HELPING UK CASINO PLAYERS GAMBLE RESPONSIBLY:

March 31, 2021

Evaluating the Impact of Safer Gambling Customer Interactions (November 2018 - February 2020)

Executive Summary

Research Purpose

The current study uses player data gathered in the 2019 UK Casino Trial of the ALeRT *BETTOR* Protection System from November 2018 to February 2020 to assess the impact of safer gambling interactions by UK casino staff in reducing behaviours associated with customer risk for gambling problems among slots players.

Background

Gambling is a popular recreational activity in the UK with about half of all adults typically making at least one wager each month and about 5% visiting one of 156 casinos in Britain prior to the impact of COVID-19 pandemic and casino closures. [1] For a minority of adults gambling can lead to harm that has wider consequences for them, their families, and the community.[2] Among regular gamblers the risk is higher. Few of those experiencing difficulties with their gambling seek formal assistance with less than 3% in the UK accessing such services.[3] Stigma, privacy concerns, isolation, poor treatment outcomes are all identified as barriers with most delaying action until impacts are severe and at a crisis point.[4] [5] [6] This makes it challenging to assist people experiencing gambling problems. Casino staff are in a unique position to interrupt the escalation of risky play habits that contribute to gambling problems. The use of technology to help operators proactively identify and reach out to at-risk gamblers offers a significant opportunity for reducing and preventing harm especially when identification is linked to meaningful customer interactions, relevant resources, and referrals as part of a stepped customer care program. Evaluative research is a critical component of this process to monitor operator action for intended and unintended impacts and to improve the effectiveness of such actions in reducing risk and making gambling safer for customers.

Methods

From November 1, 2018 to December 31, 2019 five of the largest UK casino operators - Aspers, Caesars, Genting, Grosvenor, and the Hippodrome - took part in a live trial of the ALeRT BETTOR Protection System at 16 casino sites throughout Britain. ALeRT was purpose-built to help UK casino operators identify and interact with at-risk customers.

During the trial, UK casino staff logged 2,151 customer interactions in the ALeRT system for 1708 at-risk customers identified by the algorithms. For most of these interactions (n=2058) staff also completed a detailed survey in ALeRT answering 16 questions about the characteristics of the interaction as well as filling in observation checklists for visual cues of high-risk gambling.

In December 2019, Focal Research released an interim report examining the role of customer interactions in leading to change in risky play behaviours by slot machine gamblers.[7] Early findings for interactions from November 2018 to March 2019 were promising especially among those receiving multiple interactions with reductions observed in the amount wagered (-18%), session length (-20%), and frequency of play (-7%).

The current study expands the research to assess eligible interactions that took place from November 2018 to August 2019 to ensure changes in play patterns four to six months after the interaction, occurred prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and casino closures. Focal Research developed pre-post benchmarks for evaluating changes in ten key play indicators for eligible players in each of three conditions: 1) At-risk players receiving a single interaction (n=233); 2) At-risk players receiving multiple interactions (n=581); 3) At-risk players receiving no interaction (Baseline; n=812).

Analyses

Two primary analyses were conducted to assess the impact of the interactions and identify the factors contributing to successful outcomes.

Part A examines the impact of customer interactions by UK casino staff for changes in key play indicators; do slots players continue to gamble after a safer gambling interaction by casino staff and, if so, what affect did the customer interaction have on their gambling behaviour? Learning which player behaviours are positively influenced by customer interactions confirms the value of customer service interventions in mitigating risk and helps operators understand how to support staff and players in achieving improved outcomes. Part B reveals which characteristics of the interactions proved more helpful to the player. Learning more about how staff interactions influence play outcomes helps to inform planning and supports evidence-based best practices.

Results

Part A – Evaluation of the Impact of Customer Interactions.

To assess the impact of customer interactions pre-post values were generated for the three player groups (i.e., single interaction, multiple interaction, baseline - no interaction) for each of ten play indictors to measure changes in average frequency, intensity, and speed of play within session and over time. Welch's F-test was used as an alternative to classical F-test as it does not require homogeneity of variance and is recommended as a preferred option for most social research and in-situ testing especially for measuring treatment differences in between group means.[8] One-tailed tests were used for hypothesis testing when the direction was specified versus two-tailed tests when there was uncertainty, or the outcome differed from the hypothesized direction, to compare the mean differences for each interaction group to baseline results.

For those receiving two or more safer gambling customer interactions there were significant reductions observed for eight of the ten play indicators including speed of play (-5.1%, $p = .08$), number of monthly sessions (-9.1%, $p = .001$), monthly turnover (-11.7%, $p = .001$), session length (-15.1%, $p < .000$), average turnover per session (-15.9%, $p = .01$) and monthly play hours (-19.8%, $p < .000$) especially when in a losing session (-22.0%, $p < .000$). As a result, at-risk customers reduced their frequency of play, were less likely to be chasing losses, and had a one-third reduction in out-of-pocket losses (-31.9%, $p = .11$) underscoring the potential value of casino customer service interventions in reducing risk.

Part B – Evaluation of the Impact of Interaction Characteristics.

Casino staff completed detailed surveys in ALeRT for each interaction. This data was used to create 36 characteristic variables which were then correlated with the pre-post behavior changes for each play indicator based on interactions conducted for those customers receiving two or more interactions (n=581) in Part A.

The analysis explored how different characteristics influenced the effectiveness of the interaction for each key play behaviour, something that would not be possible without staff inputting this information into ALeRT. Many interaction factors were found to influence play outcomes especially the number and type of interactions, length of the interaction, the position of the person conducting the interaction (i.e., seniority), whether staff saw other confirmatory cues signalling risk, staff referrals for manager follow- up and manager alerts. Several strategies are discussed for improving interaction effectiveness with the results emphasising the importance of social responsibility interactions staged as a normal part of the customer journey.

Key Findings

Stopping Behavior after Interactions

- In the current study safer gambling interactions by UK casino staff did not discourage patrons from visiting the venue although it did lead to significant changes in high-risk gambling patterns especially among those receiving more than one interaction.
- Player churn was similar among all player groups; about 29% stopped playing at follow-up whether they had received a single interaction, multiple interactions, or no interaction.
- While interactions did not cause at-risk customers to stop playing there was evidence that those customers who received more than one interaction and subsequently stopped playing were more like to have self-excluded (19.2% versus 12.5%, $p = .07$).

Impacts of Single Customer Interactions

- Customers receiving only a single interaction during the trial showed little change in their behaviour at follow-up, yet these initial contacts were important in helping staff assess player risk and prioritise action that led to positive impacts for other customers.
- Following the first interaction, casino staff were more likely to direct future resources to those at-risk customers displaying other signs of risk. For example, compared to those at-risk customers that received two or more safer gambling interactions, single interaction customers played less frequently ($p = .02$), had lower turnover ($p < .000$) and lower losses ($p = .02$) suggesting staff effectively focused on customers requiring more urgent attention.
- It is noteworthy that within-session gambling behaviours such as session length, speed of play (i.e., number of wagers per hour) and betting rates (e.g., average turnover per wager, per session, and per hour) did not differ significantly between at-risk gamblers receiving multiple interactions versus single interactions.
- If these at-risk 'players of interest' increase their frequency of play or are playing at other locations, the cumulative impact of their gambling would be similar to that observed for those at-risk customers receiving multiple interactions.
- Therefore, there appears to be an opportunity, especially from a preventative position, for casinos to develop support strategies focusing on within-session gambling strategies to help staff in assisting lower-frequency at-risk players identified for interactions.

Impact of Multiple Customer Interactions

- For at-risk players experiencing multiple interactions from casino staff, there were significant reductions observed for almost all high-risk behaviours up to six months following a safer gambling interaction when compared to baseline results for those without an interaction.
- Compared to baseline, these customers identified as at-risk 'players of interest' by the ALeRT system reduced their monthly play hours (-19.8%, $p < .000$) by playing less often (-9.1%, $p < .000$) and for shorter periods (-15.1%, $p < .000$) of time after receiving two or more interactions from UK casino staff.
- Most importantly, these customers greatly reduced the hours played in loss sessions each month (-22.0%, $p < .000$) which accounted for 81% of the reduction in monthly time played.
- The findings suggest many players acted on staff advice to stop chasing losses, to set and honour play limits, and to end losing sessions before they overspend.
- While turnover per play hour was unchanged, at-risk customers receiving interactions slowed their betting speed making fewer wagers per hour of play (-5.1%, $p = .08$).
- However, compared to baseline results for those who did not receive an interaction turnover per wager went up (6.0%, $p = .03$), suggesting some players may be compensating for shorter less frequent sessions by increasing their bet rate.
- Increasing bet rates could signal an increase in betting intensity in response to cutting back their frequency of play. Alternatively, increases in turnover per hour may also reflect the impact of an increase in a player's wagering rate when they were in a winning position. A player may not even be aware they are making risky wagers when in this situation as this behaviour is less obvious than other risk markers such as increasing losses or time spent gambling. Safer gambling staff should be aware of this possibility so they can help prepare customers to counter this response when players are cutting back their play.
- Aside from increased bet rate, there were significant reductions in monthly play hours, turnover per session and monthly turnover all contributing to a decline in monthly losses of ≈£157.04 (-31.9%, $p = .11$), which is largely attributable to a reduction in hours played in loss sessions.
- Thus, it can be concluded that UK casino staff interacting two or more times with customers identified by the ALeRT system over the course of the trial helped these at-risk players moderate their gambling up to six months following the interaction.

Key Interaction Characteristics Impacting Outcomes

- The findings indicate the interaction outcomes were more effective under certain conditions that can be influenced by casino policies and practices.
- Longer, more intensive interactions were associated with stronger impacts especially when the interaction was delivered by a senior staff member such as a Gaming Manager or PML (Personal Management Licensee).
- Staff were effective in escalating action with, 'manager alert' and flags suggesting the right people were being referred for additional attention and outcomes improved when the referrals were acted upon by management.
- Interactions had the strongest effect in situations where staff noted the player was exhibiting several visible cues associated with gambling risk highlighting the value in training staff to recognize cues to help identify and confirm a player's risk status.
- Several other strategies were identified and discussed for helping casino staff and customers in addressing specific risky behaviour.

For additional information refer to the Final Technical Report March 31, 2021

[1] Source Statistica 2021 https://www.statista.com/statistics/469650/number-of-operating-casino-premises-in-great-britain-uk/

[2] https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/PDF/survey-data/Participation-in-gambling-and-rates-of-problem-gambling-Wales-headline-report.pdf

[3] Annual Statistics from the National Gambling Treatment Service (Great Britain) 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020 https://www.begambleaware.org/media/2289/annual-stats-2019-20.pdf

[4] Kaufman A., Jones-Nielsen, J., & Bowden-Jones H. (2017) Barriers to Treatment for Female Problem Gamblers: A UK Perspective Journal of Gambling Studies. 2017 33(3): 975-991https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5579153/

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[7]. NCF - ALeRT UK Casino 2019 Trial Summary Report - Focal's ALeRT BETTOR Protection System https://www.focalresearch.com/publications/ncf-alert-uk-casino-2019-trial-summary-report-focals-alert-bettor-protection-system

[8] Delacre, M., Leys, C., Mora, Y. L., & Lakens, D. (2019). Taking Parametric Assumptions Seriously: Arguments for the Use of Welch's F-test instead of the Classical F-test in One-Way ANOVA. International Review of Social Psychology, 32(1), 13. DOI: http://doi.org/10.5334/irsp.198