

Problem and Non-problem Gamblers' Attraction to Different VLT Games

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ABSTRACT:

This study investigated the opinions of problem and non-problem Video Lottery Terminal (VLT) gamblers. Specifically, two separate focus group sessions were conducted with problem and non-problem gamblers in which they discussed their opinions on two different kinds of VLT games: entertainment-focused and winning-focused games. Four major themes emerged that differentiated problem versus non-problem gamblers. The findings suggested that the selection of new VLT games for the marketplace should not be based on the preferences for problem gamblers. New VLT games should be entertainment-focused rather than winning-focused.

Playing electronic gaming machines, typically known as Video Lottery Terminals (VLTs) is a highly popular, world-wide gambling activity (Griffiths 1994). Burns (2005) tentatively classified VLT games as either 'winning-focused' or 'entertainment-focused'. Winning-focused games have large, although infrequent payouts, whereas entertainment-focused

games have relatively small, yet frequent payouts. Basically, the graphics used in winning-focused games are rather traditional, while entertainment-focused games have more advanced graphics and sounds, along with bonus rounds involving challenges.

At present, the gambling industry in Atlantic Canada, specifically the *Atlantic Lottery Corporation*, uses focus groups to determine which type of VLT games they wish to add to the marketplace. However, because the gambling industry does not differentiate between problem versus non-problem gamblers in making up their focus groups, there is often an overrepresentation of problem gamblers in these focus groups. Often, this overrepresentation leads to the selection of games preferred by problem gamblers, possibly leading to an increase in the prevalence of problem gambling in the community. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to employ a qualitative approach using focus groups in order to provide a deeper understanding of the opinions and beliefs of problem and non-problem gamblers on VLT gaming. Participants in the study were first presented with a questionnaire, the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI; Wynne 2002) that placed participants in two different groups: Problem versus non-problem gamblers. Subsequently, focus group sessions were run that allowed participants to freely express their personal opinions of playing entertainment focused and winning focused VLT games. Four major themes emerged from the focus group sessions: preferred traditional games, preferred winning indicators, winning bigger prizes, and strategies and beliefs.

Preferred traditional games

The first major theme was that both problem and non-problem gamblers preferred traditional games, but for different reasons. Problem gamblers felt that they could win more money with traditional games, whereas, non-problem gamblers preferred traditional games because they were easier to understand and were not very complicated.

Preferred winning indicators

The second major theme focused on the various indicators of winning (i.e., lights and sounds). While both problem and non-problem gamblers equally enjoyed the experience of

winning, problem gamblers responded more to the lights and sounds of winning. Several problem gamblers reported that they were not even looking at the VLT screen; they simply kept pressing “spin” on the VLT machine until the winning sound was heard. Non-problem gamblers reported that they found the lights and sounds that were associated with winning to be just part of the entertainment of playing.

Winning bigger prizes

The third major theme focused on problem and non-problem gamblers interest in winning bigger prizes. Problem gamblers played VLTs primarily to win, and were obsessed with winning large sums of money. They spent most of the discussion time talking about topics related to winning. On the other hand, while non-problem gamblers enjoyed winning, they were not overly disappointed if they did not win a large sum of money.

Strategies and beliefs

The final major theme was related to problem and non-problem gamblers beliefs that there was strategy and skill involved in playing VLT machines. Problem gamblers believed that they could control the outcome of the games, and that the timing of a payout from a machine influenced when the next payout would be for that same machine. In contrast, non-problem gamblers reported knowledge of these strategies, but did not act on these beliefs. Rather, non-problem gamblers reported switching games out of boredom, not based on a particular strategy.

Implications for the marketplace

We suggested that our findings have implications for the selection of new games into the global marketplace. We found that by examining the experiences of VLT gamblers that games that fit into a winning-focused category have appeal to both problem and non-problem gamblers. However, these games particularly cater to the motivational factors of the problem gambler: the excitement of winning bigger prizes and the illusion of control of random VLT outcomes. Alternatively, entertainment-focused games can be appealing to

both problem and non-problem gamblers, with their focus on an entertaining story line, diverse lights and sounds, and the possibility of frequently winning small rewards.

VLT usage appears to be rather lucrative for those involved in the operation of VLTs, and not so much for others (McKenna 2008). For example, VLT retailers in New Brunswick, Canada in the year 2000 obtained a profit of \$47 million while the government obtained a profit of \$53 million (Azmier & Canada West Foundation, 2001). Unfortunately, it has been estimated by Hyson (2003) that 96% of this revenue is derived from only 6% of the adult population who are regular gamblers. As a result, we often see that participants in focus groups held by the *Atlantic Lottery Corporation*, are comprised substantially of problem gamblers. We suggest that the gambling industry should be encouraged to assess the problem gambling status of potential focus group participants, and use only non-problem gamblers for the selection of new VLT games into the marketplace. We also suggest that the gambling industry should be encouraged to introduce only entertainment-focused games into the global marketplace, even though, in the short-term this may result in decreased overall revenue.

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