A Scoping Study of the Structural and Situational Characteristics of Internet Gambling

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ABSTRACT

Internet gambling has risen greatly in recent years, yet there has been very little published research concerning the particular structural and situational characteristics of internet gambling and how these may impact on gambling behaviour and problem gambling. This study develops a comprehensive list of all the structural and situational characteristics of internet gambling and identifies those which may be more problematic for internet gambling compared with offline gambling. A scoping study was undertaken to gather evidence from a wide range of sources, including a Delphi review process among a panel of eight experts to reach consensus on the assessment rating given to each characteristic. Results show that internet gambling has a number of unique structural and situational characteristics compared to offline gambling and it would appear that a number of characteristics may be more problematic for internet gamblers compared to offline equivalents.

Keywords: Delphi Technique, Gambling, Gambling Addiction, Internet Gambling, Problem Gambling, Scoping Study, Situational Characteristics, Structural Characteristics

INTRODUCTION

The gaming industry has used various design features (such as the structural and situational characteristics (Abbott, 2007; Griffiths, 1993; Griffiths & Parke, 2003; Parke & Griffiths, 2007) to entice people to gamble and to keep them gambling (Griffiths, 1993). Many of these are likely to have arisen spontaneously without in-depth psychological analysis and consideration of their impact on behaviour (Parke & Griffiths, 2007). Very little research has been carried out on the situational and structural characteristics of gambling, and most of what has been written is by Professor Mark Griffiths and colleagues. Situational characteristics are those features that get people to gamble in the first place and are primarily features of the environment. These can include macro features...
of the wider environment (such as location, the number of gambling venues in a specified area, legislative membership requirements, etc.), as well as micro (internal) features of the gambling venue (décor, heating, lighting, etc; Griffiths & Parke, 2003). Structural characteristics are those features of the gambling activity itself that are responsible for reinforcement. They may satisfy gamblers’ needs and facilitate continual and sometimes excessive gambling (e.g., event frequency, jackpot size, near miss features, etc.; Griffiths, 1999). An analysis of the structural characteristics allows us to understand which characteristics might facilitate the acquisition, development and maintenance of gambling behaviour irrespective of the individual’s psychological, physiological, or socioeconomic status (Parke & Griffiths, 2007).

Technological innovation has paved the way for increased opportunities to manipulate the potentially addictive structural characteristics of gambling activities and thus increase the appeal and arousal of the games (Shaffer, 1996). Consequently, there is a potential issue for concern regarding problematic behaviour as remote gambling developments improve (such as internet gambling, mobile phone gambling, and interactive television gambling).

By identifying particular situational and structural characteristics relating specifically to the internet, it may be possible to see how needs are identified, to see how information about gambling is presented (or perhaps misrepresented), and to see how thoughts about gambling are influenced and distorted (Griffiths, 2003). Therefore, potentially dangerous forms of gambling could be identified and effective legislation could be formulated. By examining these types of characteristics among all types of gambling activity, it may help pinpoint where technology has a role (either directly or indirectly) in gambling acquisition, development and maintenance (Griffiths, 1999). Remote forms of gambling have changed the nature of situational characteristics of gambling and could have a large impact in uptake of gambling services.

A structural characteristic approach to gambling is important as it allows the possibility to identify more accurately where an individual’s psychological constitution is influencing gambling behaviour (Griffiths, 1999). Furthermore, Griffiths also points out that this approach allows for psychologically context-specific explanations of gambling behaviour rather than global explanations such as an ‘addictive personality’. Although many of the potentially gambling-inducing structural characteristics are dependent on individual psychological factors, the behaviour appears to be contingent on a psycho-structural interaction (Griffiths, 1999). Therefore a structural approach can be useful. In the context of internet gambling, it has been speculated that structural characteristics of the software itself might promote addictive tendencies for vulnerable individuals (Griffiths, 1999). The internet promotes interactivity and to some extent defines alternative realities to the user and allows them feelings of anonymity (Suler, 2004). Such features may be very psychologically rewarding to some individuals. Given the relative lack of information about the structural and situational characteristics of internet gambling, a scoping study was undertaken. The aim of the study was to find out whether internet gambling shares the same structural and situational characteristics of gambling in general, which characteristics are not applicable to internet gambling, and whether any additional characteristics could be found that have not been identified in offline gambling.

**METHOD**

**Design and Materials**

A scoping study was conducted to find out what the situational and structural characteristics of internet gambling activities are and how these might impact on the behaviour of vulnerable players. A scoping study aims to “map rapidly the key concepts underpinning a research area and the main sources and types of evidence...
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