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Brief Research Report

Internet Gambling: Preliminary Results of the First U.K. Prevalence Study



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Acknowledgements:

The author would like to thank the research organization MORI who collected the data for this study.

Abstract

Technology has always played a role in the development of gambling practices, and new technologies such as Internet gambling may provide many people with their first exposure to the world of gambling. Further to this, Internet gambling could be argued to be more psychologically enticing than previous non-technological incarnations of gambling because of anonymity, accessibility and interactivity. This paper reports on the results of the first U.K. study of Internet gambling; 2098 people were interviewed for their behaviour and attitudes. Results indicated that only 1% of Internet users (n=495) had ever gambled on the Internet and that there was no evidence of problematic gambling behaviour associated with the Internet.

Introduction

What seems clear is that the field of gambling is not immune to the technological revolution taking place in other fields. Griffiths (1996a, 1999) has argued that these new technologies (e.g., Internet gambling, telephone wagering, interactive television, etc.) may provide many people with their first exposure to the world of gambling and be more psychologically enticing than previous non-technological incarnations. Further to this, it has been alleged that social pathologies are beginning to surface in cyberspace, i.e. "technological addictions" (e.g., Griffiths, 1995a, 1996b, 1996c). Technological addictions can be viewed as a subset of behavioural addictions (see Marks, 1990) and feature all the core components of addiction (e.g., salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict and relapse, see Griffiths, 1995a, 1995b, 1996b, 1998). Given these assertions, Internet gambling is an issue of potential social and psychological concern.

Internet gambling

No-one is really sure how the Internet will develop over the next five to 10 years, but Internet gambling as a commercial activity has the potential for large financial rewards for its operators. The success of Internet gambling depends on many factors including diversity, accessibility and advertising. Internet gambling is provided by a network of networks that span geographical borders and are not discrete. Internet gambling is therefore global, accessible and available 24 hours a day.

The growth of the Internet raises interesting questions. Perhaps one way to think of this growth is to see the Internet as providing a medium for other addictions (e.g., gambling, computer game playing, etc.). It has been argued (Griffiths, 1996a, 1998) that the Internet could easily be a medium for obsessive and/or compulsive behaviours such as gambling. Some observers (e.g., O'Neill, 1998) have argued that Internet gambling provides "a natural fit for compulsive gamblers." Griffiths (1999) also raises the following issues:

- *Underage gambling.* How can you be sure that adolescents are not accessing Internet gambling by using a parent's credit card?
- *Problem gambling.* How can you stop problem gamblers from gambling?
- *Gambling while intoxicated.* How can you be sure that a person under the influence of alcohol or other drugs does not have access to Internet gambling?
- *Internet gambling in the workplace.* How can you be sure that a person is not wasting time at work gambling on the Internet?
- *Electronic cash.* How can a person with a credit card be prevented from spending more than they intended? It is very likely that the psychological value of electronic cash will be less than "real" cash (and similar to the use of chips or tokens in other gambling situations). This may lead to some kind of "suspension of judgment."
- *Hours of operation.* How can you prevent a person from playing all day? The Internet never closes, so it is theoretically possible to gamble all day, every day.

Internet gambling is a new phenomenon and to date no research on prevalence has been published. This study, therefore, provides the results of the first U.K. survey of Internet gambling, examining both behaviour and attitudes.

Method

A total of 2098 people (918 male and 1180 female) were interviewed across 167 different sampling points by MORI, a market research company. (MORI was founded in 1969 and is the largest independent research service agency in the United Kingdom.) People were interviewed face-to-face in their homes, and the interviewers used computer-assisted techniques. The data were weighted in order to represent the entire U.K. population. Of the 2098 participants, 495 (24%) were Internet users.

Results

Attitudes toward gambling:

Participants were asked a number of questions about their attitudes toward gambling in general. Gambling was defined as "risking money for a future reward on a particular activity," such as horse race betting, slot machine gambling, etc. Fifty-one per cent thought gambling was generally addictive, 20% described it as an unhealthy activity, 22% said it was a dangerous activity and 56% thought it was a waste of money.

Attitudes toward Internet gambling

Participants were also asked a number of questions about their attitudes toward Internet gambling compared to non-Internet gambling. Eight per cent thought Internet gambling was more addictive, 5% said it was more unhealthy, 9% claimed it was more dangerous, 13% said it was less regulated and 21% claimed it was more likely to attract children.

Gambling on the Internet:

Participants who were also Internet users (n=495) were asked about their actual Internet gambling behaviour. The results showed that no-one gambled regularly (i.e. once a week or more) on the Internet and that only 1% were occasional Internet gamblers (i.e. less than once a week). Results also showed that a further 4% had never gambled but would like to do so, whereas the remaining 95% had never gambled on the Internet and said they were unlikely to do so.

Teenage Internet gambling:

Participants who were between 15 and 19 years old (n=119) were also asked if they had ever gambled on the Internet, and if they had, whether they had used a parent's credit card. No-one in the sample had done either, although 4% said they would like to gamble on the 'Net.

Female Internet gambling:

Female participants (n=1180) were also asked about their attitudes toward gambling online as compared to gambling in a betting shop. Of those surveyed, 73% said they would never gamble on the Internet. However, 2% reported that they would rather gamble on the Internet because it's safer, 9% said it's less intimidating, 9% claimed it's more anonymous, 2% said it's more fun and 13% claimed it was more tempting.

Conclusions

The results of this first U.K. survey of Internet gambling behaviour and attitudes are interesting but not that surprising given the relatively low use of the Internet in the U.K. (Traditionally, in the U.K. most people have to pay by the minute for Internet access, which most likely inhibits use.) Interestingly, general attitudes toward gambling were quite negative (i.e.

people thought it was addictive, unhealthy, etc.), whereas attitudes toward Internet gambling appeared quite positive. However, this may be due to inexperience and/or ignorance of the issues involved. For instance, only 13% of the sample thought Internet gambling was less regulated than other forms of gambling. This is clearly not the case as there is little legislation in the U.K. concerning Internet gambling.

Although there has been speculation that Internet gambling is addictive, there is no evidence from this study. Although a problem gambling screen was not administered, the fact that no-one in the study was a regular gambler suggests that there were few problems (if any) among this particular population. However, as the number of online users in the U.K. increases, the potential for problem gambling will increase. This study should therefore be viewed in the context that it was carried out at a time when Internet use was limited in the U.K. The U.K. has a higher prevalence of Internet use than France or Germany, but its rate is much lower than the U.S. and many Scandinavian countries (Snoddy, 2001).

This survey also highlights a small minority of women who think that Internet gambling may be a more positive experience than visiting the male-dominated environment of the bookmaker. These women claimed the Internet was not intimidating, but was safer and more fun. Internet gambling may therefore (in the future) provide a safe forum for women wanting to gamble—at least from a perceived point of view.

Since many teenagers now have access to the Internet either at home or at school, there has been a pressing concern that children and adolescents will take up gambling on the Internet. This perception was partly shared by participants; one in five of those surveyed felt that Internet gambling would be more attractive to teenagers. Having said that, no teenagers in this study gambled on the Internet. However, one in 20 teenagers interviewed found the prospect of using their parent's credit card to gamble tempting.

Internet gambling is at the cutting edge of future entertainment and is an issue that must be grasped by many people (legislators, social policy analysts, psychologists, sociologists, etc.), as the number of sites and users will rise dramatically over the next decade. Gambling online, which is currently a minor activity, may be tempting because of the anonymity and accessibility of the Internet. It therefore has the potential to become a social problem in the near future, unless guidelines and legislation are introduced. It has also been speculated (Griffiths, 1993, 1995c) that structural characteristics of future software programs might promote addictive tendencies. Structural characteristics (i.e. features which manufacturers

design into their products) promote interactivity and to some extent define alternative realities to the user, allowing them feelings of anonymity. These features may be very psychologically rewarding to individuals with these tendencies. There is little doubt that Internet use among the general population will increase over the next few years, and if social pathologies exist, then there is a need for further research.

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This article was peer-reviewed.

Submitted: May 17, 2001

Accepted: September 21, 2001

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issue 5—october 2001



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