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CMC - CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT NATIONAL RESEARCH TEAM

A qualitative examination of online gambling culture among college students: Factors influencing participation, maintenance and cessation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The convergence of social media gambling simulated play-for-fun sites and Internet gambling has raised considerable concern among some clinicians, researchers and legislators. The objective of this qualitative study was to help identify a better understanding of the factors that attract college students to online gambling including the role played by social media sites amongst college students. More importantly, the issue of migration between the play-for-fun gambling social media sites and online gambling was explored. This qualitative study was conducted as a first-step in comprehensive program of research on this topic.

In total six focus groups were conducted: Three focus groups with regular online gamblers (N=21); three focus groups with college students who gambled occasionally in traditional land-based venues, but were frequent users of social media websites (N=30).

RESULTS

Multiple themes emerged regarding online gamblers' and social media users' reason for play:

Online Gamblers

- Primary themes were: Loss of control (ease of spending money, the fast speed of the games, the tendency to be more impulsive when gambling online), play for free games on social media sites (including their link to online gambling), online gambling had fewer restrictions (i.e., easier access especially for underage youth, less social pressure to play well, no need to leave your place, simple use of credit card, gambling instructions and odds provided), responsible gambling practices (setting limits to time and money spent but not with use of any features offered), and manipulations by online providers (including promotion/advertisement tactics).

- Many people indicated that they learned how to gamble on *Facebook*, commenting that it served as a poker training ground.

Social Media Users

- Social media is credited for keeping people connected, informed (via pictures and status updates, access to news), and enhancement of self (good for the ego). While not verbalized frequently, there was a general consensus that social media is an integral and important part of daily life, and that to not be part of it can be difficult and isolating for some. Participants expressed feeling the need to check-in regularly in order to stay informed, to the point of excess.

Relationship between social media use and online gambling: Is there a migration?

- There was a general consensus that online gambling and social media sites provide excellent opportunities for learning how to gamble so that when they play with friends or at the casino they have the "skills" to be successful.

- Social media sites, in particular, serve to teach how to gamble without risking real money.

- A common theme was that the play-for-fun gambling sites were easily accessible via smart phones, tablets or computers and they helped enhance how individuals feel about themselves.

- Loss of control was a major theme for both play-for-fun games and actual online gambling sites. Social media users expressed concerns about the addictive aspect of *Facebook* almost as much as online gamblers expressed how easy it is to lose control when gambling online. These activities were perceived as all-consuming.

- There was an expressed concern about how online site providers use psychological principles of persuasion to manipulate users and migrate people from the play-for-fun sites to online gambling sites.

- Privacy concerns were noted, however, this was of greater concern with social media users than online gamblers.

- Social media users perceived a greater relationship between social media and online gambling than did online gamblers. While the majority of the social media users do not gamble online, this appears to be a conscious choice based on their personality styles, a general distrust of the Internet as well as awareness that gambling is risky. In contrast, online gamblers perceived the link between playing for virtual money versus real money, if any, was minimal despite many stating that they learned how to play Texas Hold'em on *Facebook*. They reported that the interfaces of the games were significantly different (social media being much less sophisticated) such that individuals attracted to one medium would likely not be attracted to the other.

- Social media users seem satisfied with the "fun and socially competitive" aspect of playing gambling type games, whereas online gamblers are unimpressed and not entertained by them, preferring to play on the practice sites or actual sites of real online casinos.

- The notion that social media activity takes place in a 'fake world', having repercussions for the 'real world' is a new concept that emerged. It was explained that if a person starts playing for fun in the fake world and fake money, and then transfers to gambling online, there is confusion and they can forget that they are playing for real money.

- Both social media users and online gamblers expressed that their higher education serves as a protective factor against addiction. They feel more savvy and capable of wiser decision-making compared to their non-educated peers.

Overall, while several participants noted a potential migration from social media sites such as *Facebook,* online gamblers were more drawn to the actual casino play-for-free sites. Amongst this limited college sample, the competitive nature of these games was more important for non-online gamblers. Social media users were significantly more concerned about privacy issues. Of concern was the finding that there appears to be a general perception that online gambling is a safer environment than land-based venues. College students feel as though their education buffers them for the possibility of gambling problems. This issue needs to be further explored.

As more and more Internet and social media providers merge and find common business opportunities, the issue will become further blurred. Of significant concern remains one student's comment:

> *"I didn't understand how I got from one place to another place, from playing for fun to being in trouble."*

A qualitative examination of online gambling and social media use among college students: Factors influencing participation, maintenance and cessation

RATIONALE/LITERATURE REVIEW

Technology and technological advances have been at the core of the gambling industry since its early beginnings (Turner, 2008). The most significant advance in gambling over the decade has been the increasing use of the Internet. Worldwide profits from Internet gambling are reported in the tens of billions of dollars. KPMG released a relatively recent report suggesting that the global online gambling market will grow about 42% from 2008 levels, to reach US$30 billion by 2012 (KPMG International, 2010). Among other reasons, governments have recognized the lucrative revenue source that accompanies Internet gambling. As such, there are an increasing number of government-run and regulated online casino sites. What was once perceived as untrustworthy, Internet gambling has, via government involvement, gained the trust of many gamblers.

The use of the Internet as a gateway to gambling activities has resulted in the awareness that there may be more risks inherent in gambling online than with land based games. There is now a growing amount of literature that suggests Internet gamblers are at increased risk for problem and pathological gambling compared to those who do not gamble via the Internet (Griffiths et al., 2009, McBride & Derevensky, 2009, Wood et al., 2007, Olason et al., 2010). A survey of almost 2000 Internet gamblers found over 40% of respondents met criteria for problem gambling (Wood & Williams, 2007). Among other reasons for this high rate of pathology among Internet gamblers, Internet gambling allows for solitary and unsupervised playtime, continuous access, and few age verification tools thus allowing for underage gambling. Since youth are at such a vulnerable, formative period of their life, increased exposure to online gambling via enticements from social media networking platforms may likely result in increased life-altering consequences as a result of gambling over-involvement and addiction, cyber addiction, and other psycho-social consequences of spending excessive time online. Public and legislative reaction to *apps* and other attractions to online gambling sites, positioned in places often frequented by youth online, remain likely.

In previous years, cultural spaces where youth spent time socializing primarily consisted of shopping malls, movie theaters, game halls, and parks, amongst others. Today, the context within which youth are choosing to socialize has taken a digital turn. Youth socialize on such sites as

Facebook and *Twitter*, which increasingly have available "fun" online gambling-like games. Indeed, youth are now exposed to a plethora of online gambling-like activities including poker or casino-type activities, played with virtual money. With no actual money being risked, many individuals perceive that such practices represent a relatively harmless form of entertainment. The risks associated with using social networking platforms, or popular *apps*, as a way of recruiting players to online gambling sites will be examined.

The convergence of gambling and digital media has meaningful implications for gambling among young people. New gambling technologies (i.e., play/practice sites in social network sites) make gambling increasing familiar and easily accessible to young people – accessibility being a factor that has been shown to heighten involvement in gambling when land-based casinos are opened in a jurisdiction that previously did not have such venues (see Wohl & Sztainert, 2011). Moreover, these social media networks have a tendency to promote factually incorrect information about the nature of gambling, provide a convenient and easy escape from daily problems and hassles, depression, and psychological trauma (i.e., history of abuse or traumatic events; King, Delfabbro & Griffiths, 2010). In addition, the nature of these social media platforms can take place in a creative gambling environment that can make youth susceptible to peer pressure to gamble and to gamble in riskier ways given the competitive qualities that surface when playing (Cole, Douglas & Griffiths, 2011).

Other problems may result from online access to gambling sites. It is widely accepted that often, when gambling, one loses track of time and enters a temporary world where not much else matters, a phenomenon often referred to as *dissociation* (Jacobs, 1988). College students are often reported to spend too much time online and insufficient time participating in more active pastimes, although it is becoming accepted that the way youth socialize is changing and that social networking sites (e.g., *Facebook*) simply represent a new method through which youth form and/or maintain relationships. Regardless, spending increasing amounts of time online can result in additional risks and concerns, and increased access to gambling or gambling-like opportunities can only contribute to the level of concern that exists since gambling activity can span large amounts of time at each play session.

The topic of Internet addiction, or cyber-addiction, is also one worthy of mention and investigation, especially within the context of gambling. Brezing and her colleagues (Brezing,

Derevensky & Potenza, & 2010) referred to over-involvement in the Internet environment as a "technological addiction" (defined as time spent online that exceeds 35 hours per week or total time that exceeds the time intended) which is accompanied by distortion of time, compulsive behaviors, unsuccessful attempts of controlling use, deception about extent of use, use of the Internet to escape or cope with problems, and preoccupation with the Internet when offline. Of importance for the proposed programme of research, young people who gamble online open themselves up not only to gambling addiction but also Internet addiction, simply by the nature of the increased exposure to the Internet (Griffiths & Parke, 2002).

The overall objective of the research is to provide an understanding of the factors that attract college students to online gambling (including the role played by social media sites) from online gamblers themselves. Avid social media users who have regular exposure to play-for-fun gambling-type games and online casino advertisements will also contribute to our understanding of the influences leading to online gambling. The college student population represents a meaningful proportion of online gambling consumers, thus a group that should be considered at heightened risk for the onset of gambling problems.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Qualitative research design: Six focus groups in total
  - ➤ Three focus groups with college students who gamble online. Inclusion criteria: college students aged 18-24 years who report gambling online at least two times per month.

  - ➤ Three focus groups with college students who use social media sites. Inclusion criteria: college students aged to 18-24 years of age who indicate using social media Internet sites a minimum of four times per week.

Online Gamblers
There were 21 online gamblers in total, across the three focus groups. A number of individuals who had signed up for the focus groups subsequently notified the research team before the group meeting that they could not participate for logistical reasons (i.e., work-related, school-related,

unexpected appointments). Seven individuals failed to attend the focus groups. Focus groups were conducted at McGill University (two focus groups) and Carleton University (one group). The gender distribution was skewed with most being males (18 males, 3 females). While we had hoped to obtain a more even distribution, it proved to be a challenge to find female online gamblers willing to participate. Numerous strategies to recruit females were attempted including announcing the study in female-dominated classes, increasing financial compensation, and specifically soliciting female participants.

Prior to the focus group, individuals were asked to complete a short background questionnaire. With respect to frequency of online gambling, 52% indicated gambling less than once per week, and 48% indicated doing so (at least once per week to several times per week). Seventy-six percent indicated gambling more frequently and/or for longer periods of time than intended (61.9% occasionally and 14.4% often). Participants were asked to indicate on a 7 point Likert scale of how knowledgeable they perceived themselves to be on the topic of online gambling. Overall mean scores were 4.38. The majority of the sample (85.7%) indicated that they tend to play on one or two online gambling sites, whereas 14.3% stated they like to experiment with different sites. Sixty-two percent of participants revealed playing gambling-type games (i.e., *Texas Hold'em*) on *Facebook* or other social media sites.

Social media users
Thirty individuals (56.7% males; 43-3% females) participated in the social media focus groups. From the background questionnaire, the great majority (96.7%) indicated checking their social media site multiple times per day. Only one participant indicated checking less frequently (i.e., only once per day). The devices most often used to access social media sites included smart phones, and laptop computers. However, 70% of respondents indicated using a combination of devices. This was reported to be geographic and time related. Slightly more than half of the participants indicated that they play games offered by social media sites, and 29% (N=6) gamble online with real money.

Recruitment, consent, and compensation of participants
Recruitment occurred in two ways:

➢ Each year, a wide survey of all first year students at Carleton University screening for online gambling and problem gambling prevalence rates is conducted. This academic year, a question about the use of social networking sites, along with a "permission to re-contact" participants was included (individuals wishing to participate in follow-up studies provided their email addresses). This allowed researchers to seek out participants who met the inclusion criteria for the focus groups.

➢ Recruitment of participants occurred at McGill, Carleton and Concordia Universities by visiting large classrooms and advertising the study on billboards around campus.

All participants were required to provide active consent before their participation. Participants were provided with a description of the study objectives and were informed that they are free to stop their participation at any time. Dr. Rina Gupta – a licensed clinical psychologist – led the focus group discussions.

Participants were compensated for their time and were provided food and beverages throughout the course of the discussion that ensued.

Materials
Each focus group was recorded with use of digital recording devices (two were used at each session to ensure no loss of data and the capturing of all dialogue.

Open-ended questions along two lines of inquiry were asked:
1. What role do social networking sites play in online gambling behavior?
2. What personal factors and factors inherent in the online gambling environment contribute to online gambling, sustain the gambling, and eventually result in the termination of a gambling session?

A full list of questions used to guide the focus groups can be found in Appendix A.

Research Design

Focus groups: Benefits of qualitative methodology

One facilitator (who was accompanied by two note-takers) conducted the focus groups. All sessions were conducted at either McGill or Carleton University. The rooms used were spacious and provided a comfortable space for the groups. Each group lasted approximately 60 – 75 minutes in duration.

Focus groups are a form of group interview that capitalizes on communication between research participants in order to generate data. Although group interviews are often used as a convenient way to collect data from multiple people simultaneously, group interaction becomes an essential component in this methodology. Rather than the researcher asking each person to respond to a question in turn, individuals are encouraged to talk with one another; asking questions, exchanging anecdotes and commenting on each other's experiences and points of view. The method is particularly useful for exploring people's knowledge and experiences and can be used to examine not only what people think, but also how they think and their underlying reasons.

The premise behind the focus group methodology is that group processes can help people explore and clarify their views. Group discussion is particularly appropriate when the interviewer has a series of open-ended questions and wishes to encourage research participants to explore issues of importance, generating their own questions and pursuing their own priorities. When group dynamics work well, the participants work alongside the researcher, taking the research in new and often unexpected directions, providing rich information and revealing dimensions of understanding that often remain inaccessible by more conventional data collection techniques. The six focus groups conducted for this study reflected this dynamic, and while every attempt was made to cover all the questions in the script, the dialogue did go in unexpected directions at times, revealing rich information, although not central to the main objectives of the current study. This information will be outlined throughout the results section.

Procedure

Participants were asked to provide informed consent and complete the short background questionnaire. They were then provided with food, snacks and beverages. At the end of each

session participants were provided with a debriefing document and compensated for their time. Participants in the first two groups were compensated $20 for their time and those in the remaining 4 groups were provided with $40. (The increased compensation was used as an incentive to attract participants due to difficult getting sufficient numbers of people to participant in any given focus group session. The additional funds facilitated the recruitment process).

Numerous participants indicated that it was a very enjoyable and informative experience and some even sent an e-mail indicating that they would like to participate in any future focus groups.

Data Treatment

Each focus group was transcribed and coded. Due to time constraints, only one coder was used (Dr. Gupta). However, all transcripts were reviewed, making adjustments to the assigned coding a total of three times. NVivo 10 qualitative research software for qualitative analyses was used to organize and quantify the data. A research team meeting was held at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec on 10 December 2012 to review the findings and discuss their implications. The results reported below are discussed in light of this data treatment.

RESULTS

The major themes that surfaced within each focus group type (online gamblers and social media users) are briefly summarized. This will be followed by a closer analysis of common themes, shared by both focus group types.

Online Gamblers

Nineteen distinct themes emerged from the focus groups that were conducted with online gamblers. The most talked about issues amongst the online gamblers included the following: Loss of control (ease of spending money, the fast speed of the games, the tendency to be more impulsive when gambling online), play for free games on social media sites (including their link to online gambling), the fact that it is so much simpler to gamble online (i.e., easier access especially for underage youth, less social pressure to play well, no need to leave your place, simple use of credit card, gambling instructions and odds provided), responsible gambling practices (setting limits to time and money spent but not with use of any features offered), and manipulations by online providers (including promotion/advertisement tactics). Many

individuals indicated that they learned how to gamble on *Facebook*, communicating that it served as a poker training ground for them.
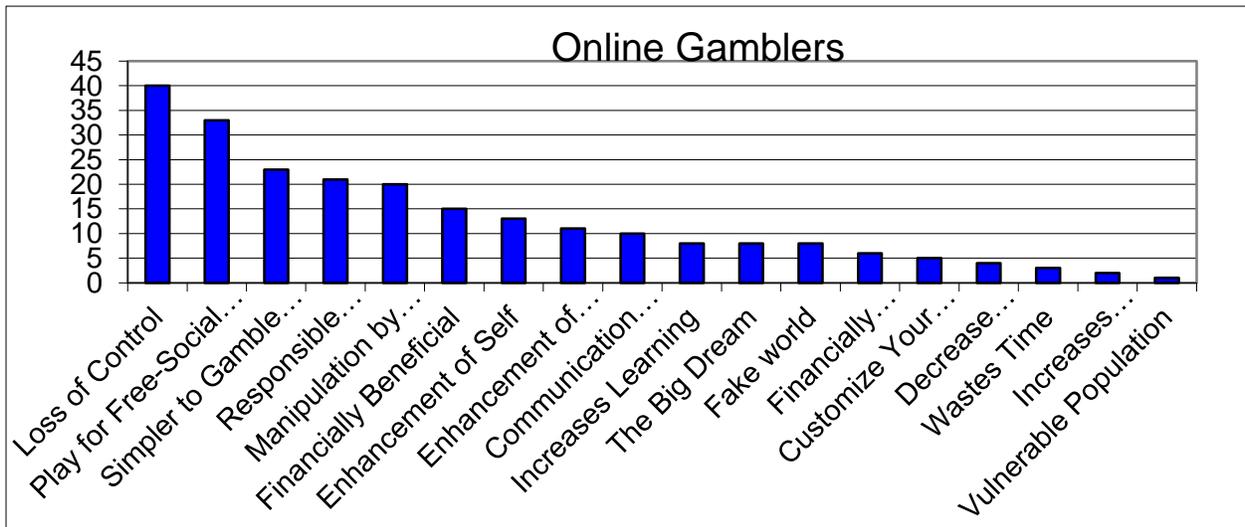
Frequency counts of statements reflected within each theme category

Other observations included the idea that online gambling was referred to as being financially beneficial more frequently than financially detrimental. Often, these statements were made in comparison to land-based gambling (i.e., casino). Participants referred to the fact that online providers give better rates of return and sign-up bonuses. Also, the fact that online gambling is easily customizable; the participants expressed being able to gamble exactly the way they want on specific games, being able to wager small amounts should they elect to do so, and thus having more control over their overall play experience compared to land-based gambling. As such, more participants believed they were in control of their finances. Participants also debated over whether online gambling was more risky than land-based gambling and although there were diverging opinions, the majority consensus was that online gambling entails less risk overall (reasons cited: gamble less carelessly because less time invested in going to a casino, less social pressure, still exposed to "real life" which limits your play).

> *In person, there are a lot more people influencing your behavior. You get really down on*
> *yourself if you lose in a public environment. It is very humiliating. The people keep*

pressuring you to keep playing to win back your money whereas at home you can stop anytime you want.

If you are betting and my mom is "Well let's go for dinner" and I'm not going to be "Well let me bring my laptop" – I'll come back to this later

…if you go to the casino it takes more time, you have to drive there, plus you socialize. Once you've invested in that process you know you're dumping all kinds of money.

Some positive themes that emerged were self-enhancement (elevation of mood, feel better about oneself, relieve stress), enhancement of experience (placing money on a game makes the game more exciting), increased opportunities to learn (about sports games and how to gamble), and the enjoyment of chasing the "big dream" that is promoted by famous successful poker players.

Themes less positive in nature included statements referring to the wasting of "precious" time (especially for students) that can occur when gambling online, as well as the decrease in socialization that online gambling tends to result in. Online gambling was referred to as something that took place in a "fake world", as opposed to the "real world", and that one does not discuss with friends what happens in the fake world. Some, however, argued that online gambling actually increases one's ability to socialize with friends abroad since people from different locations can be playing at the same virtual poker table together, or betting on sports together.

The idea that there are vulnerable pockets of the population that are more susceptible to developing gambling problems as a result from gambling online (i.e., youth, less educated, impulsive) surfaced only once among the online gambling groups conducted, although merely as a passing mention. In general, there did not seem to be much of an awareness that serious problems could arise from online gambling, despite their understanding of how easily one could lose control. The general theme that emerged was that they felt immune to serious problems and in control given they are "educated". In their opinion, education served as a protective mechanism against addiction.

Social Media Users

Twenty-one themes emerged from the discussions with avid social media users. Social media is credited for keeping people connected, informed (via pictures and status updates, access to news), and enhancement of self (good for the ego). While not verbalized frequently, there was a general consensus (nodding and agreement among the groups) that social media is an integral and important part of everyday life, and that to not be part of it can be difficult and isolating for some.

> *I want to speak to this idea that "we have a choice" and we can decide what we want to put out there. I basically agree with that but at the same time social media has become really normative and my colleague said she left Facebook but then she was missing out on stuff because Facebook has become such an avenue of information so she had to go back. You can argue that there is a choice there but because the social media has become so normative, where is the choice really coming in? - What are you sacrificing by not being part of it? These sorts of cost benefit things like it has changed communication. With Facebook, you can argue well there is a choice, but to choose not to share all your information, you have to again go against the norm just to protect your privacy.*
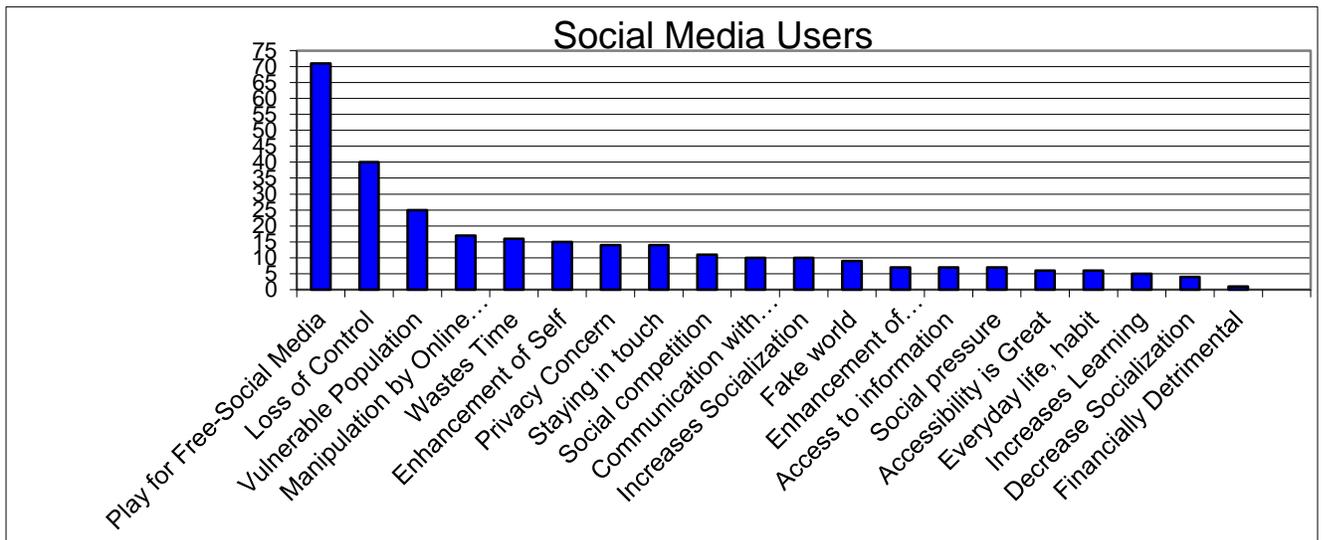
Frequency counts of statements reflected within each theme category

The most verbalized aspect of social media pertained to the games that could be played in a social way. It was argued that since social media sites are designed to connect people within a social forum, the idea of having the option to play games within a social context makes perfect sense. There were, however, mixed feelings about the games overall. Some found them to be boring, annoying, an avenue for procrastination, all consuming (think about the games even when not playing), not sophisticated enough (i.e., graphics), and simply a waste of time.

There was a good deal of resentment expressed over how Facebook now charges money to players for certain games in order to enhance their play and thus be more competitive.

> *Some of them have micro transactions and that means that you pay for advantages in the games and you pay for that with real money so people can actually spend money to waste more of their time.*

> *It makes no sense to pay money to get things that accentuates your play in this fake world.*

The second most referred to issue was a loss of control. Social media games were described as being very addictive in nature, resulting in obsessive-type behaviour (preoccupation even when not playing). Examples of verbalization for loss of control are presented later in the document.

The socially competitive aspect of the games (leader boards, bragging online about one's score) was mentioned in favourable terms, even to the point that one's ego can be nourished with such games. Others made comments about the easy path that games on social media pave for onset of online gambling. This, however, was challenged by other participants who reported that they found the gambling-type games sufficiently enjoyable and that there was no need to seek real gambling experiences on other sites. When it came to the topic of games and certain features offered on social media sites, there was a general sense of 'if it is right there, we will use it (even if it is not optimal)" as opposed to shopping around for better options.

> *Well I think it is about the behaviour of people. People are lazy in general. Say you go to a supermarket and check for something that's on sale when you see something else you want too that's for sale in another store but that store is far away you will probably just grab the things altogether so since Facebook is very popular and most people would just*

see the Texas Hold'em poker and save the trouble of going on another site. It's this kind

of behaviour among people.

Other major themes that emerged were how social media sites can be detrimental to some (vulnerable populations) if they are too young, not educated, or not computer savvy (examples include cyber-bullying, arguing online, invasion of privacy, waste of valuable time.) It was reported that it is a very easy tool to use to spread messages to large numbers of people, and create social movements. There was debate about whether it actually increases or decreases socialization (people message instead of talking to one another), but the consensus was that it increases one's social functioning overall as it is much easier to send someone a note on *Facebook* than to looking up their number and call them. *Facebook* allows students to customize their socialization parameters. They might not want to have a lengthy conversation with someone so sending them a cryptic note via social media allow for contact, but establishes limits at the same time. As well, participants indicated that social media allows the room for reflection before responding whereas face-to-face communication does not have that buffer. There appears to be a new culture of communication and sharing that has developed as a result of social media.

Social media users frequently raised privacy concerns, but surprisingly this was not mentioned to any great extent by online gamblers. The idea of needing to share personal details in order to gain access to games on social media sites was a point of contention. They viewed it as a necessary form of 'payment', similar to selling your personal information, just to be mainstream and play games with your friends. There was an expressed feeling of being violated because sites like *Facebook* use your personal information (or sell it) to target you with advertisements, etc.

I want to speak to this idea that "we have a choice" and we can decide what we want to

put out there. I basically agree with that but at the same time social media has become

really normative and my colleague said she left Facebook but then she was missing out

on stuff because Facebook has become such an avenue so she had to go back. You can

argue that there is a choice there but because the social media has become so normative,

where is the choice really coming in? -what are you sacrificing by not being part of it?

These sort of cost benefit things like it has changed communication. With Facebook, you

can argue well there is a choice, but to choose not to share all your information, you have

to again go against the norm just to protect your privacy.

The issue of social pressure surfaced on multiple levels. There is the pressure to be like everyone else and keep up with trends on social media. However, the contrary to that, there is also the sense that social media buffers one from social pressures in the sense that you are alone as opposed to having peers around you applying pressure.

> *I guess it is hard to quantify this but you have to deal with the social pressures that come with social media and whether it be gaming or sharing your image online and not reporting it if you are uncomfortable with it – there's now this pressure to put yourself out there even though there might be something that you might not be OK with.*

> *Maybe you don't want to spend your afternoon playing a social media game on Facebook but it's become normative and there's these different pressures that come with this evolution of using social media and what you're expected to be OK with having out there. And if you're not OK with it then you are not really like everyone else.. kind of have this divide between you and others.*

Relationship between social media use and online gambling

> *"I didn't understand how I got from one place to another place, from playing for fun to being in trouble."*

Since the primary focus of this qualitative study was to understand the influences that might lead to online gambling among college students, and in particular the influence of social media, it was useful to examine the common themes across the focus groups.

There was a general consensus, that online gambling and social media sites provide excellent opportunities for learning. Specifically, gambling sites allow people to learn how to gamble and learn about sports via gambling. Social media sites provide users with a vast array of access to information about people they know, friends of friends, people posting articles and links to information, as well as to serve as a way to learn how to gamble via the play-for-fun gambling opportunities. Both focus group types highlighted the ease of accessibility, the constant presence of these activities, and attribute, in part their popularity to the how easy it is to access them in today's era of the smart phones and tablets. Another common theme that surfaced was that games (either play-for fun or play-for-free) helped enhance how individuals feel about themselves. The competitive aspect of the game (whether the competition is against someone

else or with oneself) provides users with a sense of accomplishment, an enhanced ego, elevation of mood; all of which are categorized under enhancement of self.
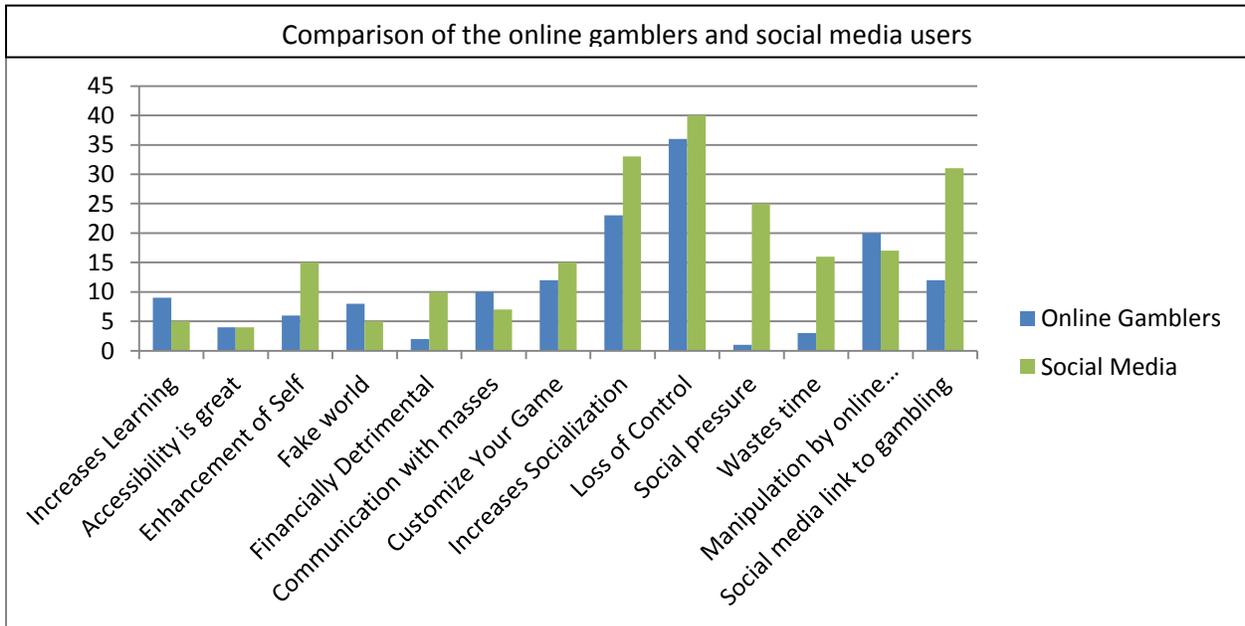
Frequency counts of statements made in each category, organized by focus group type, reflecting common themes.

The notion of a "fake world" was an unexpected finding. Participants expressed a feeling that what happens online is somehow distinct and separate from what happens in the real world, yet the two are intricately linked in the sense that the consequences of actions are realized.
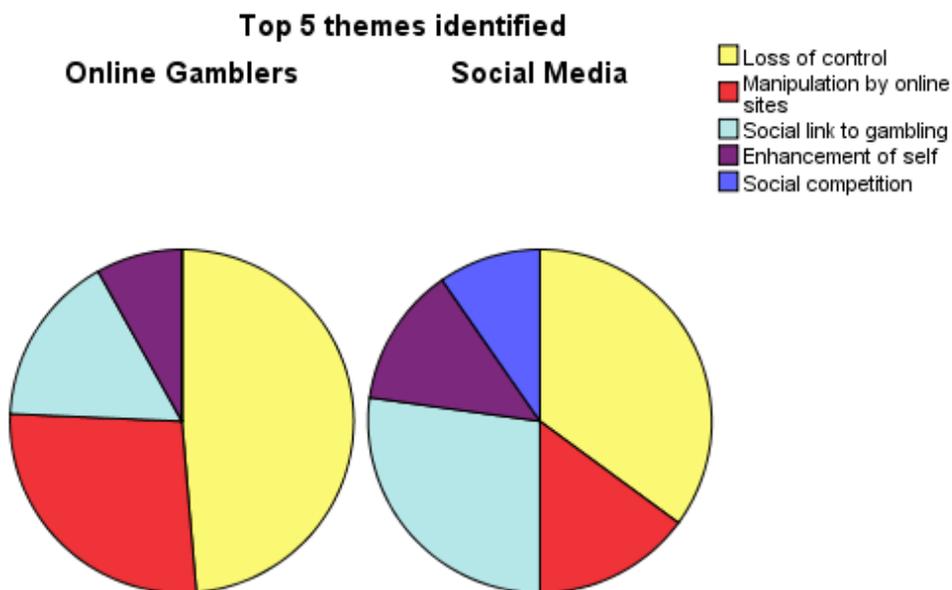
Yes, and it's like people have no idea of the repercussions. They're like "I'm in front of a computer screen and I can say anything I want. I'm here and they're over there. They can't do anything to me", whereas in real life you would never dare to say those things to someone.

You look at other people and they have scores that are ridiculously higher than you, and you like have to find a way to beat that score. And you waste the whole day and in the end it doesn't matter because it's not real. It's in the fake world. There is regret afterwards.

On participant stated that when gambling online, the money doesn't even seem real because it is happening in this "fake" parallel universe and so it is easier to spend.

> If you transfer from Facebook to online gambling, you still have the mentality that you are in a fake world and you are used to playing with fake money and you forget that the money you are spending is real.

Loss of control also surfaced as a major theme between both focus group types. So did the topic of social media sites paving the path to online gambling. The pie charts below depict the 5 most discussed topics that emerged from the focus groups conducted. It is useful to see the data in the pie chart as it provides a larger context for interpretation; proportion of statements made as opposed to frequency counts. The yellow segment represents loss of control. Amongst online gamblers, it dominates, consisting of the most referred to issue, and occupying almost half of the pie chart. Amongst social media loss of control also surfaced as the major issue, with a proportion slightly larger than the link between social media sites and online gambling (represented by the turquoise section). Concerns over manipulation by online site providers, and enhancement of self are also shared by both groups of participants. The aspect of competing

Top 5 themes identified

Online Gamblers   **Social Media**

□ Loss of control
■ Manipulation by online sites
□ Social link to gambling
■ Enhancement of self
■ Social competition

socially was a meaningful component of play for social media users but not for online gamblers. Apart from this discrepancy, it can be seen that the top topics discussed are extremely similar between online gamblers and avid social media users

Some examples of verbalizations for loss of control are:

> *I think that the only damage I see is that you getting out of control like you can't separate yourself from that game. And that can be something really bad because you have to weigh which kind of thing is your priority*

> *As a person who has played Farmville I just did it for a while, I played it for maybe 3 months after a while the games the way a lot of them are shaped, is in a way that is repetitive and definitely reward-based so it can be addictive. It has the potential to be very addictive.*

> *Addicting, need to keep checking it*

> *There's nobody telling you not to if you have nothing better to do …there is no one telling you not to and no one is offering a better thing to do.*

> *You walk in with $20 in your wallet and you are there to have fun more than to win but when you are online and it starts at whatever it starts at but it is so much easier to increase and increase it and you don't have your friends next to you telling you to stop.*

> *I have noticed that when I am online it's very easy for the stakes to escalate and escalate because it is so easy they have your credit card information so you can deposit more because you won't care about the charge until the end of the month when your statement comes in.*

> *…the successful games all have a component of competitiveness and the leader board and all that so it gets addictive and you can level out or interact with your friends.*

Participants in both focus group types discussed how online site providers use human psychology to manipulate users. There was a general sense of needing to be smart and savvy in order to not fall prey to the tactics of online casinos and social media sites. A feeling of distrust

was echoed, although most participants felt that they, being educated, were aware enough and therefore able to sustain the attempts at manipulation.

> *Once you play for fun, they sort of get people into the gambling, you think ok, this would be great if it were real money, so you try. That's the way the websites make you go through that road.*

> *If you want to see how people are drawn to it…-you definitely should look into those promotions - I am just saying like low bonus and stuff but for example…this tennis player he became one of their spokespeople – yeah so I can see how that could draw some tennis players to play in it and also they make off their pro members and their stories and how they started in being in university and they dropped out and then they played – and those are really bad examples for anyone because it just seems so easy-they make it seem so easy and the people are so ordinary like you.*

> *… and obviously the companies like Facebook give out the information let's say things that you are doing like all the games poker even though it's not for money. Your side bar has all advertisements that are personalized to you so for me I see a lot of gambling, sports, apparel stuff and stuff like that is all on my side bar. They try that's how Facebook makes money. It's an easy way to push you get you into gambling.*

> *On Facebook – like I am horrible at card games and I somehow win on Facebook and I know that if I went to a casino and I played the exact same thing I would the money would be gone in like 10 seconds. I would love to see the programming behind it to see if it is designed to trap you.*

> *Every day, every day, the online casino sends you notifications.*

Social Media Link to Gambling

Towards the beginning of each focus group, participants were made aware, both online gamblers and social media users, that we were interested in better understanding what role – if any – social media plays in the transition from play-for-fun to play-for-pay gambling sites. Therefore, many of their comments on this topic were "solicited", although this was not the case for all comments about potential transition from one to the other. Of specific interest social media users perceived a greater relationship between social media and online gambling than did the online gamblers

themselves. The majority of the social media users do not gamble online, but this appears to be a conscious choice they are making based on their personality styles, a general distrust of the Internet, and awareness that gambling is risky. In contrast, online gamblers (despite many stating that they started playing *Texas Hold'em* on *Facebook*) felt that the link, if any, was minimal. They explained that the interfaces of the games were so different (social media being much less sophisticated) that people who would be attracted to one would likely not be attracted to the other. Social media users seem satisfied with the "fun and competitive" aspect of playing gambling type games where online gamblers are unimpressed and not entertained by them, and prefer to play on the practice sites of real online casinos. The following are examples of verbalizations made regarding the social media link to gambling. Since this topic constitutes one of the main research objectives, we have included quite a few quotes to be able to properly convey the beliefs and experiences of those who participated in the focus groups.

The accessibility of the Internet is something big I guess the biggest danger for online gambling is actually bringing the gambling concept to all the users of social media throughout the Internet and leaving that exposed to many people – it can have a big impact because some people might have no prior knowledge about gambling and they can be attracted.

Taking into account the population of people who are not gamblers who don't gamble and are then introduced through social media sites… it is a good thing that they have the opportunity to learn these things online like that.

So regardless of whether it is Facebook or just the practice sites on the online casinos it's a natural progression to start from play-for-fun train, learn then you realize you are not learning enough because people are not taking the game seriously and then move onto paying.

Now the practice layout of the actual game (referring to practice sites of online casinos)*, it looks exact same thing as if you play for real money so it's not like practice looks more like cartoons like on Facebook with their big chips all these different colors, but on these websites that you are practicing with it is exactly the same thing that you are playing*

with except the only difference is that instead of 500 you have a $ sign and 500, really that is the only different thing.

For my case I started gambling on the for free thing for a while before I actually started gambling for real money online.

Texas Hold'em with free chips that's how I started.

A general progression starts with these Facebook entertainment games which are purely for fun and some people take it to the next level where the its for fun and money, that's where we are now most of us and then some people will take it eventually to the next level where the fun has disappeared and they are just doing it for the money.

So you get used to betting with higher amounts on these fake games because you are not using real money but in the same concept still applies when you start with real money. You might feel like Ok I am winning $5-10 hands and all of a sudden this is boring let me go up the stakes to $50 a hand and then you lose it all except this time you are not losing fake money you are losing real money.

Well, I saw that I was somewhat successful at least in my terms playing at the non-money tables and I decided it might be good thing if you actually have real money involved You might not be as eager to take a risk as when there's no money involved so I started trying with money.

The way I found my gambling website was I was on Facebook, I had nothing to so, so I was I bored. I said: let me look for a game and I found the website.

Facebook, it's not necessarily a teaching tool like teaching them how to play but it gives them that feeling of winning and that desire to get more and more and more and then at one point it's not going to be sufficient anymore…

A few of my friends started on Facebook playing Texas Hold'em and then they started playing on Poker Stars for real money. And they were losing like a lot of their money. And like at the time, they did not realize what was going on. They had a hard time with the transition from playing online for free, to paying for playing online; and they were losing like hundreds of dollars. Moderator: *And when you say that they didn't understand, did*

they tell you that? Participant: *Ya. They talked to a lot of people about it, and they said 'I didn't understand how I got from one place to another place, from playing for fun to being in trouble'.*

<u>Discussion</u>

These focus groups represent a qualitative examination of factors inherent to social media use and online gambling. The main purpose was to investigate if there were characteristics or features of social media that provide a direct link to online gambling activities. From a larger framework, these focus groups were also intended to inform us on new topics that could form avenues for future research. The results obtained have resulted in valuable information on both accounts.

Social media link to online gambling

These focus groups, for the most part, confirmed that social media and online gambling share many commonalities, ranging from the reasons why people engage in the activities (easy access, relieve boredom, procrastination from school work, social connectedness, learning opportunities, self-enhancement, enhancement of experience, competitive fun), and the cons of such activities (waste of time, loss of control, privacy concerns, manipulation of online site providers).

Social media use and online gambling both take place on their smartphones, laptops, and tablets, devices, which follow college students everywhere they go. The accessibility is completely unlimited, and it is up to each individual to set limits to they play activities. One message that was communicated very clearly by students in the focus groups is that they are very aware of the link that bridges the gap between social media sites such as Facebook and online gambling. Most online gamblers expressed making use of Texas Hold'em on Facebook to learn how to play before transferring over to paying sites. Others, who have not made the transfer, expressed an awareness of how tempting it is (and an awareness of the advertisements for online casinos present on social media sites) but that they realize financial success is less likely on paying sites and appear more concerned about Internet privacy and trust issues than those who have transferred over. There was an overall consensus that personality traits of risk-taking and competitiveness must play a role in determining those who are more likely to transfer from play-for-fun to play-for-pay. However, once online gambling was initiated, the competitive aspect no

longer was pertinent. They was also a consensus that underage teens are more susceptible to the enticements and manipulations of online casinos that they are exposed to via social media activities.

Among the current college students who participated in this project, the main factors that seemed to result in gambling for real money are: 1) People who play-for-fun do not play in a serious way, do not follow the basic rules of the games. Those who are looking for a realistic experience are not satisfied playing alongside those people and as such choose to put a little money in and have a more realistic experience thus making it more enjoyable/ exciting and allows for more learning of the game, and 2) They played for fun for a period of time and realized that they were getting bored (not exciting enough) and they could be winning money if they played for real money. These people indicated transferring over within a time frame of 2 months. While we anticipated finding a strong relationship between social media usage and online gambling, this qualitative project represents the first time researchers have established this link. This link, however, now needs to be examined more in depth empirically.

Limitations

One major limitation of this study resides in the fact that we did not recruit enough female gamblers to evaluate different trends and cognitions that might be gender specific.

The findings of the current project are not intended to be reflective of the college population as a whole. Rather, the findings are qualitative in nature and will be used to guide future research initiatives.

Unanticipated findings: Future avenues for research

One wonderful advantage of qualitative investigations is that unexpected topics or findings can emerge that can be also be translated into action, intervention and change (Robson 2002). A few themes surfaced in the dialogues amongst participants that could be very useful to prevention initiatives.

Privacy concerns were frequently cited by social media users. These concerns were echoed by a much lesser degree amongst online gamblers. Could this fear of loss of privacy (credit card information can be stolen, invasion of personal information by website providers) result in a

reluctance to gamble online? Is there a way to lessen the sense of safety that online gamblers tend to feel? Many of the sites they play on are not regulated, and the risks inherent to that type of activity could be made clearer to them. The few online gamblers who also felt a sense of distrust either use prepaid credit cards as a way to avoid fraud, or gamble on the Loto-Quebec site where they feel it is safe to do so.

Inherent to the nature of the current population is the issue of education. The college students in the current study equalled education to protection, fostering in them a sense of invulnerability towards online gambling. They explained that they are computer literate, they have taken math classes and understand the laws of probability, and they have other priorities (such as their school work) thus requiring them to set limits to their play. While this may in fact be true for those who participated (or maybe not, since 76% of the online gamblers indicated gambling more frequently and for longer periods of time than intended), the issue of viewing a higher education as a protective cloak is concerning. Considering the large numbers of college students who gamble online (10%) (McBride & Derevensky, 2012), and who have issues with disordered gambling (7.9%) (Blinn-Pike, Worthy, & Jonkman, 2007) it might be beneficial to provide the college population with this normative feedback (Moreira, Oskrochi, & Foxcroft, 2012) in order to highlight that, in fact, they too are vulnerable. The perception that education is protective, making college students feel invulnerable, could represent a significant risk factor for college population. This needs to be empirically investigated and addressed.

The perception that it is safer to gamble online was communicated numerous times. This was unexpected. They feel this way because they can tailor their wages to their comfort level, do not have to invest time and money getting to a casino, and have less social pressure when gambling online. While they were very aware of how easy it is to lose control while gambling online due to the speed of play (resulting in impulsive moves) and the ease of money use, this seems to be counterbalanced by their ability to set limits and respect real life responsibilities. The idea of spending less that they would in a casino (i.e., 5 cent bets) and not investing as much time either getting to a gambling locations, makes the overall "investment" less than if their gambling was land-based. With less investment comes less commitment (and maybe less financial loss), and thus less need to "keep gambling" to recoup. Since online gambling has traditionally been

conceived as placing a player at *increased risk*, this new angle deserves more investigation in future research.

While we often focus on impulsivity and risk-taking as traits of vulnerability, the idea of being "socially competitive" was cited by social media users as being a major source of enjoyment when engaging in gambling-type games for fun, as well as risk factor for transferring over to pay-for-pay games and developing problems with online gambling. The online gamblers did not echo this, expressing that online gambling is not fueled by a competitive drive (other than competition with oneself). Could it be that an enjoyment of social competition could serve as a preventative trait, making it less likely for someone to feel the need to transfer from play-for-pay to play for fun? This might be worth exploring and could easily be translated into prevention messages.

Referring to online activities as things that happen in the "fake world", accompanied by a lack of awareness of the repercussions that affect them in the "real world" deserves further investigation. If this in fact is reflective of how college students think of social media use and online gambling activities, it could represent a risk factor that we, as researchers, were unaware of.

Conclusion

We view the results of the current study as a preliminary foray into the influence of social media play-for-fun gambling games on gambling in general. The initial results suggest that young adults who play-for-fun adults might be especially likely to be future play-for-pay gamblers, especially in light of the "learning" they are getting from play-for-fun gambling as well as their sense that they are "too educated" to become addicts. Specifically, they fail to grasp the addictive nature of gambling and may thus be lured to play for money without taking the necessary precautions. These possibilities, as well as others, will be examined in a longitudinal study of social media play-for-fun gamblers that will begin in January 2013.

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Appendix A

Online Gamblers focus group script

Everyone who is participating in this group has indicated gambling online for money. That makes you the experts. We are turning to you to help us understand certain things related to online gambling activity. We are not looking to find out personal information on your play activity, we are looking for information in general.

1. For example, I'd like to gain a better understanding of the things that lead to online gambling in the first place. Based on what you know, what are the factors, the events, or the influences that result in a young person deciding to bet money on gambling activities online?

2. You know that social media sites have gambling-type games such as Texas-Hold'em or Sloto-mania. In your opinion, do you think experience with these games leads a person to seek online gambling sites? In other words, do these types of games serve as a form of initiation to gambling online with real money?

3. In your opinion, do you think people who gamble online have particular personality traits, or factors that are unique to them that make them more likely to gamble online?

4. There are a lot of gambling sites out there. How do you choose one over the other?

5. What are the features that render one online gambling site more appealing than another?

6. If you think about the sites that are "not good", sites that you have navigated away from, what were the things you did not like?

7. What are the pros and cons of online gambling?

8. Once you are engaged in an online gambling session, what usually makes you decide that it is time to stop?

9. What strategies do people your age tend to use to minimize their risks? Are there common responsible gambling practices?

Everyone who is participating in this group has indicated using social medial sites on a regular basis. That makes you the experts. We are turning to you to help us understand certain things related to use of social media. We are not looking to find out personal information about you, we are looking for information in general.

1. When you think about social media sites like Facebook, what is the first thought that comes to mind? What do you like best about social media? What do you like least?

2. You all must be aware of games that are offered on sites such as Facebook. I'm talking about games such as Farmville, Words with Friends, etc… What, in your opinion, are the benefits or downfalls of these games? Overall, do they contribute to your well-being? If not, in what way? Which games have the greatest appeal?

3. There are also gambling-type games such as Texas Hold-em and simulated casino play offered on these sites. Texas Hold'em is actually the most popular of all the games offered on Facebook (62 million fans on their page). What, do you think, is the appeal of these free gambling-type games?

4. Even though there is no real money exchanged, people do seem to get very caught up in the gambling-type games, often playing for longer than intended. Due to recent developments, Facebook now allows online casinos to advertise on their site. What are your opinions on this? Would you ever click on the casino ads?

5. We are interested in your impressions (based on your own experiences or those of others whom you know) about what role, if any, social networking sites play in promoting or encouraging online gambling behavior (for real money).

6. Do you think individuals who never would have considered gambling online, will gamble now that they are exposed through these social media sites?

7. Online casinos often offer "play for fun" options, allowing you to play without real money. In your opinion, what are some advantages or downfalls of these play-for-free options?

8. Thinking about the free games on social media sites as well as free-play options on online gambling sites, would people be likely to move from free games to paying games? Why or why not?