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Exploring the topics on an online gambling support forum

What this research is about

Many people who have gambling problems do not seek help from treatment service providers. They are more likely to get self-help or peer support on their own. For example, people who gamble may use online forums to get support from other people who gamble. Online forums are websites where people have conversations with others by posting written messages.

People may experience many benefits of using online support forums. They may make new friends and feel less alone about their gambling problems. People who use online forums may be more likely to disclose their gambling problems to others or to get help from a treatment service provider. They may also have fewer gambling symptoms, gamble less often, and spend less money on gambling if they also use other self-help strategies.

Research studies suggest that people who use online support forums talk about similar issues. These issues include feelings of guilt and shame, and their gambling problems. But studies that explore discussions in online forums usually look at a small number of posts. They also use different methods to analyze the discussions. A more comprehensive analysis of the content of online forums is needed.

Online support forums contain a lot of information. It is difficult for researchers to analyze that information using common qualitative methods. In this study, the researchers explored the topics people who gamble talk about on an online support forum using a method called topic modelling. Topic modelling is useful for identifying important topics when there is a large amount of written content.

What you need to know

In this study, the researchers explored the topics that people who gamble talk about on an online support forum. The researchers reviewed the first posts that people made in 2,298 conversation threads in a UK forum called "My Journal". They analyzed the text from the threads using a method called topic modelling. The researchers identified 10 topics that people regularly discussed on the forum. They organized the topics into four themes. People most commonly talked about the negative emotions that gambling caused them. People also talked about resources available to help them recover from their gambling problems, gambling products and consequences, and money and financial support to help pay for their gambling. These findings can be used to create gambling resources, such as educational programs, that people can access on their own to get help.

What the researchers did

The researchers reviewed the first posts that people made in 2,298 conversations or threads in a forum called "My Journal". The My Journal forum is from an online gambling help website in the United Kingdom called Gambling Therapy. The researchers used a computer program to web scrape 92 pages of threads from the first forum post on June 30, 2005 to November 16, 2017. Web scraping refers to extracting specific data from a website into a separate document. The web scraper program extracted the title and the number of replies from each page. It also copied the original post that started each thread.

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To help with analysis, the researchers did some common text processing including removing numbers, punctuation, and stop words (e.g., "the", "and", and other common words that do not add much meaning). They then analyzed the text from the threads using topic modelling. Topic models group words that appear together in a piece of writing and share a common meaning.

What the researchers found

The researchers identified 10 topics that people regularly discussed on the forum. They organized the topics into four themes. The most common theme that people discussed in the forum was about the negative emotions that gambling caused them. Many expressed feeling pain or hurt from their gambling problems. The second most common theme people discussed was about the resources available to help them recover from their gambling problems. They talked about formal resources, such as treatment services, and informal resources, such as support groups and online forums. People used the online forum in creative ways to support others in their recovery. Some shared information and encouraged others to change their gambling behaviour.

The third most common theme people discussed was about gambling products and the consequences. They talked about traditional gambling games in venues and online gambling games such as poker and sports betting. People described their gambling journey from the gambling products they originally started playing to the products they moved onto playing. The fourth most common theme was about money and sources of finance. Many people talked about how their family and friends gave them money because they had lost theirs to gambling. They also mentioned that their gambling behaviour negatively affected their family and friends. People using the forum did not talk about other outcomes such as breaking the law, lying, or losing out on opportunities because of their gambling.

How you can use this research

Treatment service providers can incorporate this research into their gambling treatment programs. For example, they could revise their programs so that they use language that people understand and connect with. They could also ensure their programs help people cope with their negative emotions, provide them with helpful resources, explore their gambling behaviour, and discuss the effects that gambling has on family and friends. Policy makers can use this research to work with researchers, people who gamble, and treatment providers to create gambling resources, such as educational programs, that people can access on their own to get help.

About the researchers

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About Gambling Research Exchange (GREO)

Gambling Research Exchange (GREO) has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. GREO is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization that aims to eliminate harm from gambling. Our goal is to support evidence-informed decision making in safer gambling policies, standards, and practices. The work we do is intended for researchers, policy makers, gambling regulators and operators, and treatment and prevention service providers.

Learn more about GREO by visiting greo.ca or emailing info@greo.ca.