

opinion

Online gambling in unprecedented times: Risks and safer gambling strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic

Sasha Stark¹ & Janine Robinson¹

¹Centre for the Advancement of Best Practices, Responsible Gambling Council, Toronto, ON, Canada

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way we live our lives: how we work, socialize, and gamble. As land-based gambling venues around the world are shut down and many professional sports paused or cancelled, those persons who bet on sports or play in land-based venues are forced either to stop gambling or find other means to do so. Academic papers, market research, and news articles have reported that the reduction in available gambling opportunities and widespread COVID-19-based restrictions (and associated stressors) are been linked to important changes in online gambling.

As countries, economies, and land-based venues open, it may seem appropriate now to shift our attention away from online gambling. However, the pandemic has changed the (online) gambling industry and players for the long term. The economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 restrictions will be long lasting. Large numbers of people are still off work or working from home and are largely isolated from friends and family. Furthermore, many people have expressed hesitation in returning to play in gambling venues without a vaccine (SynergyBlue, 2020). For those gamblers who are comfortable returning, they are only being presented with a fraction of the games they are used to, with certain venues not opening table games (Adams, 2020). Additional waves of COVID-19 are forcing other closures (Stutz, 2020). The landscape of online gambling has also expanded and changed over the last few months. Many operators have added new lines of business, games, and betting options aimed at increasing their appeal to a broader audience of players. Many jurisdictions, such as several US states (Associated Press, 2020; Covid-19 has driven, 2020) and Brazil (Menmuir, 2020), are fast tracking or beginning plans to legalize online gambling to offset the financial repercussions of the pandemic. All of these factors suggest that online gambling will continue to remain relevant for many

or even more players. In one survey, almost a quarter of players who plan to return to land-based gambling (23%) stated that their gambling spend would increase, and 93% of players who gambled online would continue to do so once restrictions are lifted (SynergyBlue, 2020).

Online gambling has been the focus of much research and safer gambling initiatives for some time, because of the nature of this gambling format—high speed, simultaneous play, privacy—and its association with gambling-related harm (Papineau et al., 2018). In the current unprecedented context, particular attention should be paid to the risks associated with online play and approaches for mitigating them. Below we review risk factors for and changes in online play during the COVID-19 pandemic, and outline a series of safer gambling initiatives for reducing harm among online players.

How the COVID-19 pandemic may be putting gamblers at risk

Several known risk factors for gambling and gambling harm are being experienced by large segments of the population as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. These factors include depression, anxiety, and psychological distress (Barrault & Varescon, 2013; Oksanen et al., 2018; Welte et al., 2017), substance abuse and gambling while intoxicated (Barnes et al., 2015; Martin et al., 2014), loneliness (Gill & McQuade, 2012; John et al., 2019), financial difficulties and stress (Olason et al., 2017; Paterson et al., 2020), and gambling to escape or because of boredom (Hing et al., 2016; Mercer & Eastwood, 2010; Wood & Griffiths, 2007). It is unprecedented that all of these risk factors are happening together on a global scale. The impacts will likely be unparalleled as well, which is why it is imperative at this time to monitor risks and outcomes continuously and to be adaptable to identify and meet player needs.

Changes in online gambling across the globe

It is expected that the global online gambling market will grow from \$58.9 billion to \$66.7 billion from 2019 to 2020, largely because of COVID-19 social distancing (Online gambling continues to thrive, 2020). Increases in online gambling spending and consequently revenue are being seen in several jurisdictions. In Queensland Australia, online gambling has grown by 1.4 times (Johal, 2020). In Pennsylvania, online gambling revenue for May was more than twice the revenue for March, largely from online slots and table games (Stradbroke, 2020b). In New Jersey, online gambling revenue in April hit a record high at \$79.9 million (Castleman, 2020).

Increases in gambling have not been across the board. With the closure of most land-based gambling opportunities, overall gambling participation decreased substantially. In Australia, play on most land-based games reduced significantly, with past-year gamblers playing fewer games during lockdown (Jenkinson et al., 2020). In a separate Australian sample, 64% spent less time gambling and 10% stopped all together, with median monthly spend decreasing by over half (Gainsbury & Blaszczynski, 2020). Reductions in gambling are translating into reductions in

harm in certain cases, with calls to helplines decreasing sharply by roughly 50% in Ontario (Turner, 2020) and the majority of those with gambling problems in an Australian sample reporting a decrease in their problems during the shutdown (Gainsbury & Blaszczynski, 2020). These changes are also leading to shifts in gambling revenue, with levels down from previous years in large part because of losses in land-based revenue which are not being entirely recovered through increases in revenue from online gambling, which makes up a fraction of overall revenue in most jurisdictions (AGA Commercial Gaming Revenue Tracker, 2021). Certain countries saw changes in existing online player behaviours, but not increases in new players. In the UK, only 0.2% of adults reported having taken up gambling during the lockdown, but many existing players were playing more games and spending more time or money online (Overall gambling participation down, 2020). Other jurisdictions saw increases in player signups—such as a 50% increase in Finland—but the average spend per player is remained the same (Phil, 2020; Stradbroke, 2020a).

Many countries and operators reported increased player signups, as people tried online gambling for the first time or experimented with new operators and games. Worldwide, 32% of players actively looked for new types of betting that continue to be available (Esports gambling revenue, 2020). In the UK, 41% of those persons who have bet since the beginning of the pandemic have opened a new online betting account (Davies, 2020a) and 42% of recent gamblers have tried a new product during the lockdown (Overall gambling participation down, 2020). In Australia, 30% of past-year gamblers have signed up for a new online account(s) (Jenkinson et al., 2020). The Golden Nugget, an online operator in New Jersey, reported a 20% increase in new player signups in March (Parry, 2020). Global Poker, an online poker room, reported a 43% increase in use of online poker sites in the US in April and more than double the first-time poker players (Hacohen, 2020).

In terms of games played, we saw a resurgence of previously popular games—such as casino games and poker. According to UK operator data, gambling through online slots increased by 29% in May (Stradbroke, 2020d), and a 70% increase in the number of online poker bets placed occurred between March and April (Stradbroke, 2020c). In New Jersey, online casino games increased by 1.18 times between April 2019 and 2020, and online poker doubled over this same period (Wargo, 2020).

We also saw substantial increases in play on forms of betting that previously had limited popularity, such as obscure international sports. In mid-April, ping pong matches in Ukraine and Russia accounted for almost 60% of money wagered over the previous week on Draftkings (Freyman, 2020). Virtual sports also increased in popularity. In the UK, operator data showed a 44% increase in gambling on virtual sports between March and April (Stradbroke, 2020c). Esports also saw large growth in available betting opportunities and wagers. UltraPlay, an esports-oriented iGaming company, reported five times the turnover growth between mid-March and mid-April for esports, and over four times the growth in the number of bets over this same period (UltraPlay reports a record-breaking increase, 2020). Bets can even be placed on COVID-19-specific events. Gambling sites in Russia and India offer bets

on COVID-19 outcomes, including infection rates, death tolls, and timing for vaccine development and lockdowns (Newsdesk, 2020; Thomsen, 2020).

Of particular concern, reports are showing increases in play among those gambling online during the pandemic. In the UK, more gamblers are playing more than one type of game (42% vs. 26%; Stradbroke, 2020c), 27% are spending more time and money (up to 68% among those who played three or more games in the last month; Covid-19 and its impact, 2020), average spend per player increased in May across all game types (Covid-19 and its impact, 2020), and the number of gambling session lasting more than an hour had increased by 23% (Davies, 2020b). Gamblers in Australia (16%), Canada (26%), New Zealand (12%), and Sweden (6%) also reported increased gambling since the start of the pandemic (Abacus Data, 2020; Brown & Hickman, 2020; Håkansson, 2020; Nielsen, 2020). Being influenced to gamble online during COVID-19 and increased gambling frequency and spend during the lockdown are associated with moderate or high problem gambling severity (Gainsbury & Blaszczynski, 2020; Håkansson, 2020; Price, 2020). Since the beginning of lockdown, 17% of gamblers in New Zealand have worried about their gambling (Nielsen, 2020).

Safer gambling innovation in unprecedented times

With large numbers of persons initiating, changing, or increasing their online gambling behaviours—and certain of those participants experiencing harm as a result—the question becomes whether existing safer gambling resources are well suited in content, quality, and quantity for responding to these changes. The player has changed and the risks have changed. Players may be at risk because of the high speed of play of certain online games, different gambling motivations and financial circumstances compared to pre-COVID-19, and a possible lack of informed decision making on unfamiliar games (Collins, 2020; Price, 2020). To prevent benefiting from high risk play and provide a heightened duty of care to players, operators need to bolster safer gambling resources and programs under these unparalleled circumstances to minimize the impact of these changes in risk by providing more player information, resources, interaction, and support.

The gambling industry can meet this need in the same way other industries have around the world, from the hospitality industry to essential businesses—by innovating to serve their customers better. This is an opportunity for gambling operators to rise to the challenges posed by a unique, difficult, and evolving situation by identifying new and augmented solutions and approaches for safer play. These solutions, certain of which we describe below, may be in-game or outside of the gambling platform, and they may be completely new initiatives or involve tailoring or bolstering existing programs.

Games and play features

Operators should avoid adding games and offering play features that pose a high level of risk for players. This includes games that have a high speed of play and

features such as autoplay, reverse withdrawals, and bonuses (Harris & Griffiths, 2018; Hing et al., 2014). Certain regulators are implementing such restrictions. In France, bonuses for online poker are banned during the pandemic (Flanders, 2020), and the UK Gambling Commission has recommended that operators stop reverse withdrawals and providing bonuses or promotions to players showing indicators of harm (Customer interaction, 2020).

Player monitoring

Operators should engage in stricter monitoring of player behaviours during this time. More resources should be dedicated to this task, and there should be an increase in the level and quality of the customer service being provided to players, as discussed in the following section.

Operators should also consider how the typical player has changed and re-examine existing markers of risk used in player monitoring accordingly. For example, are the existing affordability thresholds appropriate, given the current strained financial situation of many players? Further, thresholds for new players should be reviewed, in light of operators' limited knowledge of these players' behaviour patterns (Customer interaction, 2020). Operators should also explore whether the addition of new markers is required. Are there COVID-19-specific markers that can be added, such as changes in behaviour pre-, during, and post-lockdown(s) (Martin Lycka sees no worrying change, 2020)? Staff should then be interacting with players who are showing increases in play behaviour across these time periods, such as time and spend (10 pledges for safer gambling, 2020).

Player communications

Communications with all players should be increased and tailored. Changes in the player base, player behaviours, and game offerings provide increased need and opportunity to interact with players. The increases in new players, presence of high intensity players, and the return of popular games such as sports betting provide more touchpoints for checking in with and supporting players. Staff should be interacting with players early and often, providing information and support that considers the possible impacts of COVID-19 on players and their behaviours. For example, the UK Gambling Commission has told operators to interact with players who have been playing for an hour in a single session (Customer interaction, 2020). With the shifts to digital healthcare, opportunities consequently emerge for operators to identify more effective ways to connect players with support options and resources using technological and remote means.

For new players and new games, communications should focus on promoting informed decision making through thorough onboarding on how games and platforms work and the safer gambling tools available. This information should be highly visible, heavily promoted, and easy to access and understand.

Existing players should be provided with pre-, during, and post-COVID lockdown notifications and reports. Players should be able to obtain reports in their player accounts documenting trends across these time points and receive notifications of increases in time or money spent across these periods.

All players should receive messaging about how COVID-19 restrictions can impact gambling behaviours and how to minimize risk. For example, players should be reminded not to play to escape negative feelings or to make money, and to reconsider their financial limits in light of impacts on their employment or income. Relevant safer gambling tools—such as time and limit setting—can be highlighted as well.

Incentivizing safer gambling

Now may be an ideal time to try something new to incentivize safer gambling behaviours and the use of associated tools. By attaching rewards to them, it may be possible to increase the uptake of these behaviours and tools initially, as well as over time, by adding progressively to their perceived value and player exposure (Wohl, 2018). Players can be provided with messaging directing them to set, time and money limits, and receive points towards non-gambling items such as retailer gift cards for using these tools. Such a points system has been implemented by Finland's Veikkaus (Wohl, 2018), and in the current context, this approach would be akin to Caesars Entertainment handing out free slot machine play to players wearing masks in venues (Velotta, 2020).

Marketing and advertising

Globally, paid advertisement impressions for casino and gambling brands have grown during the pandemic, with an increase of 1.58 times in April of this year compared to last (Oakes, 2020). In certain jurisdictions, operators are being criticized for seeming to capitalize on social distancing orders by heavily promoting online gambling (Martin, 2020). Many steps can be taken to reduce the potentially negative impacts of gambling advertising on gambling harm in the current climate (Binde & Romild, 2019; Gainsbury et al., 2016). These recommendations apply to all marketing platforms, and may be particularly important in online spaces where people are spending increased time while social distancing.

At minimum, operators should not suggest in their advertising that gambling can alleviate any of the negative impacts of social distancing or economic recession, such as stress or financial concerns. More proactively, gambling advertising should feature more or exclusively safer gambling messages. Safer gambling should feature more prominently in individual advertisements and overall across operator messaging. Operators could consider replacing marketing targeted at recruiting new players or increased play (i.e., bonuses) with safer gambling messaging during lockdown situations. Operators can also take steps to limit gambling advertising. In Spain, gambling advertising is only permitted between 1 and 5 a.m. (Portugal to limit online gambling, 2020), and in New South Wales venues are being encouraged

not to promote pokies in their emails to customers during their reopening (Office of Responsible Gambling, 2020).

Staff training

Improved, tailored, and reinforced staff training can be critical at moving safer gambling approaches beyond compliance (Quilty et al., 2015). High quality training can support the roll out of the new and expanded programs described above, and provide staff with information for navigating these difficult times and supporting players in new circumstances. For example, certain regulators are placing requirements for enhanced staff training as part of the conditions for resuming gambling operations (Nevada Gaming Control Board, 2020). New training can be developed for all staff that focuses on COVID-19 impacts on players and considerations for player interactions or that outlines new safer gambling programs. Core training can be updated on similar topics, and refreshed regularly as the pandemic and programs evolve. Segmented training can also be offered to customer service representatives, marketing, and C-suite members that focuses on the specialized knowledge and skills required for these roles. With a thorough and thoughtful training approach, all players can be supported during the pandemic through targeted staff training. Low risk players can be encouraged to learn about how the games work. At-risk players can benefit from interacting with staff trained on player interactions, precommitment tools, and tailored messaging. High-risk players can be supported through referrals to counselling and options for self-exclusion.

Moving forward

In these unique and high risk circumstances, now is the time to improve safer gambling initiatives—expand their scope and reach, try innovative approaches, and increase their visibility. Cuts to safer gambling should be avoided at this time, to mitigate a surge of player harm and self-exclusions.

In moving forward, successful innovative programs for mitigating the impacts of the pandemic will be born out of various approaches. Operators should contribute to destigmatizing safe gambling by moving upstream—focusing on all players (Browne et al., 2017), and not just framing safer gambling as a response to problem gambling. Marketing, player communications, and staff training should convey information and resources for the entire spectrum of players, from low to high risk (Responsible Gambling Council, 2011). Regulators should focus upstream by aligning their goals with broader public health concerns and improvements, and widening the focus to include the financial sector and promoting healthy online activities. Further, operators, staff, and players can all be incentivized to use and encourage safer gambling approaches, by factoring these behaviours into performance reviews and licensing conditions.

Operators must be proactive in identifying new ways to support customers during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. They should use all of the resources and data

at their disposal to identify opportunities for and develop additional supports. In innovating, it is important to base safer gambling programs, tools, and strategies in existing operational or research evidence. Initiatives should be monitored for unintended consequences, evaluated during and after roll out, and adapted as needed. Strong inter-sector collaborations, between operators, regulators, treatment providers, and researchers from various disciplines, will be critical for basing programs in evidence, preventing unanticipated consequences, and ensuring thorough evaluation. With a concerted effort, we can push safer gambling meaningfully beyond its current form.

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For correspondence: Sasha Stark, Ph.D., Centre for the Advancement of Best Practices, Responsible Gambling Council, 411 Richmond Street East, Suite 205, Toronto, Ontario M5A 3S5, Canada. E-mail: sashas@rgco.org

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