WHAT DO GAMBLERS THINK OF RESPONSIBLE GAMBLING TOOLS?

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The promotion of responsible gambling (RG) and the prevention of problem gambling have become major topics in the gambling studies field. This has led to the introduction of many RG and harm-minimisation initiatives. As gambling products become more technologically sophisticated, the same technological innovation is starting to be used to facilitate the development of harm-minimisation tools to assist gamblers in maintaining self-control and make rational and controlled gambling-related decisions.

The Global Online Gambler Survey (International Gaming Research Unit, 2007) conducted for eCOGRA (eCommerce and Online Gaming Regulation and Assurance) 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 study. In relation to social responsibility, online gamblers were specifically asked about five particular features (i.e., self-set spending limits, self-set time limits, self-exclusion, provision of regular financial statements, and self-assessment problem gambling tests). Although no single feature stood out as critically important, 51-75% of players (across all five social responsibility features) stated that they would consider some responsible gambling elements at least 'quite useful'. The most popular option was receiving regular financial statements (i.e., objective feedback about all wins and losses) with 75% considering this option to be at least quite useful and the least popular feature was self-set time limit with 51% reporting this as at least quite useful. Those players who were younger, female, gambled out of boredom, and reported losing more money, were significantly more likely to consider responsible gambling features to be useful. ▸

Griffiths, Wood and Parke (2009) examined players' attitudes

and behaviour toward using the behavioural tracking tool PlayScan. The tool provides players with information concerning various social responsibility control tools (e.g., personal gaming budgets, self-diagnostic tests of gambling habits, self-exclusion options, etc.). Out of 2,348 participants (all customers of the Swedish gaming operator Svenska Spel) who completed the survey, just over a quarter of players (26%) had used the voluntary system. Over half of PlayScan users said it was useful (52%) versus 19% who said it was not. Many features were seen as useful by gamblers, including limit setting (70%), viewing their gambling profile (49%), self-exclusion facilities (42%), self-diagnostic problem gambling tests (46%), information and support for gambling issues (40%), and gambling profile predictions (36%).

Providing Information For Gambling More Responsibly

Some gambling companies have started to utilise responsible gambling tools to support their clientele gambling more responsibly. Gamblers now have access and/or are given general advice concerning healthy and responsible gambling. However, evaluations of the effectiveness of providing gamblers with such information have been mixed. For instance, some research has supported the use of information in helping individuals gamble more responsibly (e.g., Dixon, 2000; Ladouceur, 2003), whereas other studies have reported no significant association between providing information and gambling responsibly (e.g., Hing 2003; Focal Research, 2004; Williams & Connolly, 2006).

However, research has also shown that the way information is presented can significantly influence behaviour and thoughts. Several experimental studies have investigated the effects of interactive versus static pop-up messages during gambling sessions. Static messages do not appear to be particularly effective, whereas interactive pop-up messages and animated information have been shown to change irrational belief patterns and subsequent gambling behaviour (e.g., Cloutier, Ladouceur, & Sevigny, 2006; Ladouceur & Sevigny, 2003; Schellink & Schrans, 2002; Monaghan & Blaszczynski, 2007 & 2010a; Monaghan, Blaszczynski & Nower, 2009). Monaghan et al. (2010a) found that pop-up messages on electronic gambling machines containing self-appraisal messages had significant effects on self-reported thoughts and behaviour during experimental sessions.

A study by Munoz, Chebat and Borges (2013) assessed the impact of graphic warning messages versus text-only messages, in terms of their impact on gamblers' levels of processing of the message, cognitive appraisal, fear, and attitudes. The graphic warning message was a picture of an electronic gaming machine (EGM) being depicted as a monster eating a gambler. The image also contained smaller circular graphics within the EGM that depicted the negative (financial or family) outcomes that gamblers might suffer from gambling. Results indicated that the graphic message enhanced cognitive appraisal and fear, as well as having positive effects on the depth of information processing.

The Use of Pop-Up Messaging In Real World Settings

More recently, a number of studies have been carried out in real world settings using real gamblers in real time. For instance, Auer, Malischnig and Griffiths (2014) investigated the effect of a pop-up message that appeared after 1,000 consecutive online slot machine games had been played by individuals during a single

gambling session. The study analysed 400,000 gambling sessions (200,000 sessions before the pop-up had been introduced and 200,000 after the pop-up had been introduced). The study found that the pop-up message had a limited effect on a small percentage of players. Although the study reported nine times as many gamblers stopped after 1000 consecutive plays compared to those gamblers before the introduction of the pop-up message, the number of gamblers that actually stopped after viewing the pop-up message was less than 1%.

In a follow-up study, Auer and Griffiths (2015a) investigated the effects of normative and self-appraisal feedback in a slot machine pop-up message that appeared after playing 1,000 consecutive games on an online slot machine within a single session compared to a simple (non-enhanced) pop-up message. The study compared two representative random samples of 800,000 gambling sessions (i.e., 1.6 million sessions in total) across two conditions (i.e., simple pop-up message versus an enhanced pop-up message). The results indicated that the additional normative and self-appraisal content doubled the number of gamblers who stopped playing after they received the enhanced pop-up message (1.39%) compared to the simple pop-up message (0.67%). As in the previous study by Auer et al. (2014), the findings suggested that pop-up messages influenced a small number of gamblers to cease long playing sessions but that enhanced messages are slightly more effective in helping gamblers to stop playing within-session. To date, these are the only two studies (i.e., Auer & Griffiths, 2015a; Auer, Malischnig and Griffiths, 2014) to examine the impact of pop-up messaging on actual gamblers in a real world online gambling environment.

Personalised Feedback Using Behavioural Tracking Systems

Personalised feedback which informs players about their past behaviour and incorporates a longer time period than just the current session has begun to be empirically studied by analysing player data from behavioural tracking tools (PlayScan and mentor). Auer and Griffiths (2015b) studied the behaviour of 1,015 online gamblers in connection with their voluntary use of a responsible gaming behavioural tracking tool (mentor) compared with 15,216 matched control group gamblers (that had not used the behavioural tracking tool) on the basis of age, gender, playing duration, and theoretical loss (i.e., the amount of money wagered multiplied by the payout percentage of a specific game played [Auer & Griffiths, 2014]). The results showed that online gamblers receiving personalised feedback spent significantly less time and money gambling compared to matched controls that did not receive personalised feedback. However, as the gamblers who used the behavioural tracking tool had volunteered to use it and had not been randomly assigned, this meant the effect might not only be due to the feedback but also to other factors not controllable by the researchers (for instance, those signing up to use the tool may have been more responsible gamblers to begin with).

Forsström, Hesser and Carlbring (2015) carried out a study on the use of PlayScan. The data from a total of 9,528 players who voluntarily used the system were analysed. They found that the initial usage of the tool was high, but that repeated usage was low. Two groups of users (i.e., self-testers and multi-function users) utilised the tool to a greater extent. However, the study did not analyse changes in behaviour as a consequence of using the tool. Wood and Wohl (2015) obtained data from 779 Svenska Spel online players who received behavioural feedback using PlayScan. Feedback took the form of a colour-coded risk rating (green=no issues, yellow=at-risk, red=problematic) determined by a proprietary algorithm. Additionally, gambling expenditure data (amounts deposited and wagered) were gathered for the week in which players enrolled to use PlayScan, the subsequent week, and 24 weeks later. Results showed that yellow (i.e. at-risk) players who used the tool significantly reduced the amounts of money deposited and wagered compared to players who did not use the tool – an effect observed the week following enrolment as well as 24 weeks later. The results suggest that informing at-risk players who have opted to receive feedback about their gambling appears to have a positive impact in reducing subsequent expenditure.

Conclusions

Studies carried out to date appear to support the notion that harm-minimisation tools should be viewed as prevention measures for those who already gamble safely, or are at risk of developing a problem, rather than an intervention for those already exhibiting problem gambling behaviour. Whilst the limitations of laboratory-based experimental work are recognised, this does not expel their relevance in the research field of gambling harm-minimisation. Indeed, while ecological validity is largely lacking in such studies, they offer a level of experimental control often not afforded by real world research, allowing the impact of specific game manipulations and tools to be tested for both their positive and negative influences on behaviour and cognition. It is also recommended that RG tools should demonstrate positive efficacy before being widely implemented in real-world settings, which may prove costly both financially and for the gamblers themselves if tools are capable of producing unintended effects. To date, RG tools have taken on a variety of forms. However, while harm-minimisation as a research field within psychology is on the rise in terms of volume and quality of empirical research, the evaluation of such tools remains in its infancy. CGi

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