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Changes in online searches for gambling activities during the COVID-19 pandemic

What this research is about

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the landscape of gambling. Many researchers have investigated the impact COVID-19 had on people who gamble and the gambling industry. In the United Kingdom (UK), the first COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020 resulted in the closure of all land-based gambling venues. Sports events were also suspended until June 2020. There were subsequent lockdowns in both 2020 and 2021.

Previous research has found that people who changed their gambling behaviour during lockdown were at higher risk of gambling harms. Some people migrated to online gambling during this time. There was a 16% increase in online gross gambling yield (in other words, gambling revenue) in the UK during the pandemic. Little information, however, is known about how or whether online search behaviours for gambling changed during the pandemic.

Google Trends™ is an information tool that captures real-time Internet searches based on search terms or phrases. Google Trends™ data have been used by researchers to examine different topics, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health. In this study, the researchers aimed to examine gambling-related online searches before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK using Google Trends™ data. The researchers also explored whether Google Trends™ data for gambling-related online searches corresponded to data reported by gambling operators to the Gambling Commission.

What the researchers did

The researchers analyzed Google Trends™ search data between January 2020 and June 2022. The researchers chose these dates to include the period

What you need to know

Various studies have investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the gambling landscape. These studies have shown that some people changed their gambling behaviours as a result of the COVID-19 lockdowns. In this study, the researchers used Google Trends™, an Internet data tool, to examine online searches for gambling terms and phrases in the United Kingdom during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results indicate that bingo was the most searched term. Overall, searches for bingo, slots, and poker increased during the first lockdown. Industry data on number of players, number of bets placed, and gambling revenue were associated with the search volume for sports betting and poker. These findings suggest that Google Trends™ data may be able identify changes in certain gambling behaviours and activities over time.

from the initial COVID-19 outbreak to the end of data collection. Google Trends™ provides access to the Relative Search Volume (RSV) for specific search terms. An RSV in the range of 0–100 is assigned for each search term within a geographical region (e.g., UK) over a specified time period. A higher RSV means that the search term has a higher search volume.

The researchers included four gambling activities (slots, bingo, poker, and sports betting) and the general term 'gambling' in their search terms. They also included the search terms for five popular gambling operators: Bet365, Ladbrokes, Paddy Power, Sky Betting and Gaming, and William Hill. The operator terms were included to identify other ways people might search for gambling opportunities.

What the researchers found

The researchers found that online searches for poker, slots, and bingo increased sharply, while searches for the five gambling operators decreased during the first UK lockdown. Bingo was the most searched term. Searches for these gambling activities then decreased, and there were no major changes in later lockdowns. Searches for the gambling operators returned to their original level as the English football season restarted in June 2020. There were small increases in searches for the operators in later lockdowns.

Search volume for poker was positively associated with industry data on number of active players, number of bets placed, and gambling revenue per month. When there was a high search volume for poker, industry data also showed more active players, more bets being placed, and higher revenue from poker play. Search volume for gambling operators was positively associated with industry data for sports betting. Surprisingly, search volume for slots was negatively associated with slot-related industry data.

These findings suggest that Google Trends™ data may be able to indicate changes in certain gambling behaviours (e.g., poker and sports betting). They are also in line with findings from previous studies suggesting that people might have substituted sports betting with other gambling activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

How you can use this research

This research can be used by gambling researchers and regulators. The findings suggest that Google Trends™ data may be a reliable method to examine changes in certain gambling behaviours. Regulators can use this information to identify which aspects of gambling may be causing significant harms. Additionally, future studies could examine how gambling searches were impacted in different countries and regions in relation to COVID-19 restrictions and other world events.

About the researchers

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Citation

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