorité de femmes ont participé à l'étude (74,2 %). L'analyse de la variance à un facteur révèle des résultats sensiblement plus élevés, en ce qui touche les deux types d'évasion, pour les jeux vidéo par rapport aux jeux de hasard. Par ailleurs, les individus qui s'adonnent aux deux activités affichaient, dans la pratique des jeux vidéo, des résultats plus élevés que dans celle des jeux de hasard. Ce constat suggère que les motivations des adeptes de jeux vidéo diffèrent de celles des adeptes de jeux de hasard. Les différences relevées pourraient nous aider à comprendre ce qui distingue les deux types de joueurs. Compte tenu du brouillage récent des frontières entre les deux secteurs, cette observation pourrait s'avérer des plus pertinentes. D'autres implications de nature pratique et théorique peuvent en découler, notamment la conception d'une échelle de mesure modifiée de la quête d'évasion s'appliquant aux adeptes des jeux de hasard, ainsi que des connaissances utiles à la conceptualisation théorique de l'évasion en tant que phénomène pouvant être négatif ou positif.

Introduction

The gambling and gaming industries are showing increasing overlap, as the distinctions between these once separate industries have become blurred. Consequently, the convergence of these two industries has elicited many concerns, such as gamers being exposed to gambling content, sometimes in the form of predatory monetization schemes (e.g., loot boxes). Thus, there is a need for further research to investigate the relationship between these two converging industries and the individuals who engage with such content (i.e., gamblers and gamers). In response to this increasing overlap, in the present study, we examined the construct of escapism as a motivating factor for gamblers and gamers. It is important to examine whether gamblers and gamers share underlying motivations to engage in gambling or gaming activities. The examination of escapism in this study also highlights the bifurcation of the construct itself and the inherent differences between negative escapism and positive escapism. In the current study, we explored the differences in motivating factors between gamblers and gamers and how individuals use gambling and gaming activities to escape from reality.

Escapism

The term “escapism” is often discussed across a range of research areas, such as philosophical psychology, personality psychology, and addiction research, yet the concept is not always clearly defined. In philosophical psychology, Woody (2018) defines escapism as “masking over, numbing, and absenting oneself from human reality” (p. 188). Escapism has also been examined through the lens of personality psychology. Reid et al. (2011) found that escapism was related to the personality trait

of neuroticism in pathological gamblers; pathological gamblers seeking to “escape” through gambling were more likely to be experiencing emotional distress as measured by neuroticism, which undermined impulse control (Reid et al., 2011). The motive to escape the real world has also been associated with problematic or excessive use of social network sites, the Internet, and online gaming (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014; Kircaburun & Griffith, 2019; Masur et al., 2014). Warmelink et al. (2009) also expand on escapism in relation to gaming; to escape means leaving the mundane routine of real life for a respite in a world of fantasy or entertainment. This escape from real-life routine (e.g., chores, work) can be achieved through books, television, or video games, but it can also be achieved through gambling or other more extreme activities, sometimes in the form of drug abuse (Warmelink et al., 2009).

Some researchers have further clarified the concept by classifying escapism into two distinct types. Escapism can be classified based on the motivation behind the escapist behaviour, what Warmelink et al. (2009) describe as “cause-based” and “effect-based” escapism (p. 2). Cause-based escapism involves fleeing from or avoiding negative elements of real life. Motivating factors associated with cause-based escapism could include “mundane breaking,” to escape or take a break from life’s routine challenges, or “stress relieving,” to escape from things that cause pain, stress, or suffering. Conversely, effect-based escapism involves escaping for the act itself in order to seek enjoyment or entertainment in an activity. Motivating factors associated with effect-based escapism include “pleasure seeking” (to find enjoyment in an activity), or “imagination conjuring” (to “experience an alternative reality”), such as with a fantasy book or video game (Warmelink et al., 2009, p. 2). In effect, one can perceive cause-based escapism, or escaping from reality by alleviating or eliminating negative affect (e.g., anxiety), as conceptually similar to negative reinforcement, whereas one can perceive effect-based escapism, or escaping to increase or create positive affect (e.g., joy), as conceptually similar to positive reinforcement.

The two types of escapism that Warmelink et al. (2009) label cause based and effect based are what Hagstrom and Kaldo (2014) described as negative escapism and positive escapism. Negative escapism involves using activities, such as playing video games, to escape from something negative in real life (e.g., worry, rumination, negative affect, or emotional distress); it is a form of coping that is negatively reinforced, as something unpleasant is removed by engaging in the activity (Hagstrom & Kaldo, 2014). Positive escapism is described as creating a positive experience by engaging in an activity, which is positively reinforced with feelings of pleasure or enjoyment (Hagstrom & Kaldo, 2014). Therefore, negative or cause-based escapism is a coping mechanism that functions as an escape from a challenging or negative reality, whereas positive or effect-based escapism is a pleasurable experience that functions as an escape to something positive.

Escapism and Gambling

Escapism has been associated with gamblers (Blaszczynski & Nower, 2002; Flack, 2018; MacLaren et al., 2015; Reid et al., 2011), as gambling activities present an

opportunity to escape from the real world. Some gamblers use the thrill of gambling to avoid or cope with negative feelings (Blaszczynski & Nower, 2002; MacLaren et al., 2015; Reid et al., 2011) such as loneliness or boredom. Reid et al. (2011) further determined that problem gamblers engaged more frequently in gambling activities or behaviours in order to avoid feelings of discomfort than non-problem gamblers did. Escaping reality to avoid these negative states or feelings (e.g., feelings of sadness or guilt) through gambling in order to cope with this discomfort reflects negative escapism. Thus, negative escapism appears to motivate problematic gambling more so than non-problematic gambling does. Other findings have also demonstrated that escapism moderates the relationship between impulsivity and problem gambling (Flack, 2018). Therefore, the existing literature demonstrates that many individuals use gambling as a means to escape from the real world and that the motive to escape may be associated with problematic gambling.

Escapism and Gaming

Since its creation in the 1970s, the world of gaming has exploded in user base and revenue. Yet, with increased use comes the risk for abuse. Indeed, the World Health Organization recently added gaming disorder to its 11th revision of the *International Classification of Diseases* (World Health Organization, 2018). The American Psychiatric Association (APA) also added Internet gaming disorder (IGD) as a possible condition to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 2013 (5th ed.; *DSM-5*; APA). Nevertheless, controversy exists regarding the nature of the addition of IGD as a non-substance addiction to the *DSM-5* (Petry et al., 2014). Aspects of the controversy include the critique of certain IGD criteria (e.g., tolerance and withdrawal), the name of IGD and its overlap with other terms (e.g., Internet use disorder), and the content of IGD (i.e., it is labelled Internet gaming disorder, but relates to games that are both offline and online; Király et al., 2015; Petry et al., 2014). Despite this controversy, the inclusion of IGD was based on the abundance of research that shows the serious adverse outcomes of the disorder (Petry et al., 2014).

As the gaming industry changed over the years, the nature and type of video games also changed. Many different types of games are now available that fall into various categories (e.g., massively multiplayer online role-playing games [MMORPGs], role-playing games [RPGs], first-person and third-person shooter games, Battle Royale games). Specifically, MMORPGs are a type of online video game defined by its massive player capacity, where thousands of players can play at the same time. MMORPGs are also characterized by the player's ability to immerse him- or herself in the role of the game character (Hagstrom & Kaldo, 2014). This feature of being able to immerse oneself in the role of the game character is characteristic of RPGs and has been linked to escapism (Hagstrom & Kaldo, 2014; Warmelink et al., 2009). Indeed, the design of MMORPGs and RPGs seems particularly applicable to escapism, as gamers may use MMORPGs or RPGs to avoid reality by taking on the role of the in-game character. Thus, the example of MMORPGs and RPGs demonstrates the connection between video games and escapism, in that many games almost require the act of "escaping" on the part of the gamer.

As is the case in gamblers, escapism has also been linked to gamers (Hagstrom & Kaldo, 2014; Kardefelt-Winther, 2014; Warmelink et al., 2009; Yee, 2006). In a study by Hagstrom and Kaldo (2014) on escapism in MMORPG gamers, the findings indicated that negative escapism had a weak negative relationship with life satisfaction and a moderate positive relationship with psychological distress; it was “the single most important predictor when considering the overall psychological well-being of players” (p. 23). Yee (2006) also found that escapism (not categorized as negative or positive) was the best predictor of problematic video game play. Therefore, similar to the case in problematic gambling, the motive to escape has been associated with problematic gaming. Gamers themselves have also endorsed both negative and positive escapism, describing the escapist experience of gaming as being therapeutic and used to cope with struggles in daily life (i.e., negative escapism), as well as being entertaining and used for the purpose of fun and fantasy (i.e., positive escapism; Warmelink et al., 2009).

Convergence of Gambling and Gaming

The distinctions between online gaming and gambling have become blurred in recent years, as the once separate industries are now showing increasing overlap (Teichert et al., 2017). Online social media games frequently include gambling content. Indeed, 54% of the top 100 Facebook games possess gambling content (Jacques et al., 2016). Gambling content, such as loot boxes and skin betting, is also now prevalent in games (Macey & Hamari, 2018). Many games include loot boxes, in-game boxes that can be purchased with real money or in-game currency, which contain a random selection of prizes or objects (King & Delfabbro, 2018). Some loot boxes contain prizes that help a player progress through a game, whereas others contain cosmetic prizes (e.g., different coloured skins or weapons; Li et al., 2019). Cosmetic prizes can be wagered against esports competitions and also used to bet on other games of chance in the gaming industry (Li et al., 2019; Macey & Hamari, 2019). Therefore, not only can loot boxes be considered a form of gambling in that one is exchanging currency (i.e., real or in-game currency) for a prize based on a chance outcome, but the contents of loot boxes can also be used to bet in future gambling activities (e.g., skin betting).

There are various concerns about the convergence of gaming and gambling, as expressed by Macey and Hamari (2020), such as financial struggles and problem gambling (King & Delfabbro, 2018; Macey & Hamari, 2018; Wilber & Potenza, 2006; Zende & Cairns, 2018). For instance, predatory monetization schemes found in some video games have been suggested to evoke feelings of entrapment; this is similar to the psychological concept of sunk-cost fallacy, in which players believe they have invested too much time in the game to stop playing, even at the cost of financial loss and psychological health (Brockner et al., 1979; King & Delfabbro, 2018).

Another concern associated with the convergence of gambling and gaming is the exposure to gambling that youth may experience through gaming. Youth exposed to gambling before the age of 12 have a fourfold increase in the likelihood of becoming

problem gamblers later in life (Wilber & Potenza, 2006). Furthermore, individuals who begin gambling earlier in life demonstrate a greater likelihood of exhibiting problem gambling symptoms than do individuals who began gambling later in life (Burge et al., 2006; Lynch et al., 2004). It is unclear, however, how gambling content in video games affects youth. Some researchers have suggested that gaming may act as a pathway to gambling (Fisher & Griffiths, 1995). However, this pathway approach was more reflective of gaming at the time of the study in that it compared arcade-type games to gambling slot machines (Fisher & Griffiths, 1995). Several more recent studies have found links between gaming and gambling by examining the amount of money spent on loot boxes and the severity of problem gambling (Zendle & Cairns, 2018). Gamers who purchased loot boxes were more likely to demonstrate signs of problem gaming and problem gambling than were those who did not purchase loot boxes (Li et al., 2019), and loot box engagement was also associated with problematic gambling beliefs and behaviours (Brooks & Clark, 2019). Other studies demonstrated a relationship between consuming esports and gambling (Macey & Hamari, 2018). Although the exact relationship between gambling and gaming remains unclear at present, the increasing gambling content in games indicates a need for further research to help determine whether gamblers and gamers share similar underlying motivations to play, such as escapism.

The Present Study

Although both gambling and gaming have been associated with escapism, we have not found a study that examined the levels of negative and positive escapism by comparing gamblers and gamers. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to examine how gamblers and gamers may use gambling and gaming activities to escape from reality because of either positive or negative motivating factors, as demonstrated by the following research question:

Do gamers or gamblers demonstrate higher levels of negative escapism?

We hypothesized that gamers would have higher levels of negative escapism than would gamblers. As there has not been a previous study that compared negative escapism in gamblers and gamers, no prior research was available to indicate whether gamers may have higher escapism scores than those of gamblers. Therefore, in justifying this hypothesis, we drew from other sources that examined negative escapism in gamblers and gamers independently. This expectation, that gamers would have higher levels of negative escapism, was in part based on findings reported by Hagstrom and Kaldo (2014), wherein negative escapism was found to be the most important predictor for the psychological well-being of gamers and was also predictive of Internet addiction. Although that study did not compare gamblers and gamers, it does suggest that negative escapism is an important factor for gamers. Similarly, the gambling literature suggests that factors other than negative escapism may be relevant to gamblers. For instance, gamblers often report that they gamble in order to regain money previously lost (i.e., chasing losses; APA, 2013). A five-factor model by Binde (2013) also suggests that motives to gamble recreationally include

the chance of hitting the jackpot, socializing, perceiving gambling as an intellectual challenge, positive mood induction, and the chance to win. Thus, previous literature suggests that other motives to gamble (e.g., chasing losses, hitting the jackpot) may be more pertinent to gamblers than negative escapism. Therefore, we hypothesized that negative escapism may be a weaker motive to gamble than other motives suggested by Binde (2013) and the financial motivation to recover one's losses (APA, 2013). Furthermore, although no specific hypothesis was included for positive escapism, we conducted an analysis of positive escapism in gamblers and gamers to determine whether differences in both forms of escapism were demonstrated.

Additional analyses were conducted to examine participants who self-identified as both gamblers and gamers because of the potential for individuals who both gamble and game to be categorically different from exclusive gamblers or exclusive gamers. Therefore, although the hypothesis relates only to individuals who either gamble or game, because a large portion of the sample identified as engaging in both gambling and gaming, we examined whether individuals who gamble and game demonstrate differences in negative and positive escapism related to each activity. A further exploratory analysis included sex-based comparisons in levels of positive and negative escapism. This secondary analysis was included in anticipation of a skewed sample in terms of sex (i.e., many studies with a sample of university students include more female than male participants).

Method

Procedure and Participants

Individuals were recruited from Lakehead University at both the Thunder Bay and Orillia campuses by using the Sona System, an online tool that connects students with research studies. Students are awarded bonus marks in applicable psychology classes as an incentive to participate in research studies; one bonus point was offered for participation in this study. Individuals were largely drawn from the Psychology Department, as psychology students are automatically enrolled in the Sona System. Students from other disciplines were also recruited through poster advertisements placed around the Thunder Bay campus. After being recruited for the study, participants were directed to the online questionnaire, hosted on the online survey platform SurveyMonkey.

Altogether, 387 individuals completed the test battery. Two individuals were removed due to an infrequency score of 4 or greater (as specified by Jackson's [1987] Personality Research Form Infrequency Scale). Another participant was removed because they did not answer any of the questions. A fourth participant was also removed, as they did not identify whether they engaged in gambling or gaming activities, leaving 383 participants in the working database. The mean participant age was 22.3 ($SD = 5.9$) years, with a range of 19 to 58 years. The modal age was 19 years. The majority of the sample was female (74.2%), with three participants who did not identify their sex and one participant who identified as non-binary.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	Value ^a
Age, mean (<i>SD</i>)	22.3 (5.9)
Sex	
Female	284 (74.2)
Male	95 (24.8)
I prefer not to answer	3 (0.8)
Other	1 (0.3)
Marital status	
Single	186 (48.7)
Married/common law	21 (5.5)
Divorced/widowed/widower	4 (1.0)
In a relationship	171 (44.6)
Race/ethnicity	
Caucasian	317 (82.8)
Black	11 (2.9)
Indigenous	25 (6.3)
Asian	31 (8.1)
Hispanic	3 (0.8)
Other	20 (5.2)
Education	
High school completed	46 (12.0)
Some college	2 (0.5)
College completed	24 (6.3)
Some university	287 (74.9)
Undergraduate degree	21 (5.5)
Post graduate	2 (0.5)
Alcohol consumption	
Yes	321 (83.8)
No	61 (15.9)
Cannabis usage	
Yes	158 (41.3)
No	225 (58.7)

^aValues shown are raw frequencies (%) except where otherwise indicated.

These four participants were removed from sex-based analyses, for a working total of 380 participants for these analyses only. The sample was predominantly Caucasian (82.8%), Asian (8.1%), and Indigenous (6.5%; see Table 1). A majority of the participants identified as individuals who both gamble and game (134, 34.9%), followed by exclusive gamblers (91, 23.7%) and exclusive gamers (82, 21.4%). The remaining participants were neither gamblers nor gamers (76, 19.8%; see Table 2).

Data Analyses

The specific hypothesis and additional analyses were tested by using one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs), *t* tests, and *z* tests. To conduct the analyses, we first

Table 2
Gambling and Gaming Engagement

Activity Type and Frequency	Raw Frequencies (%)
Gambling engagement	
Yes	225 (58.6)
No	158 (41.1)
Gambling frequency	
Never	139 (36.2)
Once a month or less	192 (50.1)
Once a week or less	39 (10.2)
Two to three times a week	3 (0.8)
Once a day	2 (0.5)
Multiple times daily	1 (0.3)
Gaming engagement	
Yes	216 (56.4)
No	167 (43.6)
Gaming frequency	
Never	144 (37.6)
Once a month or less	56 (14.6)
Once a week or less	44 (11.5)
Two to three times a week	64 (16.7)
Once a day	46 (12.0)
Multiple times daily	29 (7.6)

categorized the participants by activity (i.e., whether they engaged in gambling or gaming or both). Participants were categorized into groups on the basis of whether they responded “yes” to engaging in gambling activities or “yes” to engaging in online video gaming activities. Participants who engaged in gambling activities only were classified as “gamblers,” participants who engaged in video game play only were classified as “gamers,” participants who engaged in both were classified as “gamblers/gamers,” and participants who did not gamble or game were classified as “non-gamblers/gamers.”

Measures

Escapism Scale

Yee’s escapism scale (2006) was modified by Hagström and Kaldo (2014) in an effort to improve reliability and validity by differentiating escapism as positive or negative; thus, the escapism scale was divided into measures of negative and positive escapism. In this study, we used Hagström and Kaldo’s (2014) scale to assess positive and negative escapism in online gaming. Participants responded on a Likert-type scale, with responses including “very often,” “often,” “sometimes,” “rarely,” or “never” to questions addressing negative escapism within gaming (e.g., How often do you play video games so you can avoid thinking about some of your real-life problems or

Table 3
Means on Escapism Measures

Measure Scale (range possible)	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	Cronbach's Alpha
Positive Escapism – Gambling (0–12)	2.03 (2.02)	.75
Negative Escapism – Gambling (0–12)	0.55 (1.57)	.92
Positive Escapism – Gaming (0–12)	5.87 (2.66)	.87
Negative Escapism – Gaming (0–12)	3.12 (2.85)	.91

worries?) or positive escapism within gaming (e.g., How often do you start to play video games when you are in a good mood?; Hagström & Kaldo, 2014). We modified the scale by removing one question, “To what degree do you agree with the following statement...,” as both the wording and the response scaling were inconsistent with the rest of the items in the measure. Previous research indicates that the negative escapism portion of the scale had good internal consistency (.85) and the positive escapism portion of the scale had moderate internal consistency (.57; Hagström & Kaldo, 2014).

Escapism Scale and Its Modifications for Gambling

We modified the positive and negative gaming escapism scales described earlier, so that we could assess escapism as a potential motivational factor in gambling. We modified the scale to address gambling and problem gambling by replacing “play” (as in playing games) with “gamble” for gambling (e.g., How often do you gamble so you can avoid thinking about some of your real-life problems or worries?). See Table 3 for the psychometric properties that were observed in this study.

Results

Negative Escapism

In relation to the main hypothesis, a one-way ANOVA (gamblers and gamers) on negative escapism revealed that gamers ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 2.45$) had significantly higher scores than gamblers did ($M = 0.36$, $SD = .95$), $F(1, 148) = 83.68$, $p < .01$. Correlation analyses indicated that the frequency of gambling was associated with negative escapism, $r(81) = .28$, $p < .001$, and that the frequency of gaming was also associated with negative escapism scores, $r(69) = .33$, $p < .001$. Analyses were rerun with the inclusion of the social desirability measure to determine whether socially desirable responding influenced these results. The results remained significant after controlling for social desirability, $F(1, 145) = 72.98$, $p < .001$.

Positive Escapism

A one-way ANOVA (gamblers and gamers) on positive escapism revealed that gamers ($M = 5.96$, $SD = 2.16$) had significantly higher scores than gamblers did

($M = 2.16$, $SD = 1.82$) on positive escapism, $F(1, 148) = 134.73$, $p < .001$. Correlation analyses were also conducted to determine whether linear associations existed between frequency of gambling or gaming, and positive escapism scores. Results of these analyses showed that the frequency of gambling was moderately associated with positive escapism scores, $r(81) = .48$, $p < .001$, and the frequency of gaming was also moderately associated with positive escapism scores, $r(69) = .65$, $p < .001$. When analyses were rerun with the inclusion of the social desirability measure, the finding remained significant, $F(1, 145) = 122.36$, $p < .001$.

Escapism Within Gamblers and Gamers

A supplementary analysis was conducted with individuals who both gamble and game. A paired samples t test showed that individuals who engage in both types of activities demonstrated greater levels of positive escapism with respect to gaming ($M = 6.13$, $SD = 2.58$) than with respect to gambling ($M = 2.04$, $SD = 2.21$), $t(97) = -12.45$, $p < .01$. Similarly, a second paired samples t test showed that individuals who engage in both gambling and gaming activities also demonstrated greater levels of negative escapism as a motivating factor for gaming ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 3.16$) than for gambling ($M = .77$, $SD = 2.98$), $t(96) = -7.19$, $p < .01$.

Escapism and Sex Differences

Gamblers and Escapism

Independent t tests were conducted to examine positive escapism scores between male and female gamblers. The results revealed no significant difference between females ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 1.89$) and males ($M = 2.20$, $SD = 2.33$) on positive escapism, $t(195) = .76$, $p = .447$. Similarly, when we examined negative escapism gambling scores between males and females, results indicated no significant difference between females ($M = .46$, $SD = 1.35$) and males ($M = .81$, $SD = 2.04$) on negative escapism, $t(69.66) = 1.16$, $p = .251$.

Gamers and Escapism

Additional independent t tests were conducted to examine positive escapism scores between male and female gamers. The results revealed that females ($M = 5.24$, $SD = 2.51$) had significantly lower positive escapism scores than males did ($M = 6.68$, $SD = 2.72$), $t(192) = 3.76$, $p < .001$. When we examined negative escapism scores, no significant differences were found between female scores ($M = 2.79$, $SD = 2.84$) and male scores ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 2.81$), $t(192) = 1.91$, $p = .058$.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to examine levels of negative escapism in gamblers and gamers. Although previous research investigated levels of escapism in samples of

gamblers or gamers individually, no prior study had explored these factors in both groups. We included supplementary analyses of positive escapism in these groups, as well as of both negative and positive escapism in individuals who both gamble and game. Findings from our study revealed that gamers had higher levels of negative and positive escapism than gamblers did. The frequency of engaging in either gambling or gaming was also associated with negative and positive escapism scores: A greater frequency of engagement was associated with higher escapism scores. A supplementary analysis involving individuals who both gamble and game also revealed that these individuals demonstrate higher levels of negative and positive escapism associated with gaming as opposed to gambling. Additional sex analyses within gamers and gamblers revealed that male gamers have higher positive escapism scores than female gamers do.

Negative Escapism

We hypothesized that gamers would demonstrate higher levels of negative escapism than gamblers would. The findings supported this prediction, as gamers had significantly higher scores on negative escapism than gamblers did. Previous research revealed that negative escapism was a primary motive for gaming; individuals may use gaming as a form of negative escapism to cope with psychosocial stressors and life problems (Hagstrom & Kaldo, 2014; Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). Alternatively, it has been theorized that negative escapism may be less of a motivating factor for gamblers compared with that of other factors suggested by Binde et al. (2013). Thus, gamblers may view gambling as more of a financial need or pursuit, as a means of socializing, as an opportunity to improve mood (i.e., positive mood induction), or for the thrill of potentially winning big, instead of gambling as an outlet tied to escapism. In contrast, MacLaren et al. (2015) demonstrated that electronic gambling machine problem gamblers were more likely than non-problem players to gamble as a means to escape negative mental states. Our study did not include a sample of strictly pathological gamblers, which may in part explain why this other relationship within the literature was not expanded on in the current study.

Escapism and Sex

The analyses did not reveal any significant differences between male and female gamblers in measures of negative or positive escapism. There was also no significant difference between male and female gamers on measures of negative escapism. However, male gamers demonstrated significantly greater positive escapism scores than females did. The previous literature has determined that men express greater gaming involvement than women do (Gentile, 2009; Lemmens et al., 2015); further, specific male game preferences may lead to longer game play for men than for women (Rehbein et al., 2016). In one study by Rehbein et al. (2016), males indicated a preference for role-playing, shooter, and simulation games, which was associated with longer game play. As escapism has been previously linked with RPGs (Hagstrom & Kaldo, 2014), it is possible that this accounts for the difference in positive escapism between males and females.

Limitations and Implications

Several limitations should be noted when interpreting the results. First, the study may have been limited by the nature of several of the scales used. The negative and positive escapism measures contained only three items, which may have limited the range of possible content sampled in these domains. However, although short, the scales demonstrated moderate to good internal consistency. Second, the composition of the data set is skewed toward females over males (i.e., 74% female participants). This is in part due to the type of recruitment (i.e., university students primarily from a psychology department). Furthermore, the current sample is not reflective of typical gamblers or gamers. For instance, in a study of student gambling, more males than females reported gambling, with males gambling more frequently and spending more money on average (Griffiths & Barnes, 2008). Similarly, the majority of gamers are not female. Reports on sex differences in gamers vary from an equal sex distribution to females being represented far less than males, depending on a variety of factors (e.g., type of game played, duration of play, other time commitments; Paaßen et al., 2017). Third, this study relied on self-report measures, which are subject to biased reporting. Although socially desirable responding did not significantly influence the results, it is possible that direct observation of behaviour, as opposed to self-report, may yield somewhat different findings. Fourth, the results of the study may be influenced by the frequency of participation in gambling and gaming activities. Many individuals in the study were frequent gamers (i.e., 36.3% of gamers participated in gaming activities more than once a week), as compared with gamblers (i.e., 50.1% of gamblers participated in gambling activities once a month or less). The increased escapism motives found in gamers may thus reflect the nature of the participants, in that higher or more frequent participation in an activity may reflect, or be driven by, stronger motives. Finally, although escapism appears to be a motive for participating in gambling and gaming activities, the strength of the motive relative to other motivating factors remains unclear. This study did not compare different motives within gamblers or gamers. Future research should consider examining escapism in tandem with other motives to determine the relative strength of the motive to participate in gambling and gaming activities.

Despite its limitations, this study has theoretical and practical implications. With respect to theoretical implications, the findings further emphasize the relevance of escapism in both gamblers and gamers and support the conceptual distinction between positive and negative escapism. Both negative and positive escapism involve the act of “escaping” from the real world, but with different motives behind the act of escaping itself (i.e., removing oneself from unpleasant aspects of reality in the case of negative escapism; engaging in a pleasant or enjoyable experience in the case of positive escapism). Thus, this study further highlights the need to conceptualize escapism based on the motive to escape (i.e., positive or negative), rather than as a broad construct overall.

In terms of practical implications, this study is the first in which escapism scores are compared between gamblers and gamers. These findings suggest that gamers have higher negative and positive escapism scores than gamblers do and that the motive to participate in a game activity is different from the motive to participate in a

gambling activity. This motivational difference may help identify distinctions between participation in gambling and gaming activities, which adds to the literature surrounding the recent blurring of boundaries between the gambling and gaming industries. A second practical implication is the use of the escapism measures. The escapism scales were modified to measure escapism in gamblers, and the negative escapism scale itself was modified by removing one of the items. Across the four measures (i.e., positive and negative escapism in gamers and gamblers), Cronbach's alpha ranged from .75 to .92. Thus, the use of these modified scales within the study, which demonstrated moderate to strong internal consistency, add to the literature on escapism and may contribute to future studies that measure escapism.

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For correspondence: Erika Puiras, Department of Psychology, Lakehead University, 955 Oliver Road, Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada, P7B 5E1.
E-mail: eppuiras@lakeheadu.ca

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