

The WAGER, Vol. 30(7) - The acceptability and use of smartphone apps for gambling problems

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These days, the [majority of people worldwide](#) own a smartphone—and with that comes access to apps for just about everything, including support for gambling problems. [These apps](#) deliver interventions, like [cognitive behavioral therapy](#), to help people cut back or stop their gambling. While these apps are still relatively new, [early research](#) suggests they can be effective in improving problem gambling symptoms and severity. But what do the people who actually need these apps think of them? This week, The WAGER reviews a [study by C.O. Hawker and colleagues](#) that investigated how Australian adults with a history of gambling problems view and use gambling help apps.

What was the research question?

What is the acceptability and use of smartphone apps for gambling help among Australian adults with a history of gambling problems?

What did the researchers do?

The researchers recruited 173 adults (aged 18 and older) with a history of gambling problems who lived in Victoria, Australia. The participants took an online survey. They reported demographic information, their past-year gambling behavior, the severity of their gambling problems, and any professional help they had sought. Participants also completed a questionnaire that measured their attitudes towards smartphone app-delivered gambling interventions overall, and in four specific domains. These domains were: confidence in the effectiveness of gambling help apps, perceived benefits of anonymity, skepticism, and technology-related threats. The researchers calculated [descriptive statistics](#) to determine app acceptability and use overall, and [linear](#) and [logistic regressions](#) to identify predictors of acceptability and use.

What did they find?

Nearly all participants (91.3%) had some level of gambling problems in the past

year. Just over half (55.5%) had overall positive attitudes towards gambling help apps, while a third (36.4%) held generally negative views. Most participants believed these apps were effective and credible tools for support (see Figure). Many also saw their anonymity as a benefit—especially those with more severe gambling problems. On the other hand, some participants were skeptical of these apps’ long-term effectiveness. Most participants endorsed concerns about technology-related threats, such as whether an app could actually teach them the skills needed to manage their problems and help them stay motivated compared to traditional in-person counseling. People living in rural areas were less likely to perceive such threats, while those who had received professional help in the past were more likely to. Despite having overall positive attitudes towards gambling help apps, only one in five participants (20.8%) had ever used one. Those who had used the apps were more likely to be younger, had sought professional help, and had more severe gambling problems.

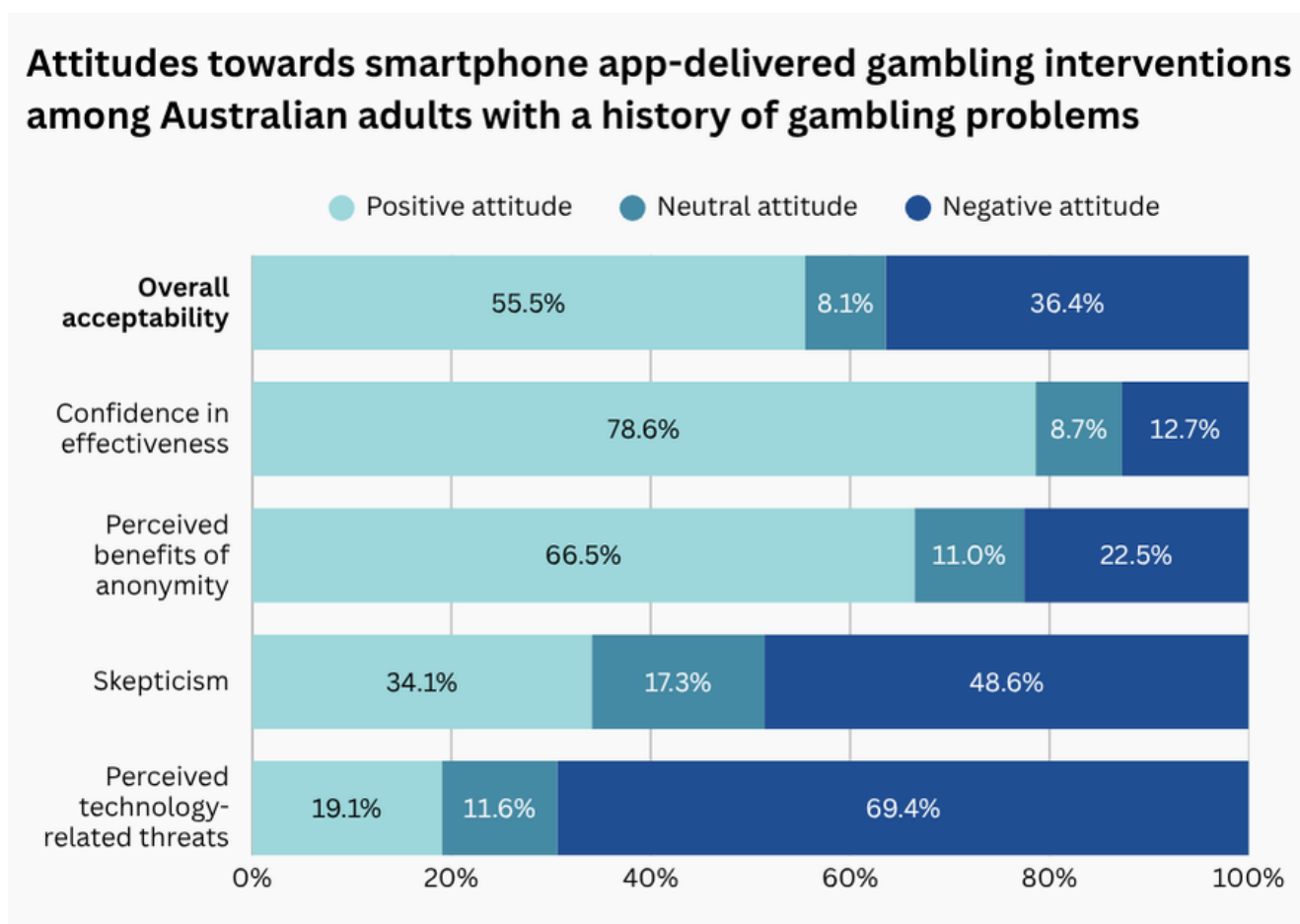


Figure. Attitudes towards smartphone app-delivered gambling interventions overall and across four domains, among a sample of Australian adults with a history of gambling problems. Click image to enlarge.

Why do these findings matter?

Smartphone apps for gambling support have many benefits. For one, they can be used anonymously—which is important because [shame and stigma](#) often stop people from seeking help. They're also affordable and easy to access, making them a useful option for people who might face [barriers to traditional in-person support](#), such as those in rural areas. This study's findings suggest that while people with a history of gambling problems hold generally positive views towards gambling help apps, few actually use them. To increase perceived acceptability and use, app developers should better communicate the benefits of these support tools (e.g., anonymity) while also addressing the areas of concern highlighted in this study. For example, apps could include some level of [therapist-delivered support](#) and incorporate features to enhance user motivation (e.g., in-app rewards).

Every study has limitations. What are the limitations of this study?

The researchers adapted the [Attitudes towards Psychological Online Interventions Questionnaire](#) to measure the acceptability of app-delivered gambling interventions. While this questionnaire has been validated for psychological interventions delivered online, we cannot be sure that it is a valid tool for measuring the acceptability of smartphone apps for gambling help. Therefore, these findings should be interpreted with caution. It is also important to note that the study was conducted in Australia, meaning that the results only reflect the views of Australians toward gambling help apps.

For more information:

Do you think that you or someone you know might have a gambling problem? Several gambling help apps and gambling blocking apps are available on smartphone app stores. Visit the [National Council on Problem Gambling](#) for screening tools and resources. For additional resources, including gambling and self-help tools, visit our [Addiction Resources](#) page.

— Kira Landauer, MPH

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