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Adolescent Internet gambling: Preliminary results of a national survey

The ability to play National Lottery games via non face-to-face methods is relatively new. Instant Win games on the Internet were launched in February 2003, Lotto and Daily Play online in December 2003, and play-by-text has been available since October 2004.

To date, there has been no direct empirical research examining adolescent Internet gambling or any other remote form of gambling such as mobile phone gambling. However, many adolescents are technologically proficient and use the Internet and mobile phones regularly. Therefore, adolescent use of remote gambling is an area worthy of examination over the coming years. The data reported here are taken from the latest national adolescent gambling study carried out by the authors and MORI¹.

Method

A survey of 8,017 young people aged between 12 and 15 years of age was carried out through interviewer administered paper self-completion sessions in classroom lessons.

The survey used the DSM-IV-MR-J screen to identify whether respondents who gambled were problem or social gamblers. There are a number of components to this screen covering different behaviours indicative of problem gambling, for example, preoccupation with gambling, needing to gamble with increasing amounts of money.

A person who confirmed that they had

undertaken four or more of the behaviours in the last year was considered a problem gambler, whereas a score of three or less indicated a social gambler (see Appendix 1).

Part of the national study examined remote gambling in relation to use of National Lottery products online. In order to ascertain their experience of gambling on the Internet, the adolescents were asked:

'Have you ever played any National Lottery game on the Internet?'

Those who had done so were also asked:

'Which, if any, of the following games have you played in the past 7 days?'

and were presented with the following options:

- Instant win games for money
- Free Instant win games
- Lotto
- One of the other draw games

Those who had experience of gambling online were also asked how they played National Lottery games on the Internet, and presented with the options:

- The system let me register

- I played along with my parents
- Another adult let me play
- I used my parent's/guardian's online National Lottery account with their permission
- I used my parent's/guardian's online National Lottery account without their permission
- Played free games

Main findings

Approximately one in twelve young people aged 12 to 15 years (8%) said they had ever played a National Lottery game on the Internet.

Table 1 highlights that boys were more likely than girls to say they have played National Lottery games on the Internet (10% and 6%, respectively), as were young people who were Asian and black.

Table 1 Have you ever played any National Lottery game on the Internet?

	Yes %	No %
Base: All young people		
Total	8	89
Gender		
Boys	10	87
Girls	6	92
Ethnicity		
White	8	90
Asian	12	85
Black	14	78
Money received in past week		
Nothing	5	93
Up to £10.00 a week	7	91
From £10.00 to £30.00 a week	9	88
Over £30.00 a week	12	83
Parents approve	29	66
Parents disapprove	5	95
Social gambler	9	90
Problem gambler	33	66

Source: MORI/IGRU

Not surprisingly, young people classified as 'problem gamblers' were more likely than 'social gamblers' to have played a National Lottery game on the Internet (37% compared with 9%).

Of those who had played on the Internet, a quarter of the adolescents said they had played free Instant Win games on the Internet (24%), nearly one in five had played Instant Win games for money (19%) or Lotto (18%), and 10% had played one of the other draw games.

Not surprisingly, 'problem gamblers' were more likely to have played every game in the past week, compared with 'social gamblers' who were less likely to remember what games they had played in the last week.

Young people with parents who approve of young people gambling were more likely to have played Instant Win games for money, Lotto, or other draw games (35% compared with 19%; 40% compared with 15%; 22% compared 6% respectively). This suggests parental consent or help in gaining access to the games via the Internet.

When asked which of a series of statements best describes how they played National Lottery games on the Internet, nearly three in ten adolescents who played online reported playing free games (29%), one in six reported that the system let them register (18%), slightly fewer played along with their parents (16%), and one in ten used their parent's online National Lottery account either with their permission (10%) or without it (7%). However, it should be noted that a third of online players said they 'couldn't remember' (35%).

Overall these findings indicate that, of all young people (and not just players), 2% have played National Lottery games online with their parents or with their permission and 2% have played independently or without their parents. Those who have played independently are most likely to have played free games, with just 0.3% of young people having played National

Lottery games on their own for money.

There were very few age differences when it came to types of games played with the exception of 13 year olds, who were slightly more likely to have played Lotto in the past seven days (26%), and 14 year olds, who were slightly more likely to have played Instant Win games for money (23%) than other respondents.

Earning more than £10

Young people earning more than £10 a week were more likely than those earning less to have played Instant Win games for money (23% compared with 14%), or other draw games (13% compared with 6% respectively). Those earning less than £10 were more likely to report that they did not remember what games they played in the last seven days (51% compared with 34%). Not surprisingly, 'problem gamblers' were more likely to have played every game in the past week, compared to 'social gamblers' who were less likely to remember what games they played in the last week (37% compared with 9% (see Table 2).

Table 2. Which, if any, of the following games have you played in the past seven days?

	Total	Problem Gambler	Social Gambler
Base: All young people who have ever played a National Lottery game on the Internet	(621) ¹ %	(86) %	(223) %
I played Instant Win games for money on the Internet	19	36	17
I played free Instant Win games on the Internet	24	40	28
I played Lotto	18	36	15
I played one of the other draw games	10	20	8
I have not played any of the above games in the past 7 days	12	15	16
Can't remember/ don't know	41	21	33

Source: MORII/GRU

Young people with parents who approve of young people gambling were more likely to have played Instant Win games for money, Lotto, or other draw games (35% compared with 19%; 40% compared with 15%; 22% compared with six percent respectively). This could indicate parental consent or help in gaining access to the games via the Internet.

Conclusion

The survey showed that approximately a fifth of Lotto and other National Lottery game players (17% and 21% respectively) purchased tickets via digital/electronic means (mostly the Internet) in the past week. This is despite rigorous security settings by the UK operator to prevent access by underage players. This is an issue of serious concern given how easy it is for adolescents to access other Internet gambling sites in comparison to the UK lottery operator².

Adolescent gambling on the Internet and other remote media is likely to become an issue of increasing concern over the next few years³ and this study is one of the very first worldwide to show that adolescents can and do gamble on the Internet and other remote media.

Overall, however, findings indicated that of all young people (and not just players), 2% have played National Lottery games online with their parents or with their permission, and 2% have played independently and/or without their parents. Of those who have played independently, the majority have played free games, with just 0.3% of young people having played National Lottery games on their own for money.

Online gambling was higher among those who said their parents approve of young people gambling. It may be the case that these parents are more likely to let their own children use their online gambling accounts and/or allow their children to play along with them. Although this is highly

speculative, it does suggest that parents need to be educated about gambling (and its potential problems) in the same way as other potentially addictive behaviours (for example, drinking, smoking, drug taking, etc.).

Problem gamblers playing online

For other National Lottery draw games, problem gamblers were more likely than social gamblers to have played games online in the past week. This is again an interesting finding. Problem gamblers may be more susceptible and/or vulnerable to gambling online and the fact that it provides convenience gambling is a cause for concern in this particular sub-group of gamblers. This is also an issue for adult problem gamblers, although being adolescent makes this group even more vulnerable.

These more "hidden" methods of gambling may be more attractive to problem gamblers, particularly if gambling is an activity they prefer to do asocially rather than with friends. In addition, once an adolescent has managed to get through age verification systems and register, they can gamble again repeatedly; this differs from offline facilities, where adolescents will have to deceive the 'gatekeepers' on each separate visit.

In the present survey, 17% of those that had played the lottery on the Internet had accessed their parents' accounts (either with or without their permission).

Demo games

One of the most common ways that gamblers (including adolescents) can be facilitated to gamble online is when they try out games in the 'demo', 'practice' or 'free play' mode. There are no restrictions preventing children and adolescents playing (and learning how to gamble) on these practice and demonstration modes. In this way, children are being introduced to the principles and excitement of gambling

without experiencing the consequences of losing money. Findings from the present study indicated that of those that had played the lottery on the internet, that almost one in three (28%) had played the 'free' games on offer.

Recent research has shown it is significantly more commonplace to win while "gambling" on the first few goes on a 'demo' or 'free play' game⁴ although this is not the case for UK National Lottery games. The same study also reported that it was commonplace for gamblers to have extended winning streaks during prolonged periods while playing in the 'demo' modes. Obviously, once gamblers (including adolescents) start to play for real with real money, the odds of winning are considerably reduced. The UK National Lottery operator has recently announced that free play games will from now on only be available to age verified players who have registered on their system.

Asian gambling

The survey found that online gambling was higher among Asians. Why this is the case is unclear although it may be due to cultural and/or religious attitudes toward gambling. For Muslims, gambling is prohibited and it may be that playing games online is more of a 'grey area' than other more traditional forms of gambling. One previous localised study found that scratchcard gambling was highly prevalent among adolescent male Asians⁵. The findings in this study appear to mirror these earlier findings.

The rise and challenges of Internet gambling cannot be seen in isolation particularly as there is ever-increasing multi-media integration between the Internet, mobile phones, and interactive television. Furthermore, young people appear to be very proficient in using and accessing these media and are likely to be increasingly exposed to remote gambling opportunities. These young people will

therefore require education and guidance to enable them to cope with the challenges of convenience gambling in all its guises.

References

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Appendix 1 Psychological/behavioural components of Problem Gambling Screen DSM-IV-MR-J

1. Preoccupied with gambling (e.g. preoccupied with reliving past gambling experiences, handicapping, planning the next venture, or thinking of ways to get money with which to gamble).
2. Needs to gamble with increasing amounts of money to achieve the desired excitement.
3. Restlessness or irritability when attempting to cut down or stop gambling.
4. Gambles as a way of escaping from problems or relieving dysphoric mood (e.g. feelings of helplessness, guilty, anxiety or depression).
5. After losing money gambling, often returns another day in order to get even ("chasing" one's losses).
6. Lies to family members, or others, to conceal the extent of involvement with gambling
7. Often spends much more money on gambling than intended (loss of control).
8. Commits unsociable or illegal acts, such as spending school fare or dinner money, stealing from the family, or stealing from outside the family in order to finance gambling.
9. Falls out with family, or disrupted schooling, because of gambling (truancy).