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Abstract | This study explores the potential for increased online gambling as a result of COVID-19 social distancing measures.

Questions were included in an omnibus survey employing an online panel sample, with data collected in early April 2020.

The results showed that almost a quarter of respondents had participated in online gambling in the previous month. Ten percent had increased their participation in at least one form of online gambling, while 14 percent had decreased their involvement. Those betting on sporting events in Australia were the most likely to increase their participation in online gambling.

When demographic factors were examined, being male, aged under 30 and in full-time employment were all associated with increased participation in online gambling in the last month.

Changes in online gambling during the COVID-19 pandemic

Rick Brown and Amelia Hickman

The rapid increase in the availability of online gambling has significantly changed Australia's gambling environment over the past 20 years. Online gambling is any form of gambling conducted on the internet or through smartphone applications. In Australia, sports and race wagering are the most prominent forms of online gambling, particularly among young men (Gainsbury 2014). Up to 92 percent of those who bet on sports and horseracing have online betting accounts (Jenkinson, de Lacy-Vawdon & Carroll 2019, 2018).

There is emerging evidence linking gambling with the perpetration of violent and non-violent offences, including domestic and family violence (Dowling et al. 2018), and gambling-related fraud and theft (Sakurai & Smith 2003).

With recent restrictions on social interactions introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the shutdown of gambling venues in Australia and restrictions limiting people's movements outside of their homes (Australian Government Department of Health 2020), gambling has become limited to online channels. In the week ending 29 March, AlphaBeta (2020) recorded a 67 percent increase in consumer transactions relating to online gambling. Drawing on survey data, this study aims to investigate changes in the prevalence of online gambling when COVID-19 related social distancing measures were introduced.

Method

To explore these issues, the study employed an omnibus survey. An online panel of 1,000 respondents were asked a variety of questions between 3 and 6 April 2020. This survey was conducted through the i-Omni service provided by the commercial survey company i-Link. The survey drew on an existing panel of survey participants, who received a reward from i-Link for participation.

The sample of 1,000 adults was broadly representative of the population with regard to gender, age and state/territory. An online survey of this kind was considered to be acceptable for this study as the topic of interest is an online activity. However, it is important to recognise the limitations of this method. Panel surveys are not necessarily representative of the general population because they only include those who sign up to online surveys. This panel design also means that results should not be extrapolated to create wider population estimates. Despite these limitations, the results provide a useful insight into changes in the prevalence of online gambling around the time social distancing requirements commenced.

Results

Prevalence of online gambling in the last month

Respondents were asked when they had last participated in a range of activities through either a mobile app or a website. These included online gambling, online banking, online shopping and social media. Multiple activities were asked about to avoid the potential for bias that may have resulted from asking just about online gambling. However, apart from using these other activities for comparisons, only the results related to online gambling are presented. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had participated in each activity in the last week, last month, last six months, last 12 months, more than a year ago, or never. For the purposes of this study, those who had participated in an activity in the last week or last month were combined to form a variable associated with activity in the last month.

Overall, 235 (24%) respondents reported participating in online gambling in the previous month. In comparison, 853 (85%) participated in online banking, 776 (78%) participated in social media and 702 (70%) participated in online shopping in the last month.

Types of online gambling

Table 1 examines the types of online gambling respondents had engaged in during the last month and whether they had increased, decreased or stayed the same when compared with January and February 2020. The results indicate that, overall, 105 respondents (11% of all respondents and 45% of respondents who had participated in online gambling in the last month) had increased their involvement in at least one form of online gambling compared with the first two months of the year. The type of online gambling respondents most commonly reported increased participation in was betting on sports events in Australia (26% of online gamblers participating more often in the last month). One in five online gamblers (20%) also reported participating in online pokies more often in the last month.

In contrast to the increased online gambling, 142 respondents (14% of all respondents and 60% of respondents who had participated in online gambling in the last month) had decreased their involvement in at least one form of online gambling compared with the first two months of the year. Note that 68 (29%) of those who participated in online gambling in the last month had increased their involvement in one form of online gambling and decreased their involvement in another. Analysis of those who switched between types of gambling were somewhat mixed. For example, the most prevalent switching included 18 (8% of online gamblers) reporting more frequent participation in online card games and less frequent participation in betting on overseas sporting events; 18 (8% of online gamblers) betting more on sporting events in Australia and less on sporting events overseas; and 16 (7% of online gamblers) betting more on sporting events in Australia and participating less in online card games. Overall, 37 respondents (4% of all respondents and 16% of respondents who had participated in online gambling in the last month) had increased their involvement in at least one form of gambling without decreasing involvement in another. In contrast, 74 respondents (7% of all respondents and 31% of respondents who participated in online gambling in the last month) had decreased their involvement in at least one form of gambling without increasing involvement in another.

	Not at all this year		About the same		Less often		More often	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Betting on sporting events in Australia	40	23.8	56	17.0	78	33.2	61	26.0
Betting on sporting events overseas	73	31.1	51	21.7	76	32.3	35	14.9
Online card games	103	43.8	36	15.3	52	22.1	44	18.7
Online pokies	99	42.1	39	16.6	51	21.7	46	19.6
Online casino games	109	46.4	39	16.6	53	22.6	34	14.5
Other online gambling	59	25.1	70	29.8	61	26.0	45	19.2

Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding

Source: AIC Online gambling survey [computer file]

Characteristics of those engaging in more online gambling

Further analysis examined the demographic characteristics of those who had engaged in more online gambling in the last month. Table 2 presents the gender, age, relationship status, employment status and household income of these respondents. Bivariate tests of association showed all results were statistically significant (at the $p < 0.01$ level). Note that this analysis is based on all respondents, not just those who had participated in online gambling in the last month.

Sixteen percent of all male respondents had engaged in more online gambling in the last month compared with January and February. This compares with six percent of female respondents.

Younger respondents were more likely to have engaged in more online gambling in the last month than older respondents. For example, while 20 percent of 18–29 year olds had increased their online gambling in the last month, the comparable figure for those aged 50 years or over was four percent.

Where relationship status was concerned, Table 2 shows that those who were single and those who were in a relationship had very similar rates of increased online gambling—both around 12 percent. In contrast, those who were separated, divorced or widowed had much lower levels of increased online gambling (2%).

There was also a difference in terms of employment status, with those in full-time employment (19%) more likely than other respondents (6%) to have increased their involvement in online gambling.

Analysis of household income showed that the prevalence of increased online gambling grew with income level. While nine percent of those earning less than \$50,000 increased their involvement in online gambling, this increased to 18 percent of those earning \$100,000 or more.

		More online gambling in last month?				χ^2 test (<i>p</i> value); Cramér's <i>V</i>
		Yes		No		
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	
Gender	Female	29	5.7	481	94.3	$\chi^2(1)=25.66$ ($p<0.001$); $V=0.16$
	Male	76	15.5	414	84.5	
Age	18–29	35	20.0	140	80.0	$\chi^2(3)=80.30$ ($p<0.001$); $V=0.22$
	30–39	36	17.5	170	82.5	
	40–49	19	10.2	167	89.8	
	50+	15	3.5	418	96.5	
Relationship status	Single (never married)	34	11.6	258	88.4	$\chi^2(2)=10.82$ ($p<0.01$); $V=0.10$
	Married/in relationship	68	11.8	509	88.2	
	Separated/divorced/widowed	3	2.3	128	97.7	
Employment status	Full-time employment	69	18.8	298	81.2	$\chi^2(1)=42.51$ ($p<0.001$); $V=0.21$
	Other employment status	36	5.7	597	94.3	
Household income	<\$50,000	31	8.5	336	91.6	$\chi^2(3)=22.98$ ($p<0.001$); $V=0.15$
	\$50,000–\$99,999	27	9.7	252	90.3	
	\$100,000+	44	17.9	202	82.1	
	Don't know/prefer not to say	3	2.8	105	97.2	

Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding

Source: AIC Online gambling survey [computer file]

The final analysis examined the demographic characteristics using a logistic regression model to account for the relationships between variables. Table 3 shows the importance of each demographic variable independent of the other variables examined. This shows that increases in at least one type of online gambling in the last month can be attributed to demographic factors associated with gender, age and employment status. Where gender is concerned, men were more than three times as likely as women to have gambled more online.

The prevalence of increased online gambling in the last month declined with age. Those aged 18–29 years or 30–39 years were each around six times more likely than those aged 50 years or over to have increased their engagement in online gambling in the last month.

Where employment status was concerned, those in full-time employment were around twice as likely as those with some other employment status to have increased their participation in online gambling.

Table 3: Logistic regression results for factors associated with increased online gambling (n=1,000)

Independent variable	Variable category	Odds ratio	p value	95% CI
Gender	Male (vs female)	3.11	0.000	1.92 – 5.05
	18–29 (vs 50+)	6.50	0.000	3.15 – 13.38
Age	30–39 (vs 50+)	5.71	0.000	2.82 – 11.53
	40–49 (vs 50+)	2.43	0.021	1.15 – 5.16
Marital status	Married/in relationship (vs single)	1.45	0.160	0.86 – 2.43
	Separated/divorced/widowed (vs single)	0.45	0.218	0.13 – 1.60
Employment	Full time (vs other)	2.07	0.008	1.21 – 3.53
	\$50,000–\$99,999 (vs <\$50,000)	0.57	0.082	0.31 – 1.07
Income	\$100,000+ (vs <\$50,000)	0.79	0.470	0.42 – 1.49
	Don't know/prefer not say (vs <\$50,000)	0.16	0.004	0.04 – 0.55
Constant		0.01	0.000	0.00 – 0.02

Note: Nagelkerke $R^2=0.225$; area under the curve=0.80; mean variance inflation factor=1.18. CI=confidence interval

Source: AIC Online gambling survey [computer file]

Table 3 also shows that, when controlling for all other demographic factors, marital status is not associated with increased participation in online gambling. The results for household income were somewhat anomalous, with those who stated either 'don't know' or 'prefer not to say' being significantly less likely to increase participation in online gambling than those earning less than \$50,000.

Conclusion

This study surveyed 1,000 adults from an online panel to explore increases in online gambling in Australia following the commencement of social distancing measures introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The results indicate that almost a quarter of those surveyed had engaged in online gambling in the last month. Approximately 10 percent of all respondents surveyed had increased and 14 percent had decreased their participation in at least one form of online gambling in March 2020.

The demographic characteristics of those engaging in increased online gambling paint a clear picture. Men aged under 30 in full-time employment were the most likely to engage in more online gambling. Indeed, almost half of those surveyed who met all three of these criteria (46%) reported increasing their participation in at least one form of online gambling in the last month. This compared with nine percent of those who did not fit this profile.

While this survey did not examine the implications of increased online gambling, the negative social impacts of gambling at a time of increased stress for many households should not be underestimated.

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