Abstract
This brief paper critically addresses a recent approach by researchers that use voluntary self-exclusion (VSE) by gamblers as a proxy measure for problem gambling. By using tracking data from online gamblers or data from player cards, such research derives typical behavioral patterns of past voluntary self-excluders and uses their data to predict and identify problem gamblers. We argue that this approach is flawed and is unlikely to help in developing harm-minimization measures. We argue that using personalized feedback is a much better approach to the prevention of problem gambling than using data from those that self-exclude from gambling.

Voluntary “Self-Exclusion”
Self-exclusion practices typically refer to the possibility for gamblers to voluntarily ban themselves from playing all (a selection of) games over a predetermined period. The period of exclusion can typically be chosen by the gambler although some operators have non-negotiable self-exclusion periods. Self-exclusion in both online sites and offline venues has become an important responsible gambling practice that is widely used by socially responsible operators. Auer, Littler and Griffiths. [1] briefly overviewed self-exclusion practices in both online and land-based environments. They argued that empirical research on the effectiveness of VSE in online gambling is rare. Hayer and Mayer [2] investigated a sample of 256 online gamblers who self-excluded. Subsequently, they were surveyed six and twelve months later. They found that VSE can have favourable psychosocial effects for the gambler. For instance, players showed a marked decrease in doubts about the results of games, and issues concerning account administration and financial transactions. Self-excluders were also different from controls with respect to the tonality of the written communications. Important indicators extracted from written correspondence were more threatening, abusive, and used threats and more abusive in written communications. Based in previous empirical research, Gainsbury [4] claimed that VSE programs are under-utilized by problem gamblers. In general, it is known that individuals do not seek help for problem gambling until they reach serious crisis [5].

Why do Players “Self-Exclude” and who are they?
Reasons for players to self-exclude are manifold. In a study by Hayer and Meyer, [2] players frequently reported excluding as a preventive measure and annoyance with the operator as reasons for VSE. Furthermore, about one-fifth of self-excluders reported to be problem gamblers (21.2%). Using the DSM-IV criteria for pathological gambling [6], Lischer [7] reported that in a study of three Swiss Casinos, 29% of self-excluders were pathological gamblers, 33% were problem gamblers, and 38% were recreational gamblers. Given that many voluntary self-excluders do not exclude themselves for gambling-related problems, Lischer [7] concluded that self-exclusion is not a good indicator of gambling-related problems. In line with these results Dragecovic and colleagues [8] compared self-excluders with other online players and reported no differences in the (i) mean number of gambling hours per month or (ii) minutes per gambling session. Similar to Hayer and Meyer [2], who report self-exclusion to be rather spontaneous, Dragecovic and colleagues [8] reported that 25% of players self-excluded within one day of their registration with the online operator. This could also be due to the fact that online players can self-exclude with just a few mouse-clicks.

“Self-Exclusion” as a Predictor of Problem Gambling
The aforementioned studies report that the majority of voluntary self-excluders tend to be non-problem gamblers. Additionally, the Australian Productivity Commission [9] reported 15,000 active voluntary self-exclusions from 2002 to 2009 and that this represented only 10–20% of the population of problem gamblers. This means that in addition to most self-excluders being non-problem gamblers, that most problem gamblers are not self-excluders. This leads to the conclusion that there is little overlap between problem gambling and self-excluding.

Over the decade, analytical approaches to harm minimization have become popular. This has led to the development of various tracking tools such as PlayScan (developed by Svenska Spel), Observer (developed by BBIN.com), and mentor (developed by Neccton). Furthermore, regulators are increasingly recognizing the
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Personalization and Dynamic Feedback

But what could be done to prevent the development of gambling-related problems in the first place? For the reasons outlined above, we would argue that the attempt to identify problem gambling via playing patterns that are derived from self-excluders does not assist harm minimization. Firstly, this approach does not target problem gamblers, and secondly it does not provide any insights into the prevention of such problems.

It is evident that any gambling environment should strive to minimize gambling-related harm and reduce the amount of gambling among vulnerable groups. It is furthermore known that information that is given to individuals to enable behavioral change should encourage reflection because research has shown that self-monitoring can enable behavioral change in the desired direction [12-14]. Orford [15] also states that attempts to explain such disparate gambling types from a single theoretical perspective are essentially a fool’s errand. This also complements the notion that problem gambling is not an homogenous phenomenon and there is not a single type of problem gambler [16]. This also goes in line with our belief that gambling sites have to personalize communication and offer the right player the right assistance based on their individual playing history [17,18]. Research supports this line of thinking.

Studies [19] have shown that dynamic feedback in the form of pop-up messages has a positive effect on gambling behavior and gambling-related thoughts. Kim and colleagues [19] found that animation-based information enhanced the effectiveness of a pop-up message related to gambling time limits. Auer and Griffiths [20] found that an enhanced pop-up message (that included self-appraisal and normative feedback) which reminded players they had played 1,000 consecutive games on an online-slot machine led to significantly greater number of players ending their session than a simple pop-up message. In a real-world study of online gamblers Auer and Griffiths [18] found that personalized feedback had a significant effect in reducing the time and money spent gambling.

Personalized feedback is a player-centric approach and in addition to gambling-specific research, there is evidence from many other areas that shows the beneficial effects on behavioral change. For instance, personalized messages have shown to enable behavioral change in areas such as smoking cessation [21,22], diabetes management [23,24] and fitness activity [25]. Contrary to the self-exclusion oriented detection approach, we conclude that personalized feedback aims to prevent and minimize harm in the first place and is a much better approach to the prevention of problem gambling than using data from those that self-exclude from gambling.

References


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