



Responsible Gambling as an Evolving Concept and the Benefits of a Positive Play Approach: A Reply to Shaffer et al

Richard T. A. Wood¹ · Michael J. A. Wohl² · Nassim Tabri² · Kahlil Philander^{3,4}

Accepted: 23 July 2023 / Published online: 3 August 2023

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2023

Keywords Responsible gambling · Positive play · Corporate social · Responsibility · Gambling studies

Introduction

The Reno Model—the seminal responsible gambling (RG) framework—continues to be influential in the field of gambling studies and public policy. Recently, the authors of the Reno Model suggested that the relatively new Positive Play approach (Wood & Griffiths, 2015; Wood et al., 2017) represents a subset of RG that does not intend to prevent or reduce gambling-related harms (see Shaffer et al., 2023). In this reply to Shaffer et al. (2023), we clarify what Positive Play is and what it is not. We do so by using both our previous writing on the concept and data we and others have published using the Positive Play Scale (PPS). We also discuss ways in which Positive Play and the Reno Model can work together to promote a safer, more sustainable gambling environment and help reduce gambling-related harms.

Defining Responsibility

We agree that personal responsibility is an important (if not central) component of RG. The Positive Play approach underscores the importance of accepting personal responsibility. It is why the PPS includes items that directly assess the extent to which a player accepts personal responsibility (e.g., “It’s my responsibility to spend only money that I can afford to lose”). We now have empirical support from over 40 published and unpublished studies

✉ Richard T. A. Wood
Richard@gamres.org

¹ Gamres Limited, Arnprior, ON, Canada

² Department of Psychology, Carleton University, Ottawa, ON, Canada

³ Carson College of Business, School of Hospitality Business Management, Washington State University, Everett, WA, USA

⁴ School of Psychology, University of Sydney, Camperdown, NSW, Australia

that substantiate the importance of personal responsibility for the full spectrum of people who gamble (e.g., Tabri et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2018). Specifically, using the PPS, we (as well as others) have found that most players appear to accept that it is ultimately their responsibility to gamble in a responsible manner. This could be because the promotion of personal responsibility (e.g., “*Please play responsibly!*”) has traditionally been a dominant theme in much RG programming. In contrast, there is greater variation in the extent to which players appear to be gambling literate (i.e., having an accurate understanding about the nature of gambling), pre-commit (i.e., thinking about what is affordable to spend on gambling in terms of money and time), and are open and honest about their gambling, suggesting important areas for future RG focus.

Defining Responsible Gambling

Shaffer et al. (2023) claim that within the field of gambling studies there is a lack of conceptual clarity and worse, conceptual chaos. They suggest that the Reno Model (Blaszczynski et al., 2004) goes some way towards resolving this confusion by defining RG as follows:

“Responsible gambling refers to policies and practices designed to prevent and reduce potential harms associated with gambling; these policies and practices often incorporate a diverse range of interventions designed to promote consumer protection, community/consumer awareness and education, and access to efficacious treatment” (p. 308).

The Reno Model definition of RG has been useful for outlining the policies and practices of gambling operators and regulators as they relate to RG. However, in this respect the definition is limited because the focus is exclusively on RG implementation or the “process” of RG programs—what might be considered the independent variable (IV). Put differently, RG is conceptualized as something that gaming companies and/or regulators should do to facilitate harm-minimization. Missing is a delineation of what the outcome or dependent variable (DV) of RG programming (the IV) constitutes. Programming may indeed be “*designed to prevent and reduce potential harms associated with gambling*” but designs are not always as effective as intended. RG without measurable outcomes for the full spectrum of players renders the consequence of RG programming unknowable. We contend that RG policy and programming cannot be immune to question or criticism. We can only know if RG policy and practices are effective if we know what beliefs and behaviors constitute responsibility and that those beliefs and behaviors are measurable. Towards that end, the Positive Play approach was first discussed in broad terms by Wood and Griffiths (2015) and was later refined by the authors of the current paper, in part, via the creation of the PPS (Wood et al., 2017)—the first measure of RG as an outcome or DV.

During the development of the PPS, we examined the RG literature, interviewed 30 players about their understanding of RG, and conducted a Delphi study with 10 experienced researchers in the field (from five different countries). Subsequently, the following working definition of RG as an outcome or DV was generated:

“RG, is when a player undertakes Positive Playing experiences and holds attitudes and beliefs that do not put them at risk for developing gambling problems. More specifically, this means only spending what is affordable to lose and sticking to personally allocated spend and time limits (formal or informal). Responsible play includes

honesty and openness with self and others about personal gambling habits. Belief in luck or other superstitions may be present, but they do not have a significant negative impact on play. There is recognition that gambling will always involve some degree of chance.” (p. 3).

We agree with Shaffer et al. that there is a need to distinguish RG as an IV (as defined by the Reno Model) from RG as a DV (as defined by the Positive Play Scale approach). It is important to do, in part, because the effectiveness of the IV (i.e., RG policy and practices) can be assessed by way of changes in the DV (i.e., RG as an outcome). It may also point to where the IV may require refinement. In other words, to prevent or reduce gambling-related harms there is a need to know whether the IV is working. The PPS is one route to make such an assessment.

Gambling involves complex bio-psychosocial influences and so caution is warranted when attributing changes in RG beliefs and behavior to specific RG policies and practices. Nevertheless, we argue that identifying the deficits in RG beliefs and behaviors of a player-base, by way of the PPS, provides gaming operators information that was previously unknown and offers a direction for refinement of their RG policies and practices. For instance, Louderback et al. (2022) found that older players scored significantly higher on the PPS compared to younger players, particularly in relation to *Gambling literacy*. In this light, it may benefit gambling operators to explore whether the deficit in *Gambling literacy* among younger players may exist in their player-base and, if so, direct RG attention (resources) to increase *Gambling literacy* in that player segment.

Positive Play

Positive Play, as an approach, has two key objectives. The first is to promote RG in a way that is more palatable to players and that will encourage RG engagement. There is now a considerable body of evidence that suggests RG tools (e.g., pre-commitment tools, behavioral feedback, pop-up messages) can help players maintain a healthy approach to their gambling behavior (see Auer et al., 2021; Delfabbro & King, 2021; Kim et al., 2014; Monaghan, 2009; Wohl, Davis, & Tabri, in press; Wood et al., 2014; Wood & Wohl, 2015; Wood et al., 2017). A common issue facing RG programming is a lack of player engagement with RG—only 1%–23.2% of players use the RG tools provided by gambling operators (Auer et al., 2021; Engebø et al., 2022; Forsström et al., 2016; Forsström et al., 2017; Nelson et al., 2008; Schottler Consulting, 2009). Additionally, a recent US study found that only 2.38% of surveyed players picked up RG related brochures in a casino and a mere 0.26% spoke to RG advisors in a casino (Louderback et al., 2022). These low rates of engagement may be, in part, due to the belief that RG is primarily aimed at people who have a gambling problem and not for everyday players (Parke et al., 2007; Wood & Griffiths, 2008). Furthermore, it has been observed that RG programs that exclusively focus on personal responsibility can contribute to the felt and enacted stigma associated with problem gambling (Marko et al., 2023; Miller & Thomas, 2018).

We should be cognizant that gambling is primarily a form of entertainment and consequently people who gamble expect to have fun and be entertained. Traditionally, many RG approaches have been anything but fun and the language used to promote RG may reinforce the idea that RG is not part of the entertainment process. Words like “limits” and “budgets” do not sound like fun (McDonnell-Phillips, 2006). RG “tools” sound like work. The term “RG” sounds somewhat patronizing and is rooted in the subject of problem gambling. RG

initiatives with a negative focus appear to be somewhat unproductive. Broda et al (2008), for example, observed that negative player feedback about the consequence of exceeding a money or time limit was ineffective at reducing play. Similarly, Burton et al (2015) found that the presentation of positive imagery was more relatable for players and more effective at limiting the future gambling behaviour of regular players than negative imagery. Notably, Gainsbury et al (2018) conducted focus groups to test RG messages with specific cohorts of players (young adult, senior, frequent gamblers, and gamblers of skill-based games). They found that all cohorts agreed positive non-judgemental language should be used to promote RG (see also: Rothman et al., 2006), and concluded (based on the outcome of the focus groups and a literature review) that positively framed RG messages were more persuasive than those that were negatively framed. Consequently, we contend that RG may be useful as a “catch all” term that can be used by academics, government officials, and the gambling industry for policies, initiatives, strategies, and activities. However, the term “RG” and its associated negative imagery may be less useful (and perhaps counterproductive) when those policies, initiatives, strategies, and activities become player facing.

The second goal of the Positive Play approach is to measure and better understand RG as an outcome or DV. In this respect, we see the Positive Play approach not as a replacement for RG (which is a general term for a variety of approaches designed to encourage players to play within their means) but rather as way to determine the extent to which RG programming has been successful. To date, a lot of RG evaluation has focused upon what gaming companies are doing in the name of RG (“look at all the stuff we do!”) or has examined the impact of specific RG tools (e.g., limit setting tools and behavioral feedback tools). However, there has been little evaluation of players’ overall RG beliefs and behaviors. Given that cultivating RG beliefs and behaviors is, arguably, the goal of RG policies, having a psychometrically sound measure of RG beliefs and behaviors is not a want, it is a need. In the absence of such a measure, gaming companies may be producing ineffective RG strategies at best, and at worst they could be having negative unintended consequences (Bernhard & Preston, 2004). Accordingly, the aim of the Positive Play approach is to help reduce the incidence of gambling related harms. It is not a substitute for the assessment of harm. Positive play helps determine the elements of RG programming that effectively reduce gambling-related harms. Providing preliminary evidence for a link between Positive Play and harm reduction, Delfabbro et al., (2020) as well as Tong et al (2020) found that gambling-related harms were lower amongst players who scored higher on the PPS.

Contrary to Shaffer et al.’s supposition, Positive Play is not simply the inverse of disordered gambling (DG). Indeed, published empirical evidence to the contrary has shown that the two are only negatively correlated to a moderate extent (e.g., Tabri et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2017). We have found that players who score high on the PPS (responsible players) tend to score low on the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI; see Tabri et al., 2020). This makes sense because a high-risk player is not gambling responsibly. However, the inverse is not always true. People who score low on the PPS are not necessarily scoring high on the PGSI (in fact the profile is scattered). There are likely an array of reasons why this is the case. Those who do not hold Positive Play beliefs or engage in Positive Play behaviors may not gamble with sufficient intensity (yet) to develop gambling-related problems. Scoring low on the PPS may be a harbinger of future gambling problems. Targeted or segmented RG programing may help prevent problems among such players before they develop. In this light, Delfabbro et al., (2020) found that the PPS predicted gambling harm after controlling for variance accounted for by the PGSI. This is important because it suggests that the PPS is assessing something distinct from the PGSI. We encourage those

interested in RG, and the distinction between PPS and DG, to read our PPS validation paper (see Tabri et al., 2020).

Prior to the development of the PPS, assessments of a player-base frequently relied on measures that assess DG symptomatology. Although we do not discount the importance of having information about the rate of DG in a player-base, it may be less useful (compared to Positive Play) for understanding how best to allocate funds to RG programming. As demonstrated by Browne et al. (2017), gambling-related harms are often concentrated among those who do not live with a gambling disorder. This finding supports the need for a psychometrically sound measure that can direct RG programming in a way that reduces gambling-related harms, both among those who do and those who do not live with a gambling disorder (i.e., the full spectrum of players). However, whilst a high PPS score may suggest that gambling-related harms are minimal, in practice, there are an array of individual and environmental factors that contribute to the development of disordered gambling (e.g., using gambling as a coping strategy for stress or gambling excessively following a relationship break-up). Our point is that important RG related information is lost by concentrating solely on DG in the player-base or even the prevalence of DG in the community more broadly. Needed is information about the beliefs and behaviors of those who play in a relatively low-risk manner. As an analogy, if we wanted to measure healthy exercise habits in a population, we wouldn't focus on people engaged in pathological exercise. Understanding the pathways to pathological exercise has immense value (see Tabri & Wohl, 2022). However, the pathways to pathological exercise should not be confused with healthy exercise habits. To understand what constitutes healthy exercise, a measure that assesses the beliefs and behaviors identified as helping to facilitate healthy exercise is required. Similarly, the PPS provides information about healthy, gambling-related beliefs and behaviors.

Conclusions

Responsible gambling is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of approaches. We agree with Shaffer et al. (2023) that Positive Play is best considered an aspect of the wider subject area that is “RG.” RG can also be a term to describe the harm-reduction/prevention processes of gaming operators and regulators (as outlined by the Reno Model). However, the term “RG” does not resonate well with players (Parke et al, 2007; Wood & Griffiths, 2008). Instead, we suggest that less stigmatizing and more positively focused terms are more effective when communicating RG messages and features to players. To that end, the Positive Play approach describes one such attempt aimed at making RG programming more palatable to all players.

The PPS is a validated psychometric instrument designed to measure RG as an outcome, which can be used to optimize an RG strategy and aid in the prevention and reduction of gambling-related harms. It can do so, in part, by providing knowledge about how a player-base (and segments within that player-based) gamble across a range of key RG indicators (i.e., *Personal responsibility, Gambling literacy, Honesty and control, and Pre-commitment*). Although the policies and programs offered by gaming companies typically have been evaluated based on how RG has been conceptualized in theory (e.g., the Reno Model), less evaluation has been conducted empirically on the outcome of RG policy and programming and the effect it can have on the beliefs and behaviors of the players they were designed to help. RG should have a measurable outcome or DV. The Positive Play

approach and the PPS were developed to fill this gap and can be used alongside the Reno Model with the objective of advancing harm-minimization efforts.

Finally, we wholeheartedly agree that more research needs to be done in the realm of measuring RG as an outcome or DV. Consequently, we are committed to developing the PPS further through both longitudinal and experimental studies, and through an examination of player behavioral data. We are currently in the process of empirically testing the influence of the Positive Play Quiz over time. The quiz is a player facing version of the PPS that gives players instant results, compares their scores to average scores for their locale and gives suggestions for how to play more positively. Results from 29 PPS studies are also currently being reviewed to detail key findings and the PPS has been used by several other researchers (see Delfabbro & King, 2020; Louderback et al., 2022) including the validation of a Chinese version of the PPS that was tested in Macau (Tong et al., 2020). Also, the Positive Play approach was recently used to develop a scale to measure lower-risk cannabis use (see St-Jean et al., in press). In conclusion, we believe that RG is a field that has developed considerably over the last 20 years, and it continues to develop. Positive Play is a relatively new but evolving part of RG development that focuses on encouraging RG engagement amongst players and optimizing RG by measuring RG beliefs and behaviors amongst all player segments.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors did not receive support from any organization for the submitted manuscript.

References

- Auer, M., Hopfgartner, N., & Griffiths, M. D. (2021). An empirical study of the effect of voluntary limit-setting on gamblers' loyalty using behavioural tracking data. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 19, 1939–1950. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-019-00084-3>
- Bernhard, B. J., & Preston, F. W. (2004). On the shoulders of Merton: Potentially sobering consequences of problem gambling policy. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 47, 1395–1405. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764204265340>
- Blaszczynski, A., Ladouceur, R., & Shaffer, H. J. (2004). A science-based framework for responsible gambling: The Reno model. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 20, 301–317. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:JOGS.0000040281.49444.e2>
- Broda, A., LaPlante, D. A., Nelson, S. E., LaBrie, R. A., Bosworth, L. B., & Shaffer, H. J. (2008). Virtual harm reduction efforts for internet gambling: Effects of deposit limits on actual Internet sports gambling behavior. *Harm Reduction Journal*, 5, 27. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1477-7517-5-27>
- Browne, M., Rawat, V., Greer, N., Langham, E., Rockloff, M., & Hanley, C. (2017). What is the harm? Applying a public health methodology to measure the impact of gambling problems and harm on quality of life. *Journal of Gambling Issues*, 36, 28–50. <https://doi.org/10.4309/JGI.2017.36.2>
- Burton, J. L., Hill, D. J., & Bakir, A. (2015). Influencing light versus heavy engagers of harmful behavior to curb their habits through positive and negative ad imagery. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 14, 237–247. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cb.1514>
- Delfabbro, P., King, D. L., & Georgiou, N. (2020). Positive Play and its relationship with gambling harms and benefits. *Journal of Behavioral Addictions*, 9, 363–370. <https://doi.org/10.1556/2006.2020.00041>
- Delfabbro, P. H., & King, D. L. (2021). The value of voluntary vs. mandatory responsible gambling limit-setting systems: A review of the evidence. *International Gambling Studies*, 21, 255–271. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14459795.2020.1853196>
- Engelbø, J., Pallesen, S., & Torsheim, T. (2022). Gamblers' use of measures to prevent gambling problems and reduce harm. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 13, 1412. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2022.857280>

- Forsström, D., Hesser, H., & Carlbring, P. (2016). Usage of a responsible gambling tool: A descriptive analysis and latent class analysis of user behaviour. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 32, 889–904. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10899-015-9590-6>
- Forsström, D., Jansson-Fröjmark, M., Hesser, H., & Carlbring, P. (2017). Experiences of playscan: Interviews with users of a responsible gambling tool. *Internet Interventions*, 8, 53–62. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.invent.2017.03.003>
- Gainsbury, S. M., Abarbanel, B. L., Philander, K. S., & Butler, J. V. (2018). Strategies to customize responsible gambling messages: A review and focus group study. *BMC Public Health*, 18, 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-018-6281-0>
- Kim, H. S., Wohl, M. J. A., Sztainert, T., Gainsbury, S., & Stewart, M. (2014). Limit your time, gamble responsibility: Setting a time limit (via pop-up message) on an electronic gambling machine reduces time on device. *International Gambling Studies*, 14, 266–278. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14459795.2014.910244>
- Louderback, E. R., Gray, H. M., LaPlante, D. A., Abarbanel, B., & Bernhard, B. J. (2022). A comparison of two GameSense implementation approaches: How program awareness and engagement relate to gambling beliefs and behaviors. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 38, 153–183. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10899-021-10013-6>
- Marko, S., Thomas, S. L., Pitt, H., & Daube, D. (2023). The impact of responsible gambling framing on people with lived experience of gambling harm. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 8, 1074773. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2023.1074773>
- McDonnell-Phillips Pty Ltd. (2006). *Analysis of gambler precommitment behaviour*. Report to the National Gambling Research Program Working party on behalf of the Australian Ministerial Council on Gambling, Brisbane.
- Miller, H. E., & Thomas, S. L. (2018). The problem with “responsible gambling”: Impact of government and industry discourses on feelings of felt and enacted stigma in people who experience problems with gambling. *Addiction Research & Theory*, 26, 85–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16066359.2017.1332182>
- Monaghan, S. (2009). Responsible gambling strategies for Internet gambling: The theoretical and empirical base of using pop-up messages to encourage self-awareness. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 25, 202–207. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2008.08.008>
- Nelson, S. E., LaPlante, D. A., Peller, A. J., Schumann, A., LaBrie, R. A., & Shaffer, H. J. (2008). Real limits in the virtual world: Self-limiting behavior of Internet gamblers. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 24, 463–477. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10899-008-9106-8>
- Parke, J., Rigbye, J., Parke, A., Wood, R. T. A., Sjenitzer, J., & Vaughan Williams, L. (2007). The global online gambling report: An exploratory investigation into the attitudes and behaviors of internet casino and poker players. Commissioned by eCOGRA (*e-Commerce and Online Gaming Regulation and Assurance*). https://www.ecogra.org/wp-content/uploads/Global_Online_Gambling_Report.pdf
- Rothman, A. J., Bartels, R. D., Wlaschin, J., & Salovey, P. (2006). The strategic use of gain-and loss-framed messages to promote healthy behavior: How theory can inform practice. *Journal of Communication*, 56(suppl_1), S202–S220.
- Rothman, A. J., & Salovey, P. (1997). Shaping perceptions to motivate healthy behavior: The role of message framing. *Psychological Bulletin*, 121, 3–19. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.121.1.3>
- Schottler Consulting. (2009). *Major findings of a trial of a card-based gaming product at the Redcliffe RSL: Card-based trial evaluation. August 2008 to February 2009*. Adelaide: Department of Treasury and Finance.
- Shaffer, H. J., Ladouceur, R., & Blaszczynski, A. (2023). A comment: Positive Play is a subset of responsible gambling. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 39, 1019–1025. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10899-023-10204-3>
- St-Jean, R., Stefaniak, A., Salmon, M. M., Tabri, N., Wood, R. T. A., & Wohl, M. J. A. (in press). The Cannabis Lower-Risk Scale: Psychometric Validation of a Multidimensional Measure of Lower-risk Cannabis Beliefs and Behaviors. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-022-00925-8>
- Tabri, N., & Wohl, M. J. A. (2022). Explaining reinforcement and erroneous beliefs in pathological exercise: A commentary and expansion on Coniglio, (in press) using the pathways model of disordered gambling. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 55, 180–183.
- Tabri, N., Wood, R. T., Philander, K., & Wohl, M. J. (2020). An examination of the validity and reliability of the positive play scale: Findings from a Canadian national study. *International Gambling Studies*, 20, 282–295. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14459795.2020.1732442>
- Tong, K. K., Chen, J. H., & Wu, A. M. (2020). Validation and application of the positive play scale adapted for Chinese gamblers: Its relation to disordered gambling and gambling attitudes. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 263. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00263>

- Wood, R. T. A., & Griffiths, M. D. (2008). Why Swedish people play online poker and factors that can increase or decrease trust in poker websites: A qualitative investigation. *Journal of Gambling Issues*, 21, 80–97.
- Wood, R. T. A., Shorter, G. W., & Griffiths, M. D. (2014). Rating the suitability of responsible gambling features for specific game types: A resource for optimizing responsible gambling strategy. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 12, 94–112.
- Wood, R. T. A., & Griffiths, M. D. (2015). Understanding Positive Play: An exploration of playing experiences and responsible gambling practices. *Journal of Gambling Studies*, 31, 1715–1734. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10899-014-9489-7>
- Wood, R. T. A., & Wohl, J. A. (2015). Assessing the effectiveness of a responsible gambling behavioral feedback tool for reducing the gambling expenditure of at-risk players. *International Gambling Studies*, 15, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14459795.2015.1049191>
- Wood, R. T., Wohl, M. J., Tabri, N., & Philander, K. (2017). Measuring responsible gambling amongst players: Development of the Positive Play Scale. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 227. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00227>
- Wood, R. T. A., Wohl, M. J. A., & Tabri, N. (2018). National validation of the Positive Play Scale: Assessing responsible gambling across Canada [Research Report]. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Responsible Gambling Association. Retrieved from <https://gamres.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/PPS-overview-and-Canadian-example-2019.pdf>

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Springer Nature or its licensor (e.g. a society or other partner) holds exclusive rights to this article under a publishing agreement with the author(s) or other rightsholder(s); author self-archiving of the accepted manuscript version of this article is solely governed by the terms of such publishing agreement and applicable law.