

The effect of opting out of direct marketing on betting frequency, spending, and gambling harm

What this research is about

Direct marketing is an important means for gambling operators to promote sports betting by contacting people by emails, text messages, app notifications, and phone calls. Previous research has found that exposure to direct marketing is associated with increased betting behaviour. However, there is a lack of evidence on the causal link between the two. To address this gap in research, this experimental study aimed to test whether opting out of direct marketing reduces betting frequency, spending, and short-term gambling harms in a real-world gambling setting.

What the researchers did

The researchers conducted a field experiment with an ecological momentary assessment (EMA). An EMA involves collecting data multiple times over short time frames. In this study, the researchers collected data every other day for a two-week period.

The researchers used Qualtrics, a panel aggregator that uses market research panels, to recruit Australian residents from all states and territories. They invited a subset of participants who previously completed a baseline survey and met the inclusion criteria. To be included in the study, participants had to be at least 18 years old, live in Australia, have an active online wagering account that they used in the last year, and report regularly betting on sports or races at least once every two weeks in the last year. Participants also had to agree to complete seven EMA surveys over a two-week period and be willing to opt-out of direct marketing from wagering operator(s) during the study. Participants were

What you need to know

This study tested whether opting out of direct marketing reduces betting frequency, spending, and short-term gambling harms. The researchers conducted a field experiment with an ecological momentary assessment (EMA). Participants were adults who had an active online wagering account that they used regularly in the last year. Of the 400 participants randomized, 227 were included in the analysis: 96 in the opt-out group and 131 in the control group. The treatment group opted out of direct marketing for the duration of the study, while the control group was not asked to do so. Participants completed seven EMA surveys every 48 hours over a 14-day period. Overall, participants in the treatment group placed 23% fewer bets, spent 39% less money, and reported 67% fewer short-term gambling harms compared to those in the control group.

excluded if they did not meet these criteria, failed a baseline attention-check item, and/or did not complete at least one EMA survey.

A total of 1,015 participants completed the baseline survey. The researchers set a quota of 400 people for the experiment. A total of 615 participants from the baseline survey were invited, and 405 agreed to take part. In total, 227 participants followed the instructions to provide proof of opting out of direct marketing (if assigned to the treatment group) and completed at least one EMA survey.

Participants were stratified based on (1) Problem Gambling Severity Index risk category (no/low risk vs.

moderate risk/problem gambling; (2) age group (18–35 years vs. 36 and above); and (3) gender identity (male, female, and other). Within each stratum, participants were randomly assigned to the treatment or control condition; the final sample analyzed included 96 participants in the opt-out group and 131 in the control group.

Participants completed seven EMA surveys every 48 hours over two weeks between July and August 2023. This period coincided with major Australian sporting and racing events. The EMA surveys included the following measures:

- (1) Betting behaviour in the last 48 hours, including number of bets and total amount wagered.
- (2) The 10-item Short Gambling Harm Screen, adapted to refer to harms experienced in the last 48 hours 'due to betting.'

What the researchers found

Completion rates of the seven EMA surveys ranged from 71% to 90% across the two groups. In both groups, betting behaviour peaked during weekends and major sporting events. This pattern suggests that opting out of direct marketing did not change when people chose to bet. Instead, it reduced betting behaviour and gambling harms.

Overall, participants in the treatment group placed 23% fewer bets, spent 39% less money, and reported 67% fewer short-term gambling harms compared to those in the control group. On average, the control group placed 12.5 bets over the two-week period. The treatment group placed an average of 9.6 bets. The control group bet an average of \$185.50 over the two-week period, while the treatment group bet an average of \$113.40. The control group reported an average of 0.77 short-term harm across each EMA survey, while the treatment group reported an average of 0.25 short-term harm.

How you can use this research

Policy makers and gambling regulators can use this research to support restrictions on direct marketing from gambling operators. The findings provide experimental evidence, with caveats, that reducing direct marketing exposure is associated with fewer bets, less spending, and fewer short-term harms,

supporting consideration of opt-in requirements or caps on marketing frequency.

About the researchers

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