

The Perceptions of Macao Undergraduates Regarding Help Websites for Problem Gambling

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Introduction

Many young people are increasingly engaged in gambling (Welte et al., 2008). A survey conducted in Macao in 2013 showed that the gambling participation rate for those in the 22 to 29 age group was around 49 percent (ISCG, 2014). Another survey, also conducted in Macao, showed that 6.6 percent of students aged 12 to 22 had gambled online. Among them, 10.7 percent and 25 percent were problem and pathological gamblers respectively (Wong, 2010). When people start gambling at a young age, they are likely to persist gambling over time (Griffiths, 1995). They also have a higher likelihood of becoming problem gamblers (Winters et al., 2005). Problem gamblers tend to gamble more than they can afford and they run into debts. As a result, they often experience anxiety, poor mental health and other psychological and social problems. They may also have suicidal thoughts (Ledgerwood et al., 2005).

When the young gamblers are in trouble, they may not be sure where to turn to for help as they may be fearful of confiding in their parents or elders (Kelsey, 2014). They may surf the Internet to look for help because it is a convenient place to do so and they can do it anonymously (Lee, 2011). Very little is known, however, about the types of help that are available online. There is also little research about the perceptions of young people regarding the online help organizations. Among the published research in this area, they have tended to address the Western contexts.

Gambling has evolved rapidly in many parts of Asia. Macao's gambling revenue, for example, has surpassed that of the Las Vegas Strip (Cheung, 2007). The demographics of Macao's gamblers showed that the majority were from mainland China (Steffen, 2008) and the proportion of young gamblers was increasing (Leung, 2009). The need to provide help for the young Chinese gamblers, therefore, was very pressing (Zeng, 2009; Emier, 2010). Hence, the purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions of young people, specifically those of Macau undergraduates, regarding the help websites for problem gambling. The specific objectives of this study were as follow:

- (1) to determine the types of online help services that were available for problem gambling,
- (2) to examine the perceptions and preference of the undergraduates regarding their choice of online help organisations, and
- (3) to gather comments/suggestions on the available online help websites.

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Research Background

Help with problem gambling is a service provided for people who are affected by problem gambling; whether the gamblers themselves or individuals closely associated with them. Many people gamble for fun and they consider gambling as a social activity (Loo et al., 2008). Traditionally, problem gambling has not been regarded as something serious requiring special attention or treatment. With the commercialisation of the gambling industry (Hsu, 2006), however, many people have fallen into the trap of heavy or compulsive gambling. They may gamble for fun and excitement or they may bear hopes of becoming rich, despite losing more money as they gamble (Vong, 2007).

With increasing awareness of the need to minimise the harm done by problem gambling, there is growing concern about the availability of help for problem gamblers (Leung, 2009). Unlike the Western approach of treating problem gambling as a psychiatric condition, the Chinese view problem gamblers as individuals who lack self-control (Luk & Bond, 1992). In many Asian countries, the treatment for problem gambling typically involves counselling – in areas such as managing emotions, controlling impulsive behaviour, and controlling expenditure. Problem gamblers are encouraged to participate in activities that distract them from gambling. However, due to the traditional Chinese emphasis on ‘saving face’ (Raylu et al., 2008), problem gamblers are often reluctant to meet with counsellors or to participate in the activities organised for them. In such situations, telephone hotlines and online help services that preserve the anonymity of problem gamblers could be more useful. They can promote greater or earlier help-seeking activity, and may help to minimise the financial and psychological strain to which problem gamblers and their significant others are exposed.

The online provision of help for problem gamblers has many benefits, such as convenience, cost-effectiveness, an alternative for those unwilling to seek face-to-face assistance, and the ability to reach a large number of people (Griffiths & Cooper, 2003). Another significant benefit noted by Cooper (2004) is that problem gamblers can ‘lurk’ at the help websites (i.e., visit the sites without registering their presence to other users), making it easier for them to consider seeking further help. Wood and Wood (2009) also argued for the usefulness of online support forums designed to help people with gambling problems. They found such forums to yield very positive results, helping users to better understand and cope with their own gambling problems or those of others.

Method

This study was conducted in a computer lab among a group of undergraduates in Macao. Students attending the Gaming Technology course were asked to complete a web-surfing exercise and a written questionnaire survey. They were told the study was about getting to know the types of online services that were available for problem gambling and it sought their comments regarding the online help organizations. The students had at least an hour to use the Internet and complete the questionnaire survey. The questionnaires were in English and students could respond in Chinese or English.

The students were provided with examples of the various types of online help websites that were available in Macao and Hong Kong. They were asked to view these websites or other problem gambling websites they might know. The websites were in Chinese, and many also had an English version. After viewing the websites, the students were asked to name the services that the online help organizations provide. They were also asked to indicate three online organisations they would most likely to approach for assistance with problem gambling, in rank order. They were to give their reasons (in free-text format) for their choice of the preferred organizations. The survey also gave the participants the opportunity to provide comments on the websites they had visited.

This study collected data from 59 undergraduates enrolled in two classes, all of whom participated in the web-surfing exercise and questionnaire survey. All the participants were Chinese, and between 21 and 25 years old. Thirty-three (56 per cent) were male and the rest female.

Results

The students' responses to the question about the services provided by the help websites are displayed in Table 1. The services relate mainly to information sharing. They are organized into three main categories. They include: (1) information about contacting the help organization, for example, its location, hot line telephone number, and email address, (2) information that might be useful for problem gamblers, e.g., how to exercise responsible gambling, tips on managing money, details about activities that are organized for problem gambling, links to related organizations, videos that shared recovering experiences from gambling addiction, and (3) online facilities such as tools for evaluating the extent of gambling addiction and forums for communicating with members of the help organization.

Table 1
Services provided by the problem gambling websites

Information about contacting the help organization:

1. Offers information on a telephone hotline for those in need.
2. Map/locations of organization.
3. Email contacts.
4. Links to related help organisations.

Information sharing:

1. Purpose and mission of the organization.
2. How to exercise responsible gambling.
3. Tips on managing money.
4. Videos that share recovery experiences from gambling addiction.
5. Organized activities related to problem gambling.
6. Free counselling services.

Online help facilities:

1. Self-test to help evaluate one's addiction.
2. Forum on problem gambling.

The ranks given by the participants for their choice of help organisations were scored using assigned weights. The help organisations ranked first, second and third were assigned corresponding weights of three, two and one. The scores for each type of help organisation were then added together to obtain an overall preference score. The preference scores are displayed in Table 2. The results showed that most participants have a preference for help from the government-affiliated organisations, regardless of the participants' gender. The two government-affiliated help organisations are the Resilience Counselling Centre (RCC), which is part of the Social Welfare Bureau, and the counselling service provided for young people by the Education Department. The latter organisation provides other types of help services besides problem gambling. Detailed analysis of the results indicates that for those who cited a preference for government-affiliated organisations, only 4 percent chose the counselling service provided by the Education Department. In descending order of popularity, the next two types of help organisation selected by the participants were volunteer-based and

spiritual/religious entities. The online help provided by gambling-related and medically affiliated organisations was least popular.

Table 2
Preference scores for the various types of help organisations found online

Organisational affiliation	Male	Female	Total
Government	79 (42%)	65 (42%)	144 (42%)
Volunteer-based	49 (26%)	41 (26%)	90 (26%)
Spiritual/religious	53 (28%)	34 (22%)	87 (25%)
Gambling-related	2 (1%)	10 (6%)	12 (4%)
Medical	3 (2%)	5 (3%)	8 (2%)
Others – university counsellor	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	1 (0%)
Total	186 (100%)	156 (100%)	342* (100%)

*Note: Some of the respondents provided only their first choice of preferred organisations.

The reasons given for the participants' choices were analysed by searching for the underlying themes of their responses. Three initial themes were identified through pawning the responses – a process that grouped the commonalities and similarities of the answers, based on the meanings of the identified themes. The themes that were initially identified were: (1) trust, (2) familiarity and (3) web-related factors. The theme for trust was later expanded to include (a) trust in ability, (b) trust in benevolence, (c) trust in integrity, and (d) overall trust.

In Table 3, the participants' reasons for their preferences were organised according to the above underlying themes. The sub-theme of 'trust in ability' relates to respondents' perceptions of the ability of a help organisation to assist problem gamblers in resolving their problems. Analysis of the qualitative data suggests that the respondents felt trust in ability to be built through the organisation's online depiction of its services, professionalism, and resources. One student linked trust in ability with the organisation's budget and resources: 'The government has a budget to support people who need this kind of help, and so should be able to do a better job than other organisations'. 'Trust in benevolence' refers to the respondents' trust in the organisation's desire to carry out good and kind acts. This form of trust was described by a student as trust in an organisation that 'truly wants to help problem gamblers'.

Table 3
Reasons/perceptions regarding choice of help organisations

Trust in ability

1. It seems to provide a good counselling service.
2. It seems professional.
3. The government has a budget to support people who need this kind of help.
4. Government departments have more powerful resources.

Trust in benevolence

1. Feeling that the government wishes to help.
2. The organisation truly wants to help problem gamblers.
3. The service is free.
4. It prioritises young problem gamblers.

Trust in integrity

1. The organisation says that all information will be kept secret.
2. It provides a confidential service.

Overall trust

1. The organisation belongs to the government/It is a government-based organisation.
2. Confident that the organisation can help to solve gambling addiction.
3. It has a good reputation.
4. It is a reliable government organisation.
5. It is managed by the government.
6. The government should be able to do a better job than other organisations.

Familiarity

1. It is a well-known help organisation in Macao.
2. I don't know of any others.
3. Most famous help organisation.
4. Other organisations may lack promotion.
5. Well-known.

Factors related to the website

1. The design of the website is visually impressive, very clear, very well organised.
2. Very comprehensive website, has different languages.
3. The web layout is professional, easy to navigate.
4. The website has an upbeat and hopeful design.
5. The website is user-friendly.
6. The site offers a self-test to determine whether one is a problem gambler.
7. The website uses Flash, which makes its pages more interesting.
8. The website has useful links.
9. The visuals are colourful.
10. The website has different font sizes to accommodate the needs of different Web users.

‘Trust in integrity’ relates to the organisation’s strict adherence to moral or ethical principles. This form of trust is built by organisations’ efforts to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of their clients’ information. One participant described this form of trust as the belief that ‘all information will be kept secret’. The participant described ‘overall trust’ as general confidence in the help organisations and the perception of such organisations as reliable and reputable.

The theme of ‘familiarity’ refers to the participants’ knowledge of an organisation based on prior interactions or experiences. The participants who gave this reason for their choice organization explained that they preferred help organisations of which they were already aware. Some participants had not considered certain help organisations listed on the survey questionnaire because they had not heard of them, presumably due to a lack of publicity.

With regard to the theme of ‘web-related factors’, the participants offered many reasons for being impressed by the organisations’ websites. Some approved of the comprehensive nature of the website; others cited professionalism and organisation; and some were attracted by the use of Flash to make the websites more interesting.

The participants also provided comments and suggestions regarding the online help websites. The comments and suggestions were collated and presented in Appendix A. They will be discussed in the next section.

Discussion

The results of this study showed that online help organizations provided mostly basic information sharing services. They inform the users about the organizations and where they can get help. They also provide responsible gambling information. Some websites provide forums to interact with members of the help organization. In Western countries, online help could go beyond these services to include counselling, therapy or guided self-treatment using tools such as email, chat rooms, workbooks and feedback (Cunningham et al., 2011; Carlbring & Smit, 2008), or there could be combinations of Internet-delivered help and telephone support (Raylu et al., 2008). However, the effectiveness and legal issues related to these additional services offered in the Western countries are still being evaluated (Gainsbury & Blaszczynski, 2011). As yet, there is no consensus on best practice or ‘golden’ standards regarding the effective use of the Internet to engage problem gamblers.

Regarding the respondents’ choice of the online help organizations, the findings showed that most preferred the RCC. Very few indicated they would be willing to seek help from a medical or gambling-related organisation. They associated their choice with trust, familiarity, and web-related factors. Many participants felt the RCC to be trustworthy because it is a government-affiliated organisation. They expressed not only overall trust in the organisation, but more specifically, trust in its ability to assist problem gamblers, trust in its benevolence and trust in its integrity. Non-governmental help organisations should try to build such trust among their potential customers. For example, they could seek governmental backing or accreditation for their work to increase confidence in the services they provide. Help organisations of all kinds should also allocate a certain portion of their budget to publicising and thus increasing familiarity with their services. Many of the respondents commented that they had heard about the RCC through various methods of advertising, such as bus adverts, newspapers, radio and television. Other help organisations should do the same, advertising their services in a range of media.

As it takes time for trust and familiarity to develop, help organisations should put strategies in place to establish trust and familiarity among problem gamblers as quickly as possible. One solution is to host a professional-looking website that is easily accessible and highly visible to anyone who is looking for help. It would thus be useful for help organisations to engage in some form of sponsored or targeted advertising. For example, sponsored advertising increases the likelihood of a website’s being found by an online search engine. If help organisations do not have the resources to implement sponsored advertising, they can optimise their websites to ensure that they appear among the first few results of online searches. Online users looking for help will also have a far more positive impression of help organisations if their websites are well designed, well organised and useful. They are likely to associate a professional-looking website with a competent and effective help organisation. In addition, such websites are more memorable, encouraging return visits. If help organisations pay attention to the ‘web-related factors’ listed above, they may be able to attract more people in need of help. The organisations should also use their websites to foster a sense of trust in their services

among online users. For example, they could highlight their integrity by informing users of the confidentiality of their services (if indeed their services are confidential). This is pertinent to Chinese gamblers' sense of pride and disinclination to 'lose face'.

Arising from the results that most survey participants preferred help for problem gambling from a government-affiliated organization, it would be interesting to compare, in future research, whether the same preference for help from government-affiliated organization(s) is applicable to young Chinese in other countries, such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Europe, or America. Additionally, we can also examine the preferences among the non-Chinese samples. The results from this line of research could add valuable knowledge to our understanding about help seeking behaviour for problem gambling. They might also provide insights into cross-cultural issues pertaining to problem gambling.

With regard to the comments and suggestions for the websites (see Appendix A), although they seem straightforward, help organisations are advised to take careful note of the recommendations. There are four areas of comments and suggestions: publicity, design, content, and focus. The participants who highlighted publicity felt that the help organisations should do more advertising, as some of their website counters had not registered many visitors. It is possible many help seekers are unaware of the existence of these help organisations. One respondent also suggested presenting statistics on the number of problem-gambling cases that an organisation has helped to resolve. This has the potential not only to help with publicity but to boost the confidence of help seekers. With regard to website design, the respondents felt that much more could be done. For example, the websites could make use of brighter colours and videos instead of plain text. Another respondent felt that once a user has been identified as a problem gambler by the self-assessment test, the organisation should follow up with suggestions on what the user should do next. The respondents also felt that the organisations should have given more thought to the ease of navigation on their websites. Their suggestions for improvement included the provision of links to enable users to apply for casino exclusion, learn about managing money or make appointments with counsellors.

Addressing the content of the websites, a number of respondents felt that the websites should provide more opportunities for engagement with online users, rather than simply providing information. For example, live-chat facilities should also be available to provide problem gamblers with instant help. The respondents felt that these online tools are especially useful because problem gamblers usually wish to remain anonymous, and the Chinese, in particular, have a fear of 'losing face'. Another recommendation on the content of the websites includes updating news items more frequently.

Lastly, the respondents commented on the focus of the help websites. They said that the websites' presentation should match the problem-gambling theme, but that they should not depict money, cards or casino games, as these could trigger problem gamblers to return to a gambling context.

With respect to the respondents' comments and suggestions, it is useful to note that past research has found Chinese gamblers to have difficulties admitting that they have problems with gambling (Loo et al., 2008). It is thus useful to provide a tool for assessing the nature and severity of the problem. Once problem gambling has been identified, gamblers need to be given options on what they can do. Currently, gamblers in Macao can ask the Gaming Inspection and Coordination Bureau to exclude them from entering a casino (Lages, 2011). This type of self-exclusion programme has been shown to be useful for problem gamblers (Ladouceur et al., 2007). However, problem gamblers may be unaware of the possibility of applying for casino exclusion, or unsure of how to do so.

It would thus be useful for organisations to provide information on this process, as well as links to the application form, on their websites.

Conclusion

There are a number of limitations related to the results of this study. The first limitation is that evaluations of the students' tendency for problem gambling were not measured, as we had intended just to conduct a pilot study focusing on the undergraduates' perceptions. Thus, caution should be exercised in generalizing the results to problem gamblers. The second limitation of this research is that the results obtained in this study were based on a small convenience sample, and therefore, they might not be representative of the undergraduate population. The third limitation of this study is the use of the term 'problem gambling' and 'problem gamblers'. In this study, the terms have a general meaning, and they did not indicate the degree or severity of the problem. In future studies, it would be useful to consider different levels of problem gambling as they may require different kinds of help and support.

To conclude, this study has found that online help organizations in Macau and Hong Kong provided mainly information services for those seeking help with problem gambling. Participants in this study, comprising Macao's undergraduate students, preferred to seek help for problem gambling from the RCC. Their choice was associated with their perceptions of trust, familiarity, and website-related factors. A number of comments related to the publicity, design, contents, and focus of the websites have also been gathered through the study. These comments provide help organizations with useful information and guidance on designing their websites to attract potential users.

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Appendix A

Comments and suggestions regarding the help websites

Publicity

1. I think help organisations should do more advertising. The website counter did not register many visitors.
2. The website should provide statistics on the number of cases the organisation has helped to resolve. This would increase the confidence of those seeking help, making them more willing to join the programme.

Design

1. Help organisations should put more effort into constructing their websites. The websites I have browsed are too boring and lack interest. For example, the organisations could provide a video on the dark side of problem gambling and what individuals should do to get rid of this bad habit.
2. I think the websites for Macao's online help organisations for problem gambling are too simple. There is a lot of room for improvement.
3. They have a self-assessment test to find out whether you are a problem gambler or not. I liked that, but even when users are identified as problem gamblers, the website does not encourage them to seek help.
4. The colour of the website is very important. Dark colours make viewers feel passive and depressed, whereas bright colours make them feel relaxed and hopeful.

Content

1. I think most of the help websites just provide information. There should be more engagement with users, so that users can interact with the site. For example, there could be a forum for gamblers to write messages.
2. The websites should update their news items more often.
3. The website offers advice on managing one's finances, which I find useful.
4. More approaches than simply inviting users to call a telephone helpline are possible. For example, organisations could post videos of problem gamblers who have been successful in obtaining help, or videos that show the negative effects of gambling. They could also provide links for users who wish to apply for casino exclusion.
5. Online help organisations could provide live-chat services on the Web. Sometimes, problem gamblers do not wish to tell anyone that they have a problem for fear of 'losing face'. The Internet offers an alternative, because it does not require problem gamblers to meet or talk to counsellors, but still allows them to share their feelings. Live chat also offers instant help for those addicted to online gambling.

Focus

1. The help organisations' websites should have more pictures matching the problem-gambling theme. However, they should not depict money, cards or casino games, as these may trigger problem gamblers to return to a gambling context.
2. Some organisations provide many services, making it difficult to find useful and specific information about problem gambling.
3. The websites should encourage problem gamblers to actively seek help. But they don't seem to do so. They just provide information, and do not attempt to elicit the user's emotions. The pictures on the websites seem to suggest that everything is satisfactory. Nothing on the websites indicates that gambling addiction hurts the gambler and his/her loved ones, or encourages the gambler to get help. The Australian problem-gambling website seems to be doing a better job. It shows that addictive gambling can create problems for the gambler and his/her family – there is a picture of a couple arguing and a sad child sitting in front of them with an empty wallet. Just looking at the picture makes the user aware that something is wrong. The happy pictures on the Macao websites are unlikely to make problem gamblers think that they truly have a problem. The Australian website also emphasises that one person's gambling problem affects others.