

Chapter 62

Internet Gambling Addiction

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ABSTRACT

As the Internet offers a new venue for gambling, the risks for engaging in pathological behaviors are potentially increased. In light of this, a systematic literature review was conducted in order to shed further light on the relationship between gambling on the Internet and possible addiction by assessing Internet gambling in general and addictive gambling on the Internet specifically. Based on previous research, it is argued that a combination of individual, situational, and structural characteristics determine whether and to what extent individuals engage in Internet gambling. The results suggest that there are more problem gamblers on the Internet than in land-based venues. A reason for this may be the structural characteristics of the Internet inherent to this technology, namely availability, ease of access, anonymity, and convenience. In conclusion, however, the Internet cannot be claimed to be addictive per se, but rather to facilitate the engagement in addictive behaviors, including gambling.

INTRODUCTION

Gambling can be defined as playing games with an uncertain result that is determined (at least partly) by chance (Bolen & Boyd, 1968) and it can be claimed to be as old as humanity itself (Derevensky, 2009). The vast majority of gamblers engage in gambling because it is an enjoyable pastime activity (Griffiths, Hayer, & Meyer, 2009a).

Prevalence estimates suggest that up to 90% of adults have gambled at least once within their lifetime (Ladouceur, 1991). In the 15th Century, it was suggested that for a minority of gamblers, gambling may become pathological (Wykes, 1967). From a modern perspective, pathological gambling is the only behavioral addiction that is officially recognized as mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association (American Psychiatric Association, 1987, 2000) as well as the World Health Organization (WHO, 1992).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-0315-8.ch062

Moreover, it is the one behavioral addiction that is most empirically researched in current scientific work (Grüsser & Thalemann, 2006).

In order to be diagnosed as suffering from pathological gambling, individuals must fulfill five or more of the following criteria: (i) preoccupation, (ii) tolerance, (iii) relapse, (iv) withdrawal symptoms, (v) escapism, (vi) chasing, (vii) concealment, (viii) illegal acts, (ix) jeopardizing occupational, educational and/or relational life, and (x) financial problems. Moreover, a manic episode must be foreclosed (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). With regards to pathogenesis, pathological gambling is believed to develop within three phases (Meyer & Bachmann, 2005). In the initial stage, the gambler has his first contact with the game and experiences it as arousing and euphorogenic. In the critical habituation phase, chasing occurs. Gamblers wager increasing amounts of money in order to compensate for their rising losses. Their gambling increases in intensity and they start concealing it. In the final addiction stage, gambling is used as a coping strategy in order to deal with psychological problems. Loss of control and abstinence, illegal activities, and feelings of guilt accrue. Moreover, cognitive distortions and personality changes follow. Gamblers deny their problems and have an exaggerated feeling of potency and control. Their mood is modified and they lose their drive, which may eventuate in suicidal ideation. Finally, negative consequences in occupational and relational life leave gamblers isolated (Grüsser & Thalemann, 2006).

Although pathological gambling is an officially recognized mental disorder, there appears to be a controversy about which psychiatric diagnostic category it belongs to (Bühringer, 2004). Some argue that it is an impulse control disorder (e.g., Black & Moyer, 1998), whereas others assert that it is an addiction (e.g., Holden, 2001; Wiesenhütter, 1974). Here, the latter position is adopted because there appears a strong neurobiological link between pathological gambling and substance use disorders (Grant, Brewer, & Potenza,

2006). Specifically, this position is advocated by neuropsychological (van Eimeren, Ballanger, Pellecchia, Miyasaki, Lang, & Strafella, 2009), neurochemical (Comings, Rosenthal, Lesieur, Rugle, Muhleman, Chiu, Dietz, & Gade, 1996), genetic and molecular genetic research (Xian, Scherrer, Slutske, Shah, Volberg, & Eisen, 2007; Zeeb, Robbins, & Winstanley, 2009).

As new technologies have flourished and expanded, it becomes possible to engage in gambling on the Internet. Studies indicate that 2% of the American population participated in Internet gambling in 2007 (American Gaming Association, 2008), 8.6% in the UK in 2009 (Gambling Commission, 2009), 1% in Singapore in 2008 (Ministry of Community Development Youth and Sports, 2008), and 3.5% in the Netherlands in 2005 (Motivaction, 2005). According to the final report of RSe Consulting (Ranade, Bailey, & Harvey, 2006), half of all Internet gamblers are from Asia, a third are from the United States, and a quarter from Europe. In terms of preferred online gambling venue, both Canadians as well as the overall international online gambling community favor playing poker on the Internet (Wood & Williams, 2008). Furthermore, playing poker online rather than other games of luck has been linked to problematic gambling (Gaming Intelligence Group, 2007). Moreover, a number of studies suggest that there are more problem gamblers on the Internet than in land-based venues (Griffiths & Barnes, 2008; Griffiths, Wardle, Orford, Sproston, & Erens, 2009b; Wood, Williams, & Lawton, 2007a). This either means that gambling on the Internet is more addictive or that pathological gamblers use the Internet more for gambling (Wood & Williams, 2007). In light of this, the present systematic literature review was conducted in order to shed further light on the relationship between gambling on the Internet and potential addiction.

A comprehensive literature research was conducted by means of using the scientific database *Web of Knowledge*. The subsequent search terms

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