

Gambling on the internet: motivating and inhibiting factors

Gambling operators can certainly benefit from knowing who their customers are, and why they choose to gamble. Professor Mark Griffiths and Abby McCormack, of Nottingham Trent University, discuss different socio-cultural player profiles, and assess how offline and online gambling platforms compare in this context.

According to the latest market research carried out by Ukom/Neilson, the number of people gambling online in Great Britain has increased by 40% since July 2009 to 11.35 million people every month. Ukom/Neilson also reported that in July 2010, 3.2 million extra people logged onto the online arm of high street bookmakers - almost certainly as a result of World Cup betting on football. This appears to concur with the Gambling Commission which reported that the prevalence rate of internet gambling among adults in Great Britain is now just under 11% for participation in remote gambling in the past month¹. Much of the academic research to date on internet gambling has examined demographic factors. For instance, the British Gambling Prevalence Survey² found that internet gamblers were significantly more likely to be male, young adults, single, well educated and in professional/managerial employment.

Despite the increase in online gambling research over the last five years, there has been very little empirical research examining why people gamble online or - just as importantly - why they do not gamble online. Online gambling has features that clearly differentiate it from offline gambling. This may result in different motivations and reasons

for gambling in this medium. A 2008 study³ of nearly 500 student gamblers reported the main motivations for gambling on the internet: ease of access (84%), flexibility of use (75%), 24-hour availability (66%), because friends do (67%), large gambling choice (57%), advertising influence (40%), anonymity (25%), and because family members do (14%). Most internet gamblers preferred to gamble with online operators who also had offline gambling facilities (e.g., high street bookmakers) (90%). To extend this line of research, a qualitative interview study with adult online and offline gamblers was carried out, examining the motivating and inhibiting factors in online gambling⁴.

Motivating factors in online gambling

Our findings on the motivation to gamble online identified one major overarching theme (i.e., greater opportunity to gamble) and four sub-themes (i.e., convenience, value for money, the greater variety of games, and anonymity) as to why people gamble online. Our participants told us that online gambling had many advantages as it saves time because the people do not have to travel anywhere, they are not restricted by opening hours and they can gamble from the comfort of their own home. The removal of unnecessary time consumption (e.g., travelling to a gambling venue) through internet gambling was another barrier to gambling participation that had been removed.

For operators, the cost of setting up an online gambling business is significantly lower than the cost of opening an offline gambling venue. As a consequence, the online gambling industry has become highly competitive and gamblers can receive more competitive

prices and promotional offers that they would be unlikely to receive offline. Therefore, online gamblers in our study felt they are getting better value for money online and this perceived increase in value for money may have led to an increased likelihood to gamble online. In particular, we found that the free offers and bonuses had tempted some people in our study who had never gambled before. We also found that through the use of 'free play' and 'demonstration' modes, online gambling also had the capacity to remove or lower the potential for embarrassment caused by inexperienced play.

In addition to increased convenience and value for money, we also found that players liked gambling on the internet because of the greater variety of games online compared to offline. Players also had the potential to participate in simultaneous multiple games (e.g., playing more than one hand of online poker simultaneously), something which they could not do offline. We also found that the structural and situational characteristics of internet gambling (e.g., anonymity, level of skill required, stake size, jackpot size) reduced social barriers that sometimes exist for offline gambling venues. For example, a beginner poker player may feel intimidated playing poker in a casino but, online, the anonymity of the internet allows an individual to play against opponents without 'losing face' if they consistently lose or do not know the rules. The impact of engaging in a potentially stigmatised activity is significantly reduced online because the gambling can be performed in isolation, anonymously, and in secret. Internet gambling may therefore appeal because the anonymity it provides can remove some of the negative stigma attached to gambling. This may be

especially attractive for female gamblers as traditional gambling venues are typically seen as very masculine places.

Inhibiting factors in online gambling

Our findings on the inhibiting factors of online gambling identified one major overarching theme (i.e., the authenticity of gambling was reduced when gambling online) and four sub-themes (i.e., the reduced realism, the asocial nature and characteristics of the internet, the reduced psychological value of electronic money, and concerns about the safety of online gambling websites and their trustworthiness). These four sub-themes all contributed to the reduced authenticity of gambling. The example of online poker, where players cannot pick up on the non-verbal cues of the opponent, was one of the key examples described by online gamblers in our study to highlight the effects of reduced realism. Other players said that online gambling seemed less real because they were not actually physically handling the money, whereas if they were to win in the bookmakers, they would receive the winnings in cash, and therefore the enjoyment would be greater.

Some research has argued that the use of chips, credit and tokens in gambling appears to 'disguise' the money's true value⁵. Some of the players in our study reported being cautious about online gambling because they thought it but it might lead them to spending more money. There were also issue around website security and trust, and how 'safe' online gambling actually was. Predictably, we found that online gamblers were much more likely than the offline gamblers and non-gamblers to believe that the gambling websites

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were secure. However, there was a perception that some websites were trustworthier than others, and, consequently, gamblers generally played on well-known sites (for example, companies that were well-established offline).

We also found that the antisocial nature of online gambling was one of the inhibiting factors of online gambling as it reduces the opportunity for social interaction and reduces the authenticity of gambling. However, it was also identified as one of the motivating factors for problem gamblers due to the ability to disguise a gambling problem more easily. The antisocial element may therefore have different impacts for different activities and types of players. For social games such as poker, many recreational players may be put off from playing poker online because there is no social interaction but they may still choose to gamble on the internet for other activities such as sports betting. Some offline sports bettors said they gambled with friends because they enjoyed the social element of going to the betting shop with friends and placing bets, then watching the game in the afternoon, but they would not enjoy betting online on their own.

Our study suggests that further research is required on the characteristics of internet gamblers to come to a better understanding as to the causes and reasons for internet gambling, and how this compares to individuals who engage in offline gambling. It is possible that internet gambling sites offer players a range of distinct features that are unavailable in land-based venues and internet gambling may be used by a different population than land-based gambling. Further research would help clarify whether internet and land-based gambling sites are in direct

competition with one another, or whether the type of gambling medium caters for different groups of gamblers.

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