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Chasing losses in online poker and casino games: Characteristics and game play of Internet gamblers at risk of disordered gambling

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ABSTRACT

Disordered Internet gambling is a psychological disorder that represents an important public health issue due to the increase in highly available and conveniently accessible Internet gambling sites. Chasing losses is one of the few observable markers of at-risk and problem gambling that may be used to detect early signs of disordered Internet gambling. This study examined loss chasing behaviour in a sample of Internet casino and poker players and the socio-demographic variables, irrational beliefs, and gambling behaviours associated with chasing losses. An online survey was completed by 10,838 Internet gamblers (58% male) from 96 countries. The results showed that Internet casino players had a greater tendency to report chasing losses than poker players and gamblers who reported chasing losses were more likely to hold irrational beliefs about gambling and spend more time and money gambling than those who reported that they were unaffected by previous losses. Gamblers who played for excitement and to win money were more likely to report chasing losses. This study is one of the largest ever studies of Internet gamblers and the results are highly significant as they provide insight into the characteristics and behaviours of gamblers using this mode of access.

1. Introduction

Internet gambling is an increasingly popular activity now widely available given increased Internet penetration and strong marketing efforts of online gambling operators (Gainsbury et al., 2012). Although most players gamble within reasonable means at recreational levels, a small proportion of players become overly involved, spending more time and money than they can afford, and experience subsequent negative consequences (Wood and Williams, 2011; Braverman and Shaffer, 2012; Gainsbury et al., 2013c). These players are referred to as problem gamblers, and are characterised by difficulties limiting their gambling behaviour, disruption to important relationships and other activities, and preoccupation with gambling. Disordered gambling and the less specific problem gambling (a term generally used for individuals experiencing significant harms but have not been clinically diagnosed as disordered gamblers) is a serious public health issue that is receiving increasing attention internationally (Gainsbury et al., 2013a).

Disordered gambling is a recognised psychological disorder classified as a behavioural addiction (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Prevalence rates of problem gambling have been relatively stable over the past few decades, with approximately 0.5–1.5% of adults having significant gambling problems and a further 1.5–2.0% experiencing milder difficulties (Stucki and Rihs-Middel, 2007; Productivity Commission, 2010; Wardle et al., 2011b). Internet gambling has been argued to represent a particular risk to individuals vulnerable to experience gambling problems due to its ease of accessibility and the immersive, private environment that enables gambling on multiple forms with rapid continuously play (Wood and Williams, 2011). Several studies have found substantially higher rates of disordered and problem gambling among samples of Internet as compared to land-based gamblers (Griffiths et al., 2009; Binde, 2011; Wood and Williams, 2011).

One of the symptoms and diagnostic criteria associated with disordered gambling is chasing losses, that is, betting more money after losses in an attempt to 'win back' funds (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Chasing losses is theorised to reflect an underlying preoccupation with gambling and a misunderstanding of how gambling outcomes are determined and irrational beliefs about the likelihood of winning (Svetieva and Walker, 2008; Griffiths and Whitty, 2010). Gambling is based on a house edge, making it unlikely that a gambler will be successful. Therefore, continued gambling after losses in the hopes of a payout is likely to result in further losses. Theoretical models of disordered gambling posit that chasing losses is central to the initiation and continuance of gambling sessions, contributing to on-going unaffordable losses and subsequent negative consequences

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(Blaszczynski and Nower, 2002; Sharpe, 2002). Both irrational beliefs and chasing behaviours are commonly reported by disordered and problem gamblers, including Internet gamblers, and in particular, characterise the lowest levels of disordered gambling severity (Blaszczynski and Nower, 2002; Orford et al., 2003; Toce-Gerstein et al., 2003; Strong and Kahler, 2007; MacKay and Hodgins, 2012). Critically, chasing losses is one of the few signs and criteria for disordered gambling that is observable. Other signs of disordered gambling such as preoccupation with gambling, restless or irritability when cutting back gambling, gambling when distressed, lying about gambling, and jeopardising important relationships are generally not easily observed without contextual information.

Numerous studies indicate that chasing losses is likely a behavioural marker of problem and disordered gambling. In an evaluation of the criteria for disordered gambling, Stinchfield et al. (2005) found that chasing losses was a reasonably strong discriminator of disordered gambling. Similarly, in a large study of 6682 land-based and Internet gamblers, Gainsbury et al. (2013c) found that problem gamblers were more likely to report chasing losses than moderate risk gamblers. However, other factors, including gambling behaviour and socio-demographic variables may mediate the relationship between chasing losses and problem gambling severity. In a US study, Strong and Kahler (2007) found that younger gamblers were more likely to report chasing losses at lower levels of disordered gambling severity than older gamblers. The prevalence of endorsing chasing among subclinical and problem gamblers was 27.1% and 80.9% respectively for younger gamblers and 15.0% and 78.7% respectively for older gamblers, respectively. Other known predictors of disordered Internet gambling that may influence the likelihood of chasing losses include being male, lower socioeconomic status, lower education levels, being unemployed, having a greater number of gambling-related irrational beliefs, gambling on a greater number of activities, higher gambling expenditure, longer sessions and more frequent gambling (Hopley and Nicki, 2010; Wardle et al., 2011a; Wood and Williams, 2011; Gainsbury et al., 2013c; McCormack et al., 2013).

This study aimed to examine loss chasing behaviour in a sample of Internet gamblers and how chasing losses was associated with socio-demographic variables, irrational beliefs and game play behaviours. The objective was to investigate whether the characteristics of Internet gamblers who chase losses are similar to profiles of disordered gamblers found in previous studies, including non-Internet gamblers. Similarity between profiles of these groups would provide some support for the use of chasing losses as a behavioural marker to identify Internet gamblers as potentially at-risk for gambling problems. These results would then add to the knowledge of the characteristics and game play behaviours that are associated with risky Internet gambling. Previously published analyses of the data used for this current paper found that chasing losses was associated with several known predictors of disordered gambling, including reports that responsible gambling tools would be useful, having a dispute with an online gambling operator, and suspecting players and sites of cheating (Gainsbury et al., 2013b). The current paper aims to expand these findings by investigating the specific demographic and game play factors related to chasing losses in a large sample of Internet gamblers.

Research with land-based gamblers has found that poker players and casino gamblers differ on measures of novelty seeking and gambling problems (Goudriaan et al., 2009; Welte et al., 2009). However, few studies have directly compared Internet poker and casino players including their likelihood of chasing losses. Internet poker has been argued to be a less risky form of gambling than online casino games as there is an element of skill involved in poker and players are less likely to dissociate, but play socially or competitive as compared to rapid and continuous casino games (Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy (DBCDE), 2013). However, several studies have found sub-groups of more involved online poker players who do not play in a disciplined and rational manner and may chase their losses, and studies have found that the effects of change largely outweigh any skill component (Shead et al., 2008; Bjerg, 2010a; Meyer et al., 2013). Many studies combine samples of Internet gamblers, despite the heterogeneity of this population (Wardle et al., 2011a). Therefore, in the current study Internet casino and poker players were analysed separately in this study to determine whether the variables associated with chasing losses differed between online gamblers based on their use of gambling activities.

2. Method

2.1. Procedure

Data were collected using an online data collection tool between August and December 2006. Evidence suggests that online surveys generate data that is as equally valid as face-to-face or telephone surveys as they are less subject to social desirability bias, which is particularly important when discussing potentially sensitive issues such as online gambling which is illegal in some jurisdictions (Wood and Williams, 2007). Furthermore, since the target population were Internet gamblers, this mode of recruitment was considered appropriate. Recruitment advertisements were placed on over 100 Internet casino and poker sites and reputable portals (i.e., information and news sites), which upon request agreed to host these links, and the research was promoted via the media. Advertisements encouraged individuals who had played Internet poker or casino games in the previous three months to click through to the online survey. Participants were not offered any incentives or asked to provide any identifying personal information. The home page of the survey included a description of the study, requirements for participation and an informed consent preamble. A cookie was used to ensure that only one response could be given per ISP address. The research was granted ethical approval from a University Ethics Committee.

2.2. Measures

The online survey included 85 closed and open-ended questions; all questions were optional and subsequently not all respondents answered each question. The questions analysed in this manuscript were:

a) *Socio-demographic and gambling variables*: five questions to measure age, gender, occupation (options to select either a specific industry or 'student', 'unemployed', 'retired', or 'full time parent'), and country of residence. One question asked respondents to indicate which types of online gambling they regularly participated in (multiple responses allowed).
b) *Chasing behaviour*: one question asked 'If you lose when gambling online are you more likely or less likely to keep playing to try and win some money back?' Fixed forced-choice response options were: 'less likely'; 'more likely'; 'I would be unaffected by what was lost on previous gambles'.
c) *Internet casino use*: all participants who affirmed that they play at online casinos (not including poker) were asked further questions including: frequency of playing (eight response options ranging from '2–3 times per day' to 'annually'); initiation of online casino playing (eight response options ranging from 'less than 3 months ago' to 'more than 5 years ago'); average session length (nine response options ranging from 'less than 15 minutes' to 'more than 12 hours'); typical wager per session (10 response options ranging from 'less than $10' to 'more than $5000'); and the extent to which participants played online casinos for excitement, relaxation, to win money, (five response options for each motive ranging from 'never' to 'always').
d) *Internet poker use*: the same questions for Internet casino user were asked about poker use for all participants who affirmed that they play online poker. Poker players were not asked about their typical wager per session, rather they were asked about typical blind levels (11 response options ranging from '$0.10/0.20' to 'Greater than $100/$200'). Two additional questions asked about the type of poker typically played (five response options: 'mainly a cash game player', 'mainly a tournament player', 'a player that plays both cash games and tournament games', 'mainly a freeroll player', 'mainly a "play-for-free" player';), and perceived poker skill level (7 response options ranging from 'extremely weak' to 'extremely good').
e) *Bias in betting behaviour:* one fixed-choice question asked participants to choose the response which best reflected their betting behaviour. Three