Pre-commitment: Is the Smart Card that Smart?

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Robert Ladouceur, Ph.D. Professor Emeritus, School of Psychology, Université Laval, Québec, Canada
Outline

1. Political trigger for mandatory pre-commitment
2. The rational of pre-commitment
3. Main results
4. Philosophical issues and conclusions
The following results are based on a paper

Pre-commitment in Gambling: A review of the empirical evidence

Robert Ladouceur, Alex Blaszczynski, & Daniel Lalande
(International Gambling Studies)
Political vs scientific issue

In the 2010 parliamentary Australian election, Julia Gillard negotiated with Independent Senator Andrew Wilkie to gain power in return for a promise to introduce **mandatory** pre-commitment system on all poker machines in country.

and....

Julia Gillard was elected as Prime Minister....
Political vs scientific issue

• Created a fantastic controversy in Australia
• Government established a series of meetings with experts in industry and research
• Some were strongly for and some were strongly against.
Political vs scientific issue

Interestingly, in our review on this issue, using a broad definition of Pre-commitment (many key words), we found

- A total of 218 papers,
  - 201 (92%) were opinions based papers
  - 17 (8%) were based on data
Rationale of pre-commitment

This interesting concept was first introduced by Mark Dickerson in Australia.

*His studies indicated that the majority of the gamblers “lose of control” WHILE they gamble*
Furthermore, Dickerson believed that while gambling, the gambler’s emotional and cognitive states “blur” rational decision.

What do we find?
Dissociations
Erroneous perceptions (Can I disagree with this??????)
Therefore, the decision on the amount of money and time spent gambling should be taken **BEFORE** rather than **DURING** the gambling session.
Main Question

Do we have sufficient evidence to implement a mandatory pre-commitment system (smart card) to all inhabitants in a given jurisdiction?
The main studies I will review here are:

Empirical studies
Designed for EGM
(I will exclude the online gambling)
Empirical studies related to precommitment
Norway prevalence study

• In 2007, all gaming machines were removed, eliminating access to legal land-based gaming machines.
• In 2008, new low intensity machines with mandatory precommitment were installed
• Paradoxically, the prevalence of adult problem gambling rose from 1.3% to 2.1%.

Why? We don’t know but possible explanations may be

- Migration from low intensity machine to internet..
- A rise in illegal gambling
Empirical studies related to precommitment: NS-1

- 70 modified machines distributed in 10 different venues in NS
- 121 regulars gamblers (once a month) Response rate?
- Participants were not required to use the card every time they gamble.

Results based on self report

- 45% used the card every time they gambled
- 87% used the summary statement and 52% limit-setting options
- 80% played more responsibly with the card
- 44% removed the card and continue gambling
Empirical studies related to precommitment: NS-2

Main characteristics of the study

• Card was mandatory
• Study conducted in a laboratory
• Use of RG features was optional
• Participants did not use their own money
Empirical studies related to precommitment: NS-2

Main results
- 75% supported precommitment
- 60% played more responsibly and spent less
- 51% of participants used at least one RG features
  - Most popular: summary expenditure

But
- Card swapping commonly reported
- No actual expenditure was recorded
- Summary of losses triggered chasing in some participants
- Gamblers did not use their own money

“We cannot at this stage state that specific RG policies caused any specific behavioral changes”
Empirical studies related to precommitment: NS-3

Main characteristics of the study
• 161 regular VLT players, after attrition 137
• Study carried in the natural environment
• Card used was mandatory but RG features were optional
• Self report and behavioural measures were collected over time

Main results
• 60% reported occasional or regular used of 1 type of RG
  • Mainly summary statements
• 70% reported that the system helped them play more Responsibly, with 57% reported spending less time and money
Main results (continued)

- 50% borrowed cards
- If we take only the gamblers who used only their own card (N=88),
  - 55 reduced their expenditure
  - 6 no changes
  - 27 increased their expenditure

Limitations and conclusions

- Card swapping was frequent
- About 30% increased their expenditure
Empirical studies related to precommitment: Australian Qld trials

Two trials were conducted in two metropolitan venues, Redcliffe and Sandgate. We will discuss Redcliffe first.

**Main characteristics**

- 52 gamblers recruited on site (response rate unkown)
- The design included a 35-min telephone interview and 3 focus groups with gamblers who used SimPlay for up to 6 mo.
Empirical studies related to precommitment: Australian Qld trials

Main Results

- Use of RG features was low (28%);
- 79% reported no impact on expenditure
- Only 10 participants reported that they were spending less with the card
- Pre-post analyses showed that
  - 42% spent less
  - 5% no change
  - 53% spent more

In the second arm of the study Sandgate of 66 eligible participants, only 22 agreed to participate. No results will be discussed.
Empirical studies related to precommitment: SA 3 studies

Study 1
• Due to a very small sample (N=26) no conclusion can be outlined

Study 2
• Difficulty in recruitment; 135 with no incentives 137 with
  • But only 91 completed the telephone survey
• 6 Hotel venues participated in the trial
• Patrons were able to play with or without use of their card
Empirical studies related to precommitment: SA 3 studies

Main results
• 62% increased their awareness about their expenditure
• 47% expressed more confidence playing the EGM
• 33% rated the RG device as useful
• 60% reported setting a limit at a higher amount than typically spent
Main conclusions

Taking into account the overall results, unfortunately, meaningful conclusions cannot be drawn due to

- Small and unrepresentative samples
- Reliance on self-report data
- Failure to control for non-card use and gambling at other venues
- Card swapping behaviour
- Some gamblers increased with their expenditure
- Chasing losses in response to player information
- Setting higher limits and reaching those limits
Conclusion

Although the notion of **mandatory** precommitment appears very compelling and possibly useful, it’s implementation appears to be dictated by a **political** rather than a **scientific** agenda.
As someone said,

I don’t like **data**, they make me insecure because they are changing all the time,

I prefer **opinions,**

**my opinions,**

they are

**stable,**

**permanent and resistant to any changes…**

An famous unknown man
Thank You

Robert.Ladouceur@psy.ulaval.ca