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Structural characteristics of online gambling platforms: How the provision of multiple gambling formats could contribute to harm

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“Structural characteristics” are gambling product features that can encourage gamblers to spend more time or money gambling than they otherwise would (Cornish, 1978). Most research has focused on structural characteristics of electronic gaming machines, such as their fast speed of play (Griffiths, 1993; Livingstone et al., 2008). But related structural characteristics have been identified in, for example, online sports betting products too. ‘In-play’ bets can be made while a sporting event is happening (Newall et al., 2021), and therefore have a faster potential speed of play, and are also more strongly associated with harm, than traditional pre-event betting (Hing et al., 2018). Online gambling is increasingly popular in jurisdictions such as the UK, Canada and the US (Etuk et al., 2022), and is also strongly associated with harm (Allami et al., 2021). Online gambling raises similar issues to these other gambling products, as it can also deliver fast-paced games (Newall, 2022). One prior study has looked at the structural characteristics of specific online games such as online slots, but found them a poor predictor of the total number of bets made (Auer & Griffiths, 2022). This letter argues that perhaps a more relevant, and yet largely neglected structural characteristic for online gambling, is its unique ability to deliver multiple gambling formats via online gambling platforms (Hing et al., 2022).

Nowadays, even online gambling operators that were once associated with only a single gambling format now have platforms with a full range of games, and even many versions of a given game, with operators having around 14 roulette games on average (Newall et al., 2022). PartyPoker was the largest online poker site in the early 2000s, and was also the first poker site to offer non-poker games to its customers, by introducing blackjack and roulette in 2005 (Tran, 2006). Betfair created the first sports betting exchange in 2000, which allowed bettors to trade against each other, with Betfair acting as a market maker. Despite being uniquely associated with this innovative form of sports betting, Betfair still introduced a traditional fixed-odds sportsbook in 2012, where Betfair generates the odds and takes bets against its customers (Osborne, 2012). Diversification of products offered by online gambling platforms has therefore been observed across operators.

The provision of multiple gambling formats should be considered a relevant structural characteristic of online gambling platforms, since engagement with multiple online gambling formats has been linked to both higher expenditure (Forrest et al., 2022), and harm (Brosowski et al., 2012; LaPlante et al., 2014) in studies using behavioural data. But much less is known about the dynamics of how this harm occurs. “Loss-chasing”, a cycle of desperate bets to recoup prior losses (Zhang & Clark, 2020), is one plausibly relevant behaviour. If prior losses make it more likely for someone to switch gambling formats, then the provision of multiple gambling formats could have an enabling role in increasing harm.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of online operator data freely-available to researchers (Cassidy et al., 2013). Should switching behaviour be associated with an increased risk of harm, this could serve as a critical indicator for the safer provision of online gambling. Further analysis on switching behaviour across gambling formats – and between varieties of a same format – is needed, with ultimate evidence for causal effects on harm demonstrated by a field study that experimentally tests reductions on the ease of switching between available gambling formats.

Declaration of conflict of interest

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