

research snapshot

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Exploring people's experiences of social norms and goal setting interventions to support safer gambling

What this research is about

People with problem gambling, as indicated by a score of 8+ on the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI), can often experience negative consequences. However, people with a lower gambling risk can also experience harm. In the United Kingdom, prevention approaches to mitigate gambling risks and harms have been criticized as being inadequate. Interactive messages that involve goal setting or target social norms have the potential to reduce gambling-related harms. Social norms are the rules and standards understood by group members that guide behaviour. The purpose of this study was to examine how feasible and acceptable online social norms and goal setting interventions were in promoting safer gambling.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited participants from the EROGamb 2.0 feasibility trial. Participants were adults who gambled at least monthly and had a PGSI score of less than 8, indicating low-to-moderate gambling risk. They took part in a 6-week intervention period within the 26-week trial. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four groups: goal setting, descriptive social norms, injunctive social norms, or control. The goal setting group set weekly goals. The social norms group received weekly text messages comparing their gambling behaviours (descriptive) or attitudes (injunctive) to those of others. The control group did not receive any intervention.

Ten participants from each intervention group and six from the control group were interviewed. Most participants were male (86%) and gambled daily (64%).

What you need to know

This study aimed to examine how feasible and acceptable online social norms and goal setting interventions were in promoting safer gambling. The researchers recruited participants from the EROGamb 2.0 feasibility trial. Participants were adults who gambled at least monthly and had a score of less than 8 on the Problem Gambling Severity Index. They were randomly assigned to one of four groups: goal setting, descriptive social norms, injunctive social norms, or control.

The researchers interviewed 36 participants, including 10 from each of the intervention groups and 6 from the control group. Motivations for joining the trial included interest in the topic, altruism, and financial incentives. Overall, participants felt that the trial ran smoothly. They thought that the questionnaires were interesting and encouraged reflection on gambling behaviours. Most participants in the social norms groups found the information shared through the messages interesting and aligned with their expectations. However, some questioned the statistics presented. Participants in the goal setting group mostly found the information helpful. Some felt that they learned more about their own gambling habits. Others saw no need to change their behaviour or attitudes towards gambling.

What the researchers found

Motivations for participation: Most participants saw the trial advertised on a gambling website or they were referred by friends. About two-thirds decided to participate because they were interested in the topic.

About half of the participants felt that they could contribute valuable insights to the study (altruism). About one-third were motivated by financial incentives. Some participants wanted to try to curb their spending or wanted to see how their gambling compared to others.

Trial participation experience: Generally, participants felt that the trial ran smoothly. They thought the information was clear, the processes were efficient, and interactions with the researchers were positive. However, some participants talked about technical challenges with downloading and using the required app. Others mentioned initial difficulty with receiving the financial incentives for participating in the study.

Perceptions of trial questionnaires: Participants generally felt that the trial questionnaires were interesting and encouraged reflection on gambling behaviours. However, some participants had concerns about the repetition of the questions included in the questionnaire. One participant felt that the language used to describe gambling was overly negative.

Experiences of the interventions: Most participants were willing to share their gambling data with the researchers. Participants generally accepted their assigned group. Most participants in the social norms groups found the information shared through the messages interesting and aligned with their expectations. Others questioned the statistics and basis for comparisons. Participants in the goal setting group mostly found the information helpful. Some felt that setting goals was easy, while others struggled with it and would have liked additional support. Most participants felt that they achieved their goals. Overall, participants felt that goal setting was useful.

Perceived impact of intervention: Some participants felt that they learned more about their own gambling habits. However, others reported no change in their behaviour or attitudes towards gambling. Participants agreed that the interventions might not benefit everyone, especially people who are not in control of their gambling. They suggested that interventions should be tailored to different types of gambling.

How you can use this research

Policy makers and researchers can use this study to tailor intervention approaches for safer gambling.

About the researchers

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