

Interactive television quizzes as remote gambling

Recent media reports surrounding interactive television quizzes has added to debate on whether such platforms are a form of remote gambling. In this article, Professor Mark Griffiths of Nottingham Trent University sets out why such shows could be viewed as a form of gambling and the issues that this raises.

The last few months have seen many articles in the UK national press about interactive television quizzes. There have been accusations of fraud and deceit and television companies have been asked to 'put their house in order.' One of the lesser talked about aspects is whether some of these quizzes are actually a remote form of gambling. Typically, viewers call into the television show using a premium rate telephone service to answer simple quiz questions.

The similarities of interactive television quizzes to gambling experiences have not gone unnoticed by those of us in the UK who research in the gambling field. For the television viewer, interactive quiz shows and the opportunity to gamble, tends to increase interest in the event they are watching. Before examining this issue further, it should be noted that there has been no empirical research carried out into this area and that the role of this article is to raise some issues based on what we know about other forms of remote gambling.

Interactive television quiz shows share many of the dimensions of interactive television gambling, and also raised the same types of concern when talking about vulnerable and susceptible populations. The combination of gambling's impulsive nature, the general public's appetite for quiz trivia and the ubiquitous ease of

television, may prove hard to resist for many viewers.

There are two main reasons why interactive television quiz shows could be viewed as a form of gambling. Firstly, at a very simple level it could be argued that in many interactive television quizzes, viewers are participating in a lottery. For instance, viewers are typically asked to call a premium rate telephone line and asked to answer a very simple question. ('Rearrange the following letters to make the name of a top rock group - STOLLING RONES'). A winner is then chosen from all those viewers getting the correct answer. This, to all intents and purposes, is a lottery. However, unlike lotteries, those participating do not even know what their probability of winning is.

Secondly, it could also be argued that the viewer is staking money (through the cost of the premium rate telephone call) on the outcome of a future event (i.e., whether they predict the correct answer). Such a scenario could be defined as a form of gambling. It is clear that the gambling-like analogy is present as the UK Gambling Commission are already examining these types of quiz shows and are likely to make regulatory recommendations for them to be included within the gambling legislation. The UK telephone watchdog, the Independent Committee for the Supervision of Standards of the Telephone Information Services, is also investigating whether such practices constitute a form of gambling. Ultimately, it will be the job of the UK government regulators and politicians to determine (in this case) the line between a contest and a gamble. Participation in interactive television quiz is a good example of how the definition of gambling is being blurred.

There are a number of reasons why the social impact of i-TV quizzes should be monitored. For instance, i-TV quiz shows appear to be introduced with little concern for the psychosocial implications that may affect a small percentage of the population. Bringing such activities to a television set in the home carries with it a special social responsibility. For instance, there are issues about consumer protection for vulnerable populations, for example, adolescents, problem gamblers and the intoxicated.

It could be argued that the viewers who participate in late night and 'through the night' interactive quiz programming (like 'The Mint', 'Make Your Play', 'Quiz Call', 'The Great British Quiz') may be some of the most vulnerable and susceptible. These viewers are more likely to be those who do not work and therefore are on low incomes and can least afford to participate (for example, the unemployed, the retired, and elderly). Viewers may also be making decisions to play in an intoxicated state (as these programmes typically start just as people get in from an evening's drinking) and/or in a state where they are not fully alert (i.e., at 3am in the morning). They may also be participating because they think their chances of winning are better in the belief that there are very few other people awake at 4am. In fact, this latter point highlights the fact that no-one participating has any idea what the odds are of winning.

There may also be issues surrounding the type of payment used to participate. When viewers spend money participating in i-TV quizzes, they are using a form of electronic credit payment that eventually ends up on their monthly telephone bill. In effect, viewers are 'gambling' with virtual

representations of money. Psychologically, this is akin to 'chips' being used in casinos and tokens being used on some slot machines. In essence, chips and tokens 'disguise' the money's true value (i.e., decrease the psychological value of the money to be gambled). Tokens and chips are often re-gambled without hesitation as the psychological value is much less than the real value. For most gamblers, it is very likely that the psychological value of virtual money or electronic credit used to pay for i-TV quizzes will be less than 'real' cash (and similar to the use of chips or tokens in other gambling situations). Gambling with virtual representations of money may lead to a 'suspension of judgment.' The suspension of judgment refers to a structural characteristic that temporarily disrupts the gambler's financial value system and potentially stimulates further gambling. This is well known by both those in commerce (i.e., people typically spend more on credit and debit cards because it is easier to spend money using plastic), and by the gaming industry. Evidence appears to suggest that people gamble more using virtual money than they would with real money.

As there is little to stop innovative developments in i-TV gaming moving forward, all interested stakeholders must start to think about the potential psychosocial impacts and all companies (who, in effect, are gaming operators) must have social responsibility codes in place to ensure that viewers are not being exploited, that games are fair, and that there are protective measures in place for vulnerable individuals.

In future, television viewers are more likely to participate in a much wider array of events than interactive quizzes and sporting

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events. This is likely to be via credit payment directly through their digital interactive service. This may include popular UK television events like betting on who will win the Eurovision Song Contest, who will be evicted from the Big Brother house, or who will pick up an Oscar. Such non-sport gambling may also bring in new clientele such as female television viewers. The take up of i-TV quiz participation and/or i-TV gambling may also be very popular with those people who would not dream of going to a casino or betting shop. The use of i-TV quiz participation and/or i-TV gambling may help change people's attitude about gambling by destigmatizing and demasculinizing it. These new types of gambling and gaming experience could lead to a more social experience shared by clientele across the demographic spectrum.

The issue of i-TV quiz participation can also be framed more widely in a contemporary society that is increasingly governed by virtual processes. The kind of manipulation that is involved in getting people to respond to an event, even if they have to pay to respond, is achieved by offering a prize that the individual is very unlikely to win. In getting people to respond through this kind of process, the entrepreneurial operators are assured that they will have increased financial revenue through the money they raise by facilitating people to voluntarily behave in these ways. This opens up a discourse examining the ways that people are intentionally manipulated to behave in ways that cost while promising an improbable outcome. This may help us construct useful models which could help understand and provide insight into gambling

behaviors. It also invites discussion of what policies should inform the ways that media such as television and the internet engage and prime people who have become 'enchanted' by a theatrical experience to behave in ways that, if not inevitable, are statistically predictable. There may even be factors of vulnerability that correlate with the likelihood that people will act that way.

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Note: Ideas and examples in this article were first published by the author in the *Journal of Gambling Issues* (2007).