

research snapshot

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Voluntary self-exclusion is not a reliable way to measure problem gambling

What this research is about

Online gambling has become popular in recent years. However, many countries are lagging behind in their regulation of this new form of gambling. There are concerns that online gambling is risky due to its convenience and easy access. At the same time, online gambling provides an opportunity for gambling operators to store and monitor people's gambling activities. These behavioural tracking data can then be used for customer protection purposes. For example, operators can communicate with customers about their gambling behaviour and how to gamble safely.

Many gambling operators offer responsible gambling tools to help customers control their gambling. One of the tools is voluntary self-exclusion (VSE). People can choose VSE to remove their access to an online gambling account for a certain period of time. Several studies have used VSE as a proxy measure of problem gambling. A proxy measure is an indirect way to measure an outcome. The assumption is that people who use VSE likely have a gambling problem. However, some studies have found that not all customers use VSE because of a gambling problem. Reasons for VSE might include being annoyed at the gambling operator or wanting to use VSE as a way to prevent problem gambling.

This study investigated if VSE is a good proxy measure of problem gambling. The researchers used behavioural tracking data provided by an online gambling operator with UK customers.

What the researchers did

The researchers were given access to the data of 7873 UK customers with Unibet. Unibet offers a variety of online gambling products, including casino games,

What you need to know

Voluntary self-exclusion (VSE) allows people to remove their access to an online gambling account for a certain period of time. Past research studies have used VSE as an indirect way to measure problem gambling. However, some studies found that not all people who use VSE have a gambling problem. This study investigated if VSE is a good proxy measure for problem gambling. Data were provided by Unibet, an online gambling company with customers in the UK. The researchers compared between 7732 customers who chose VSE for six months and 141 customers who closed their account because of a gambling addiction.

The results showed that half of the customers who used VSE did so within the first seven days of opening their account. Customers who used VSE spent less money than customers who closed an account because of a gambling addiction. There were large differences in the number of days gambling and amount of money spent prior to VSE. The researchers concluded that VSE is not a reliable way to determine if a customer has problem gambling.

poker, and sports betting. Of the 7872 customers, 7732 chose VSE for six months and 141 self-reported a gambling addiction when closing their account. The majority of customers were men (80.9%).

The dataset covered the period from January 2017 to May 2018. Data included the amount of money customers spent during their time with Unibet and the number of days leading to VSE or account closure. The researchers examined gambling behaviour prior

to VSE or account closure. They compared between those who used VSE and those who closed their account because of a gambling addiction. The expectation was that if VSE could be used as a proxy measure for problem gambling, the two groups should have similar gambling behaviours.

What the researchers found

Almost one-fifth of the customers who used VSE did so on the first day of opening their account. Overall, half of the customers who used VSE did so within the first seven days of opening a gambling account.

Customers who closed their account because of a gambling addiction spent more money on gambling than customers who used VSE. On average, customers who closed their account because of a gambling addiction spent £2584.40 prior to account closure. But, there were large differences in the amount of money spent among the customers.

Customers who used VSE also differed greatly in the amount of money spent prior to VSE. Among customers who used VSE, those who used VSE within the first three months spent the most money (£845.70 on average). Those who used VSE after the first three months spent £593.30 on average. Those who used VSE within the first month spent £362.20 on average. Those who used VSE within seven days spent £305.60, and those who used VSE within the first day spent £200.50 on average.

Given the large differences in the gambling behaviour of customers who used VSE, the researchers concluded that VSE is not a good proxy measure of problem gambling.

How you can use this research

The study findings can inform gambling operators, researchers, and policy makers. The researchers suggested that gambling operators should be cautious when using VSE as a marker of problem gambling. Customers who request VSE within a few days of opening their gambling account may not necessarily have a gambling problem. Instead, gambling operators could monitor customers who have gambled intensely for at least a month.

Further research is needed to understand why people use VSE when they do not gamble much. Future research could consider sociodemographic characteristics and other aspects of gambling behaviour that may influence why people choose to use VSE or not.

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.

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