Research Highlights:

Getting Grounded in Problematic Play: *Using digital grounded theory to understand problem gambling and harm minimisation opportunities in remote gambling*

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The present study used a novel methodological approach to explore and explain patterns of Internet problem gambling, and to provide insights to support strategies to mitigate risks associated with Internet gambling. Only problem gamblers were observed in this study; low-risk, moderate risk and non-problem gamblers were beyond its scope. Qualitative rather than traditionally quantitative techniques to make sense out of the 'big data' held by gambling companies. This new approach has several benefits, the most important of which is generating new ideas.

Key Points

Some key insights include:

- **Winning is a critical ingredient for risky behaviour among problem gamblers wagering on the Internet. The timing and nature of wins can have different cognitive, emotional and practical implications making it difficult to stop gambling.**

- **When problem gamblers win money back, they try to reduce risks, at least temporarily by taking breaks, reducing stakes, changing games and withdrawing funds from their account. However, risk usually re-escalates if gambling continues.**

- **A 'cash-out' feature, giving players the option to prematurely settle their bets, together with 'live betting' options permit problem gamblers to gamble for longer, more frequently and with fewer breaks.**

- **Among the usual harms associated with gambling this study highlighted how pre-occupation with gambling can be problematic even when a player is not logged on, or losing money.**

Implications for policy and research include:

- **Promoting and facilitating the account withdrawal process to ensure problem gamblers are not nudged out of their decision to stop gambling or withdraw funds.**

- **Increasing focus on strategies to mitigate risks associated with continuity (e.g., the timing and delivery of breaks in play) and exploring options for restricting riskier betting options.**

Background

Internet gambling participation rates are increasing among British adults with 15% of men and 5% of women now gambling on-line (Conolly et al., 2017). While most Internet gamblers do not experience gambling-related problems, studies have consistently demonstrated that gambling on the Internet is associated with significantly higher rates of problem gambling compared to land-based gambling (Wood, Williams and Parke, 2012). Growing participation in Internet gambling, and acknowledgment of its risks, has led to Internet gambling being identified as a priority area for research in Great Britain.

Research Approach

Grounded theory was employed because of its powerful application to areas of limited existing theory such as Internet gambling. This method generates new theory that is 'grounded' in data capturing real gambling, in real gambling situations. It involves a systematic process of identifying and explaining patterns of relevant behaviour (i.e., Internet problem gambling).

Two types of data were analysed in this research. First, digital data capturing hundreds of thousands of gambling events and behaviours of 101 problem gamblers were explored. Second, multiple in-depth interviews with 11 problem gamblers provided insights through exploring attitudes, experiences and personal explanations of their own Internet gambling behaviour.

Model 1: Evolving Features of Risk

Figure 1 summarises the proposed model 'Evolving Remote Features of Behavioural Risk'. These features of Internet gambling observed in relation to pattens of problem gambling fell into two categories:

- **Features of a Gambling Activity**: Speed of Play, Live Betting, Cash-Out and Betting Option Expansion, and;
- **Features of the Gambling Website:** Transaction Speeds, Marketing Prompts and Withdrawal Barriers.

LONG DURATION

An increased number of betting markets (bet types, sporting event types), betting at short odds to increase win rate and cashing out losing bets to re-stake elsewhere all contributed to making Internet gambling (particularly sports betting) more continuous (i.e., shorter and fewer breaks between bets). This continuity creates an opportunity for problem gamblers to continue gambling after incurring losses and avoid potential valuable breaks in play that support evaluation of gambling behaviour.

PLAYER VIEWS

"[Remote Gambling] allows players to make a lot of decisions in a very short space of time before they have had a chance to consider just how potentially damaging these decisions are, when things are going badly there is a strong temptation to ignore the negative sides in the hope that if you quickly bet big and add more in, you'll end up making profit and not have to deal with those negative feelings or ideas... This only ever lasts during the moment, afterwards you do realise how irrational you were, even in the case of you actually winning back the losses there can be a sense of guilt or self-awareness at the ridiculousness of the situation you have let yourself get into."

Male Problem Gambler, Age 28, Problem Gambling Severity Index =12

Figure 1. Evolving Remote Features Model of Behavioural Risk
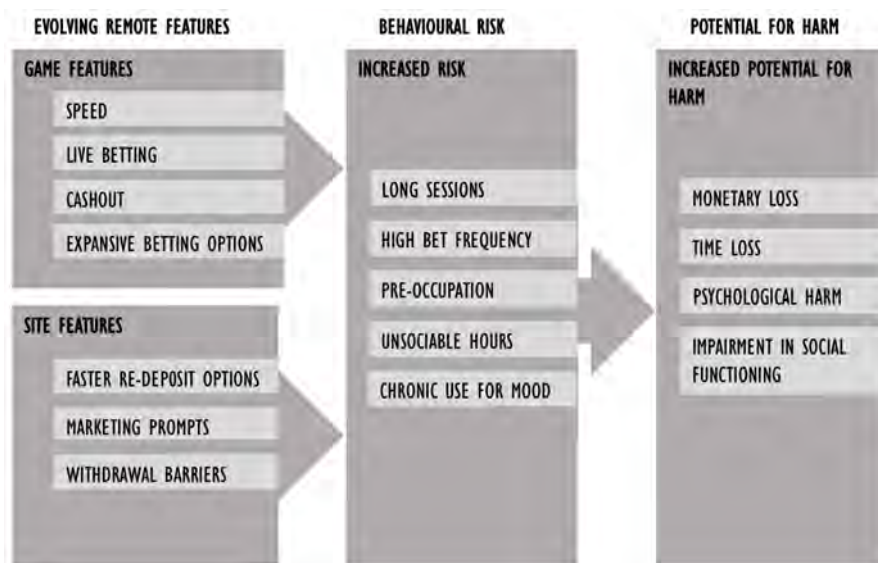
HIGH BET FREQUENCY

The virtually unlimited availability of betting options and increased speed of gambling means that problem gamblers can lose substantial sums in a short space of time.

PRE-OCCUPATION

The accessibility of Internet gambling means that problem gamblers are betting intermittently throughout the day to chase losses or alleviate boredom. Being pre-occupied with gambling in this way can make it difficult to focus on life's priorities such family, work and health. New features like *cash-out* can increase these kinds of distractions among problem gamblers.

UNSOCIABLE HOURS

The ability to gamble on-line between midnight and 6am can lead to additional negative consequences including bad decision-making, fatigue, and the various negative consequences associated with sleep deprivation.

MOOD MODIFICATION

Evolving features of Internet gambling further intensify the immediacy and accessibility of this gambling medium; these conditions provide an ideal environment for problem gamblers to use gambling to temporarily alleviate negative feelings and avoid stress. However, avoidant coping will likely exacerbate problems over the longer term.

POTENTIAL FOR GAMBLING-RELATED HARM

Data also indicated that monetary losses were not the only harmful consequences for for problem gamblers. Time-loss, pre-occupation, psychological harm and the inability to give sufficient focus to life's priorities were also reported.

MODEL 1 IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

- Further developing and promoting of time-related responsible gambling tools (e.g., options for designating 'gambling windows').
- Developing opportunities for restricting riskier betting options (e.g., live betting, cash-out, reverse withdrawals).
- Exploring more innovative responsible gambling options as such 'in-play withdrawals' direct to the customer's bank account.
- Exploring strategies to mitigate risks associated with continuity (e.g., timing and delivery of breaks in play).
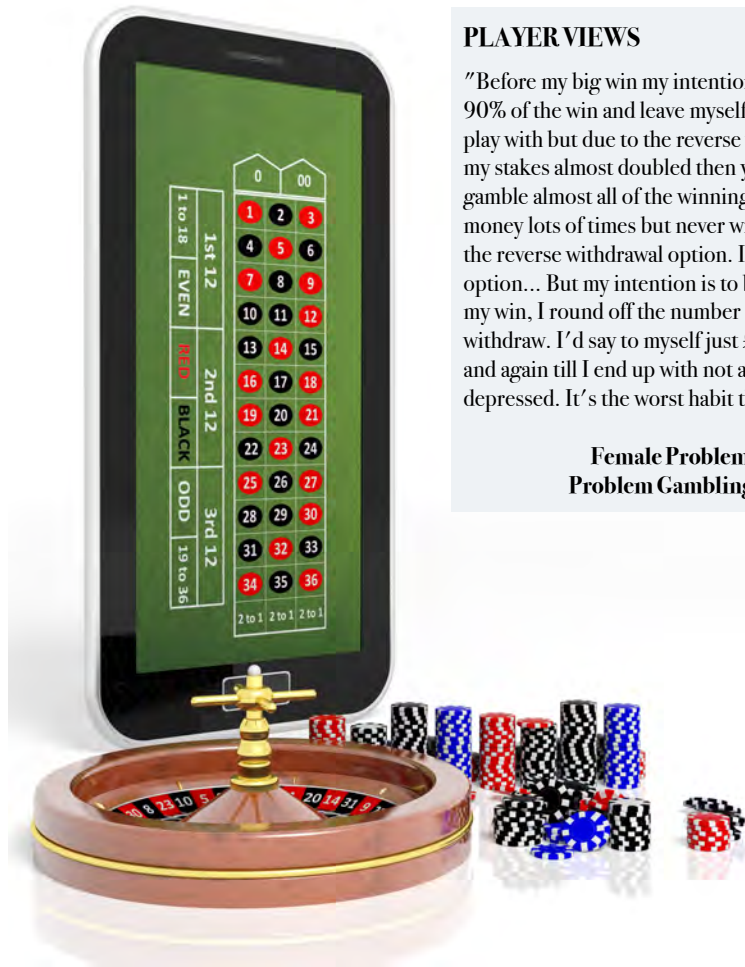
Model 2: Winning and Behavioural Risk

Figure 2 summarises the proposed model 'Winning and Behaviour Risk' and outlines opportunities for improving responsible gambling provision.

PROXIMAL (IMMEDIATE) RISK

Where winning occurred early in a session, while there was no immediate financial threat, problem gamblers exhibited risky behavior by gambling for longer, playing later at night or betting at higher stakes. Such risks were attributed by problem gamblers to the following factors: increased belief in personal luck or skill, having more money with which to gamble, undervaluing electronic money relative to real cash, enhanced mood, and the motivation to recover losses from previous sessions.

SELF-PROTECTIVE BEHAVIOUR (SPB)

Problem gamblers become more risk averse following the successful recovery of session losses. However, this self-protective behavior (SPB) was usually time-limited and was most commonly expressed through account withdrawals. Most problem gamblers retained a small portion of the balance to continue gambling. SPB was reported to reflect pressures on time or money and the relief that emerged from winning their money back. SPB also included breaks in play, reducing bet frequency and playing lower stakes.
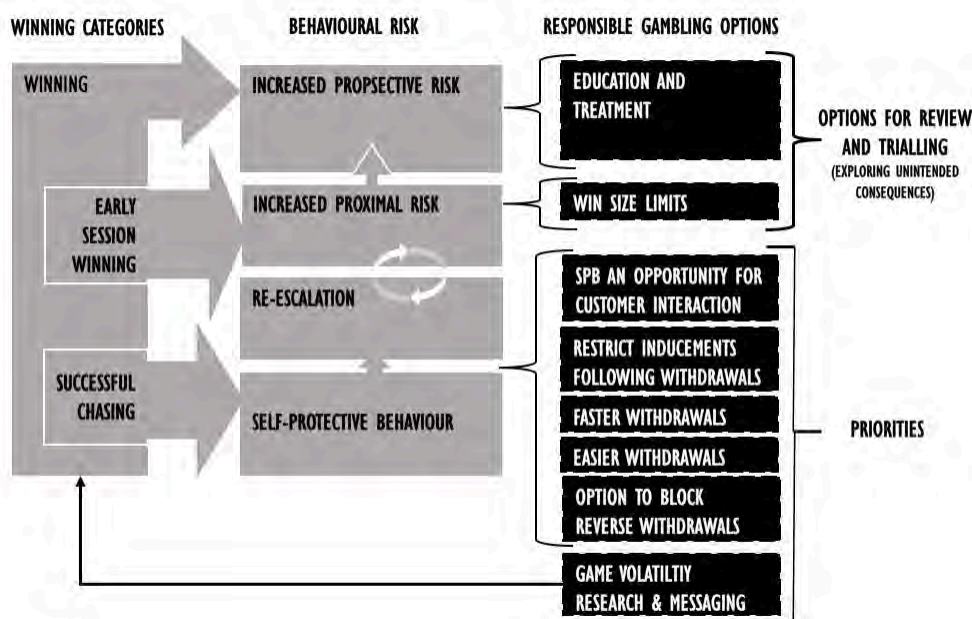
RE-ESCALATION

Despite exhibiting caution after recovering losses, risky behaviour may re-escalate if problem gamblers fail to stop gambling shortly thereafter. Recurrent deposits and reversing previous withdrawal decisions are common features when risk re-escalates. Interviews revealed that a desire to sustain the positive feeling of winning, and a tendency to convince themselves that winning is likely to continue, both inhibit the ability to discontinue gambling.

PROSPECTIVE (FUTURE) RISK

Sessional winning also increased risk in future gambling sessions. Increases in net expenditure, deposit size, deposit frequency, and session frequency were observed subsequent to winning sessions. Attachments to specific games associated with winning big were also observed. Risks appear to dissipate over time particularly following periods of losing.

Figure 2. Winning and Behavioural Risk and Implications for Responsible Gambling

MODEL 2 IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

- Promoting and facilitating the account withdrawal process to ensure problem gamblers are not nudged out of their decision to stop gambling or withdraw funds.

- Exploring self-protective behaviour and winning as an opportunity for staff to engage with suspected problem gamblers who may be more amenable to outside interventions during these periods rather than when losing.

- Exploring win limits as a responsible gambling option may prove helpful in reducing the impact of winning in subsequent gambling sessions and improve the consumer experience.

- Developing a better understanding of the impact of softer versus harder profile games (i.e., volatility) given the potential link to Winning and Behavioural Risk and exploring options for how product volatility can be communicated to consumers.

- Problem gamblers can develop an attachment and unrealistic expectations of winning on specific games where they have previously experienced success. Specifically challenging these heuristics could feature in some education and treatment programs.
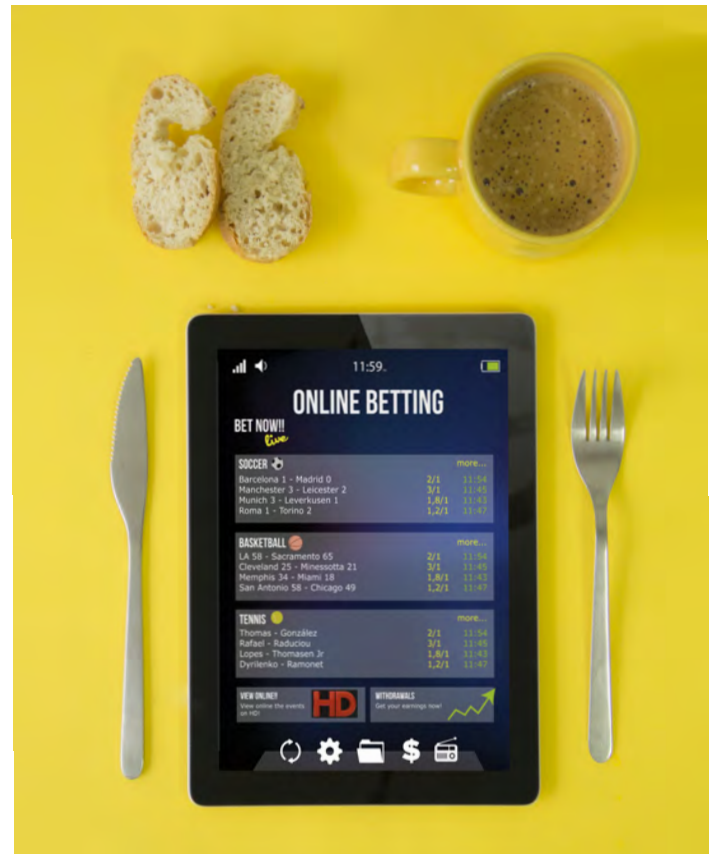
Conclusions

This study was an extensive, systematic investigation of problem gambling behaviour on the Internet. The research proposes explanatory accounts of how (a) evolving features of Internet gambling, and (b) the size, nature and timing of winning outcomes, can influence gambling-related risk. As with all qualitative research it is important to remember that the behaviour and experience of this sample of problem gamblers may not be reflective of all British-based on-line problem gamblers. Therefore, it is important to back up this qualitative investigation with further empirical support. The behavioural patterns of the problem gamblers within this study were not simplistic, but rather demonstrated a complex interaction of structural characteristics, gambling outcomes and gambling behaviour.

References

Conolly, A., Fuller, E., Jones, H., Maplethorpe, N., Sondaal, A. & Wardle, H. (2017). *Gambling Behaviour in Great Britain in 2015: Evidence from England, Scotland and Wales.* London: National Centre for Social Research.

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