



# Fantasy sports, real money: Exploration of the relationship between fantasy sports participation and gambling-related problems



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- 11.5% of respondents participated in fantasy sports in the past year
- There was an association between fantasy sports participation and gambling problems
- The association indicated above varied by gender

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## ABSTRACT

Participation in fantasy sports increases annually. Wagering on fantasy sports is a form of gambling and researchers have found that fantasy sports participants are more likely to engage in other forms of sports betting than non-fantasy players; however, no published studies have examined whether there is a relationship between fantasy sports participation and gambling-related problems. Our study examined whether fantasy sports participation is associated with gambling-related problems among college students. We assessed fantasy sports participation and endorsement of DSM-5 gambling disorder (GD) criteria among a large convenience sample ( $N = 1556$ ) of college students via an online health survey. We found that 11.5% of respondents participated in fantasy sports in the past year, the majority of which were males. Logistic regression analyses indicated that males who play fantasy sports for money and females who play fantasy sports (for money or not) were more likely to experience gambling-related problems.

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## 1. Introduction

Fantasy sports leagues allow participants to select or “draft” professional or college athletes, thereby creating a fantasy team that competes against other people’s fantasy teams in their league. Fantasy sports are scored via the real-life statistics of the individual athletes on each fantasy team during a given season, and the fantasy team that compiles the most points wins. Widely available high-speed Internet connections and Internet sites (e.g., Yahoo) that provide low-maintenance fantasy leagues to the public at no cost have facilitated a rise in the popularity of fantasy sports. The Fantasy Sports Trade Association (FTSA; 2013) estimates that over 36 million Americans and Canadians participated in fantasy sports in 2012, and that number is increasing annually (e.g., an estimated 32 million participated in 2011). Among those participants, almost half (46.9%) paid a league fee to participate (Fantasy Sports Trade Association, 2013). Fantasy sport league fees are collected

prior to the season and paid out to the winner (or winners) of the league at the conclusion of the season. Unlike a ticket to a movie or sporting event, fantasy league fees are not simply payment for access to the league. In fantasy sports, participants can “win” back their league fee (along with the league fees paid by other participants in the league) if their team is more successful than the other teams in the league.

According to the FTSA (2013), the mean age of fantasy sports participants is 31.7 and the majority of participants are male (80%), Caucasian (89.8%), and not married (51.5%). The majority of fantasy participants participate in professional football (77%) and/or baseball (33%) leagues. Other sports with a large number of fantasy players include NASCAR (21%), professional basketball (20%), golf (15%), college football (20%), professional hockey (18%), and professional soccer (12%) (Fantasy Sports Trade Association, 2013).

The economic impact of fantasy sports has been estimated at more than \$2 billion per year, including advertising, subscriptions, and dues paid by players (Cade, 2012). While many fantasy leagues have no monetary stakes involved for the individual players, others have low stakes (e.g., \$20 league fees per player over a season) or high stakes (e.g., \$1000 league fees per player over a season plus additional

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money for in-season trades) associated with participation. As mentioned above, league fees are distributed to the league winner (or winners) at the end of the season. Consequently, wagering on fantasy sports, whether by paying league fees or other means, is a form of gambling. In addition to gambling on fantasy sports occurring via league fees, sportsbooks and online gambling sites (e.g., FanDuel) have recently provided the opportunity to gamble weekly on fantasy football.

### 1.1. Fantasy Sports-related Research

No studies in the peer-reviewed scientific literature have examined whether there is a relationship between fantasy sports participation and gambling-related problems; however, there are studies that have examined other aspects of fantasy sports participation. For instance, researchers have looked at motivations for participating in fantasy sports and found that participants are motivated by a number of factors, including enjoyment, entertainment, arousal, and surveillance (Farquhar & Meeds, 2007; Ruihley & Billings, 2012). Other researchers have examined how specific personality traits influenced attitudes and intention towards participation in fantasy football and found influences differed by gender (i.e., males were influenced by sensation seeking, locus of control, and perceived football knowledge and females were not influenced by any of the personality traits assessed) (Lee, Kwak, Lim, Pederson, & Miloch, 2011). Another study found that both skill and chance influence success in fantasy baseball (Weiss, Demski, & Backen, 2011). Finally, others studies have examined the impact of fantasy sports participation on other forms of sports consumption (e.g., television viewing) and found that fantasy sports participation complements these other forms (Karg & McDonald, 2011; Nesbit & King, 2010). Karg and McDonald (2011) published the only study examining associations between fantasy sports participation and any gambling behaviors - in this case, other forms of sports betting. They found that fantasy sports participants are also more likely to gamble on other forms of sports betting than non-fantasy players.

### 1.2. Assessing Gambling-related Problems

The DSM-5 uses nine criteria to diagnose gambling disorder (GD): Preoccupation, tolerance, inability to cut down or quit, withdrawal 'chasing' one's losses, lying, committing illegal acts to support gambling, jeopardizing or losing a significant relationship, job, educational or career opportunity due to gambling, and relying on others to provide money to relieve a desperate financial situation resulting from gambling (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Individuals who meet four of these nine criteria qualify for the disorder. Because of the low base rate of GD in the population (<1%), many studies examine "gambling-related problems," often defined as endorsement of  $\geq 2$ –3 criteria, or sometimes even endorsement of  $\geq 1$  criteria, instead of GD diagnosis.

### 1.3. College Student Gambling

The college student population is more likely than the general population to experience gambling-related problems (Barnes, Welte, Hoffman, & Tidwell, 2010; Blanco et al., 2008; Blinn-Pike, Lokken Worthy, & Jonkman, 2007; Martin, Nelson, Usdan, & Turner, 2011; Shaffer & Hall, 2001). Further, excessive gambling participation and gambling-related problems are associated with numerous negative consequences and are highly correlated with other risky behaviors in the college student population, including driving under the influence, binge drinking, alcohol problems, illicit drug use, depression, stress, and considering and attempting suicide (Engwall, Hunter, & Steinberg, 2004; LaBrie, Shaffer, LaPlante, & Wechsler, 2003; Martin, Usdan, Cremeens, & Vail-Smith, 2014; Stuhldreher, Stuhldreher, & Forrest, 2007).

Male college students are more likely to gamble and experience gambling-related problems than their female counterparts. Research

has shown that compared to female college students, male college students gamble with more money (Giacopassi, Stitt, & Nichols, 2006), are more likely to have gambled in the past year (LaBrie et al., 2003), and are more likely to report having gambling-related problems (Blinn-Pike et al., 2007; Engwall et al., 2004; Martin, 2013; Stuhldreher et al., 2007; Weinstock, Whelan, Meyers, & Watson, 2007).

Although no studies have assessed the onset of fantasy-sports participation, it is likely that a large proportion of fantasy sports participants are first introduced to fantasy sports in their college-aged years. Given that (1) the popularity of fantasy sports participation is increasing annually and (2) college students are more at risk for gambling-related problems than other populations, it is important to examine the association between fantasy sports participation and gambling-related problems in this population. It is possible that fantasy sports participation might be associated with heavier gambling and experiencing gambling-related problems.

### 1.4. Current Study

Because no studies in the peer-reviewed scientific literature have examined whether there is a relationship between fantasy sports participation and gambling-related problems, we assessed past year fantasy sports participation and past year gambling-related problems among a large sample of college students via a cross-sectional online health survey. We examined fantasy sports participation two ways: (1) no fantasy participation vs. any fantasy participation, (2) and fantasy participation for no money vs. fantasy participation for money (i.e., league fees). The purpose of our study is to (1) investigate fantasy sports involvement among participants in our sample, and (2) explore whether fantasy sport participation is associated with experiencing gambling-related problems in this population.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Procedure

This study was conducted in Fall 2012 and received approval from the institutional review board of the university at which we conducted the research. We assessed fantasy sports participation and gambling-related problems among a large convenience sample of college students via a cross-sectional online health survey.

Our measures, which are discussed in detail in the subsequent Measures section (Section 2.3), were incorporated into the online health survey in the Fall 2012 semester. Before taking the online health survey, participants provided their consent electronically. That consent section informed participants that their participation is voluntary, their responses were anonymous, and they could withdraw from the study at any time.

### 2.2. Participants/Setting

The participants in this study were a convenience sample of undergraduate students ( $n = 1,556$ ) who were enrolled in an introductory health course at a large, southeastern university in Fall 2012 and chose to complete a non-mandatory online health survey. All students taking the introductory health course were provided the opportunity to complete the online survey for extra course credit. Participants completed the survey on their own time using either a personal computer or campus computer. The online health survey was active for seven days and participants could complete the survey at any time throughout that timeframe. No identifiable information was collected; however, students received a printable receipt upon completing the survey. Students who submitted the receipt to their instructor received extra credit in the course. Because of the incentive of extra credit and the anonymity of the survey, the response rate of the online health survey is typically high.

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