

research snapshot

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How do peers on self-help forums assist in abstinence from gambling?

What this research is about

Our habits can be influenced by our peers. Peers include people in our social networks both physically and in an online environment. Social contagion theory proposes that people are more likely to adopt a habit from their social network if they are exposed to it in many ways, for example, through multiple friends having the same habit. Research on smoking had found that people whose peers spoke more negatively about smoking were unlikely to smoke, whereas people whose peers spoke more positively about smoking were more likely to smoke.

The aim of this study was to examine social contagion effect amongst people who gamble. Specifically, the author of this study wanted to know the effect of social contagion on abstinence from gambling in online self-help forums to quit gambling. The author hypothesized that people with many peers in the self-help forums would be more likely to be abstinent. The author also hypothesized that people who received negative, rejecting comments from peers in the forums would be less likely to be abstinent.

What the researcher did

The author collected data from a website for online self-help forums to quit gambling in Japan. Only forums that the author could browse freely were included. In total, there were 99 forums. Users of these forums were provided with a personal counter that counted the number of days since they last gambled. If they relapsed, they reported to the administrator and their counter was reset. Between September 8, 2008, and March 10, 2020, 161 users had been abstinent continuously from gambling for at least three years, and 928 users were non-abstinent.

What you need to know

Social contagion theory suggests that people are influenced by their peer network, particularly if exposed to something from many peers. The researcher of this study applied this theory to examine the influence of self-help forums on people trying to quit gambling. The researcher extracted data from Japanese online self-help forums for quitting gambling. They found several factors that influenced users' likelihood of achieving abstinence during the three years after joining the forums. First, having more peers in the first three months of using the forum predicted abstinence. Second, having a close relationship with a few senior abstinent peers after the first three months also helped people to stop gambling. Third, receiving rejective comments from peers was not helpful for users trying to quit.

The abstinent users received 91,878 comments in the three years, and the non-abstinent users received 77,439 comments. The measures for this study were taken from comments posted in the forum that were publicly available (i.e., did not need a password to see). Gender, age, gambling history and debt were recorded for each participant through identification of keywords relevant to each category (e.g., "years" and "history" for gambling history, and "cash" for debt).

Gambling abstinence and date of abstinence were the outcomes of interest in this study. The author looked at three factors that might have affected these outcomes: social distance, number of comments received during the first three years, and categories of received comments. Social distance was measured in

terms of direct and indirect contact. If User A commented on User B's post, and User B commented on User C's post, the relationship between User A and User C was indirect and considered "distance 2". The relationship between User A and User B was direct and considered "distance 1". Distance 3 relationships were also identified.

The received comments were categorized into change, general, sustain, acceptive, neutral, and rejective. Change comments were positive comments about gambling abstinence. Sustained comments were negative comments about gambling abstinence. Acceptive comments were positive comments directed at the user, and rejective comments were negative comments. General and neutral comments were neither positive or negative, and might not be related to gambling.

What the researcher found

Users who were abstinent had more peers that interacted with their posts and received more comments of all categories than non-abstinent users. Having more peers meant it was more likely for a user to be abstinent, and this was determined to be the most important factor. Importantly, having more peers in the first three months after joining a forum predicted abstinence. Receiving more comments from peers after the first two months meant it was more likely for a user to be abstinent. However, receiving more sustained and rejective comments meant it was less likely for a user to be abstinent. Additionally, disclosing that one had lied because of their gambling meant it was more likely for a user to be abstinent.

The researcher also found that forum users who had been abstinent for a longer period of time (senior abstinent peers) influenced those who had been abstinent for a shorter period of time (junior peers). If a senior abstinent peer focused most of their forum interaction on a junior abstinent peer (social distance 1), that junior peer was more likely to become abstinent. This relationship was also seen for junior and senior abstinent peers at social distance 2 and social distance 3. The researcher concluded that it was more important to have a close relationship with

certain senior abstinent peers than to have many relationships with other peers on the forum.

How you can use this research

This study could be useful for gambling researchers and clinicians interested in how self-help forums can be effective for people trying to quit gambling. The researcher found a social contagion effect and identified several factors that predicted gambling abstinence within three years of joining a forum. These included having many peers in the first three months, receiving fewer sustained and rejective comments, and having a close relationship with a few senior abstinent peers.

About the researcher

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