

24th Annual Alberta Gambling Research Institute Conference



Preliminary Speakers (alphabetical by last name)

Youseff Allami

Dr Youssef Allami is a clinical psychologist and assistant professor at Université Laval's School of Psychology. His research focuses on psychological factors influencing the severity of harm related to various addictive behaviours. Dr. Allami explores care access pathways and the psychological mechanisms underlying addictions, including the interaction between addictive behaviours and other mental health problems.

Presentation: From gambling to other addictive behaviours: how to explain addiction substitution and natural recovery

Many questions remain regarding addiction substitution and natural recovery in the context of gambling. This study examines these processes through a longitudinal design with two waves of data collection. In March 2024, approximately 6,000 Canadian adults who actively gambled were recruited from an online panel. Participants scoring 3 or higher on the Problem Gambling Severity Index were categorized into three biopsychosocial profiles using the Gambling Pathways Questionnaire. Six months later, addiction substitution was assessed with the Screener for Substance and Behavioural Addictions, which evaluates 10 different addictive behaviours, including alcohol use, internet use, and sexual activity. Natural recovery was measured by self-reported help-seeking from a list of ten options. Results from indicate that substitution patterns vary by biopsychosocial profile, with certain behaviours being more frequently adopted. Additionally, preliminary predictors of successful self-directed recovery were identified.



Kasra Ghaharian

Dr. Ghaharian is the director of research for UNLV's International Gaming Institute. He is a global gaming expert who specializes in online settings and AI applications, machine learning, consumer protection, and payments modernization. Dr. Ghaharian brings several years of industry experience in digital analytics, strategic marketing, e-commerce analysis and product management, enterprise strategy, and sales at several of the world's largest casino-hotel companies to the position. His scholarly works have examined ways to improve industry tech and user experience. While pursuing his Ph.D., Dr. Ghaharian explored the implications of digital payments for the gambling industry and applied machine learning to payment transaction data to uncover behavioral patterns and potential markers of problem gambling. His master's thesis was a first-of-its-kind study to apply mathematical methods to the age-old task of optimizing the casino floor. His current research projects include using consumer bank transaction data to support gambling harm prevention and investigating the efficacy of AI chatbots to educate consumers about responsible gambling. Dr. Ghaharian has been called upon by media outlets including *BBC*, *Sports Handle*, and *Inside Asian Gaming* to offer industry insights.

Presentation: Is AI a problem for gambling?

This presentation will explore the role of AI in the gambling field, highlighting its transformative potential and the challenges it poses. Attendees will gain insights into key AI use cases, ethical considerations, and strategies for responsible adoption and governance. Additionally, a focal point of the presentation will be our recent research that investigates AI chatbot responses to problem gambling-related scenarios. Our research into this specific use case effectively reveals the capabilities and limitations of AI in addressing individuals' gambling concerns and emphasizes the need for thoughtful integration to ensure AI serves as a tool for positive change rather than a source of harm.



Joshua Grubbs

Dr. Joshua Grubbs is a licensed clinical psychologist and associate professor of psychology at the University of New Mexico where he researches gambling, compulsive sexual behavior, and other addictive behaviors at the Center on Alcohol, Substance use, And Addictions. He has done extensive research on the processes that lead people to feel out of control in behaviors such as gambling, with a particular focus on how those behaviors change over time. Dr. Grubbs has recently concluded a two year study of sports gambling behavior in the United States, with a specific focus on how gambling behaviors naturally trend over time and how they correspond to other addictive behaviors.

Presentation: Sports Gambling: Examining America's Most Available Form of Gambling

This talk will summarize data gathered from 2022 to 2024 in a longitudinal study of sports gamblers in the United States. The nature of sports gambling in the United States will be discussed. Legislative changes around sports gambling will be reviewed. Types of legal sports gambling will be explained, and the implications of legalization of sports gambling will be reviewed. Data showing the natural trajectories of sports gamblers in the united states will also be reviewed, with a focus on understanding how sports gambling corresponds to problem gambling behavior and other addictive

behaviors over time.



Andrew Kim

Dr. Andrew (Hyouonsoo) Kim, C. Psych is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at Toronto Metropolitan University and an Adjunct Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Calgary. Dr. Kim has published over 120 peer-reviewed publications, and he has been awarded over \$2.2 million in research funding. He was recently named a Rising Star by the Association for Psychological Science, the President's New Researcher Award by the Canadian Psychological Association and was awarded a Tier II Canada Research Chair in Addictions and Comorbidity. Dr. Kim's research interest includes examining the links between gambling-like activities in video games such as loot boxes and gambling as well as the impact of recent legislative changes on sports betting in Canada. Dr. Kim leads multiple international collaborations including large scale studies on video games and gambling.

Presentation: A cross-cultural examination of the link between loot boxes and gambling: Is it a Global Issue?

There is now a robust literature that links loot boxes to increase engagement in real-money gambling both cross-sectionally and longitudinally. Yet, the vast majority of studies have examined the loot box-gambling link in Western cultures, despite gaming and gambling being popular activities around the world. This presentation will examine the link between loot boxes and gambling among 4115 gamers recruited from 5 countries (Canada, Australia, Brazil, China, and Korea). Specifically, the presentation will examine the frequency of loot box engagement (opening, purchasing) and whether cultural factors (e.g., Western vs. Eastern, availability of gambling) moderate the link between loot boxes and gambling. Additionally, the demographic and psychological profiles between gamers who do and do not purchase loot boxes will be examined. The presentation will provide novel insights into the loot box-gambling link from a cross-cultural perspective and examine whether this is a global issue that requires further empirical and legislative attention.



Amanda McCormick

Dr. Amanda McCormick is an Associate Professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at the University of the Fraser Valley in Abbotsford, British Columbia, and a Research Associate with the Centre for Public Safety and Criminal Justice Research. She has examined the effectiveness of voluntary self-exclusion programs from the perceptions of program participants, drawn comparisons of VSE enrollers to gamblers who do not access VSE programs, examined the psychosocial characteristics of individuals who enroll in and who violate VSE programming, explored promising practices in gambling reinstatement policies, and studied gambling in custody among youth. Dr. McCormick has authored more than 60 research reports, peer-reviewed articles, and book chapters on subjects including gambling, policing, intimate partner violence, and incarcerated youth.

Presentation: From Time Out to Game Break: Key Insights from Three Longitudinal Evaluations of BCLCs Voluntary Self Exclusion Program

Voluntary self-exclusion (VSE) programs enable individuals to take a break from gambling by enrolling in industry-run programs designed to prevent or limit access to gambling. VSE programs have evolved remarkably over the past three decades, such as through the introduction of facial recognition technology to enhance the effective identification of excluded individuals and the requirement for responsible gambling education prior to reinstatement. In this plenary presentation, Dr. Amanda McCormick will share key findings from three longitudinal evaluations of the British Columbia Lottery Corporation's VSE program using data and insights collected from program participants. The talk will conclude with a discussion about the future direction of VSE programming and potential enhancements to further support individuals on their journey towards responsible gambling.



Spencer Murch

Dr. Spencer Murch is an AGRI Postdoctoral Fellow working under Drs. Daniel McGrath and Andrew Kim in the Department of Psychology at the University of Calgary. He obtained his PhD in Cognitive Psychology from UBC Vancouver (2020) and completed a CIHR Postdoctoral Fellowship under Drs. Sylvia Kairouz and Martin French in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Concordia University (Montreal). Dr. Murch's research seeks to leverage emerging Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies towards the prevention of harms related to online gambling. This includes mining 'big' datasets for behavioural markers of problem gambling, developing AI-based gambling harm detection systems, and using generative AI systems to create always new Responsible Gambling messages and imagery.

Presentation: AI for RG: New opportunities for online gambling harm reduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies present new opportunities to develop responsible gambling (RG) tools that contribute to a broader ecosystem of online gambling harm prevention. At the same time, many questions surround the uses and utility of AI-based RG tools, including: (1) how well they function in RG efforts, (2) whether or not they continue to function over time, (3) whether they can be made compliant with emerging, equity-advancing legislation, (4) to what extent they could be harmonised with existing social services, (5) whether online gamblers themselves could accept AI-

based RG tools, and (6) whether or not AI tools outperform existing RG approaches and human efforts. In this talk, I will explore research conducted in Canada over the last 5 years that seeks to answer these questions. In doing so, I will make the argument that AI-based RG tools may be suitable in certain circumstances, but further refinements to these approaches are needed before they can be released to the public.



Philip Newall

Dr Philip Newall is a Lecturer at the University of Bristol's School of Psychological Science. They completed a PhD at the University of Stirling in 2016, before going on to postdoctoral research fellowships at Technical University Munich, the University of Warwick, and Central Queensland University's Experimental Gambling Research Laboratory. Dr. Newall is a member of the Advisory Board for Safer Gambling – an advisory group of the Gambling Commission in Great Britain, and was a special advisor to the House of Lords Select Committee Enquiry on the Social and Economic Impact of the Gambling Industry. Their research applies concepts and research methods from behavioural science to gambling.

Presentation: A strategic approach to gambling regulation

Gambling regulation can be informed by various theoretical models, which each provide blueprints for how policymakers might look to minimize gambling's harms relative to other potential benefits. For example, the Reno model takes inspiration from economic models of market competition, by stating that at-risk groups should be provided targeted support such as clinical therapy, while competition between gambling operators maximizes gambling's benefits among the rest of society. By contrast, the public health model takes inspiration from tobacco control, by stating that gambling harms are widespread, and that preventative actions such as gambling marketing restrictions are needed to solve the relevant policy problems. Here I propose a novel "strategic" model for gambling regulation, which takes inspiration from game theoretic models of optimal poker strategy. This inspiration is argued relevant to gambling's particular policy situation, where policymakers have to set longstanding policies, which the gambling industry can dynamically respond to via its utilization of technology and ability to innovate new gambling products. These factors allow the gambling industry to benefit from regulatory vagueness, exploit regulatory loopholes, and enjoy beneficial outcomes for example via self-regulation. This talk will be illustrated with international examples and suggest ways to build a strategically-sound approach toward gambling regulation.



Gerda Reith

Dr. Gerda Reith is Professor of Social Science at the University of Glasgow. Her work focuses on the socio-political and commercial drivers of gambling and the relationship of gambling harm to social inequality. Dr. Reith's recent and ongoing research focuses on the framing of gambling in policy and industry discourses, and on the spread of gambling into lower- and middle-income countries such as Sub-Saharan Africa. She is a member of the World Health Organization's Expert Panel on gambling and was a Commissioner on the Lancet Public Health Commission on Gambling. Dr. Reith has published extensively on a range of topics related to gambling and its wider environmental contexts, and her work has been translated into a number of languages, including Korean, Spanish, French and Hungarian. Dr. Reith's book, *The Age of Chance: Gambling in Western Culture*, won the Philip Abrams Prize, and her latest book, *Addictive Consumption: Capitalism, Modernity and Excess*, is published by Routledge.

Presentation: The Commercial Determinants of Gambling Harms

This presentation will outline the range of products and practices deployed by gambling corporations to influence policy and behaviour. This includes mapping trends in product developments and deployment; reviewing use of advertising, marketing and data-driven profiling; and, examining how industry frame policy and public perspectives, lobby for their own interests and shape the evidence base. It will situate these trends within the wider political economy that gambling corporations operate in, and outline trends in global expansion. Finally, the presentation will conclude by outlining some recommendations for addressing the drivers of gambling harms. The paper, which this presentation is based on provides an overview of the development and application of the concept of the 'commercial determinants of gambling harms', with particular reference to the work of the recent Lancet Public Health Commission on Gambling (2024).



Simone Rodda

Dr. Simone Rodda is an Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience at Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand. She has worked in gambling treatment, education, and research for more than 20 years. Dr Rodda is currently involved in multiple investigations involving e-mental health, self-help and brief interventions for problem gambling and other behavioural addictions.

Presentation: Does Delivering the Right Self-Help Strategy at the Right Time Improve Gambling Outcomes?

Most people who gamble use self-help tools, resources, and strategies to manage their behaviour or stick to limits. However, choosing the right strategy at the right time can be difficult, often relying on what worked in the past rather than meeting current needs. This presentation examines the development and findings from multiple studies that looked at ways to improve the use and effectiveness of self-help. These studies tested different approaches, including websites, workbooks, personalised feedback, and Just-In-Time Adaptive Interventions, to help people choose the best strategies for their situation. Results show the importance of tailoring strategies to individual needs and providing strategy specific support only when needed. Feedback from the studies highlights an opportunity to further enhance engagement by incorporating more lived experience through strategy-

specific written and spoken stories.



Rob Williams

Dr. Williams is a clinical psychologist and professor in the Addiction Counselling program in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Lethbridge. He is also a Research Coordinator with the Alberta Gambling Research Institute. Dr. Williams provides frequent consultation to government, industry, the media, and public interest groups; and regularly gives expert witness testimony on the impacts of gambling. Dr. Williams is [highly published](#) and one of the world's leading authorities in the areas of: prevention of problem gambling, the etiology of problem gambling, online gambling, the socioeconomic impacts of gambling, the proportion of gambling revenue deriving from problem gamblers, Indigenous gambling, and the population assessment of problem gambling. Of final note, he was the principal investigator for the recently completed AGRI National Project (ANP-1) as well as the soon to be launched AGRI National Project 2 (ANP-2).

Presentation: Trajectory, chronicity, and etiology of problem gambling: A synthesis of longitudinal research

The purpose of this presentation is to summarize all longitudinal research findings pertaining to the trajectory, chronicity, and etiology of problem gambling. These findings establish that problem gambling is not usually progressive. Rather, most people with early problems reduce their subsequent involvement and sustain this reduction. Problem gambling is also not usually chronic and unremitting. A minority do have a sustained chronic course, particularly more severe cases. It is also enduring in that relapse and risk of relapse remains high in anyone who has ever had the condition. However, the condition most typically remits, with some people having sustained remission and others having repeated relapses and remissions. In terms of etiology, up to 20 variables additively contribute to the initial onset of problem gambling with different combinations of variables being present in different people. That said, intensive gambling involvement, gambling fallacies, addiction-propensity, a social group that regularly gambles, and impulsivity tend to be particularly important factors. In general, problem gambling has a biopsychosocial etiology with a trajectory and chronicity very similar to substance use disorder.



Leon Xiao

Dr. Leon Y. Xiao is a PhD Fellow at the IT University of Copenhagen. Dr Xiao researches video game law, particularly the regulation of loot boxes, a quasi-gambling monetisation mechanic in video games. He uses empirical legal research methods and is passionate about open science. Dr. Xiao also dabbles in some research on gameplay time and the intersections between cryptocurrencies, NFTs, and gambling. Dr Xiao's research is often featured in the media. Game companies have also taken direct compliance and remedial actions following his research. His current main research area of interest is to use EU law (GDPR and DSA) to access research data.

Presentation: Regulating the video game and gambling convergence around the world: Loot boxes and beyond

Loot boxes are virtual products within video games that players can buy with real-world money to obtain random rewards. Most rewards are worth very little, but a few desirable rewards are very valuable. Players are known to purchase many loot boxes in order to obtain the rare and valuable rewards. However, the legal definition of 'gambling' differs from our common sense understanding: most loot boxes are not 'gambling' within the meaning of the law and cannot be so regulated in most countries. Internationally, various regulatory approaches have been taken to address potential loot box harms. Leon shares his empirical policy research on Belgium's ban on loot boxes and information disclosure requirements in China and the UK. Minimum age rating requirements in Germany and Australia are also discussed. All these regulatory measures have performed poorly. Leon identifies why these measures have failed and makes recommendations on how we can improve these regulations.

