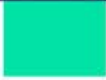


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Tools & Strategies

How do players manage their gambling?

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Tools & Strategies:

How do players manage their gambling?

What is the topic?

The topic is the tools and strategies players use to manage their gambling.

Tools are specific mechanisms or resources made available by an operator or a third party for a player to use. They span players at none to low risk of harm (e.g. tools for tracking, budgeting) and players at moderate to high levels of risk (e.g. tools for self-assessment, treatment).

Strategies are typically principles or methods that players adopt to manage their gambling, potentially drawing on specific tools where relevant. Examples of strategies include cash control and financial management, social support, avoiding or limiting gambling, finding alternative activities, changing thoughts and beliefs, and self-assessment/monitoring (Rodda et al., 2017).

Why is it important?

Players vary widely in the strategies and tools they consider using and ultimately adopt to keep their gambling activity within comfortable limits for them.

Sufficient awareness and availability of suitable strategies and tools is an important way to reduce gambling risk in a population of players, alongside such efforts as operator-responsible gambling strategies, careful product development, gambling analytics, and proactive interventions by operators, regulators, and stakeholders.

Operators have a role to play in supporting players with the strategies and tools they adopt, in developing or partnering to make good tools available, in recommending and encouraging usage of tools, and also in empowering players to understand and implement strategies that might suit them.

As summarised in this research note, it is striking that many players adopt or plan to adopt deliberate strategies to manage their gambling. This is in contrast to how few players adopt tools to do so, whether operator-provided tools or third-party tools, and suggests we have more to learn in understanding how tools and strategies can complement each other to support players.

What did the research do?

Playtech funded RG Plus to conduct a literature review, web research, and stakeholder consultation to understand the available digital tools to support gambling (Stark, 2022).

In preparing this research brief, the RG Plus literature review was complemented by reviewing several recent academic papers that explore the strategies players adopt, their usage, or the use of specific digital tools that may be available. For instance, Bagot et al. (2020) surveyed 411 Australian gamblers with a 30-day follow-up to understand which of a list of 99 individual strategies they intended to use to manage their gambling vs which they did. In another, the usage of operator-provided consumer protection tools was analysed among some 40k online players (Heirene et al., 2021). The references can be found at the end of this note.

What did the research find?

An extensive range of gambling management strategies can be identified, and most gamblers describe themselves as deliberately adopting one or more methods to manage their play.

- In a survey of Australian gamblers, 99 different change strategies were identified, with 92% of gamblers attempting at least one strategy to stick to their limits over a 30-day period and the median player attempting 30 different strategies (Bagot et al., 2021). In general, gamblers felt positive about the strategies they adopted and wanted to work on them.
- Analysis of online forums identified a broad range of strategy types from pre-decisional (e.g. set reasons to change, seek knowledge and information, self-assessment), pre-actional (e.g. action planning, commitment, goal setting), actional (e.g. activity substitution, avoidance, inspiration seeking, spiritual) and multi-phased (e.g. external support, social support and well-being) (Rodda et al., 2018a).
- Tentative evidence from college students suggests players who report a greater range of protective behavioural strategies have lower levels of problem gambling severity (Lostutter et al., 2014), although there is a gap between intention and behaviour and cycling through many strategies without success may be counter-productive (Bagot et al., 2021).
- The most popular strategies in one Australian survey were cognitive in nature, i.e. deliberately reinforcing suitable thoughts and beliefs about gambling and behaviour. The most common way was players reminding themselves of other ways the money could be spent if not used for gambling (Rodda et al., 2018b).

Many tools exist and some are found to be helpful, but most are poorly used and often do not address the full range of possible users' needs. It is not straightforward to increase effective usage.

- An ecosystem review identified 69 digital tools outside of operator-provided tools like deposit limit setting, with most tools developed since 2018 (Stark, 2022). 70% of tools were developed in the UK or Australia. Only 17% had an independent evaluation or noted theoretical effectiveness. The tools typically focused more on treatment than prevention and more on the player than affected others. For instance, the most common tools were bank card blocks, cognitive behavioural therapy or mindfulness techniques, or time trackers. A small number of educational games were also identified.
- Evidence from six Australian online operators identifies low rates of use of voluntary deposit limits (16%), with limits typically set very high or later deactivated if players were initially required to set a limit (Heirene et al., 2021). Time-outs were typically used by fewer than 2% of players.
- A meta-analysis identified positive impacts on behaviour from long-term educational programmes and personalised feedback. There was insufficient, mixed, or only low-quality evidence on other preventative interventions reviewed, e.g. limits, self-exclusion, and pop-up messages (Forsström et al., 2021). Tentative positive evidence has also been found for online advice, support, and therapy in treating gambling issues (Paterson et al., 2021).
- There appear to be several promising avenues for improving the available tools ecosystem (Stark, 2022). For instance, tools are rarely encouraged proactively early on in player journeys and can be hard to access. Few tools use reminders, badges, or incentives to encourage use. With greater funding and regulatory support, tools could innovate more quickly, be made

available for free (some third-party apps currently charge users), and address concerns around privacy and quality.

What are the implications for industry and policy?

Collectively, the research reviewed makes a wide range of recommendations for industry and policymakers to reflect on. Some of the key themes include (i) developing an ecosystem of standard tools; (ii) finding the right way to communicate about tools; (iii) building tools that complement player strategies for managing their play; (iv) independent, critical evaluations of tools; and (v) increased development and refinement of tools to support players:

- i. The thoughtful development of a consistent, integrated ecosystem of tools, so that players become familiar with intuitive tools. Tools might be particularly useful if they have similar or identical interfaces across operators or providers. In addition, tools should complement each other and interoperate efficiently within gambling operators and across society-wide health and finance systems to support players at all levels of play and risk.
- ii. Many potentially useful tools are under-used, often rarely used at all. Creative and ambitious techniques need to be explored to see how the target players for particular tools might see value in them and begin incorporating them into their regular play. This may include player journey analysis, personalisation, reminders, gamification, incentives, and designing resources that better match target player needs.
- iii. More tools should reflect or build on the strategies that players are already more likely to use to manage their play, including cognitive strategies and identifying alternative activities they enjoy. In particular, tools may aim to empower players to follow through on their strategic intentions, rather than focusing solely on managing behaviour directly.
- iv. Increased funding and publication of independent and critical evaluations of tools is important both for identifying success and for identifying areas to improve. For instance, it will help us understand which tools/features are poorly used, but might be beneficial if presented in the right way, as contrasted with tools/features which simply do not work and should be removed.
- v. There remains significant potential to develop more and better tools, with particular gaps identified in tools/resources for affected others, tools tailored to particular groups/risk levels, and upstream prevention-focused tools. However, it will remain important to curate and personalise suites of tools made available to players to reduce confusion over what to use. To curate the right set of 2-5 tools for one particular player may require us to develop and experiment with many hundreds.

These are ambitious themes. Success will require significant resourcing, regulatory support, and collaboration among operators, tool developers, researchers, and experts in reducing harm. We will need more evaluation and more sharing of what doesn't work and why. The prize is widespread usage of a personalised tool suite aligned to players' strategies that players welcome and substantially contributes to reducing gambling risk.

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August 2022

How can I find out more?

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