

Defining the 'online gambler': the British perspective

The UK 2010 Gambling Prevalence Study (GPS), published on 15 February, has shown that there are many different types of attitudes and behaviours towards gambling. What an 'online gambler' is in reality is difficult to ascertain as many factors need to be taken into account. Heather Wardle, Researcher at the National Centre for Social Research, and Mark Griffiths, Professor at Nottingham Trent University - who both co-authored the 2010 GPS - analyse the different types of behaviour in the sphere of 'online gambling'.

The title of this article might appear strange given that you are reading it in a publication devoted to online gambling issues. In fact, many of you reading this article may have already reached the conclusion that it is obvious what an online gambler is (i.e., someone who gambles online). However, those of us who carry out research into online gambling have to operationally define what we mean by an 'online gambler' in every research study that we carry out.

To date, there is still relatively little empirical research into online gambling. Currently, most of the published research talks about 'online gamblers' as if everyone is totally clear as to what is being referred to when findings are reported. Many of the published research studies in the area have compared 'online gamblers' and 'offline gamblers'. For instance, in our secondary analyses of the British Gambling Prevalence Survey 2007 (BGPS) data, online gamblers were operationally defined as 'all those participants who reported gambling online, betting online, and/or gambling using a betting exchange (but excluding those who had either bought National Lottery tickets online or played National Lottery games online)'.

In this article, we outline some of the issues that need to be considered when trying to define who or what an online gambler actually is. Our observations suggest that a broader definition, which considers if and how online gambling is integrated with offline gambling behaviour, is needed to obtain a clearer picture of the factors that influence the acquisition, development and maintenance of online gambling and online problem gambling. The patterns of integration of online and offline gambling are likely to be highly influenced by the broad

gambling landscape of different jurisdictions. Great Britain has potentially one of the most diverse gambling environments and therefore presents a useful case study to explore these issues. Below we present some observations about online gambling and suggest a framework that may prove useful to others when thinking about this topic, based on empirical evidence collected from the BGPS.

Observations about online gamblers

In the last BGPS, 476 people - out of 9,003 people who participated in the survey - reported gambling online in the past year. Of these, only nine people did not take part in any other kind of 'offline' gambling activity. In other words, the vast majority of online gamblers (98%) also gambled offline. The data suggest that, in Britain, 'online only' gambling is a low prevalence activity - 5% of BGPS respondents had gambled online in the last year but only 0.1% had only gambled online in the past year.

Data from the BGPS 2007 about mode of gambling are limited. However, it is possible to use online and offline bettors as a case study to look at mode choices in more detail. In total, 362 people reported betting online with a bookmaker in the past year. Of these, 268 also reported betting offline with a bookmaker and 94 people reported that they did not bet offline with a bookmaker but did gamble online on some other activity. In other words, 74% of online bettors also bet with a bookmaker offline. The question of interest is whether these groups represent unique sub-types of gamblers and whether there are differences between each group.

We created a crude mode variable to categorise online gambling to look at this. This generated three

broad categories:

- those who bet online with a bookmaker (and may also have gambled online on other forms of gambling) but did not bet offline with a bookmaker;
- those who bet both online and offline with a bookmaker; and
- those who did not bet online with a bookmaker but did gamble online on some other activity.

We then looked at the broad demographic profile of these groups and examined scores to the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI). The age and sex profile of online and offline bettors, and online only bettors, was similar. However, those who gambled offline but did not bet online tended to be younger and had a more equal distribution of male and female participants than their counterparts who has used the internet to place bets. For example, 22.1% of online and offline bettors and 20.2% of online only bettors were female. Whereas, 40.9% of those who gambled online on non-betting activities were female. Some of these differences may, in part, be due to the relative activity preferences of men and women. However, that in itself demonstrates how using a broad category of 'online gamblers' misses a range of information about different types of gambling behaviour. Furthermore, PGSI scores varied significantly among each group. The prevalence of having a PGSI score of 1 or more was higher among those who gambled online on non-betting activities (41.8%) than those who either bet online and offline (35.5%) or bet online only (24.0%). This analysis is by no means definitive, but is a useful starting point for thinking about the fuller taxonomy of gambling behaviour in relation to online and offline gambling behaviour and how characteristics may vary by

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different sub-groups.

A taxonomy of e-gamblers?

As a general rule, therefore, it may be considered that there are three basic sets of gamblers as defined by the medium or mode in which they gamble:

- online and offline gamblers (those people who gamble in both online and offline environments);
- online only gamblers (those people who gamble in online environments only); and
- offline only gamblers (those people who gamble in offline environments only).

However, this broad categorisation potentially misses some further diversity within each group. For example, among 'online/offline gamblers' there may be further sub-groups evident. Theoretically there could be:

- online and offline gamblers who only engage in one distinct form of gambling activity (e.g., someone who only plays poker but does it in both online and offline environments); and
- online and offline gamblers who engage in more than one distinct form of gambling and potentially engage in different activities within different environments.

Further distinctions may also be made about the temporal sequence of online and offline gambling behaviour, that is thinking about which type of behaviour came first (i.e., did a gambler play poker online first and then play poker in person or *vice versa*) or based on the frequency of online and offline behaviour. For example, is it correct to categorise someone as an online and offline gambler if they engage in one form of gambling regularly and the other very rarely?

The BPGS 2007 data did not permit us to look at the fuller taxonomy of online and offline gambling behaviour in this level of detail. However, we aimed to

demonstrate that these very basic distinctions, using the mode and type of gambling as the primary discriminators, produces a wide range of gambling sub-types for future analysis and demonstrate that the concept of 'online gambler' is not homogenous.

At present, policy decisions surrounding online gambling - particularly in relation to problem gambling - are often made by conceptualising online gambling as a single entity. Our speculative taxonomy based on just a few basic variables including the medium in which people gamble, the type and number of activities engaged in and the regularity with which people gamble, produces a complex picture of online gambling and demonstrates its heterogeneity.

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