



Responsible gambling: Sympathy, empathy or telepathy?



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates whether customer contact employees can identify difficulties in managing gambling behavior among the diverse groups of patrons that frequent gambling venues. The researchers recruited employees from non-casino gambling venues located in areas with a high concentration of residents considered vulnerable to problem gambling. The results reveal that venue employees are capable of recognizing signs of difficulties in controlling time and money spent on gambling and can distinguish differences in behavior between age, gender and specific cultural groups. Young men emerged as most vulnerable to problem gambling, however, venue employees had little sympathy for these patrons. The study contributes to the literature on how recreational gamblers manage their gambling behavior and has implications for venue management and gambling policy.

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1. Introduction

Recreational gambling includes escapist elements that create an intrinsically enjoyable, hedonic experience that frequently occurs in pleasant environments (Bridges & Florsheim, 2008). Consequently, differentiating between those that enjoy the gambling experience from those that have difficulty in maintaining gambling control can be challenging. In Australia, approximately 15% of the population gambles regularly and a number of those develop into problem gamblers (Hing & Nusk, 2011a; Scull & Woolcock, 2005). While problem gamblers display unique antecedent conditions (Burn, Gillett, Rubenstein, & Gentry, 1990; Prentice & Woodside, 2013), the risk of developing problem gambling is heightened by the over consumption of gambling products (Blaszczynski & Nower, 2002).

As a result, the gambling industry in Australia is required to ensure that gambling is conducted responsibly so that those that display gambling difficulties can be identified before problems escalate (Delfabbro, Borgas, & King, 2012). This includes minimizing the risks associated with excessive gambling through the introduction of industry codes of practice, which in some jurisdictions, mandate how gambling venues should operate (Breen, Bultjens, & Hing, 2003; Hing, 2004; Hing & Dickerson, 2002; Monaghan, 2009; Song, Lee, Norman, & Han, 2012). These responsible gambling procedures include identifying

and assisting those that show visible signs of distress (Productivity Commission, 2010). The literature shows that the responsible management of gambling within gambling venues can only be effective if customer contact employees recognize when patrons are experiencing difficulties in controlling gambling behavior (Delfabbro et al., 2012).

Research has sought to establish whether venue employees are capable of identifying those in need of assistance based on their understanding of patrons' gambling behavior (Delfabbro et al., 2012). For example, Delfabbro et al. (2012) use the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) to assess patron's gambling and compare the results with venue employees' views about the gambling habits of these patrons. Over 63% of patrons presenting in the PGSI as having gambling problems were identified as not having any difficulties by venue employees.

The present study contributes to the literature by exploring whether gambling venue employees are capable of identifying signs of gambling difficulties that might indicate problem gambling behavior among the diverse groups of patrons that frequent gambling venues. Specifically, the study examines employees' perceptions of the gambling behavior of groups that are understood to be vulnerable to loss of gambling control. This includes those of low income (Caillois, 1961; Lynch, 1990), seniors and those from culturally diverse backgrounds (Ohtsuka, 2013; Ohtsuka & Ohtsuka, 2010; Raylu & Oei, 2004).

The majority of definitions of problem gambling include loss of control, anxiety, frustration and levels of debt that lead to negative consequences such as conflict within the home (O'Guinn & Faber, 1989; Prentice & Woodside, 2013). In Australia, the accepted definition is presented by Neal, Delfabbro, and O'Neil (2005, p. 5) as "difficulties in limiting money and/or time spent on gambling that leads to adverse consequences for the gambler, others, or for the community". Neal

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et al. (2005) recognize that limiting money and/or time spent on gambling involves a continuum of gambling consumption ranging from consumers that have no difficulty to those who have extreme difficulty.

The notion of a continuum or stages in gambling difficulty is supported within the literature (Kimberley, 2005; Prentice & Woodside, 2013), however, time spent in gambling venues can be influenced by a variety of factors including the servicescape (Lam, Chan, Fong, & Lo, 2011). Thus, while “problem and at risk gamblers clearly spend considerable time in gaming venues ...” (Hing & Nuske, 2011b, p. 459), time spent in venues may not be an accurate method of identifying problem gamblers or those who are at risk of becoming problem gamblers.

The purpose of this study is to investigate whether customer contact employees within non-casino gambling venues are capable of identifying signs of difficulties in controlling time and money spent on gambling that might indicate problem gambling behavior among patrons that are perceived to be vulnerable to loss of gambling control. The study extends the literature by investigating gambling behavior from a venue employee perspective, concentrating on non-casino venues. That is, gambling venues that supply food and drink in premises that include electronic gaming machines (EGMs), which are more commonly known as slot machines in the northern hemisphere.

2. Literature review

The literature on gambling behavior is multi-disciplinary, incorporating hospitality, service management, clinical, psychological and neurobiological perspectives (Walker, 1992). An understanding of these underpinnings is therefore valuable to inform this study so that the research environment and the groups that are considered vulnerable to gambling difficulties are better understood.

Philips and Jang's (2012) investigation of gambling intentions of seniors within casinos shows that this group sees casinos as attractive leisure and entertainment environments. The availability of free transportation as well as discounted meals adds to the attraction and increases the social component of the experience. Sullivan (2001) confirms this adding that seniors can be lonely, bored and crave social involvement. Gambling venues can provide a social outlet for this group, allowing them to combat loneliness in a pleasant environment (Hagen, Nixon, & Solowoniuk, 2005). The prospect of winning is not a key motivator for seniors, most of whom understand that the odds are stacked against them (Hope & Havir, 2002; Ohtsuka, 2013; Philips & Jang, 2012).

Holdsworth, Hing, and Breen's (2012) extensive review of literature on problem gambling among women concludes that gambling has become a mainstream activity for women. There are several stages in the development of gambling difficulties for women which begin with gambling as a social activity and progress to problem gambling (Kimberley, 2005). The first is the solo stage which highlights how women who gamble alone have progressed from gambling at a social level to where they may have difficulty maintaining gambling control. Women that use EGMs are considered to be at greater risk of developing problem gambling (Holdsworth et al., 2012). Social isolation is also a motive for women to frequent gambling venues particularly where friendly employees create a sense of belonging and community (Brown & Coventry, 1997).

The attraction of the venue is a recurrent theme within the literature on gambling motivation. Recent studies show that various amenities and entertainment offered within casinos increase gambling volumes, particularly on low-end slot machines (Suh, 2011; Tanford & Lucas, 2010). The physical environment also influences overall satisfaction, duration of stay and behavioral intentions (Haw & Hing, 2011; Lam et al., 2011). As a result, time spent in gambling venues may be a poor indicator of problem gambling making it difficult for customer contact employees to distinguish between the frequency and duration of visits and difficulty in managing gambling behavior.

2.1. Control

Although disordered gambling is classified as an addictive syndrome (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), impaired control is a key dimension in the medical model of pathological gambling (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Corless & Dickerson, 1989). Research indicates that subjectively assessed self-control in electronic gaming machine players distinguishes between starting a session and continuing a session (Corless & Dickerson, 1989). A link has also been found between beliefs in chasing and loss of control. These are divided into two types of control beliefs (Moore & Ohtsuka, 1997, 1999a,b). The first is the illusion of control, which is a reliable predictor of problem gambling. Illusion of control refers to the overly optimistic level of control that people claim to have over chance events. Langer (1975, p. 13) defines this as “... an expectancy of personal success probability inappropriately higher than the objective probability would warrant” which translates to failure to recognize a distinction between chance activities and tasks requiring skill (Ginakis & Ohtsuka, 2005). Gambling participation, as well as familiarity with gambling, tends to increase illusion of control beliefs (Langer, 1975). As a result, illusion of control is a risk factor in gambling behavior.

Gambler's fallacy is a further cognitive distortion associated with perceived gambling skill levels. An example is a coin flip, which is a discrete independent, chance event (both “head” and “tail” have a 50% chance of occurrence). However, some people mistakenly use the immediate history of outcomes (for example, a sequence of head, head, tail, head) to estimate the likelihood of a future chance event. Since the perfection of skill is a measure of success in many societies, applying a skill-based approach to gambling is common despite the fact that gambling activities are governed by chance or high levels of uncertainty (Moore & Ohtsuka, 1999a,b). Recent research in erroneous gambling-related beliefs (EGRBs) investigates cultural and idiosyncratic beliefs that contribute to the maintenance of cognitive distortions and extended gambling sessions (e.g., Ohtsuka & Chan, 2010; Ohtsuka & Ejova, 2014). Research indicates that pathological gamblers gamble to win, for excitement and risk-taking, control and power and to test their skills based on the notion that they can beat the odds (Platz & Millar, 2001). These risk taking tendencies are significantly related to many forms of compulsive consumption behavior (Kwak, Zinkhan, & Roushanzami, 2004).

Although the chance of winning is an objective estimate of probability, a gambler's perception of control varies. Gamblers tend to overestimate their overall influence over games and attribute losses to external factors (Gadbourey & Ladouceur, 1989; Wagenaar, 1988). When gamblers believe that they have a greater chance of winning due to greater perceived control, they will be more satisfied and conversely will be less satisfied if they perceive that they do not have the greatest chance of winning. As a result, if patrons blame venue management for their losses this may indicate that they believe that external factors contributed to their lack of success.

The second type of belief in relation to gambling is self-control or an individual's ability to maintain control over his or her gambling behavior (Moore & Ohtsuka, 1997, 1999a,b). Self-control beliefs are protective in recreational gambling because they are related to levels of gambling frequency and problem gambling. Consequently, the ability to discontinue a gambling session is central to maintaining control and a key element in gambling harm minimisation (O'Connor & Dickerson, 2003).

2.2. Harm minimization

The use of harm reduction strategies to minimize adverse health, as well as the social and economic consequences of gambling behavior is well recognized (Blaszczynski, 2001). A wide range of harm minimization initiatives are recommended, however, the majority relate to the gambling environment including the display of information; the design and layout of gaming machines; and patrons' access to funds, with

particular reference to the availability of Automated Teller Machines within gambling venues (Hing & Dickerson, 2002; Turner, Wiebe, Falkowski-Ham, Kelly, & Skinner, 2005).

The range of harm minimization initiatives identified within the literature can be categorized as primary, secondary and tertiary prevention strategies. These categories include protection of participants, limiting the potential for problems to arise and reducing the severity of existing problems (Blaszczynski, 2001). Hing and Dickerson (2002) assert that gaps exist in the research into harm minimization and recommend that future research should focus on the types of gamblers already known to be at risk to identify differences in problem gambling between different groups.

Among the measures available to safeguard patrons from problem gambling in Australia are an industry code of ethics and a series of guidelines which seek to promote responsible gambling. Gambling venue employees play a crucial role in identifying patrons that display difficulties in managing gambling behavior and in assisting those that show signs of distress (Productivity Commission, 2010). This may involve observing the behavior and characteristics of venue patrons and making judgments when they perceive that patrons are angry, disappointed, worried or sad and whether they might appear to be losing at a level that is beyond their means (Neal et al., 2005).

3. Method

The study investigates whether customer contact employees within non-casino gambling venues could apply elements of the definition of problem gambling (difficulties in controlling time and money spent gambling) and whether they are capable of identifying signs of these difficulties that might indicate problem gambling behavior among the diverse groups of patrons that frequent these venues. This includes exploring whether employees in gambling venues observe differences in the recreational gambling behavior of individuals from different age, gender, socio-economic or cultural backgrounds.

The study employs a qualitative approach to explore employees' observations and interpretations of patrons' gambling behavior. In-depth interviews are used to capture the detail of these perceptions and to provide the deeper phenomenological description suggested by O'Guinn and Faber (1989) in relation to compulsive consumption in general, which can be better understood through the use of inductive processes (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995).

3.1. Participants

In the Australian State of Victoria, a significant proportion of gambling revenue comes from EGMs. The majority of EGMs are located in large food and beverage outlets, small hotels or clubs in the city and suburbs of Melbourne. The review of literature highlights that seniors, those of low income and those of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are more vulnerable to gambling harm (Black, Shaw, & Blum, 2010; Lynch, 1990; Ohtsuka & Ohtsuka, 2010; Raylu & Oei, 2004; Victorian Casino and Gaming Authority, 2000). As a result, national census data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) were used to identify a low socio-economic, culturally diverse region where seniors are prevalent as the research site.

In principle, individuals who have immediate access to gambling due to the number of electronic gaming machines and gambling venues in a region are deemed to be most at risk of developing a gambling problem (Korn, 2000; Millhouse & Delfabbro, 2008). These parameters were considered when developing the study's sampling frame. The western suburbs of Melbourne is a region of low socio-economic status and among Australia's most culturally diverse (ABS, 2011). Moreover, one city within this region, the City of Maribyrnong, has traditionally had the state's highest net EGM expenditure (AUD 1147.29) per adult per year. Based on perceived vulnerability within the region, the State government capped the total number of EGMs in the City of Maribyrnong

and three adjoining areas (Hobsons Bay, Brimbank and Moonee Valley) in the western region of Melbourne because the area was deemed vulnerable to gambling harm. This region, therefore, fit the parameters of the research. A review of the registry of gambling venues in the region revealed 58 venues with EGMs with the number of EGMs per venue ranging from 19 to 105. In total 3451 EGMs were located in the region with an average of 59 per venue. Venue operators where the number of EGMs were within a range of the average (between 50 and 70) were contacted and the managers of 12 of these venues agreed to take part in the study. A non-probability sampling method was used to recruit respondents. That is, venue managers were contacted and asked to take part in the study and those that did were interviewed. These respondents were then asked to refer other potential respondents to the researchers creating a snowball sample (Minichiello et al., 1995). This led to the inclusion of two venues within the city of Hobson's Bay, five venues within the city of Maribyrnong, three venues within the city of Brimbank and two venues within the city of Moonee Valley.

A total of 28 venue employees including gambling floor staff, managers and cashiers were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule developed to incorporate topics and themes that were identified within the literature. A series of background questions were asked to gain an understanding of the venue environment, including questions about the respondent's role and level of experience in hospitality services and in gambling venues. Respondents were then asked about their understanding of the backgrounds of venue patrons such as age, socio-economic status and cultural background. The literature review also highlights a number of issues relating to loss of control in gambling such as inability to end a gambling session, an overly optimistic level of perceived control over the outcome of a chance event, an inability to stop gambling and a reliance on skill to inform gambling decisions. These signals that employees might identify among venue patrons were also incorporated into the interview schedule developed to guide the interviews. Gambling within patron means and time spent in venues were also discussed during the interviews to ensure that respondents understood the difference between patrons excitedly enjoying a gambling session and those that may have lost control. An indicative interview schedule is presented in Table 1.

Theoretical saturation determined the number of interviews. That is, the point at which additional data provided no new or further insights (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interviews were analyzed immediately on completion so that insights gained within one interview could be explored within the next. After 24 interviews, no new insights emerged; however, four additional interviews were conducted to ensure that saturation point had indeed been reached. In total, the researchers conducted 28 interviews with gambling venue employees in 12 suburban gambling venues. Of these nine were venue managers, six were gaming floor managers or supervisors, nine were gaming attendants and four were cashiers. The majority of respondents had extensive experience in hospitality services with 19 employees reporting that they had been employed in hospitality venues that included gambling facilities for at least five years. Seven had been working in the industry between 10 and 20 years and only four employees had been working in the industry for less than five years.

4. Analysis and findings

Interviews were transcribed, coded and content analyzed using the topics and themes presented in the interview schedule (see Table 1). This allowed the researchers to ensure that all questions relating to these key topics and themes had been fully answered by all respondents prior to examining the data for unexpected or emergent themes. Interview data were then summarized to establish links between the research objectives and the findings derived from the raw data (Thomas, 2006). Appropriate quotations were selected to convey the core theme or essence of the findings and respondents were given code names to protect their identity when presenting these quotes. For

Table 1

Indicative interview schedule incorporating key themes within the literature.

Topics and themes	Supporting literature	Questions/probes
Age and gender of patrons	Raylu and Oei (2004), Philips and Jang (2012), Sullivan (2001), Hagen et al. (2005)	Can you provide a profile of venue patrons: age, gender, culture?
Patrons: local or non-local, cultural/ethnic background	Ohtsuka and Ohtsuka (2010), Ohtsuka (2013)	Do you have patrons' from specific backgrounds frequenting the venue? - Local residents - Particular cultural groups
Any observed differences in type and frequency of play	Hing and Nusk (2011a,b), Turner et al. (2005).	Have you observed any behavioral differences, that distinguish gaming patrons based on: - Age of the patrons - Gender of the patron - Cultural background (if not already covered earlier) - Frequency (i.e. frequent compared to infrequent gamblers) - Time of day or week when different patrons use gaming machines
Any observed differences in time spent in the venue and time spent playing EGMs	Hing and Nusk (2011a,b)	Have you observed differences among patrons in: - Length of stay? - Duration of gaming session?
Behaviors of different cultural groups Individual differences within a group and/or differences between groups including frequency of gambling, amount spent	Ohtsuka and Ohtsuka (2010), Ohtsuka (2013) Hing and Dickerson (2002)	Do these behaviors vary across different cultural groups? Have you observed differences in frequency of gambling, and/or amount spent by: - Individuals? - Groups and/or differences between groups?
Level of consumption of food and beverages in relation to EGM play	Tanford and Lucas (2010), Lam et al. (2011).	Based on your observations and experiences with patrons, are you aware of why different patrons come to your venue and play EGMs? Do different patrons behave differently with regard to: - Interaction with other patrons - Alone or in groups - Consumption of food and beverages - Time spent on machines - Time spent in the venue
Control strategies	Blaszczynski (2001), Corless and Dickerson (1989), Hing and Nusk (2011a,b), Moore and Ohtsuka (1997), Turner et al. (2005).	In your opinion, do any of the following affect the behavior of gaming patrons (and if so how): - Display of clocks (in venue or on EGMs) - Taking regular breaks from EGMs - Use of low bet EGMs - Self exclusion
Observations on: Patron's inability to end a session, any apparent reliance on skill levels, complaints about losing, loss of self-control	Moore and Ohtsuka (1999a,b), Blaszczynski (2001), Ginakis and Ohtsuka (2005); Platz and Millar (2001), Gadboury and Ladouceur (1989), Wagenaar (1988)	Have you observed any specific behavior related to: - -Difficulty ending a gambling session, - -Over reliance on personal skill, - Complaints about odds, rigged machines, abusing machines, abusing staff

example, employee number one is identified as EMP 1, employee number two as EMP 2 and so on.

4.1. Profile of gambling patrons

With most venues operating 24 h a day, employees observed different types of gambling patrons. Young men were reported to attend after work on weekdays or as a group on Friday evenings before moving on to other leisure activities. During the day, venues were frequented by older women some of whom attended every day; while late night patrons were likely to be male shift workers. Most venue patrons lived within the general or immediate vicinity of the venue; however, one venue manager advised that the venue was generally busy with a mix of locals and those from outside the area. He further observed that locals at the

venue used the restaurant and bar, while outsiders generally confined themselves to the gaming rooms.

4.2. Age

Respondents observed several differences in patterns of consumption behavior based on the age of patrons. Seniors accessed the venue during the day from Monday to Friday and younger patrons frequented in the evenings and on weekends. In keeping with the review of literature, many respondents commented that older people seem to regard gambling as a social outing, a place to have lunch or coffee and meet with friends. Some respondents felt that seniors who were lonely were attracted to the gaming rooms to socialize and meet people. Common phrases used by respondents

included: "... to get out of the house ..." (Emp 12), "... to have a little flutter ..." (Emp 17), and "... to meet up with friends ..." (Emp 22). Some respondents also suggested that when older people are in the gaming room, although they may sit beside friends, they would not carry on a conversation while playing EGMs. This suggests that even when people frequent the venue to meet friends, the gambling element of their visit is broadly a solitary pursuit.

Respondents frequently spoke of the amount of money a person could afford to lose, indicating that they were generally aware of the definition of problem gambling that relates to limiting money. Seniors were more likely to set spending limits and to stick to them and were also perceived to spend less than younger people because "... pensioners can probably only afford to lose \$20" (Emp 21). In contrast, younger people were perceived to be less likely to stick to a budget. Comments such as: "young blokes seem to have money to burn ..." (Emp 26), "... young people can afford to lose \$200 ..." (EMP 14) and "younger people are more likely to spend whatever is in their pocket" (EMP 23) were frequent. Younger people were also perceived to be boisterous or rowdy and to consume a significant number of alcoholic beverages.

Several respondents observed differing perspectives of winning depending on the age of patrons. One respondent felt that younger people: "... had unrealistic expectations of winning" (Emp 11), while another suggested that: "young people come to win [and] ... older people come to the venue for something to do, not to win their fortune and are ... happy with a little win" (Emp 16). Younger people, especially men, were more likely to get angry when losing money, while older patrons were considered more level headed.

4.3. Gender

All but three respondents noted gender specific behavior, reporting that women were more frequent gamblers than men. "You do see more women than men in the gaming room ..." (EMP 19), and "... a lot of our patrons are women" (EMP 26), were some responses to this theme. The amount spent on bets was also considered to be gender based. For example, one respondent asserted that: "... men bet bigger than women but women bet more frequently and use the lower bet machines" (EMP 9). This was reinforced by several respondents who noted that people use the lower bet machines so that their money will last longer and they can stay in the venue for longer periods. Women who frequented gaming rooms were perceived to be predominantly 30 plus years and generally visited gaming rooms during the day. Several respondents commented that some women go to gaming rooms for something to do while their children are at school noting "... they come in the morning, and then have to go and get the kids by 3.00" (Emp 22) and "... some women come to meet friends, have lunch or coffee, then play the machines for a little while" (Emp 8). For the majority of women the act of going to the gaming room was found to be either a social activity, or something to do to pass time.

One perceived difference between men and women was the behavior displayed when losing. Men were reported to be more likely to get angry and to become aggressive with the machines. Respondents commented that "men get loud and angry when they are losing ..." (Emp 7), "... men show more aggression than women – they will give the machine a whack" and "men are the only ones who get violent – they hit the machines and spit on them" (Emp 19). Women were not perceived to have a universal response to losing. Some respondents reported that women would just walk away, or that women were likely to get upset and cry. One venue manager noted that "women are usually more fidgety ... [and] can't sit still" while another felt that "women are more likely to be rude when they are upset" (EMP 12).

Patrons' responses to losing evoked different emotions among respondents. They were empathetic towards seniors classifying them as pensioners who could not afford to lose much money, they were sympathetic towards women and particularly concerned when they became upset and cried. However, they were unsympathetic towards young

men who they considered loud, angry and aggressive and could afford to lose significant amounts of money.

4.4. Time spent on EGMs and in a venue

Frequency and duration of gambling varied among patrons. A typical length of stay was a few hours; however, some customers spent an extended period of time at the venue or accessed the venue every day. Some accessed venues to have a meal, and then spend a short time afterwards in the gaming rooms, however; most gambling patrons were reported to spend their time playing EGMs taking short breaks for coffee or to smoke. Venue staff reported that time spent at the machines varied among groups, for example, seniors were observed to spend more time gambling but also tended to play lower value machines.

Several respondents noted that many patrons attend every day, or spend the entire day in the gaming room, indicating potential gambling problems. However, one venue manager observed, "you can't judge whether they can afford it or not – someone might come in who shouldn't but you can't tell" (EMP 12). This illustrates difficulties faced by venue staff in distinguishing between those that are engaged in leisure gambling and those that are having difficulty maintaining control of their gambling behavior based on Neal et al.'s (2005, p. 5) definition. That is, they are unable to determine whether individuals are gambling "... within their means with respect to expenditure and time on the majority of occasions". Thus employees are aware of the distinctive elements of the definition, although translating this into practice is challenging. Respondents' also perceived that they could not approach someone who they felt was having problems, other than to offer them coffee and suggest that they might like a leaflet to read on problem gambling.

4.5. Perceived cultural differences in patrons' behavior

In order to assess whether particular communities or cultures were more vulnerable to gambling harm than others, as suggested within the literature (Ohtsuka & Ohtsuka, 2010; Raylu & Oei, 2004), respondents were asked whether they had observed any cultural differences in gambling behavior. In the first instance, respondents were asked about the cultural backgrounds of the patrons that frequented their venues to assess whether they were aware of the specific cultural backgrounds of these patrons. A list of respondents' observations was then compiled for each venue and this list was compared with Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data to determine whether respondents' perceptions of the dominance of a particular cultural group was indicative of the actual cultural breakdown of the region in which the venue was located. With the exception of Philippine residents in the city of Brimbank and United Kingdom (UK) residents in the City of Moonee Valley, respondents' observations were mostly accurate. Table 2 shows respondents' perceptions of the cultural groups that frequent these venues as well as the ABS breakdown of cultural groups living within each locality.

In Maribyrnong, most respondents perceived that the predominant cultural group was Vietnamese. Indeed, within one venue the manager stated that 90% of patrons were Vietnamese. Given that the ABS statistics for the region show that only 9.7% of the population is Vietnamese (see Table 2) this indicates that Vietnamese patrons are over-represented in gambling venues in this locality. Similar figures regarding the Greek population were evident. That is, employees at two venues in Brimbank suggested that Greek patrons were among the most represented culture, yet the Greek-born population in Brimbank represents less than 1% of the population in that locality. The City of Moonee Valley hosts sizable Italian and Greek populations, however, respondents did not identify any particular cultural group as dominant within gambling venues, but did note that Australians, Italians, and Greeks were all represented in venues within this locality.

Despite having a good understanding of the cultural groups that frequented their venue's, most respondents were of the opinion that

Table 2
Cultural backgrounds of gambling venue patrons.

Venue location	Number of venues in locality	Perceived culture of patrons at venue	ABS statistics on country of birth of residents in locality
Hobson's Bay	2	Maltese, Asian, European; Australian, Greek, Italian, English	Australian 64%, UK 3.5%, Italy 2.3%, NZ 2%, Malta 1.8%
Maribyrnong	5	Vietnamese, Italians, Yugoslavs; Australian, Vietnamese, Italian, Greek, Turkish, African; Vietnamese, Chinese, Italian, Greek, Maltese; Vietnamese, Lebanese, Chinese, Australian, Italian, Greek; Australian	Australian 52%, Vietnam 9.7%, China 2.6%, Italy 2%, UK 1.9%
Brimbank	3	Vietnamese, Maltese, Greek, Italian, Lebanese, African; Australian, Italian, Greek, Maltese, Asian (non specified)	Australia 49.3%, Vietnam 9%, Malta 3.6%, Italy 2.4%, Philippines 2.4%
Moonee Valley	2	Asian (non specified), Croatian, Italian, Greek; Australian, Italian, Greek; Greek, Yugoslav, Italian, Chinese, Vietnamese	Australia 66%, Italy 5.6%, Vietnam 2%, UK 2%, Greece 1.5%

gambling behavior was individual rather than associated with a particular cultural group. However, two groups were perceived to stand out in terms of gambling expenditure. These were Vietnamese and Chinese patrons who were described as big spenders. Respondents advised that “Asian people generally spend a lot of money in the gaming rooms” (EMP 12), that “... the Asians do bet more, and use higher bet machines” (EMP 7) and that “for Vietnamese people, the motivation seems to be to win big, and to do that you have to bet big” (EMP 16). Other observations about cultural differences were less clear. Some respondents reported that Vietnamese customers were quiet, they did not complain about losing, and simply left, either when the money ran out or when they won. Conversely, other respondents reported that “Asian customers get very boisterous and excited” (EMP 19) and that the “... Vietnamese are a lot noisier and like to celebrate their wins with everyone in the venue” (EMP 16). These apparently contradictory observations may be related to the fact that some venues were considered to be dominated by Vietnamese (as is the case in Maribyrnong) and Asian gamblers and that these patrons were considered to be more boisterous within these venues. However, those respondents that felt that Asian patrons were quiet and did not mix with other patrons worked in venues that were frequented by only a few Asian patrons. This would seem to suggest that when surrounded by people from their own culture, Vietnamese patrons (and Asian patrons in general) are boisterous, but when in a minority, they are more reserved.

In contrast, Australian-born patrons were reported to be less likely to put a lot of money in EGMs. They were perceived to want “a flutter” or a small bet to test one's luck. Australian-born customers were reported to be slightly older and more likely to set and stick to a spending limit. Australian-born gamblers were also more likely to visit venues for social reasons, that is, for company, to get out of the house and to meet with friends, which is consistent with the literature (Chrostowski, 1997; Hagen et al., 2005; Philips & Jang, 2012). Respondents noted, however, that Italian-Australian men were more likely to be aggressive with the gaming machines and that both Italian and Maltese gamblers were more likely to complain when they did not win. Anglo-Australians and some Asian patrons were also perceived to focus completely on gaming in a manner that was referred to as “zoning out”. This zoning out behavior included refusing to take breaks or access free drinks. Overall, gambling industry employees' observations reflect the client base relatively accurately (see Ohtsuka, 2013, for qualitative research on EGM gamblers from the same area).

4.6. Loss of control

Respondents reported that some gambling patrons frequent gambling venues regularly to gamble and not for social interaction. They observed that regular gamblers do not eat or drink while they gamble and

that committed, solitary gamblers focus solely on gambling. They did not seem to notice much that was happening around them and did not react to small and medium wins. Respondents felt that these gamblers were chasing the really big win and were unlikely to talk to others even when they were having a break.

4.7. Employees views on harm minimization strategies

Among the initiatives mandated to prevent problem gambling in Victoria is the inclusion of clocks on EGMs. These are designed to ensure that gamblers do not lose track of time spent on gaming machines through deep involvement in the gambling experience (Bridges & Florsheim, 2008). However, venue employees observed that people did not use these clocks and reported incidents of patrons asking staff the time when the clock on the EGM was right in front of them. However, most respondents felt that patrons knew when they had to leave, for example, to pick up their children from school.

Most gambling patrons were reported to take breaks, and this was seen by venue staff to be beneficial “... because that is when people start to think about what they are doing, how long they have been there and how much they have spent” (EMP 22). Some respondents encouraged patrons to take breaks or to go to another part of the venue to have a coffee and a chat with friends. Smokers were more likely to take breaks because smoking is not allowed in gaming rooms. One respondent also suggested that smoking provided employees with an opportunity to assess whether someone might be a problem gambler. They suggested that if they take a smoking, or drinking break, and are relaxed during the break, they are more likely to be recreational gamblers. However, those who drink a beverage in one go, or who smoke very quickly and rush back to the machines could be considered to be the more likely to have a gambling problem.

5. Discussion

In general, these venue employees were cognisant of the important elements of the definition of problem gambling, specifically difficulties in controlling time and money spent on gambling. They were aware of many of the signs of potential loss of control in gambling and they understood age, gender and cultural differences in gambling behavior. While they understood the somewhat complex definition of recreational gambling, however, they perceived that some aspects of the definition were difficult to assess. That is, whether time spent in venues and amount spent gambling were related to difficulties in maintaining control. In essence they felt that nothing short of telepathy would allow them to understand whether individuals were losing at a level that could have a negative impact for themselves, others or the community.

The findings suggest the need to reassess who is vulnerable to loss of control in these gambling venues. For example, no evidence was found that seniors are vulnerable to problem gambling and these results are consistent with previous studies where the main motivation for seniors to access gambling venues relate to social needs (Hagen et al., 2005; Sullivan, 2001).

Problem gambling among women was also hard to identify because respondents could not generalize in terms of women's gambling behavior. However, particular signs of gambling behavior that may lead to adverse consequences, as noted in the definition provided by Neal et al. (2005), were becoming upset and crying, as well as becoming fidgety, and rude when losing. Employees in this study recognized these visible signs of distress.

Overall, young men were perceived to be most vulnerable to gambling difficulties displaying classic symptoms of loss of control including the attribution of losses to external factors – displayed when kicking machines and blaming venue operators for their losses – and a lack of self-control in not setting limits on spending. Frequenting gambling venues purely to win also suggests a misguided notion of their skill levels, indicating that they were susceptible to gamblers' fallacy. While support for Holdsworth et al.'s (2012) view that women are considered mainstream within gambling venues was found, the findings are also consistent with a more recent study by Prentice and Woodside (2013) which found that problem gambling was mainly a male difficulty. The present study highlights, however, that it is more pronounced among young males.

The findings also show that the majority of perceived differences in gambling behavior are based on age and gender rather than cultural background. Most respondents considered that behavior was individual and in most cases where one cultural group was considered to be over-represented in a venue there was a predominance of that cultural group within that locality. However, one ethnicity (Vietnamese) was considered to be over represented in one jurisdiction (based on the ABS profile for the region) and Italian and Maltese patrons were found to be more likely to complain when they didn't win indicating that they attributed their losses to external factors.

Some differences were noted between group and individual behavior, for example, groups were perceived to be more social, particularly groups of women and seniors. Groups were also less likely to overspend, except for younger men who might be encouraged by peer pressure to spend a bit more than they should. Individuals were found to be quieter and more solitary and this zoning out and solo behavior was recognized as indicative of problem gambling.

Time spent in a venue was confirmed as a poor indicator of likely problem gambling unless accompanied by over consumption as noted by Blaszczynski and Nower (2002). Importantly, however, the range of intervention measures available at the venue was considered to be limited. For example, suggesting to patrons that they take a break, offering a free coffee and presenting a brochure with contact numbers for assistance, were perceived to be inadequate in the event that patrons did not wish to take up any of these offers.

6. Implications

The study contributes to the literature on gambling behavior by including insights from customer contact employees with a specific emphasis on their understanding of the gambling behavior of vulnerable groups. The study extends Delfabbro et al.'s (2012) work showing that venue employees can apply elements of the definition of problem gambling to identify signs of difficulties that might indicate current or emerging gambling problems. As a result, venue patrons' interactions within these venues can be classified into indicators that have some predictive abilities in relation to gambling difficulty. For example, social behavior, rudeness, isolation and taking very short breaks as well as reactions to losing; which could be overt such as kicking a machine; or

subtle, such as quietly crying. These are tangible cues that venue employees can identify.

Employees' reactions to patrons losing also have implications for responsible gambling. That is, respondents concern for seniors and women but lack of sympathy towards young men. This should be of concern to policymakers given that young men were found to be the most vulnerable group in this study. Finally, the study highlights gambling venue employees as an additional dimension in the framework under which gambling behavior can be studied which has important implications for researchers who seek to understand the totality of the gambling consumption experience (Fullerton & Punj, 2004).

6.1. Limitations and future research

The study has some limitations. Firstly, while qualitative research aims to investigate subjective views and meanings within complex real-life contexts, a larger quantitative study to validate these findings would complement the present study. Respondents in this study also had extensive experience in both hospitality and gambling venues with some working in the industry for between 10 and 20 years. As such, their insights may not necessarily reflect the true state of play in non-casino gambling venues. A proposed next step might be to investigate whether self-control in regulating consumption behavior in an environment where alcohol is consumed has an additional impact on young men's excessive risk-taking as noted by Kwak et al. (2004).

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