

Social responsibility in online gambling: voluntary limit setting

Allowing players to set spending limits would be a solution to tackle the problem of gambling addiction. Dr Richard T.A. Wood and Dr Mark D. Griffiths, two experts in the field of gambling psychology, look into recent research investigating how players react to monitoring their gambling expenditure.

Facilities allowing gamblers to set limits on their spending are becoming increasingly more common. Spending limits come in many forms:

- Deposit limits - This refers to the maximum amount of money that a player can deposit into their play account at any given time. Winnings can either be included or excluded from this figure.
- Play limits - This refers to the maximum amount of money that a player can actually play with at any given time. As with deposit limits, winnings can either be included or excluded from this figure.
- Loss limits - This refers to the maximum amount of money that a player is allowed to lose at any one session.
- Bet limits - This refers to the maximum amount of money that can be bet on a single game, or on concurrent games.

In addition to this, mandatory limits can either be fixed so that all games have the same limit, and/or all players have the same limit, or limits can be variable depending upon factors such as the type of game played, or the demonstrable wealth of the individual player. Fixed limits have the advantage that they are initially easy to administer. However, this does not take into account that players vary in the amount of disposable income available to them. A low fixed limit may be frustrating for wealthier players but may not be

low enough to avoid negatively impacting on poorer players. Furthermore, fixed limits may require regular monitoring and updating to examine their relevance to new games and to existing games over time.

It could also be argued that fixed limits do not encourage and facilitate players to take individual responsibility for managing and monitoring their own gambling expenditure. Variable limits for specific games require that each new game be assessed independently. This may provide a more accurate assessment of the required limit, but they need more consideration on initial set up.

As far as we are aware, there is no empirical evidence to show that either higher mandatory spend limits or player self-set limits are associated with increased levels of problem gambling in either online or offline settings. A study examined the effects of player deposit limits on internet sports betting by customers of bwin Interactive Entertainment¹. Their study examined 47,000 subscribers to bwin over a period of two years and compared the behaviour of players who tried to exceed their deposit limit with all other players. Deposit limit referred to the amount of money deposited into a player's spend account excluding any accumulated winnings. Bwin sets a mandatory deposit limit of • 1,000 per day or • 5,000 per 30 days. Players can also set their own deposit limits (per 30 days) below the mandatory limits.

Overall, the study found that only 0.3% of players attempted to exceed their deposit limit. However, the large mandatory limit may be one reason for this finding as the authors noted that the vast majority of players never came close to reaching the maximum deposit limit. More specifically, the vast majority of the

sample (95%) never deposited more than • 1,050 per 30 days, 1/5 of the maximum allowed • 5,000. However, the study did not distinguish between those who attempted to exceed either the mandatory limit or their own personally set deposit limits.

A study carried out in Nova Scotia² found that the trial implementation of several responsible gaming features for Video Lottery (VL) games (including player set spend limits) generally reduced the overall levels of expenditure by players. Use of these features was associated with longer play for the same or lower levels of expenditure. Whilst this research related to VL games only, there is no reason to assume that there would be different findings for online games given the similarity of their basic structural characteristics. However, it must be noted that in this particular study, the specific impact of the player set spend limit could not be separated from the impact of the other responsible gaming features.

The Global Online Gambler Survey³ collected data from 10,865 participants, from 96 countries, who reported that they had gambled at internet casino sites, internet poker sites (or both) within the three months prior to the research. It covered many areas but one of the findings was that 70% of players thought that the option to set voluntary spend limits would be a useful feature.

Overall, the attitudes among focus group participants were that the onus for playing responsibly should rest only with the player. The survey and the focus group data showed that players preferred informed choice options such as supplying regular financial statements to players. The majority of players were very much opposed to mandatory spend limits which they regarded as patronising and

overly restrictive. Very similar findings were observed in a series of focus groups conducted in Las Vegas, where participants were asked to consider a range of responsible gaming measures including player set spend limits⁴. Mandatory spend limits were strongly opposed, whereas player-set limits were more widely regarded as useful.

More recently, a study⁵ among Svenska Spel clientele examining players' attitudes and behaviour towards using social responsibility tools among 2,348 online gamblers (all clientele of Svenska Spel) who completed an online survey. The most useful feature was the setting of spending limits with over 2/3 of respondents (70%) reporting the feature to be 'quite useful' or 'very useful'. The other 'quite/very useful' endorsement ratings were being able to view their gambling profile (49%), performing self-diagnostic tests of gambling behaviour (46%), being able to self-exclude for a certain period of time (42%), getting information about support for gambling issues (40%), and getting information about predicted gambling profile (36%).

To date, there is no evidence to suggest that it is possible to have a weekly spend limit that is appropriate for all players. What is too little for some players will be too much for other players. The only ways to achieve an appropriate mandatory level would be by having different levels for different customers defined by their expendable income. Such a scheme would most likely be impossible to implement, and would likely be extremely unpopular with players. It would appear from reviewing the small empirical literature base that there is evidence to suggest that most gamblers (irrespective of pathology) try to regulate their

Bwin sets a mandatory deposit limit of no more than • 1,000 per day or • 5,000 per 30 days. Players can also set their own deposit limits (per 30 days) below the mandatory limits

spending. Furthermore, it would appear that voluntary spend limits have the capacity to helpfully assist in that process. The evidence base suggests that the most appropriate responsible gambling strategy to be implemented by gaming companies would be for voluntary (rather than mandatory) pre-determined spending limits by players. This is because individuals are likely to vary widely in the amount of disposable income that they have available for leisure activities such as gambling. Therefore, a fixed mandatory spend limit will always be too little for some and too much for others. Players should therefore be required to set their own self-determined spending limits before they commence gambling. Such an action emphasises individual responsibility for managing expenditure. It may also ensure that the player actively engages with at least one of the responsible gaming tools on offer. There would appear to be a consensus of expert opinion that encouraging player responsibility is a more effective long-term strategy for harm minimisation than imposing mandatory restrictions upon all players. One of the more consistent research findings from the limited empirical base is that mandatory limits are unpopular with the majority of gamblers. This could conceivably lead to some deciding that they would prefer to take their custom to perhaps less responsible gaming operators. Should this be the case, it is reasonable to assume that vulnerable/susceptible players would be more at risk to develop gambling problems. Any such increase in the prevalence of problem gambling will impact upon the local jurisdiction where the player resides, regardless of how the problem occurred. In other words, driving gamblers away through what may be

perceived as overly restrictive practices could potentially contribute to an overall increase in problem gambling locally. Given that research in this important area is rather limited, it is recommended that the implementation and ongoing effectiveness of player set limits by gaming operators should be carefully monitored and evaluated. The term 'limit' appears to be unpopular - therefore, the emphasis should instead be placed on offering game management tools that assist players in decisions about how much they want to spend gambling.

**Dr Richard T.A. Wood
Dr Mark D. Griffiths**

GamRes Ltd, Canada
Nottingham Trent University
info@gamres.org mark.griffiths@ntu.ac.uk

1. Broda, A. a.o. (2008), Virtual harm reduction efforts for Internet gambling, *Harm Reduction Journal*, 5, 27.
2. Focal Research Consultants (2007), *Assessment of the behavioural impact of the responsible Gaming Device (RGD) Features: Analysis of Nova Scotia Player-Card Data*.
3. International Gaming Research Unit (2007), *The global online gambling report, e-Commerce and Online Gaming Regulation and Assurance*.
4. Bernhard, B.J., Lucas, A.F. & Jang, D. (2006), *Responsible gaming device research report*, University of Nevada.
5. Griffiths, M.D., Wood, R.T.A. & Parke, J. (2009), A survey of attitudes and behaviour among Internet gamblers, *CyberPsychology and Behavior*, 12, 413-421.