

THE GAMING INDUSTRY'S ROLE IN THE PREVENTION AND TREATMENT OF PROBLEM GAMBLING

BY MARK GRIFFITHS

There are many factors that could be incorporated within a gaming company's framework of social responsibility and that while the industry should be proactive in the prevention of problem gambling, the treatment of problem gambling should be done by those outside of the gaming industry and that one of the ways forward may be online rather than offline help. This is reinforced by the gaming industry having formal relationships with numerous organisations that address training, compliance, accreditation, and governance.



Over the last decade, social responsibility in gambling has become one of the major issues for professional gaming operators. Although the gaming industry understandably keeps an eye on their bottom line profits, there is an increasing adherence to social responsibility standards. Evidence for this is demonstrated by the fact that the gaming industry now has formal relationships with numerous organisations that address training, compliance, accreditation, and governance.

There is also increasing integration between the gaming industry and a diverse set of stakeholders including government, practitioners, and researchers. Government bodies license and regulate. Gambling researchers can provide theoretical insight and models that the industry can apply in their day-to-day business. Practitioners can provide practical guidance and solutions linked to addiction treatment. Here, some of these relationships, particularly in relation to the gaming industry's role in preventing, containing and/or treating problem gambling, are explored.

ACCESSIBILITY AND EXPOSURE TO GAMBLING ENVIRONMENTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR PROBLEM GAMBLING PREVENTION

Environmental factors additional to gambling exposure are known to have an impact on problem gambling (Griffiths & Parke, 2003). Some are part of, or closely associated with, the physical and social contexts in which gambling occurs and play a role in increasing or decreasing exposure. Others, while more peripheral, include a number of major risk factors for problem gambling (Abbott, Volberg, Bellringer & Reith 2004).

Abbott and colleagues (2004) note that empirical investigation of relationships between proposed risk factors and

outcomes requires accurate and reliable measurement coupled with methodologically robust studies in which exposure levels are varied while other factors that may affect outcomes are held constant or controlled statistically. If this is not achieved, Abbott and colleagues note that findings and conclusions may be invalid and/or misleading.

With most drug-based addictions, different parameters of exposure are typically examined including dose, potency and duration. In the gambling situation, it is much more difficult to quantify social and behavioural exposures. Furthermore, practical and ethical considerations place constraints on experimental investigation. Gambling research is at a relatively early stage of development and it is only recently that public health approaches have been incorporated. In the future, it is likely that more complex measures of gambling exposure will be used. According to Abbott et al (2004), this could include the availability of, and expenditure on, different forms of gambling, the dispersal of and degree of accessibility to these forms, the time they have been available and extent to which harm minimisation strategies have been prescribed and implemented.

The Australian Productivity Commission (APC; 1999) developed a multidimensional framework to assess exposure. It highlighted nine specific dimensions comprising: (i) number of opportunities to gamble, (ii) number of venues, (iii) location of venues, (iv) opportunities to gamble per venue, (v) opening hours, (vi) conditions of entry, (vii) ease of use of gambling form, (viii) initial outlay required, and (ix) social accessibility. Using these criteria the APC conducted several analyses to examine the relationships between accessibility and gambling using State-level electronic gaming machine (EGM) density and expenditure data as well as data drawn from a national Australian gambling survey of gambling prevalence.

The results suggested that high levels of problem gambling with gambling machines correlated to their density relative to the population. In one analysis, the pathological gambling prevalence rate for different Australian States was plotted against the number of gaming machines per 1000 adults in each State. In another analysis, the number of gaming machines per 1000 adults was plotted against the estimated amount spent per capita on gaming machines. Both analyses showed positive relationships suggesting that (at a State level) a greater density of gaming machines per capita was associated with both higher per capita expenditure and higher problem gambling prevalence rates.

However, it should be noted that although several other studies have shown that a higher density of video lottery terminals (VLTs) in the population correlated to higher rates of problem gambling (Delfabbro, 2002; Marshall & Baker, 2002) this does not, in itself, show that the number of machines in a specific venue has any impact on levels of problem gambling. The number of machines in these studies was related to a large number of venues, and consequently the number of VLTs in this context does not tell us much about the impact of the number of gambling opportunities in one or a few centralised venues. Furthermore, one might speculate that far fewer games in a venue could conceivably encourage a problem gambler to stay on one particular machine for fear of having to wait for another machine to become vacant.

A more complex quantitative procedure was proposed by Shaffer, LaBrie and LaPlante (2004). They generated a 'standardised exposure gradient' that assessed gambling exposures within a particular region. This index includes the: (i) dose (i.e., number of gaming venues and people working in the gambling industry), (ii) potency (i.e., the number of different

major gambling modalities), and (iii) duration (i.e., the time casinos have been legalised). Although limited, the accuracy could be enhanced by the integration of further information, (e.g., the extent of illegal gambling, access to gambling in adjoining jurisdictions, gaming venue attendance, and advertising). Whether or not exposure indexed by these types of measure has an impact is strongly influenced by the form of gambling involved (Abbott et al, 2004).

Evidence suggests that gambling availability has a positive, but complex, relationship to the prevalence of problem gambling. The relationship is not linear and there are many other factors that determine problem gambling. In a review of situational factors that affect gambling behaviour, Abbott (2007) concluded that although increased availability of and exposure to gambling activities have contributed to increases in problem gambling, it was highly probable that other situational factors including venue characteristics, social context, access to cash or credit, availability of alcohol, and industry marketing and advertising also have an influence.

Volberg (2004) also reached a similar conclusion suggesting there is a correlation between increased availability of gambling opportunities and problem gambling. However, she then reported that in a number of replication studies that problem gambling rates had stabilised or decreased. Looking at these jurisdictions in more detail, she reported that all of them had introduced comprehensive services for problem gamblers including public awareness campaigns, helplines, and professional counselling programmes. She concluded that the relationship between increased opportunities to gamble and problem gambling may be moderated by the availability of helping agencies/services for problem gamblers. In areas of the US (like Montana and North Dakota) that saw an increase in problem gambling following the introduction of casinos, no public awareness campaigns or services for problem gamblers were introduced. Consequently, it appears that the increased availability of gambling opportunities do not necessarily equate to increased levels of problem gambling.

Collins (2007) has also reviewed this evidence and concluded that if a jurisdiction introduces new forms of gambling and does nothing else, it will most likely see an increase in problem gambling. However, if the jurisdiction combines the introduction of new forms of gambling with appropriate prevention and treatment services, it is likely to decrease numbers of problem gamblers. Collins noted in the national South African gambling prevalence study that the country witnessed a decline in problem gambling over a two-year period following the introduction of the National Responsible Gambling Program.

Non-dedicated gaming venues: Implications for social responsibility

One of the more noticeable trends in the land-based casino sector is the growing shift from dedicated gambling casinos to a more generalised entertainment complex where gambling is part of the overall entertainment mix. One of the issues to consider is whether this makes problem gambling and social responsibility a more diffuse issue to track and remedy. Wood and Griffiths (2008) have argued that non-dedicated gambling venues have the capacity to encourage players to do other things and have a break (and a reflective time out) from gambling. However, dedicated gaming environments are more likely to minimise impulsive decisions to gamble. This is because players must travel to a specific dedicated gambling environment (depending upon location) having made a predetermined decision to gamble. There is always a chance

that a person who entered the premises to do something other than gamble (e.g., watch live entertainment, have a meal, etc), could be encouraged to gamble (i.e., via intrinsic association of the other activities). However, it could also be argued that anyone who enters the premises of a dedicated gaming environment (even one that houses other entertainment activities) almost certainly knows that the primary purpose of the venue is for gambling. Impulse gambling by non-gamblers who knowingly enter a gambling environment still constitutes a predetermined decision to enter the environment.

Wood and Griffiths (2008) have also argued that the marketing of the gambling venue as a general entertainment site promotes the notion of people congregating for social activities in a social environment where gambling is also readily available. This may increase the likelihood that some groups or individuals may participate in gambling as an ancillary activity to their other social behaviours. Patrons may also feel less stigmatised going to gamble in an entertainment establishment that houses some gambling activities rather than a dedicated gambling environment (e.g., a casino).

There is currently no evidence to determine whether offering other non-gambling activities encourages responsible gambling, or encourages more excessive gambling by attracting vulnerable players drawn (initially) to those non-gambling activities. In essence, there are two schools of thought about the mix of gambling with other activities. The positive view is that patrons who frequent establishments that have a range of activities can spend their time engaged in many non-gambling activities without the need to gamble. The more negative view is that getting patrons to enter the establishment to engage in the non-gambling activities may in fact stimulate the desire to gamble because of the proximity of the gambling and non-gambling activities. If peripheral activities are 'loss leaders' and are incorporated as a way of keeping patrons in the establishment, it could be viewed as an exploitative marketing and socially irresponsible tactic. Clearly, this is one area where research is needed.

THE GAMING INDUSTRY'S ROLE IN THE TREATMENT OF PROBLEM GAMBLERS

There have been some recent soundings about land-based casinos (e.g., Harrahs) directly helping problem gamblers through the use of on site treatment specialists (i.e., problem gamblers having access to treatment in the gambling environment itself). Although this sounds like a very socially responsible move on the part of the operators, my view is that it is not the gaming industry's responsibility to treat gamblers but it is their responsibility to provide referral for problem gamblers to specialist third party helping agencies (e.g., problem gambling helplines, counselling services, etc.). It is thought that the number of problem gamblers who actively seek treatment is only a small percentage of the overall number of problem gamblers. This is because problem gamblers may feel embarrassed and/or stigmatised via face-to-face treatment interventions. This suggests that one of the ways forward may be for the industry to refer their problem clients towards online (rather than offline) help.

Wood and Griffiths (2007) reported one of the first ever studies that evaluated the effectiveness of an online help and guidance service for problem gamblers (i.e., GamAid). The evaluation utilised a mixed methods design in order to examine both primary and secondary data relating to the client experience. GamAid is an online advisory and guidance service whereby the problem gambler can either browse the available

links and information provided, or talks to an online advisor (during the available hours of service), or request information to be sent via email, mobile phone (SMS/texting), or post. If the problem gambler connects to an online advisor then a real-time image of the advisor appears on the client's screen in a small web-cam box. Next to the image box, is a dialogue box where the client can type messages to the advisor and in which the advisor can type a reply. Although the client can see the advisor, the advisor cannot see the client. The advisor also has the option to provide links to other relevant online services, and these appear on the left hand side of the client's screen and remain there after the client logs off from the advisor. The links that are given are in response to statements or requests made by the client for specific (and where possible) local services (e.g., a local debt advice service, or a local Gamblers Anonymous meeting).

A total of 80 problem gamblers completed an in-depth online evaluation questionnaire, and secondary data were gathered from a further 413 clients who contacted a GamAid advisor. It was reported that the majority of the problem gamblers who completed the feedback survey were satisfied with the guidance and "counselling" service that GamAid offered. Most problem gamblers (i) agreed that GamAid provided information for local services where they could get help, (ii) agreed that they had or would follow the links given, (iii) felt the advisor was supportive and understood their needs, (iv) would consider using the service again, and (v) would recommend the service to others. Being able to see the advisor enabled the client to feel reassured, whilst at the same time, this one-way feature maintained anonymity, as the advisor cannot see the client.

An interesting observation was the extent to which GamAid was meeting a need not met by other UK gambling help services. This was examined by looking at the profiles of those clients using GamAid in comparison with the most similar service currently on offer, that being the UK GamCare telephone help line. The data recorded by GamAid advisors during the evaluation period found that 413 distinct clients contacted an advisor. Unsurprisingly (given the medium of the study), online gambling was the single most popular location for clients to gamble with 31 percent of males and 19 percent of females reporting that they gambled this way. By comparison, the GamCare helpline found that only 12 percent of their male and 7 percent of their female callers gambled online. Therefore, it could be argued that the GamAid service is the preferred modality for seeking support for online gamblers. This is perhaps not surprising given that online gamblers are likely to have a greater degree of overall competence in using, familiarity with, and access to Internet facilities. Problem gamblers may therefore be more likely to seek help using the media that they are most comfortable in.

GamAid advisors identified gender for 304 clients of which 71 percent were male and 29 percent were female. By comparison, the GamCare helpline identified that 89 percent of their callers were male and 11 percent were female. Therefore, it would appear that the online service might be appealing more to women than other comparable services. There are several speculative reasons why this may be the case. For instance, online gambling is gender-neutral and may therefore be more appealing to women than more traditional forms of gambling, which (on the whole) are traditionally male-oriented (with the exception of bingo) (Wardle et al, 2007).

Women may feel more stigmatised as problem gamblers than males and/or less likely to approach other help services

where males dominate (e.g., GA). If this is the case, then the high degree of anonymity offered by GamAid may be one of the reasons it is preferred. Most of those who had used another service reported that they preferred GamAid because they specifically wanted online help. Those who had used another service reported that the particular benefits of GamAid were that they were more comfortable talking online than on the phone or face-to-face. They also reported that (in their view) GamAid was easier to access, and the advisors were more caring.

CONCLUSIONS

In their review of preventing problem gambling, Williams, Simpson and West (2007) make several important points that need to be taken on board by the gaming industry (and other interested parties) in relation to problem gambling prevention. These observations are also important for gaming operators when considering best practice in terms of social responsibility.

- (1) There exists a very large array of prevention initiatives.
- (2) Much is still unknown about the effectiveness of many individual initiatives.
- (3) The most commonly implemented measures tend to be among the less effective measures (e.g., casino self-exclusion, awareness/information campaigns).
- (4) There is almost nothing that is not helpful to some extent and that there is almost nothing that, by itself, has high potential to prevent harm.
- (5) Primary prevention initiatives are almost always more effective than tertiary prevention measures.
- (6) External controls (i.e., policy) tend to be just as useful as internal knowledge (e.g., education).
- (7) Effective prevention in most fields actually requires coordinated, extensive, and enduring efforts between effective educational initiatives and effective policy initiatives.
- (8) Prevention efforts have to be sustained and enduring, because behavioural change takes a long time.

It would therefore appear that there are many factors that could be incorporated within a gaming company's framework of social responsibility and that while the industry should be proactive in the prevention of problem gambling, the treatment of problem gambling should be done by those outside of the gaming industry and that one of the ways forward may be online rather than offline help. **CGI**

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