

ONLINE GAMING Potential risks and forms of prevention

GLÜCKSSPIELE IM INTERNET Gefahrenpotenziale und mögliche Formen der Prävention

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SUMMARY

Online gaming is becoming more and more common and increasingly accessible. Yet a lack of social control could make participation a potential risk for certain customers. This article focuses on the prevention measures that have been developed and implemented by Austrian Lotteries, the Austria-based operator of the online gaming platform win2day, in light of the specifics of internet gaming to prevent and avoid users developing gambling problems.

Key words: Online gaming – prevention - pathological gambling - responsible gaming - behavioral feedback system – pop-up messages

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Glücksspielangebote im Internet werden immer stärker genutzt und sind auf einfache Weise zugänglich. Durch die fehlende soziale Kontrolle kann die Teilnahme für manche Personen ein Risiko bedeuten. Welche Präventionsmaßnahmen der österreichische Anbieter von Online Glücksspielen, die Casinos Austria-Österreichische Lotterien Unternehmensgruppe, bei win2day.at einsetzt, um problematisches Glücksspiel zu verhindern, wird vor dem Hintergrund der Besonderheiten des Internetglücksspiels in diesem Artikel vorgestellt.

Schlüsselwörter: Online-Glücksspiel – Prävention – Glücksspielsucht - Responsible Gaming – Behavioral Feedback System - Pop-up Messages

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INTRODUCTION

Prevention in a gambling context focuses on preventing and avoiding the negative effects of gambling (Kalke et al. 2011, Meyer & Hayer 2010, Meyer & Bachmann 2005). The “Triad of Addiction Model” (“Modell der Suchttrias”) differentiates between environmental, personal and addictive substance related risk factors (Meyer & Hayer 2010). These include factors of influence which stem both from the social environment and the density of offers as well as from personal preconditions such as genetic disposition, neurobiological causes, personality structure, gender, and potential pre-existing conditions. According to Meyer and Bachmann (2005), different combinations of these background conditions have a different level of impact in each individual case and can lead to a more or less strongly pronounced pathological gambling habit. Blaszczynski and Nower (2002) define “pathological gambling” as “‘persistent and recurrent maladaptive gambling behavior’ characterized by an inability to control gambling, leading to significant deleterious psychosocial consequences”. Meyer and Bachmann (2005), in turn, describe gambling as a “process with direct psychotropic effects”. Particularly high-risk and vulnerable groups require primary protection here (Derevensky et al. 2004).

Kalke et al. (2011) identify the following vulnerable groups in the gambling addiction context: age group to 35 years, male, migration background, low level of education, unemployed, raised by parents with gambling problems, current case(s) of gambling problems in the family, at least a risky level of alcohol consumption, and consumption of cannabis within the last 30 years. Meyer and Hayer (2010) also refer in this context to a “hidden addiction”. Given that a gambling addiction can often go unnoticed for many years, attempts to identify problem gamblers at as early a stage as possible must be complemented by corresponding prevention measures and activities.

Due to the multi-causal origins of gambling problems, the challenge facing prevention lies in providing the right measures at the right time in each individual case. Accordingly, science and research consistently endeavors to identify types of gamblers (Gupta et al. 2013), each of which need to be considered in both prevention efforts and in counselling and treatment. Likewise, the specific characteristics of different gambling products, which can also have an inherent addiction triggering effect for potential gambling addicts, must also be taken into consideration in the development of responsible gaming and player protection measures (Meyer & Bachmann 2005, Griffiths 2003, Griffiths et al. 2007, Griffiths et al. 2008).

Behavioral prevention thus draws on measures which influence the behavior of the individual, while situational prevention focuses on tackling the corresponding structural aspects. A differentiation is also made between universal prevention, in which measures are targeted at a population as a whole, selective prevention, which targets those groups that are at risk of developing a particular disorder, and targeted prevention, which targets individual persons who are at risk (Buth & Kalke 2012, Kalke et al. 2012).

The prevention measures developed and used by the Casinos Austria and Austrian Lotteries Group include both behavioral prevention and situational prevention measures and are based on scientific recommendations and findings (Kalke et al. 2011). The effectiveness of the prevention measures on the group's win2day online gaming platform were evaluated in 2010 in an online survey of all win2day users conducted by the Center for Interdisciplinary Addiction and Drug Research at the University of Hamburg in Germany (Buth et al. 2011). The researchers' recommendations for optimizing the responsible gaming and player protection measures were subsequently implemented on the win2day site.

THE SPECIFICS OF ONLINE GAMBLING

Gambling via the internet can pose a potential threat to vulnerable and at-risk groups not least because of the low-threshold access, the constant availability, and the lack of social control in contrast to offline gambling (Auer & Griffiths 2014, Derevensky et al. 2004, Griffiths & Whitty 2010, McBride & Derevensky 2009). Moreover, adherence to measures to protect minors poses a particular challenge for online gambling operators (Griffiths 2003, Hayer 2012, Winters & Arria 2011, Winters 2008). So how can an operator best design its site to ensure that the risk of developing a problem is kept as low as is absolutely possible? The answer to this question requires a threefold approach: the operator must constantly scrutinize and question the measures it has in place, it must have them assessed and evaluated by independent scientists and experts, and it must be willing to follow and implement the recommendations received from these experts on how to optimize its prevention measures.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES FOR USERS OF THE ONLINE GAMING PLATFORM WIN2DAY

The online gaming platform (www.win2day.at) win2day offers a selection of lottery, casino, poker, bingo and sports betting games for adults in Austria. The license required to operate this site was awarded by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Finance to Österreichische Lotterien GesmbH/win2day in 2011. This license is valid for a period of 15 years and is subject to

adherence to the stipulated responsible gaming and player protection measures.

In addition to their first name and last name, users of the win2day platform are already required to provide their date of birth and bank account details when they first register with the site. After it has been verified that he/she meets the minimum age requirement (18 years of age) through a database search and/or with the Austrian central residents register of residents, the user is then required to set his/her personal deposit and time limits. The maximum permissible weekly deposit limit is 800 euros. The effect of the setting of limits on the behavior of high-intensity online gamblers has been studied for users of the win2day online platform. The findings here differed depending on the type of game. Time limits, which are designed to reduce the length of time a player spends gambling, proved to be most effective for online poker players, while deposit limits were most effective in reducing the intensity of play for online casino games (Auer & Griffiths 2013b).

The user can, of course, also opt irrevocably to self-exclude from the site for a defined period of time or can contact the site's free hotline with any questions regarding responsible gaming or player protection. The win2day site also reserves the right to ban a player from using the site if he/she behaves conspicuously in e-mail or telephone contacts. This measure was introduced in response to a recommendation by experts at the University of Bremen following their 2009 evaluation of self-exclusion orders/operator bans (Meyer & Hayer 2009).

“MENTOR” BEHAVIORAL FEEDBACK SYSTEM

Every win2day user also has the possibility to register for MENTOR, the platform's prevention tool. Users who register to use this tool receive permanently up-to-date feedback in graphic and text form which compares their own gambling behavior with that of other users. They also receive feedback if their gambling behavior intensifies or if the frequency of their gambling rises over time. It is important to provide users at an early enough stage with information that helps them – in line with the “informed player choice” concept – to make responsible, individual decisions concerning their own gambling behavior (Wood & Griffiths 2014). MENTOR was developed as a behavioral feedback system by neccton ltd. and Professor Mark Griffiths, Director of the International Gaming Research Unit at Nottingham Trent University, following an in-depth analysis of gambling behavior and data for all win2day users. To provide users with the information they need to make an informed decision in a manner they will also accept and understand, the texts used in the messages are formulated based on the motivational interviewing approach (Auer & Griffiths 2013a, Körkel & Veltrup 2003, Miller & Rollnick 1991). The graphical depictions are clear and demonstrative and are based on the familiar smartphone app format (see Figure 1, Figure 2).



Figure 1. Available apps: “Personalized Messages”, “Win/Loss”, “Length of time played”, “Number of days played”, “Bets per group of games”, “Game portfolio” for the last four weeks to six months



Figure 2. Example of the development in “Wins/Losses” over the last 4 to 24 weeks compared to other win2day users

The goal is to provide users with information on their gambling behavior at a point in time at which their gambling behavior can still be easily controlled and managed, thereby prompting them to reflect on their gambling and adapt their behavior as required (Auer & Griffiths 2014). After a welcome message, players then receive different messages depending on the actual developments in their individual gambling behavior.

These include messages when a rise is detected in the amounts being lost, the length of time spent on the site, the amounts being deposited, and the number of days on which a player visits the site, as well as specific messages to poker players, slot game players, and after excessive gambling episodes (binge gamblers). If a player does not fall into any of these groups, he/she will still periodically receive general messages regarding the

risk of gambling as a potential escape from reality, the risk of trying to recuperate losses, the fact that all games are determined by chance and that there is no way of predicting the results, as well the risk of viewing any fallacies about luck and gambling as an escape from everyday life. Some of these messages were evaluated by scientists, and the results show that a significant proportion of players reduced their gambling activities after reading such messages. A journal publication on these findings is currently being prepared.

POP-UP MESSAGES TO AID TIME MANAGEMENT

Studies show that dynamic messages are easier to remember than static messages and that they are of more help in encouraging people to assess their own gambling behavior. The basic assumption here is that players will be motivated more to change their behavior if the feedback they receive is personalized and is communicated in a non-judgmental and motivating manner (Griffiths et al. 2006, Monaghan 2008, Auer et al. 2014, Auer & Griffiths 2014). Accordingly, a further prevention measure – this time to aid time management – was implemented on the win2day platform. When players have been playing slot games for an hour, they receive a pop-up message on the screen telling them how long they have been playing and asking them if they want to stop the game. This measure was tested using a random, anonymous sample of a total of 800,000 gaming sessions. The findings showed that significantly more players ended their slots session after reading these pop-up messages than those who did not receive such messages (Auer et al. 2014).

CONCLUSIONS

The fact that gambling addiction can often go unnoticed for years and, above all, that gambling on the internet also often eludes all social controls, makes it all the more necessary for providers to utilize technology-based options to evaluate and make use of information about the gambling behavior of their customers to prevent gambling addiction. With the MENTOR prevention tool and its feedback loops to the user's own gambling behavior, an instrument has been developed which draws on the state-of-the-art in current research findings and technology and has been made available to all win2day customers since March 2013. Pop-up messages to aid time management, the verification of player registration details, and the provision of (self-)exclusion options all also make further important contributions to responsible gaming and player protection on the win2day online gaming platform. Nonetheless, continuing to work with research institutions to develop prevention instruments and procedures that meet the demands of modern society remains absolutely imperative.

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