

## Online Data Collection From Gamblers: Methodological Issues

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**Abstract** The paper outlines the advantages and disadvantages of using the Internet to collect data from gamblers, predominantly online gamblers. Drawing from experience of a number of studies carried out online by the authors and by reviewing the available literature, the authors discuss the main issues concerning data collected using computers and the Internet. The paper examines a number of areas including; recruiting and utilising participants, validity, suitable methods of data collection (i.e., questionnaire studies, online tests, participant observation, online interviews) and ethical issues. It is concluded that online research methods can be a useful way of examining the psychosocial aspects of online gambling and in some cases even traditional gambling activities.

**Keywords** Online research methods · Gambling · Internet gambling · Online gambling

Online gambling is a psychological and sociological phenomenon that is becoming a focus of interest for many social scientists. Increasingly, gambling researchers are using online methods to gather their data, rather than traditional research approaches. This paper examines the utility of online data collection for studying gamblers by drawing from experience of a number of studies carried out online by the authors (e.g., Griffiths, 2000; Griffiths & Davies, 2002; Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2003, 2004a, 2004b; Wood, Griffiths, Chappell, & Davies, 2004), and by reviewing the available literature.

There are a number of very good reasons why the Internet is a good medium to conduct research with online gamblers. For instance, the Internet:

- Is usually accessible to these gamblers, and they are usually proficient in using it
- Allows for studies to be administered to potentially large scale samples quickly and efficiently
- Can facilitate automated data inputting allowing large scale samples to be administered at a fraction of the cost of ‘pen and paper’ equivalents

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- Has a disinhibiting effect on users and reduces social desirability. This may lead to increased levels of honesty (and therefore higher validity in the case of self-report)
- Has a potentially global pool of participants, therefore researchers are able to study extreme and uncommon behaviours as well as make cross-cultural comparisons
- Provides access to "socially unskilled" individuals who may not have taken part in the research if it was offline
- Can aid participant recruitment through advertising on various bulletin boards and web sites

On a more general level, there is a growing body of material on the Internet which is archived, and therefore time-based research can be carried out. What's more, the data are automatically transcribed which suits some particular methodologies (e.g., Grounded Theory, Discourse Analysis, etc.). The researchers do not have to be centred around one geographical location, as long as they have access to the Internet, and this makes international collaborations much more practical. Increasingly, the researcher no longer needs to have an understanding of web design due to the development of, easy to use web design software. For example, here at Nottingham Trent University there is a facility to produce online surveys that requires little or no knowledge of web design to use (i.e., <http://ess.ntu.ac.uk/autoform/>) (see Fig. 1). Currently, this resource is free to use by any researcher who wishes to use it. Of course, there are some disadvantages to online research concerning issues such as confidentiality, validity and truthfulness, self selection biases, as well as several ethical dilemmas, and these will also be discussed.

**NTU SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES WWW FORM - Microsoft Internet Explorer**

File Edit View Favorites Tools Help

Address <http://ess.ntu.ac.uk/sutton/formfiles/raas3woodrt/onlinepoker3.htm>

mywebsearch Search Smiley Central Screensavers Cursor Mania PopSwifter Games My Info Customize More

**NTU Home**

Form created with **Autoform**

**Autoform**  
programming  
by Andy Sutton

**ICU**  
Information and  
Communication  
Unit

**School of Social  
Sciences,  
Nottn Trent Uni**

**Student Online Poker Playing**

This form was created by Dr Richard Wood  
from the International Gaming Research Unit

Please select your sex

☐ Male  
☐ Female

Please enter your age

What subject are you studying?

When did you first start playing Online Poker?

☐ less than 3 months ago  
☐ 3-6 months ago  
☐ 7-12 months ago  
☐ 13-18 months ago  
☐ 19-24 months ago  
☐ more than 2 years ago

At what age did you start gambling (in general)?

Which of the following gambling activities do you also take part in?

Slot Machines

☐ never  
☐ rarely (once or twice a year)

Done Internet

**Fig. 1** Example of an online survey using autoform

## Recruiting and Utilising Participants

One of the biggest problems with any kind of social science research is getting people to actually take part in a study. First of all, there is the problem of finding suitable participants and then there is the issue of whether or not they will want to be included in the study. It is probably because of these issues that a great deal of social science research utilises the student population to recruit participants. Of course, students are not necessarily typical of the population at large and often they may have some idea of what a study is about which may affect their response. Other ways of finding participants may be through a postal request, but these have notoriously bad return rates. Frequently, a survey that is posted out will yield a response rate of around 50% (Newell, 1993). This can also be an expensive undertaking and waiting for replies can take a long time. Alternatives to postal recruitment are placing adverts in local newspapers, specialist journals, etc. but again response rates are typically low, unless there are sufficient funds available to pay participants to take part, and even then researchers may end up attracting a biased sample.

If participants do decide to take part in a study, assuming it is not a postal survey or a telephone interview, then someone has to travel to take part, i.e., either the researcher must travel to the participant or vice versa. Either way, it takes time and money before the research can commence, and sometimes participants do not turn up and even more time is wasted. However, participants in online studies can usually take part from the comfort and privacy of their own homes, at their own pace, and at a time that is convenient for them. Online research is easy to publicise by posting links on relevant bulletin boards and sending emails to all the people that maybe interested with a note to “forward this link to anyone else who may be interested.” If the research sounds interesting enough this snowball technique can be very effective and is not limited to the geographical boundaries determined by the costs usually associated with face-to-face (FTF) interactions. Therefore, using online research methods can allow a study to be both international and multicultural in scope. Furthermore, the speed and efficiency of online research means that often the study can obtain much larger and possibly more diverse samples than would otherwise be possible to attain.

For studying online gamblers these advantages tend to be more prominent. Firstly, online gamblers nearly always have access to the Internet and they are usually proficient at using it. They are invariably interested in what the researchers are studying and often want to take part. Furthermore, they often know other gamblers who will take part and can often recommend good places to post links to contact other gamblers. However, all of this “good faith” is based on the premise that the researcher will treat them and their community with respect, something that any researcher should do anyway. Today there is a growing body of research that is beginning to examine online gambling as an entertainment and cultural phenomenon in its own right. One way to maximise the number of people who are likely to take part is by explaining in detail who the researchers are and why they are doing the research. Many people are suspicious of unsolicited requests to take part in studies and they need to be assured that the research is not a hoax, or part of a marketing scam, and that the researchers’ intentions are worthy. Our own experiences have demonstrated that sometimes the researcher may have to spend some time actually taking part in online discussions, and become familiar to that particular online community before any potential participants will trust them enough to take part. Researchers from universities or other established institutions have the advantage here in that they are more likely to be trusted than a private company or individual for several reasons. They aren’t selling anything, they have a high level of credibility, the researchers’ profile can be checked out online, and they are more likely to follow a set of established ethical guidelines.

## Validity

When gathering online data from online gamblers the researcher cannot always be sure that people are who they say they are, or that people are answering truthfully. However, this is also the case for any other kind of remotely administered study (e.g., postal or telephone). There is also the issue that any type of self-report is reliant on participants answering truthfully, although this is not just limited to online studies but a more general issue. One way to try to maximise truthfulness is to obtain a current email address from participants so that checks can be made at a later date, if necessary. This should also minimise the risk of people taking in part in the study more than once, unless they have several email addresses. Often, non-genuine responses become apparent at the analysis stage and tend to be in the form of exaggerated answers. For example, if a participant reports that they gamble for 20 h a day this may warrant further investigation and verification before it is included in the analysis. Furthermore non-genuine responses tend to be inconsistent. For example, if a participant rates their enjoyment of online gambling as low, and they say that they do not own any kind of computer or have regular access to the Internet then it is unlikely that they play for many hours at a time, 7 days a week. There is also the issue of multiple responses. For instance, a participant may respond to the research question more than once particularly if there is some kind of incentive being offered for participation (e.g., entry into a competition draw). However, often these types of entries are far easier to identify with online studies as the data is usually displayed in a spreadsheet format and similarities or patterns are visibly apparent (see Fig. 2). Frequently, it is the case that multiply responses

Microsoft Excel - onlinepoker final

File Edit View Insert Format Tools Data Window Help

Type a question for help

Reply with Changes... Egd Review...

BU27

|    | BI   | BJ   | BK   | BL    | BM    | BN    | BO    | BP    | BQ    | BR    | BS                                        | BT                                          | BU                           | BV       |
|----|------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------|----------|
| 1  | dsm7 | dsm8 | dsm9 | dsm10 | Happy | Angry | satis | guilt | proud | tired | best                                      | worst                                       | q073_textbox                 | q074_o   |
| 2  | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2     | 3     | 1     | 3     | 1     | 3     | 1     |                                           |                                             |                              | lee_j_l  |
| 3  | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2     | 3     | 4     | 3     | 1     | 2     | 1     |                                           |                                             |                              | N00236   |
| 4  | 1    | 2    | 1    | 1     | 1     | 3     | 1     | 3     | 1     | 3     | Nothing is                                | Gambling is killer!!!!                      |                              | baoli_zl |
| 5  | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2     | 3     | 1     | 3     | 1     | 3     | 1     | 1                                         | Interaction Losing trac                     | Nope                         | steven.  |
| 6  | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2     | 3     | 2     | 4     | 2     | 4     | 2     | 4                                         | Being able to can be a li                   | like how it includes the gam | n00375   |
| 7  | 2    | 2    | 2    | 1     | 1     | 3     | 3     | 2     | 4     | 2     | 4                                         | Winning                                     | Doesnt feel like real money  | jonny_c  |
| 8  | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2     | 4     | 1     | 4     | 1     | 3     | 2     | The win                                   | The loss                                    | It's fun!!                   | N00424   |
| 9  | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2     | 3     | 4     | 3     | 2     | 3     | 1     | Easy acce                                 | Invisible money' you don't realise how r    | ham.cs                       |          |
| 10 | 2    | 2    | 1    | 2     | 4     | 3     | 4     | 2     | 2     | 5     | conveinen                                 | impresno                                    | no                           | GB113    |
| 11 | 2    | 2    | 1    | 2     | 4     | 3     | 4     | 2     | 2     | 5     | conveinen                                 | impresno                                    | no                           | spikeyr  |
| 12 | 2    | 2    | 1    | 2     | 4     | 3     | 4     | 2     | 2     | 5     | conveinen                                 | impresno                                    | no                           | ginnal4  |
| 13 | 2    | 2    | 1    | 2     | 4     | 3     | 4     | 2     | 2     | 5     | conveinen                                 | impresno                                    | no                           | GB113    |
| 14 | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2     | 4     | 1     | 3     | 1     | 1     | 1     | The one th                                | not being able to interact with the peopl   | happen                       |          |
| 15 | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1     | 1     | 1     | 1     | 1     | 1     | 1     |                                           |                                             |                              |          |
| 16 | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1     | 1     | 1     | 1     | 1     | 1     | 1     |                                           |                                             |                              |          |
| 17 | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2     | 4     | 1     | 3     | 1     | 4     | 1     | The thrill of the game!                   |                                             | gb2219                       |          |
| 18 | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2     | 4     | 1     | 3     | 1     | 3     | 2     | its quite er you can get                  | beat by people you dont knce                | l056                         |          |
| 19 | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2     | 3     | 2     | 3     | 1     | 3     | 3     | if a person that you dont get to see      | peoples body lin                            | n00743                       |          |
| 20 | 1    | 2    | 2    | 1     | 2     | 3     | 2     | 4     | 1     | 2     | realistic ch                              | easy to ge over spending was at times       | 4ca2046                      |          |
| 21 | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2     | 4     | 1     | 4     | 1     | 3     | 3     | excitemen                                 | no eye contact with other players - whei    | andrew                       |          |
| 22 | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2     | 4     | 1     | 4     | 1     | 3     | 3     | It's fun and Nothing                      |                                             | cc1100                       |          |
| 23 | 1    | 2    | 2    | 1     | 4     | 5     | 4     | 1     | 4     | 3     | With time                                 | Too easy t Good survey. I do not see        | pon00365                     |          |
| 24 | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2     | 4     | 1     | 4     | 1     | 3     | 3     | excitemen                                 | no eye contact with other players - whei    | andrew                       |          |
| 25 | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2     | 4     | 2     | 4     | 1     | 3     | 2     | fun to play                               | could be a no                               |                              | DC110    |
| 26 | 2    | 1    | 1    | 1     | 3     | 3     | 4     | 3     | 4     | 2     |                                           |                                             |                              | n00180   |
| 27 | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2     | 3     | 3     | 3     | 2     | 4     | 3     | Thrill of it                              | It's too co                                 |                              |          |
| 28 | 2    | 2    | 2    | 1     | 3     | 4     | 3     | 4     | 2     | 3     | SUSPENS                                   | GUILT                                       |                              | n00204   |
| 29 | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2     | 4     | 2     | 5     | 1     | 4     | 1     | Winning                                   | Losing                                      | Directed to more addicted    | plgb1104 |
| 30 | 1    | 2    | 2    | 2     | 3     | 4     | 3     | 3     | 3     | 2     | The thrill and not having a poker face so | experience                                  | caulfr01                     |          |
| 31 | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2     | 4     | 4     | 3     | 1     | 1     | 1     | For me                                    | itAdverts from other sites trying to draw y | marcb0                       |          |
| 32 | 1    | 1    | 1    | 1     | 1     | 1     | 1     | 1     | 1     | 1     |                                           |                                             |                              |          |
| 33 | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2     | 2     | 4     | 3     | 4     | 1     | 2     | 2                                         | WINNING                                     | LOSING CASH                  | N00241   |
| 34 | 2    | 2    | 2    | 2     | 3     | 2     | 1     | 2     | 1     | 4     | The ease                                  | vVery addic                                 | Poker is a good game but th  | wilkr    |
| 35 | 1    | 2    | 1    | 2     | 2     | 2     | 2     | 1     | 1     | 1     |                                           |                                             |                              | DE107    |

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Fig. 2 Example of multiple responses from the same participant (see participants 9 to 13)

will occur in close proximity to one another as participants simply press *send* more than once, copy and paste answers or complete the study again straight away. It is less common to see multiple responses spread out over lengthy periods of time as this requires a great deal more effort and planning. It is also possible to easily check quantitative data using commands such as *sort cases* whereby cases are grouped according to response (e.g., DSM or SOGS scores). Furthermore, multiple qualitative responses, although noticeably less frequent, can be searched for using simple word or phrase searches found in any common word processing package.

Another way of verifying the data is to ask a sample of participants to complete the study again a short time after their first response. Answers can then be compared with their previous responses and the degree of correlation can be obtained. In such a way the reliability of the data can also be assessed. However, it is difficult to verify that the participant is, for example, over 18 years old or is female or male. This also poses ethical questions which will be discussed in more detail later.

There is some evidence that online communication can lead to more emotional discourse and higher levels of personal disclosure than in face to face (FTF) settings. As long ago as 1984, Kiesler, Siegle, and McGuire (1984) noted that computer mediated communication (CMC) facilitated disinhibition resulting in reduced self-consciousness and enhanced levels of intimacy. This disinhibition can also help remove many of the labels that participants may be aware of in relation to aspects such as race, gender, age etc. Walther (1996) termed this phenomenon *Hyperpersonal Communication* which he suggested was the result of communicators sharing perceived social categories and hence perceiving each other as similar (e.g., they may all be online poker players on a specific site), and that the nature of CMC allows people to think about their responses and carefully construct their replies from the safety of their own home, office, etc. It has even been suggested that emails and text messages may have replaced the love letter due to the intensity of such communications. However, the increased emotional intensity of CMC can, on occasion, lead to more hostile reactions and these are discussed later in relation to ethical considerations.

## Suitable Methods of Data Collection

There are various advantages and disadvantages for the types of data that can be collected online. Much of the data gathered is going to be based on self-report measures and this has its own set of limitations (see Howard [1994] for a full discussion). There are several types of online gambling data that particularly lend themselves to online collection, such as survey-based studies, psychological tests (e.g., IQ tests), aptitude tests (e.g., reaction times), participant observations, and interview-based studies. This is not an exhaustive list but it represents the most commonly used methods which are currently used for online gambling research at this time.

### Survey Based Studies

Surveys are probably one of the most useful applications for online research concerning online gamblers. They tend to be primarily text-based, are cheap to produce, are generally easy and quick to complete, and the data can automatically be inputted into a statistics package (e.g., SPSS) for analysis. The online survey saves time in terms of administration and data inputting, not to mention paper and other resources. Large numbers of participants can take part with no increased consequences in terms of expenses. Such studies can be

performed quickly and efficiently and can be particularly useful in gauging opinions at any particular point in time. For example, participants could be contacted soon after a new gambling game has been launched, for their initial impressions, and then contacted again at a later date when they have had more experience of the game. Similarly, participants could be asked to complete an attitude survey in the run up to a high profile online poker tournament (such as the World Poker Championships). The online survey may be particularly useful for the discussion of sensitive issues that participants may find embarrassing in a face-to-face situation.

The nature of this medium means that a relatively high degree of anonymity can be maintained, and participants may feel more comfortable answering sensitive questions on their computer than in a face-to-face situation. However, it must be noted that anonymity may be compromised if participants are required to provide an email address. Care should be taken when discussing sensitive issues (e.g., the negative effects of severe losses) as there may be an increased likelihood of causing offence or distress, due to a lack of non-verbal cues or ambiguity in wording. This may be minimised by careful phrasing of the questions, proof-reading by colleagues, providing a good explanation of the content of the survey, and encouraging participants to contact the researcher should they wish to. Providing links to self-help groups or therapists may also be worth consideration in some cases (e.g., The Samaritans, Gamblers Anonymous, national telephone helplines, etc.). Of course, these measures would be in addition to the standard ethical procedures adopted by researchers in general.

Online surveys are generally not best suited to prevalence work that requires a large sample of participants of whom only a percentage will be online gamblers as the traditional gamblers and non-gamblers are less likely to have Internet access and stratified samples may be harder to select. However, one exception to this may be the case of school children who can fill out the survey at their school. Most of the previous paper based prevalence studies have been conducted in schools (e.g., Ashworth, Doyle, & Howat, 2000; Gupta & Derevensky, 1998; Wood & Griffiths, 1998; 2004) and given the familiarity and access that children have to computers such prevalence studies could be easily accommodated using online surveys. As with pen and paper surveys, it is important that parents provide consent before any children take part in such a study. Another way that overall adult prevalence might be considered is by placing computers in public areas and inviting people to complete the survey. Whilst this method may still be self-selecting it may be no more so than a paper survey. Additionally, placing a computer in a public waiting area may lead to quite a high level of participation. For example, Ladd and Petry (2002) conducted a pen and paper survey of online and offline gambling behaviours with patients in a dental surgery while they were waiting for treatment. This approach could easily be adapted by using a lap-top or personal computer. In such cases the computer need not, but could, be connected to the Internet to retrieve the data.

### Online Testing

Online testing relates to any number of tests including psychological testing (e.g., intelligence tests, personality tests), aptitude tests (e.g., measuring reaction times), etc. Many of the advantages (as mentioned previously with surveys) also apply to online testing (e.g., economical to administer, gather and analyse data), but of course the same issues about validity (as mentioned earlier) will also apply. Furthermore, there have been various studies that have found high degrees of validity for online tests compared to their pen and paper equivalents (Campbell et al., 1999; DiLalla, 1996; Neuman & Baydoun, 1998)

Online tests also have the advantage that they can be more standardised than ‘pen and paper’ tests in terms of the instructions given and the time allowed to complete the test. Results can be given back to the participant immediately, automatically added to an ongoing data bank, and summary data such as (mean) average responses can be given back to the participant.

Such tests may be used for examining the psychological profiles or aptitudes of different types of online gamblers, or for comparisons of online gamblers versus non-gamblers (using conventional pen and paper methods). However, these tests are not very useful for examining online gambling culture or personal experiences of gambling. There are also issues of copyright to consider when publishing established tests online. Permission usually has to be sought from the publisher and this may not be forthcoming, or may incur a fee. Furthermore, publishers may be concerned that an online test is liable to be reproduced or distributed by some participants for their own purposes. However, we would argue that in practise it is no easier to copy an online test than a paper version of the same test. Document formats such as pdf can limit the use of electronic tampering and printing off a copy is no different to being given a paper copy in the first place. Furthermore, as Barak and English (2002) point out, unless a person has the scoring key there is not much advantage to be gained in copying the test anyway (for a full discussion of online psychological tests, see Barak and English [2002]).

### Participant Observation

Participant observation as a psychological research method grew out of the philosophy of phenomenology and the writings of Husserl (1970), and was concerned with people’s experiences and how events are perceived. Many anthropologists and sociologists have employed the ethnographic method as a means of understanding and describing in detail different cultures. This method has many advantages for studying online gambling. Firstly, any kind of online research will always have a subjective and interpretative element to it. The behaviours in question cannot be observed from outside of the framework within which it exists. That is, by going online, the researcher becomes a part of the phenomenon that is being studied. Furthermore, personal experience of the domain of investigation can be a distinct advantage in many ways. For example, understanding what gambling feels like, knowing gambling etiquette, and experiencing the actual dynamics of gambling can all be very insightful and may sometimes be essential for the design, implementation and analysis of online gambling studies. Also, as mentioned before, online gamblers may be suspicious of a researcher’s motives and are likely to be reassured if they are aware that the researcher is also a participant and has an understanding, and perhaps an appreciation, of what they are studying. Being familiar with the nature of the activity is an essential requirement both for understanding of what is going on and also gaining credibility with the participants. For example, we found that having some experience of online poker playing, or at least having colleagues who play, was an essential requirement for understanding the nuances of online poker behaviour.

Such insight will inevitably reduce the likelihood that the study will misrepresent the gambler or online gambling phenomenon in question. Participant observation requires that the researcher makes explicit their own biases and influences during the research, and is a method that relies on lengthy description and attention to detail. Participant observation is subjective, but subjectivity does not necessarily equate to bias. The researcher must make clear, when writing the report, their role within the study and provide enough detail that the reader can draw their own conclusions, or at least, see how the researcher arrived at theirs.

Certainly, many researchers are likely to have experience of researching gambling in one form or another. In this sense there are probably not many researchers who can approach the study of online gambling from a completely neutral standpoint. As long as what they do is explicit and detailed then this does not have to be a problem.

The academic rigour of such studies can also be made more robust by applying a number of procedures during the research. Standardised questions can be used when talking to gamblers, or standardised procedures can be used if actually taking part in a game or tournament. Detailed logs provide a record of events and can be re-visited after the event itself has finished. Screen captures can be taken and used as examples or related back to the logs (press *control* and *print screen* together then *paste* into a Word document or similar). Several researchers can be employed to gain different perspectives, to compare notes on a phenomenon, and to gauge inter-observer reliability. Periods of self-reflection may also be useful to examine the researcher's own moods, feelings, attitudes in relation to any occurring events and these too can be detailed in a log. Finally, results can be posted on bulletin boards and other participants can be asked to comment on the accuracy of the descriptions, and for any other observations that they may have. This also helps to empower the participant and ensure that they are not so likely to be misrepresented. In short, whilst participant observation is very subjective it can provide very detailed and insightful accounts. Such accounts can be useful in themselves, and/or they can be used to develop further studies perhaps utilising other types of method. For example, the experience and information gained may be useful for constructing a survey, or developing an interview schedule.<sup>1</sup>

### Online Interviews

Online interviews can constitute studies in their own right or they can be carried out alongside traditional face-to-face interviews, focus groups and other data collection techniques such as questionnaires. Bampton and Cowton (2002) coined the term 'e-interview' to denote e-mail exchanges with research participants. Unlike face-to-face interviews, e-interviews take place in cyberspace and as such, they can disrupt and transform experiences of time and space. The interactions can be synchronous (e.g., Internet Relay Chat such as Microsoft Messenger) whereby the communication is instant, or asynchronous (e.g., email) whereby communication is delayed. Furthermore, the Internet is a non-physical space so interactions between people are situated differently. However, information communicated in this way should not be seen as inferior data, rather it is different. Holge-Hazelton (2002) suggests that oral culture is different from a written culture and the Internet is different from both. Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that the Internet is able to use both to the advantage of the researcher.

Collecting data via e-interviews means a considerable saving in time for both researchers and participants. The researcher no longer has to make time consuming (and costly) journeys to visit participants in their homes and the opportunity to interview participants from other countries becomes a real possibility. Indeed, Bampton and Cowton (2002) point out that some researchers might be able to e-interview in a foreign language even if they are not sufficiently fluent to do so face-to-face. For the participant, the e-interview can be attractive and convenient allowing them to respond in their own time. Questions can be 'chunked' and asked over a period of time, although this needs to be established at the outset of the study so that participants do not suffer from interview fatigue. However,

<sup>1</sup> For a good detailed example of online participant observation, albeit in a non-gambling environment, see Suler's (1996) study of *The Palace* discussion group.

ground rules need to be established such as to how long interviews should last, indicating issues to be discussed, etc., these rules are no different from those in face-to-face studies and constitute good practice.

Moreover, there is less pressure to provide quick responses as can be experienced in more traditional interviews (despite researchers stressing otherwise). Rather, the participant has the opportunity to think and reflect at some length on the questions which can produce more considered responses and possibly even richer data. Studies dealing with sensitive issues might also benefit from using e-interviews as feelings such as embarrassment are reduced and a higher degree of anonymity afforded than with FTF interviews. However, it could be argued that despite these benefits, there is a loss of spontaneity in the interview interaction. Nevertheless, this seems a minor and not inevitable drawback and it is more likely that participant responses will be variously spontaneous or delayed.

In addition to e-interviews, Internet *forums* are an excellent source of rich textual material. Forums are interactive sites where messages can be left on particular topics discussed in real time. These sorts of data can be described as naturalistic and can be collected without identifying oneself as a researcher or even acknowledging one's presence. Collecting data by 'lurking' raises some interesting ethical issues that will be discussed later. However, there are many differences in the nature of such forums—some are established communities whilst others are far more transitory. A recent study by Chappell, Eatough, Davies, and Griffiths (2006) looked at forums concerned with the online role-playing video game, *EverQuest*. The sites accessed provided a space to discuss concerns about excessive game playing from players themselves as well as family members and friends. However, the researchers' sense was that most people posted one-off messages and did not engage in extensive dialogue with others.

## Ethics

When conducting gambling research online all usual ethical considerations should be taken. For example, researchers should obtain informed consent, respect confidentiality, make participants aware of their right to withdraw, etc. These issues have been outlined at length elsewhere and have resulted in comprehensive professional guidelines by such organisations as the American Psychological Association and the British Psychological Society. In addition to these guidelines, there are some further issues that are specific to online studies. Firstly, researchers have a duty to the research community as well as to their participants to avoid moral panics, or produce research that only examines the negative consequences of gambling. That is not to say that these areas should not be studied, but it is worth thinking about the 'the whole picture' and the implications of the research before it is undertaken.

Related to this issue is the matter of media coverage for which gambling has always been a particular source of interest. It is important to think about the media implications of the research and the consequences that it may have. It may be that the researchers decide that the cost outweighs the means, or that the publicity may be a positive thing. Either way, it pays to be prepared for media interest and to think about ways of dealing with it. Often if the media are not given an adequate explanation of the research then they will draw their own conclusions instead and these may not be wholly accurate. It is also worth considering how such publicity would affect the people who participated in the research. Would they feel betrayed or embarrassed? Would such publicity have consequences for them, perhaps from parents, employers, or even legislators? It is not enough to say that this kind of research is value-free and leave it at that. Gambling is a social phenomenon and the

findings of such research can have far reaching implications. These problems can sometimes be difficult to foresee. Therefore, any research proposal should be cleared by an ethics committee made up of peers who are knowledgeable about the area, and perhaps include representatives from the sample that is likely to take part, i.e., ask some of the gamblers for their views.

### Protecting the Individual

Protection of the individual can be a far more difficult process than in offline settings. How can we be sure who is actually taking part in the study? Previous research has identified that some online video game players will actually switch genders during the playing of video games (Griffiths et al., 2003, 2004a, 2004b) or whilst in chat rooms (Bruckman, 1993). There is anecdotal evidence of this occurring in online poker rooms (Parke, Griffiths, & Parke, 2005). Therefore, it is just as conceivable that participants could lie about their age, their location, or any number of demographic variables. For example, consider the news stories about paedophiles who pose as children in chat rooms (O'Connell, 2001). This raises problems about the issue of consent particularly in relation to minors. How can we be sure that our participants are consenting adults? The short answer is that we can never be 100% sure and thus we should be aware of the implications and consequences should minors take part in our studies. Nevertheless, we should still make it clear that we require participants to state that they are over 18 years-of-age or that they have permission to take part from their parents. Other issues that arise may depend on the type of method employed and the nature of the study.

Extra care should be taken when researching sensitive issues (e.g., problem gambling behaviour). It is often difficult to ascertain in online studies who may be a vulnerable participant, and these people could be in a relative state of isolation sat behind their computers with little or no social support. Providing an e-mail address for correspondence and/or details of support groups (e.g., The Samaritans, Gamblers Anonymous) may be worth considering, but the researcher must be careful not to provide advice that is beyond their professional knowledge. Furthermore, in any text-based correspondence the researcher should be aware that the lack of verbal and non-verbal cues can sometimes lead to the receiver misinterpreting either the meaning or the context within which the dialogue was intended. This combined with the heightened emotional responses of CMC (as discussed earlier) can in some circumstances lead to an increased likelihood of the participant feeling upset and/or reacting in a hostile way. The hostile escalation of such CMC can rapidly lead to a *flame war* (aggressive and overtly hostile interactions) whereby communicators become entrenched in their position, studying the minutiae of each communication and holding the other communicator to task over each word or phrase expressed. The nature of CMC also allows for the process of *framing* to occur whereby one person takes quotes from the other person's message and then either rubbishes the quote or demands an explanation. To avoid such confrontation, careful attention should be paid to the wording of the correspondence and all the possible connotations that they can carry. The use of text-based expressions or emoticons may help clarify the tone of the message (e.g., ☺, LOL, etc.) and avoid misunderstandings.

Studies involving any kind of psychological testing should consider any possible negative impact that may result from the insights gained as a consequence of taking the tests. For example, the impact of finding out that you can be classified as a pathological gambler, or that you score below average on an IQ test could be considerable. Careful explanation of what each test measures and the implication of the results is an essential

requirement. One way to provide reassurance and feedback is to set up a web site that provides details of the study, gives summary findings of the results, and lists contacts, support groups or links to any further information that may be of use.

Respecting a participant's right to privacy is a basic ethical requirement of any social science study. However, this issue becomes more complicated when studying online gamblers. In general, the rule of thumb is that we should only observe people in a situation where they would ordinarily expect to be observed, such as a public space. In cyberspace these boundaries become blurred as it is often difficult to ascertain what, exactly, is a public domain and, what is a private domain? For example, if we were to 'lurk' (observe without making our presence known) in a chat room containing two other people would this chat room be considered a public domain? What if these people were not aware of our presence and were discussing intimate issues? On some levels cyberspace is always a public domain unless specifically designated as private. However, can we be sure that everyone thinks this way? It is probably best to assume that people are not aware of our presence unless we make ourselves explicitly known to them, at which point the situation becomes public, unless they are under the impression that they are in a private correspondence with us. In other words, it is the perceptions of the participant that defines the domain as public or private, rather than the physicality of the situation.

The issue of privacy becomes more complicated if the researcher is employed in a participant observation. In such cases it is usually best to make other participants aware of the situation unless there is good reason to assume that this would adversely affect the responses of the people involved, and the likelihood of harm to others through covert methods is minimal. For example, if the research aimed to examine sexist language during an online poker event, detailing these motives could significantly affect people's responses. However, if participant identities are kept anonymous in the report then no individual harm is likely to result. However, identity in cyberspace can be multiple and anonymity should be afforded to player's character names or personas as well as their actual names (assuming that these are even known). For example, many poker players develop a reputation, often over lengthy periods of time, that is solely associated with their online personas, and they would not be happy to have that persona psychologically examined in public. Other ethical considerations relate to the recording of information such as keeping logs, saving texts, or taking screen shots. We should consider whether or not these actions would be considered as a breach of confidentiality and whether or not the participants would be comfortable with such recordings taking place. It is probably best to make such information known to the gambler unless it is in a situation where it would compromise the integrity of the study, and assuming that confidentiality is maintained.

It should also be noted that there are also limits that researchers or practitioners can do online. For instance, when referring participants to Gamblers Anonymous, it is important for people to recognise that they cannot always be certain of who they are talking to online and that the possibility of malpractice can be present (although this can occur offline too). For some individuals this may create more harm than help, even by referring people to GA. Clearly, meeting people face-to-face is the best way to understand the real dynamics of the people and their psychosocial world.

### Some Final Comments

As we have seen, online research methods can be a useful way of examining the psychosocial aspects of gambling, particularly online gambling. They provide an extremely

efficient way of gathering data and give the potential for large scale multinational studies to be performed. Furthermore, online gamblers' familiarity with the technology and the anonymity of the medium may facilitate such studies further. The main disadvantages (e.g., potentially biased sample, validity issues, etc.) are in many ways no different to those encountered in more conventional research techniques. The application of rigorous research protocols can help to keep these concerns down to acceptable levels. The main problems that researchers are likely to encounter concern ethical issues, however, these are not (usually) insurmountable. Gambling is increasingly becoming a technologically driven pursuit, and consequently online research methods may constitute some of the most useful and appropriate ways of examining that phenomenon.

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