

research snapshot

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An overview of cell phone apps for people with problem gambling in Australia

What this research is about

This article describes cell phone apps that people in Australia can use to manage their problem gambling (PG). Problem gambling is repetitive gambling behaviour that leads to negative consequences. About 1 in 10 people with smartphones gamble on their cell phone. The number of people who gamble on their cell phone has been increasing in Australia over the last 10 years. Australian governments do not regulate gambling on online gaming apps as well as they do land-based gambling. Gambling apps also do not offer people support for their PG like some gambling venues do.

People with PG suffer harms such as mental health, money, and relationship problems. However, few get treated for their PG. People may not seek treatment because they deny that they have a problem, feel ashamed of their gambling behaviour, or lack access to the right treatment. There are many different types of treatments for PG. More research is needed to determine how good they are at reducing people's PG symptoms or preventing them from relapsing.

Cell phone apps have the potential to be another resource for people with a gambling problem. There are currently no reviews that explore whether cell phone apps help people with PG. A few studies have found that online treatment programs can help reduce people's PG symptoms, although more evidence is needed. In this article, the researchers described cell phone apps that people in Australia can use to help them deal with their PG.

What the researchers did

The researchers searched three app stores in Australia. The app stores were Apple Appstore,

What you need to know

The researchers described cell phone apps that people in Australia can use to deal with their problem gambling (PG). The researchers searched three app stores for apps that were free, in English, and meant to help reduce, stop, or control a person's gambling behaviour. Overall, there were many more apps for gambling than there were for PG. The researchers assessed 42 apps that met their criteria using the Mobile App Rating Scale (MARS). Most of the apps were not created specifically for PG. Many apps were created by developers who did not have a relationship to addiction services. Most apps focused on helping people stop gambling but did not use a known treatment strategy. The quality of the apps varied. Apps that were affiliated with a government or non-government organization had higher quality. More research is needed to create useful apps for people with PG and make them easy to find.

Google Play, and Windows AppStore. They included any app that was free, available in English, and was meant to help reduce, stop, or control a person's gambling behaviour. They only included the same app once. The researchers used the Mobile App Rating Scale (MARS) to assess how engaging each app was, how it functioned, what it looked like, and what quality of information it provided people. They also considered the rating that people gave each app.

What the researchers found

The researchers initially identified 1029 apps. However, most of the apps were gambling apps or apps that offered betting guides. Thus, there were

many more apps for gambling than there were for PG. The researchers included 42 apps in their study that met their criteria. About 1 in 7 of the apps (14%) were related to a government or non-government organization that offered services to people with addictions. Most apps were created by developers without a relationship to government or non-government organizations in addiction services. Most of the apps were not created specifically for PG.

Most apps (81%) focused on helping people stop gambling. Some apps focused on helping people control or reduce how much they gambled. Few of the apps taught people about PG symptoms. About 1 in 4 of the apps (24%) were based on a recognizable gambling treatment, with 12-step programs being the most common type. Many of the most useful treatment strategies were not used in these apps.

Most apps had only one feature, with the majority being a tracker to track how long people stayed away from gambling activities. Some apps included behavioural intervention, such as encouraging people to do a different activity or avoid situations that would trigger them to gamble. Others encouraged people to set time or money limits on gambling. About half of the apps had features that were found to be helpful for people with other addictions. These features ranged from allowing people to block certain websites, encouraging them to think about their goals, and choosing motivational quotes and pictures.

The quality of the apps varied. Apps that were not related to government or addiction services tended to be of lower quality in terms of content, ease of use, and visual appeal. They also offered fewer features to use.

Overall, apps are just one type of gambling intervention that people could use to reduce their PG symptoms. The researchers recommend that more attention should be paid to the design and content, to make the apps more useful and noticeable.

How you can use this research

Prevention and treatment service providers can use this research to recommend specific apps to patients

that help them with their PG symptoms. Researchers can use this research to explore how often people are directed to gambling websites when they are actually looking for treatment options. More research is needed to create useful apps for people with PG that are easy to find in app stores.

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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