

research snapshot

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The use of behavioural change techniques in problem gambling prevention mobile applications

What this research is about

Mobile health applications (apps) are growing in popularity. These are apps that are accessed on a mobile phone and are intended to help users with their health. Many mobile apps use behaviour change techniques (BCTs). BCTs target a person's psychological mechanisms to bring about a change in behaviour. There are many different types of BCTs. Researchers have developed a way to classify BCTs called the behaviour change technique taxonomy version 1 (BCCTv1). It is important for researchers and for app developers to understand the types of BCTs that are helpful for people.

There are mobile health apps designed to assist with problem gambling. Previous research has found that these apps typically involve abstinence trackers and provide links to services in the user's area. However, no research has yet been done on the types of BCTs that these apps employ.

The aim of this study was to examine the types of BCTs used by mobile apps that aim to reduce problem gambling.

What the researchers did

The researchers searched for apps on the Apple App Store and the Google Play Store in October 2020. They looked for apps that were searchable with terms such as "gambling", "prevention", and "stop". Apps were included if their aim was to target problems related to gambling, were in English, and were free to download. Apps must also be available in the United Kingdom. Once downloaded, the researchers classified the types of BCTs in the app based on its description, menu, and features. They used the BCCTv1 to do this.

What you need to know

Mobile health applications (apps) often employ behaviour change techniques (BCTs). BCTs aim to change behaviour by targeting psychological mechanisms. There are many types of BCTs that may be helpful in bringing about change. The aim of this study was to identify the types of BCTs used by current health mobile apps aimed at problem gambling. The researchers identified 40 apps that were free, in English, available in the United Kingdom, and targeted towards changing problem gambling behaviours. Around 95% of these apps used at least one type of BCT. The number of BCTs used by the apps ranged from 0 to 9. In total, there were 32 types of BCTs used across the 40 apps. However, this only represented about 35% of the types of BCTs that had been identified in research.

The authors suggested that app developers of these types of apps should consider implementing BCTs not already used by existing apps. They should also implement more than one type of BCT in their app. The authors also suggested that app developers work with health experts in behaviour change when developing the app.

What the researchers found

The researchers identified 1203 apps using their search. Then they excluded apps that did not meet their inclusion criteria. This yielded a total of 40 apps that were included for analysis in the study. Twelve apps were downloaded from the Apple App Store, and 28 were downloaded from the Google Play Store.

The researchers found that 95% of the apps used at least one BCT. There were 32 types of BCTs across all 40 apps. Apps ranged in the number of BCTs they used from 0 to 9. About 35% of the apps used less than two BCTs and 30% used four or more.

The most common types of BCTs were “unspecified social support”, “self-monitoring of behaviour”, and “removal of access to the reward.” Apps that used more than one BCT most frequently used the combination of “self-monitoring of behaviour” and “self-monitoring of outcomes of the behaviour.” These two types were used in 17.5% of the apps. There were a few other common combinations. “Goal setting of behaviours” and “goal setting of outcomes” were present in 10% of the apps. “Unspecified social support” and “verbal persuasion about capability” were also present in 10% of the apps.

How you can use this research

This research could be useful for people interested in mobile health apps aimed at problem gambling. The researchers suggest that people interested in developing apps for problem gambling could consider implementing several types of BCTs in their app. They could also consider implementing different strategies than the ones already offered by current apps. The researchers also suggested that app developers work with health experts in behaviour change when developing the app.

About the researchers

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Citation

St Quinton, T., & Morris, B. (2021). Gambling prevention mobile applications: Understanding the inclusion and use of behaviour change techniques. *Journal of Gambling Issues*, 48, 110-121.
<https://doi.org/10.4309/jgi.2021.48.5>

Study funding

No funding was identified for this study.

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