

Internet gamblers and online social responsibility tools

Svenska Spel, the Swedish gaming operator, recently launched a 'social responsibility tool' – the first of its kind - that monitors gambling behaviour. Dr Mark Griffiths, Dr Richard Woods and Dr Jonathan Parke, experts in the field of gambling psychology, examine the impact and potential repercussions of this new social responsibility tool.

For many years, we have been recommending to gaming companies - especially online gaming companies and those companies who offer loyalty cards - that they should consider using their large data sets to help identify problem gambling behaviour. Despite the potential to exploit gamblers, some gaming companies are now beginning to use their large data sets to help problem gamblers rather than to promote their gaming products to them. Svenska Spel, 888.com and Nova Scotia Gaming Corporation are a few examples.

For instance, the Swedish gaming company Svenska Spel launched a package of social responsibility tools (PlayScan) that aims to prevent problems with gaming in an active way. PlayScan was designed to detect players at risk of developing gaming problems and offers them tools to change their behaviour. Unlike the conventional purpose of customer databases – that is, to increase sales - the objective of PlayScan is the opposite. PlayScan aims to detect and help those who would benefit from playing less. PlayScan has been compared to a safety belt - something you use without intending to actually make use of. The tool measures increases and/or decreases of players' gaming behaviour and uses a 'traffic light' identification system. If a player's gaming is stable and with no risky

behaviour identified, it gives a green signal to the player. A yellow signal indicates some risky gaming. Serious problems with gaming are shown by a red signal. The use of the system is voluntary, but Svenska Spel strongly recommends its customers to use it. PlayScan uses the player's behaviour from the preceding year that is then matched against a model based on behavioural characteristics for problem players. It operates through a combination of genetic programming - a neural network analogue - and Bayesian models. In order to reach a level where the model fitted actual gambling behaviour, the variables were extensively calibrated. If it predicts players' behaviour as risky, players get an advance warning together with advice on how they can change their patterns in order to avoid future unhealthy and/or risky gaming. If a player's behaviour indicates gaming problems, they are deleted from the direct advertising address lists. Players are offered use of Svenska Spel's social responsibility control tools via PlayScan - personal gaming budgets, self-diagnostic tests of gaming habits, and the chance to self-exclude from gaming.

The extent to which online gaming companies are engaging in socially responsible practices and using social responsibility tools has been little researched. Given the relative lack of research into attitudes towards social responsibility by gamblers and how they are using social responsibility tools, we recently carried out a study for Svenska Spel, examining players' attitudes and behaviour towards using social responsibility tools within PlayScan (Griffiths, Wood & Parke, 2009). In this article, we highlight some of the key findings from our study of 2348 online gamblers (all clientele

of Svenska Spel) who completed an online survey relating to various aspects of PlayScan and online social responsibility tools.

All online gamblers were asked if they had used PlayScan.

Approximately a quarter had (26%), compared to the three-quarters who had not (74%). Online gamblers who had not used PlayScan were also asked for reasons why they had not activated PlayScan. The following reasons were given for not using it:

- players did not think they needed it (75%);
- players did not know what PlayScan did (17.5%);
- players thought that PlayScan was just for problem gamblers (11%);
- players could not be bothered (7.5%); and/or
- players did not want Svenska Spel gathering data on them (4.5%).

Online gamblers who had used PlayScan were asked what their reasons were for using it. The most popular reasons were:

- players being curious about what PlayScan was (47%);
- players wanting to set time and money limits (34%);
- players wanting to play safe (23%).

Lesser reasons for using PlayScan included:

- players who were concerned they were playing too much (12%);
- players wanting to better understand their playing behaviour (11%); and/or
- players wanting some help with their gambling (1%).

A further 8% said they did not know the reasons why they started using PlayScan.

PlayScan users were also asked about which particular social responsibility features were of most use to them. The most useful feature was the setting of spending limits with over two-thirds 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 profiles (36%). Respondents were also asked which features of PlayScan (if any) they had used. Over half (56%) had used spending limits, 40% had taken a self-diagnostic problem gambling test, 17% had used a self-exclusion feature, and 0.4% had contacted a gambling helpline. They were asked about which particular self-exclusion features were the most useful to them personally. The most useful self-exclusion feature was the seven-day self-exclusion rated as 'quite/very useful' by just under half of respondents (46%). This was followed by one-month self-exclusion (24%), 24-hour self-exclusion (24%), and permanent self-exclusion (16%).

Given that PlayScan is voluntary rather than mandatory, it is hard to assess whether an uptake of a quarter of the internet gamblers sampled is a healthy uptake or not, as there are no studies by which to make a similar comparison. Those who had not activated a PlayScan account were clearly of the view that they themselves did not need it. Some clearly had the view that initiatives such as this were really aimed at problem gamblers.

The types of self-exclusion feature varied according to the gambler's own needs. Given the (presumed) unproblematic nature of internet gambling among respondents, it was unsurprising that only 16% thought permanent self-exclusion would be useful to them

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personally. If anything, this might appear to be a slightly higher figure than might have been predicted as it could be argued that non-problem gamblers would be unlikely to make use of a permanent self-exclusion. The seven-day exclusion period was the most useful, with almost a half of PlayScan users endorsing this as their most favoured. This may have been especially useful for those who do not want to gamble for a particular period, such as the week before a monthly 'pay day'. One month and one day self-exclusion periods were most popular for around half the PlayScan users (approximately 25% each). These types of self-exclusion are more likely to be associated with non-problem gamblers who may want to restrict their gambling behaviour to a very specific instance such as preceding a night of heavy drinking (for example, a 24 hour self-exclusion) or a particular time of the year like the run up to Christmas (for example, a one month self-exclusion).

Overall, these results suggest that for PlayScan users, self-exclusion is not a tool for problem gamblers but more generally a tool for responsible gambling. PlayScan has not been designed to identify people with gambling problems, but instead identifies when patterns of gambling behaviour begin to change. Such changes may be subjectively better (i.e. towards green) or worse (i.e. towards red). Either way, players should then be able to make more informed choices. What is important after that is what the player does with the information provided. Some players may ignore a red rating and develop a problem. For others, a warning may be enough for them to change their behaviour.

Consequently, the ultimate value of PlayScan cannot be measured quantitatively, as the outcome for

each player depends entirely upon their reaction. The overall efficacy of PlayScan is defined by those players who use it and gain insight into their playing habits. If such information is considered useful in helping them to gamble responsibly then PlayScan should be considered a success by that measure alone. What is important for the future is that player feedback is regularly monitored to ensure that players continue to receive a service that they perceive as user-friendly, enjoyable and useful in helping them to gamble responsibly. In other words, it contributes to an overall long-term positive and healthy gambling experience.

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