knowledge snapshot

How effective are current gambling harm-minimization tools?

What this article is about

This article reviews past studies that assessed the efficacy of harm-minimization tools for controlled gambling. Harm-minimization tools aim to make time spent gambling safer. For example, warning pop-up messages or reducing opening hours of gambling venues. The authors categorized the tools by their main purpose (i.e., breaks in play, messaging, limit-setting, behavioral tracking, and banning or modifying bank note acceptors). They summarized evidence on how well each category of tools works.

What was done?

The researchers searched electronic databases for articles on harm-minimization tools for controlled gambling. They focused on tools used within a gambling session. The researchers also hand searched reference lists of published articles and contacted gambling experts for more literature. All articles were in English and published in peer-reviewed journals between 2005-2015. The findings of the articles were summarized.

What you need to know

Enforced breaks in play temporarily stop gambling. This is intended to prevent gamblers from entering a state that leads to a loss of control. There was no evidence to suggest that breaks in play as the sole prevention method worked. Some studies reported that breaks in play alone could have adverse effects on gamblers, such as increasing their urge to gamble. However, there was some evidence that breaks in play with messaging could effectively prevent loss of control. More research is needed to explore the impact of length of break on gambling behavior.

Why is this article important?

It is important that harm-minimization tools advance as gambling products advance with technology. This article reviews the efficacy of harm-minimization tools for controlled gambling. It provides current knowledge about the impacts of breaks in play, messaging, limit-setting, behavioral tracking tools, and banning or modifying bank note acceptors. It shows that harm-minimization tools should not be viewed as intervention for problem gamblers. Rather, they are tools to help prevent the development of problem gambling among at-risk gamblers and those who are gambling safely.

Messaging for responsible gambling has evolved from static to dynamic messages. Static messages can be found on the side of gambling machines or in the menu of some online gambling sites. In contrast, dynamic messages appear on-screen and temporarily interrupt play. They are also referred to as pop-ups. Evidence showed that gamblers could recall content from dynamic messages more than static ones.

The reviewed articles reported many different types of messaging. Informative messaging provides factual information about specific products (e.g., the odds of winning). However, there was limited and inconsistent evidence to support the impact of informative messaging on gambling behavior. Another messaging style is self-appraisal messaging. These messages encourage gamblers to appraise the amount of time and money spent gambling. Evidence showed that self-appraisal messages significantly impacted the thoughts and behaviors of gamblers.

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Self-appraisal messages were also shown to be more effective compared to informative messaging.

Monetary and time based pop-up messages were not effective for intense problem gamblers. However, some evidence suggested that this type of pop up message might be more effective when used early in play. Another message style is personalized normative feedback (PNF). This is designed to correct gamblers' ideas about the normal levels of gambling behavior of others. One study found that compared to a simple message, PNF was more effective at encouraging gamblers to end their game session.

Limit-setting is a tool that lets gamblers set time or money restrictions before they start playing. Evidence showed that setting limits and receiving a reminder could prevent a vast majority of gamblers from exceeding their limits. But more intense gamblers tended to exceed their limits. The authors suggested that some gambling activities may benefit from monetary limits, while others may benefit from time limits. For example, poker is already a long game so monetary limits may be more effective.

Behavioral tracking tools are used to track individual behavior and provide personalized feedback. Evidence showed that personalized feedback resulted in controlled gambling in both low-risk and at-risk gamblers. However, the behavior of problem gamblers remained unchanged.

Banning or modifying bank note acceptors on gambling machines is a method that had been successfully implemented in Norway. However, several studies failed to find an impact after restricting the maximum amount for bank notes or after removing the bank note acceptor all together.

Who is it intended for?

This article is intended for gambling prevention specialists and researchers. It identifies current evidence and knowledge gaps for harm-minimization tools, which can be used to guide future evaluation studies and prevention efforts.

About the researchers

Andrew Harris and **Mark D. Griffiths** are affiliated with the International Gaming Research Unit at Nottingham Trent University in Nottingham, UK. For more information about the study, please contact Andrew Harris at andrew.harris2015@my.ntu.ac.uk.

Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (GREO)

Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (GREO) has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. GREO is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization that aims to eliminate harm from gambling. Our goal is to support evidence-informed decision making in responsible gambling policies, standards and practices. The work we do is intended for researchers, policy makers, gambling regulators and operators, and treatment and prevention service providers.

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