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Can disclosures be used to build resistance to persuasive techniques that encourage gambling?

What this research is about

With digital platforms becoming increasingly popular, online advertising companies and businesses have begun to use persuasive techniques to increase their profits. Persuasive technology can be described as any computing system or interface that interacts with users, with the aim of changing or affecting users' attitudes or behaviours. Such a system may use persuasive techniques like rewards and personalized content. Persuasive techniques may be used with the intention of improving people's experiences, or to raise profits for companies. Some people may not be aware that they are being persuaded. This limited knowledge could affect people's ability to evaluate and reflect on their interactions with persuasive techniques.

Two concepts are important to understand when discussing persuasive interfaces. The concept of "explainable persuasion" was introduced by Cemiloglu et al. (2023). It describes how transparent a platform is about its persuasion attempts. Transparency allows users to be aware of how a persuasive technique is being used to alter their attitudes or behaviours toward certain content or actions. The Inoculation Theory suggests that people can be inoculated, or protected, against persuasive techniques.

In this study, the researchers tested whether explainable persuasion in the form of a disclosure could be used to build resistance against persuasive techniques. They used online gambling platforms as an example because such platforms use various persuasive techniques (e.g., pop-up bonuses) to increase engagement. These types of techniques could encourage people to gamble for longer, which may lead to the development of gambling problems.

What you need to know

Various businesses use persuasive techniques to increase user engagement with their platforms. People who use different digital interfaces may be unaware of persuasive techniques and their effects. In this study, the researchers used online gambling websites as an example to examine whether explainable persuasion could be used to build resistance to persuasive techniques. The explanation persuasion used was a disclosure telling people that a persuasive technique (i.e., an online casino bonus offer) was being used. The researchers found that explainable persuasion can be used to increase people's knowledge and awareness of persuasive interfaces and improve their resistance to such techniques.

What the researchers did

The researchers conducted an experimental study. Participants were 240 adults from the UK who bet daily or weekly on slot and roulette games in the past year. The Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) was used to screen potential participants. Those who scored 8 or higher on the PGSI were excluded, as were those receiving gambling treatment or experiencing negative consequences from gambling. Participants completed the study via Qualtrics, an online survey platform. They were randomly assigned to one of four different conditions: (1) inoculation intervention and disclosure; (2) inoculation intervention alone; (3) disclosure alone; and (4) control.

In Phase 1, participants completed a questionnaire asking about their gambling experience; attitudes towards online casino bonuses; intention to claim such bonuses, and issue involvement with responsible

gambling. Phase 2 took place one week later. In the two conditions with the inoculation intervention, participants were asked how familiar they were with how online gambling platforms could motivate them to gamble. They then watched a 5-minute video about casino bonuses and how casino bonuses were used to persuade people to continue gambling. In the control condition, participants watched a 5-minute video about the history of gambling. One week after (Phase 3), participants were exposed to a “persuasive attack” (an online casino bonus). Half of the participants were shown a disclosure (explainable persuasion) warning them about the persuasive intent of the offer.

What the researchers found

The inoculation intervention successfully reduced participants’ positive attitudes towards online casino bonuses after watching the video (Phase 2). It also decreased intention to claim casino bonuses for both participants with non-problem/low-risk gambling and those with moderate-risk gambling. The inoculation intervention increased issue involvement with responsible gambling only for participants with moderate-risk gambling. However, issue involvement with responsible gambling was already higher among participants with non-problem/low-risk gambling.

One week after the inoculation intervention (Phase 3), participants in the inoculation intervention plus disclosure (explainable persuasion) condition showed the least positive attitudes towards the persuasive attack (i.e., the bonus offer). These participants also generated the most counterarguments against online casino bonuses. This was followed by participants who were exposed to the inoculation intervention only and then those who saw the disclosure only.

Among the 120 participants who saw the disclosure in Phase 3, only 28% wanted to learn more about how persuasive features could impact their gambling behaviour. This lack of interest was due to issues such as previous knowledge of persuasive techniques used by gambling companies; denial of gambling problems; and mistrust in gambling companies.

The findings suggest that explainable persuasion has the potential to build resistance against persuasive

techniques when partnered with an inoculation intervention. It can increase awareness of the risks and improve resistance to persuasive attempts.

How you can use this research

This research can be used by people who gamble and gambling regulators. It suggests that explainable persuasion in the form of disclosures may be an appropriate and effective responsible gambling tool.

About the researchers

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Citation

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