

Online Chat and Email Support for Gambling: Client Characteristics

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Introduction

Only a small proportion of the 350,000 Australians at risk of problem gambling will seek help from traditional services. Shame, stigma and structural barriers such as hours of operation and geographic location have been found to limit access to traditional modes of treatment.

Launched by Turning Point in late 2009, *Gambling Help Online* offers 24/7, immediate synchronous and asynchronous counselling and support. The website has received approximately 50,000 hits and provides self-help, information, referral and access to the counselling options.

The current research aims to determine the characteristics of clients accessing online chat and email support for gambling concerns.

Method

Eight hundred and twenty gamblers who accessed chat or email support completed a brief demographic and gambling severity survey prior to engaging in the chat or email support program.

Results

Online Chat

Online chat clients ($n=700$) were most frequently male (58%) and under 30 years (44%). The average duration of the chat session was 43 minutes with 61% of clients accessing the service anonymously.

Electronic Gaming Machines were the most often source of concern (71%) followed by wagering (14%). There were significantly higher rates of wagering from Victoria and Western Australia than other states.

Almost 70% of chat contacts occurred outside traditional business hours. As shown on Figure 1 the time of contact was different to the Victorian Gamblers Helpline provided by Turning Point.

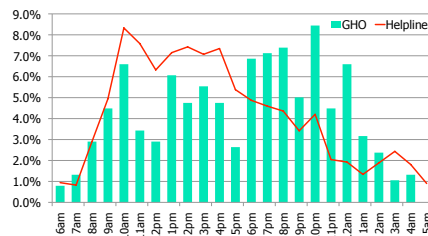


Figure 1. Online chat vs Victorian Gamblers Helpline time of contact

Cultural background was most often identified as Australian (70%) with higher rates of Asian background from NSW compared with other states.

The mean score of the Problem Gambling Severity Index was 21.4 ($SD=4.2$) with females engaging in chat scoring significantly higher than males ($p<.05$).

As shown on Figure 2 an age by gender interaction was found with a significant difference between males and females aged under 30, 40-49 and over 50.

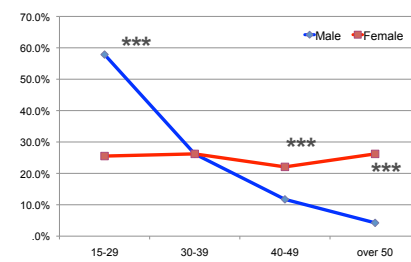


Figure 2. Online chat age by gender

Email support

The 120 gamblers accessing Email Support were more likely to be female than male (53%) and send their first email during business hours (51% compared with 31% chat).

There was a significantly higher proportion of males aged under 30 years ($p<.01$) and 30-39 ($p<.05$) accessing email support. Conversely, there was a higher proportion of females than males aged 40-49 ($p<.05$) and greater than 50 years ($p<.001$).

Discussion

The program aims to (1) attract a new cohort of clients who otherwise may not access face-to-face services and (2) extend the availability of counselling and support by addressing issues around remoteness, anonymity and after-hours availability.

The high proportion of young males accessing live chat during evening and weekend periods suggests a new treatment seeking cohort and the successful widening of treatment access.

Future Work

Based on these findings, a survey of the help-seeking experiences, motivation, mood and session satisfaction of gamblers and concerned others accessing the site is being undertaken. The results of this research, and the survey of client help seeking preferences, will inform future program development.

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