

# **An Exploration of Online Gambling on a College Campus**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Research on online gambling amongst college students suggests that most college students gamble to win money, for fun, for social reasons, for excitement or just to have something to do (Neighbors et al, 2002. 367). Some research has shown that problem gambling has sometimes become an issue, especially with those who gamble online. This study seeks to add to the current literature on online gambling, which are mainly explorative studies. I was interested to find out who gambles, why they do it, what this activity means to them and how it affects their lives. In order to carry out this study, I did participant observation and conducted 8 semi-structured interviews with Kenyon College students. I found that the majority of the students I interviewed played online poker, although some also engaged in sports betting. I found that students gamble not for the main goal of winning money, but rather for entertainment and fun. All of the participants denied that online gambling has any negative effects on either their social, personal or academic life. I found that online gambling not only provides individual entertainment, but is also a means of socializing with others.*

## INTRODUCTION

My friend, with whom I've always played poker every Friday night, introduced me to pokerstars.com one evening. It is one of the biggest online poker websites. I had seen it advertised on ESPN whilst watching college football. I was immediately hooked. Unlike real poker, it was fast, anonymous, and I could play whenever I wanted. I soon found out that three of my other close friends also played online poker regularly. I began to ask the question, who are the students who gamble online at Kenyon and why do they do it?

The birth of online gambling dates back to the mid-1990s; within merely a decade, it has become a phenomenon. From bingo to sports betting to poker, the internet offers as myriad of choices for gamblers. Today, there are thousands of online gambling sites. According to recent articles, in the past decade, online gambling has grown in popularity amongst college age youth. In a study released by University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center, out of the 43% of youth aged 18-22 who reported gambling at least once a month, 12% gambled online. Popular opinions hold that internet gambling is "a particularly virulent form of gambling" which have negative effects on the population (LaPlante et. al. 2008, 2400). Jeff Marotta, a problem-gambling services manager for the Oregon State Human Resources agency, states the problem concisely: "About one college student in twenty has a gambling problem, but it's an issue that's very much under the radar" (Yang 2006).

Although there has been some research done on online gambling, they have been mainly quantitative studies (King et al 2010, Griffiths 2010, Neighbors et al 2002). A lot of studies have focused on pathological gambling, however pathological gamblers have different motives than the general population that gambles (Wood & Williams, Matthews et al, Gour-driaan et al). With that in mind, the purpose of my research is to understand online gambling from a sociological point of view. I aim to find out who at Kenyon gambles online, why they do it, what this activity means to these students and how it affect their lives.

## **THEORY**

In order to understand the role gambling in general has in our society, I relied on those who have theorized about gambling in the past. Some of the main views that prevail in the literature on gambling theory that apply to my study include the structural functionalist view, the social frustration and escape theories, the Marxian approach and the social rewards of gambling theory.

Structural functionalism is a macro sociological theory that consists of the main idea that society is made up of different components that have distinctive functions (Binde 2009, 12). The theorists Devereux, Bloch and Tec looked at gambling from a functionalist point of view. According to Frey, “the central theme of most functional analyses is that gambling is a safety-valve institution...used for relieving strain in a socially acceptable, not necessarily legal, manner” (Frey 1984, 109). Devereux rejected the individualistic and pathological approaches used to understand gambling, and instead placed it in the general framework of the social structure (Frey 1984, 109). Gambling could be seen as meeting the societal need of tension management, or providing a thrill that is unavailable under the “dominance of order” in our daily lives (Frey 1984, 109). Thus, gambling can be perceived as positive because it functions to save society from the actions of people who are frustrated over their social existence (Binde 2009, 13). Applying this theory to my study, I should find online gambling to be a positive phenomenon and that students gamble to relieve boredom and for excitement.

Apart from structural functionalist theories, another line of theory proposes that escape from the daily routines in life is a motive for gambling (Binde 2009, 14). Anomie and alienation have been applied to the theories of gambling behavior (Frey 1984, 110; Binde 2009, 14). Merton’s theory of anomie, when applied to gambling, would imply that people of lower classes gamble more. The contradictions in the capitalist system means that although we have

the same pressure of being successful, we don't have equal means of attaining it (Frey 1984, 111). This results in adaptive behaviors like gambling. The theory of alienation "suggest that those persons most frustrated on the job will be more likely to gamble" (Frey 1984, 111). Frustration comes from feeling powerless, and gambling provides a feeling of control (Frey 1984, 111). People not only gamble to escape from frustration, they also seek to escape from all things in their life they find boring or troublesome (Binde 2009, 14). Although students here are not full participants of the work force yet, I believe this theory can still be applicable to my study. Given today's economy, there may be students who do not feel as though they have the means of attaining success. Jobs are scarce, and the message that is sent out to students is that social mobility is not the same as it was during our parents' generation. According to this theory, I may find that students who feel frustrated, powerless, and alienated to gamble more. I may also find that students gamble in order to escape boredom or to avoid doing things they dislike.

Some have applied a Marxian interpretation to gambling. The belief is that elites structure politics and the economy to allow for an activity such as gambling to exploit the rest of society (Frey 1984, 112). "By permitting safety-valve outlets, potential revolutionary energies are diverted from political activity" (Frey 1984, 112). A sense of false consciousness is created: Gambling provides fun and excitement to people and diverts their attention away from forming revolutions (Frey 1984, p112). Thus, in the Marxian point of view, "gambling continues to serve the political and economic needs of the system while maintaining control over potentially disruptive forces" (Frey 1984, 112-3). If this theory is applicable to my study, I may find students who gamble so much that they neglect other parts of their lives.

The social rewards individuals receive from gambling is also theorized to be a main motive for gambling. One of the most widely known theorists on the social rewards of gambling is Erving Goffman and his action analysis of gambling (Frey 1984, 114; Binde 2009, 16).

Goffman conceptualized social life as a game (Binde 2009, 16). Action activity, where someone takes risk, “can demonstrate character or performance under stress” (Frey 1984, 114). Since risk taking is highly valued in Western society, by committing something valuable without knowing the outcome beforehand, you reveal that you have a strong character (Binde 2009, 17). Goffman argues gambling is one form of action activity, and gambling provides a chance “to demonstrate self-composition to the outside world” (Frey 1984, 114). He viewed gambling as a social contest which involves confrontation and antagonism (Binde 2009, 17). Goffman’s theory could be applied to my study to understand why students choose to gamble. Using his theory, students gamble to compete. They take risk when they gamble in order to demonstrate their character. Thus, some students may participate in forms of online gambling which are more social and competitive to prove a point to others.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In order to design my study, I have relied on empirical studies of online gambling. Research by Neighbors et al found a list of different motives as to why students gamble. From the most to least popular, the various motives were: money, enjoyment/fun, social reasons, excitement, occupy time/boredom, winning, conformity, competition, risk taking, interest, skill, escape/coping, chasing, luck, drinking and challenge (367). Similarly Griffiths, one of the main researchers of online gambling and the most frequently cited author in this field, finds that students gamble to relax, for excitement, to win money, to socialize, to escape from problems, to relieve boredom, to develop skills, and because they are feeling lucky (Griffiths et. al. 2010, p349). Wood et. al. found online poker playing to be an important social activity for some students. In fact, in their study 62% of the students claimed that they started playing through an introduction to the game by friends (Wood et. al. 2007, 359).

Gender also seems to play a role in online gambling. In a study released by University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center, 16% of male respondents aged 18-22 reported internet gambling at least once a month, compared to the 4.4% of females (2). Gender role theory suggests that women are encouraged to avoid "masculine" activities (Williams et. al. 2009, 703). Women are expected to be "nurturing and caring", whilst men are expected to be competitive, aggressive and ambitious (Kidder. 2002, 630). Men and women internalize these expectations, and it has important impacts on individual lives and choices (Donaghue & Fallon. 2003). Thus applying it to my study, it can be hypothesized that the choices that males and females make concerning whether to gamble online, and the type of online gambling can be partially explained by gender roles. In a research on MMO players (massive multiplayer online games), it was found that both genders play to be social, but that men play for more achievement-oriented reasons (Yee). King et. al. found competitive behavior to be more characteristic of men than it is of women (1991, 617). Thus, I hypothesize that male students gamble online more to be competitive and to prove that they can be good at something, whilst female students gamble online more to be social.

In forming a picture of the Kenyon students who gamble online, I would need to understand their attitudes towards online gambling. A few decades ago, most of society would have seen gambling as a form of deviance. In a book about gambling written in 1965, the author writes that "by the social and ethical rules of American culture, gambling is immoral business" (Turner, 1965, 283). These days, whether gambling is good for society or not is hotly debated. Just four years ago, Congress banned internet gambling (Chan, 2010). While not an easy task, Congress is considering legalizing and taxing it as there is a potential \$7 billion a year in federal taxes that has so far been evaded (Schwartz, 2006). Griffiths have found the social acceptability of online gambling to be linked to the high level of problem gambling (2010, 360). The popularity of gambling is in part the result of its greater acceptance in socie-

ty. Thus, it is of interest to me to find out what students' attitudes are towards online gambling.

In the world of college sports, there is a concern that student wagering on sport events would influence a game's outcome and diminish the integrity of intercollegiate sports. An official statement by the NCAA on college sports betting states that "the NCAA opposes all forms of legal and illegal sports wagering on college sports" (NCAA). Recent reports "have suggested that a majority of student-athletes gamble, many in violation of NCAA rules" (Wienstock et al, 2007). Thus I would like to find out whether online gamblers who wager on sports at Kenyon include students who are Kenyon athletes, and what type of sports they bet on.

## **METHODS**

I chose to do a qualitative study because qualitative research provides an in-depth understanding of the social world. This understanding is reached through interpretation, where social life is viewed as dynamic as opposed to static (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, 22,4). By adopting a qualitative approach, I can conduct a naturalistic inquiry and obtain results that provide a holistic perspective within explained contexts. The methods of data generation would also be suited to the social context in which data is gathered, it is flexible and thus can accommodate different situations and circumstances (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, 4). As I'm seeking to answer the "why" and "how" and "who" questions, using the qualitative methods of generating data would allow me to use a method of analysis that is based on explanation building and which reflects the intricacy of the data in context (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, 4). Instead of beginning my research with set categories and ideas, I can identify emergent categories and theories. It will more fruitful to look at online gambling and explain it at the level of what it

means to the participants rather than what causes it. I will be able to respect the uniqueness of each case whilst conducting cross-case analysis (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, 4).

Out of the main qualitative methods, I chose to use in-depth (semi-structured) interviews along with participant observation. In-depth interviewing would allow me to achieve depth, and to capture data that is natural and unconstructed by set measures or categories (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, 168). A main goal is to attach and understand the meaning to this activity, and the best way to understand this would be through detailed descriptions, which I would be able to obtain through in-depth interviews. The flexibility of a semi-structured interview allows many topic to be covered, depending on what suits the interviewees (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, 141). Conducting successful interviews would depend on my role as the interviewer (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, 143). I do believe that as a student here at Kenyon college I would be able to establish a good rapport with the participants. As a person familiar with online gambling, I would allow my participants to feel interested and comfortable in discussing the subject with me.

I decided to supplement data generated from my in-depth interviews by also conducting participant observation. Participant observation allows me the opportunity to gain additional insights to the activity through experiencing it for myself, and also allows me to study phenomena that occurs during the observation (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, 35). Being able to observe students gambling would allow me to understand the activity in more depth through an experiential and observational standpoint (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, 35).

In order to recruit my participants for the interviews, I relied on snowballing to identify students who participate in online gambling. I then asked them if they would participate in my interviews. I chose snowballing because I believe this would help me build trust and openness with my interviewees, and they are likely to be willing to participate and tell me more about their participation in online gambling. I knew some friends who gamble online,

and I knew friends who had friends who gambled online, thus I found my interviewees mainly through these networks. My study was approved by the Kenyon College Institutional Review Board (Approval #2010045). To make sure participation is voluntary, all participants had to sign a consent form (see appendix A).

Each student was interviewed individually once. The interviews were held wherever the subject found the most convenient. Most were conducted in living areas such as dormitories, apartments or lounges. Some were conducted in more public places such Middle Ground or the dining hall. Interviewees with whom I'm acquainted often preferred to be interviewed in living areas. Each interview lasted around 15-40 minutes. There was variability in terms of how much an interviewee had to share about their online gambling experiences as it depended on how familiar they were with the activity and how much the activity meant to them. I took notes as the participants talked or taped the conversations if the interviewees allowed me to do so. I asked my initial questions in ways to encourage the interviewee to talk freely. My next question usually depended on a participant's answer. However, I also had a list of interview prompts that were useful in guiding the direction of an interview particularly in cases when the interviewees were not prone to elaborate (see Appendix B). I asked the participants to tell me about their experiences with online gambling, why they do it and what they think about it. During some of my interviews, I found that some initial responses were at a fairly surface level, and when this happened I would usually ask follow up questions to obtain a fuller understanding of what the interviewee meant.

Finding the opportunities to carry out participant observation was more difficult than recruiting interviewees. As each person faces their own computer whilst they engage in the activity, it was a potentially awkward situation for both me and the participants. Thus, I started off by asking some closer friends whether they would let me be a participant observer. I discovered that online gambling was a lot more social than I had previously thought, and thus

doing participant observation with students whom I don't know as well could be less awkward. I proceeded to ask some acquaintances whom I've gotten to talk to during my interviews whether I can join them when they gamble online next time. Through this method, I was not only able to observe different students participating in this activity, but it also became a recruiting channel for interviews as I got to know more students who engaged in online gambling. Participant observation usually lasted two to three hours, from the time it took everyone to arrive and set up their laptops, to lasting through to the final few spots on a 27 person tournament.

I was able to observe this activity on four occasions, with two different groups of students and I was able to interview eight students at Kenyon College. After I completed my data collection process, I typed up my interview notes and my notes from observations and proceeded to read through them and to find common themes. In my results section, I use pseudonyms to protect the identities of the interviewees.

## **RESULTS**

Although my interviews and participant observation produced some interesting results, my sample size is too small to have any implications beyond Kenyon College. However, my subjects provided valuable information about online gambling at Kenyon. The themes that emerged through the interviews resonated with results from past empirical research, whereas participant observation provided me with another viewpoint. Through my interviews I was able to obtain a good understanding of my interviewees' online gambling behavior, motivations and attitudes towards the activity. Through my participant observation, I was able to observe the social and competitive nature of online gambling, in particular online poker.

Peter, like many of the other interviewees, usually gambles online at night on a week-day. After team practice, dinner and a shower, he assesses whether the homework he has is urgent. If it does not require immediate attention, Peter usually goes online and surfs on the internet; he goes to youtube, facebook, espn and browses to see whether there is anything new. If nothing catches his eye, he would click on the spade shaped icon (red with a white star) on his desktop, this is the shortcut to pokerstars.com, his favorite and most frequented online gambling website. After he logs in, he clicks on the “cashier” button to see how much play money he has. Unlike some other interviewees, Peter is hesitant to use real money. “I’m usually just procrastinating, I probably would put some money into it if I were better...If I win a couple of tournaments I might, who knows.” He then chooses the play money tables. He prefers to play Hold-em poker on the tables with lower stakes but chooses tables with more players over fewer players. The bigger the table, the harder it is to finish in a top place, but the rewards are larger too. “I’ve gone broke a couple of times, but when that happens I just get my friend to transfer me some (play) money”. When asked why he likes to gamble online, Peter says, “I do it to kill time ...it’s something to do I guess, it’s entertaining. I definitely get a rush when I win”.

John is also an avid online poker gambler. “If I’m alone in my room and I have nothing to do, then I’ll play a couple of rounds.” He has been trying to avoid playing online poker as often, he used to spend thirty minutes to two hours playing every day, because he is a senior and he has been very busy with classes. “Playing online poker isn’t the same as watching a series or surfing the net. When I’m in playing poker, I’ve got all this adrenaline, I’m pretty competitive. I can’t play poker and focus on something else at the same time, whereas if I’m checking facebook I usually do my assignments at the same time.” John also participates in another form of online gambling. He likes to bet on college football “lines” on sites like sportsbook.com.

The line is what the bookmaker, which is the person who makes the line, believe the game will approximately end up in point differential. If the team has a positive line, they are the underdog, that means they are favored to lose. However when you take the final score and add whatever the positive line was to the underdog team, if that new score beats the team they just played then you win the bet. And vice versa, if the team who is favored to win have a negative score, they have to outscore the opponent by more than the line in order for you to make money. Get it?

It took a couple more explanations for me to finally understand how it worked, and I realized that anyone who bets on sports such as college football would most likely have an in-depth understanding of the sport and the teams. John, an avid Michigan football fan, goes on various Michigan football blogs and sites every day. "There're always upsets, so it's hard to predict what will happen in a game, but it helps if you know the teams like say if any key players are injured, that is going to affect the outcome." During college football season, John regularly bets on the lines. "I'll put down maybe \$25 to \$50, depending on how I'm feeling about it...I'm up around \$150 this season." Asked why he likes betting on football, John says, "Part of it is the excitement. But I also like to feel that I'm a football expert when I make the right guesses."

Like many other interviewees, Jeremy was introduced to online poker through friends. He had seen advertisements during commercial breaks on the espn channel, but did not actually try it until his Freshman year roommate encouraged him to. He started off with play money, and then gradually began to play with real money. "My ultimate goal wasn't to win a lot of money, I just wanted higher stakes. I started off with tables where the buy-in was \$0.25c, and after I won a couple of those I started to play the \$5 tables." He used his credit card to provide the billing information in exchange for real-money chips that he was able to cash out. "It was fun for a while, but after losing twice on a \$20 table I got tired of it." Jere-

my still plays online poker from time to time, but only with play money. Jeremy does know of a childhood friend who dropped out of college to play professional poker. "I'm not in touch with him, but my parents told me he dropped out of college 'cause he won a couple hundred thousand dollars on online poker...I would do the same if it happened to me (laughs)."

Zac knows the opposite side of the story. A friend he knew from high school did not have as much luck. "His parents put money for tuition and room and everything in his account, and he spent all of that on (online) poker...his parents cut him off. However, his friend "won it back next semester so things are fine now." Although Zac knows someone who had a near-disaster experience with online gambling, his attitude towards it remained neutral. Like the other interviewees, he does not regard online gambling to be immoral or negative in any way. "I mean I'm fine with it, I don't see any problems." He is active in his social and academic life and does not see online gambling as having an influence on his life at Kenyon. Other interviewees, regardless of whether they are very active in social activities at Kenyon and whether they are happy with their academic performance, all did not see online gambling as having positive or negative influences.

Brenda, the only female I interviewed in my research, does not usually gamble online alone. "Sometimes nobody would have anything to do and someone suggests a game of poker so I go why not? That's how it's fun for me, when we're all playing together on the same table. I like seeing how long people last, and out-lasting them, of course". My participant observation confirmed that online poker is a very social activity at times. One Wednesday night at around 9pm, a friend popped in and asked to play online poker with Terry. He agreed, and they all brought in their laptops. In this scenario, poker playing consisted of each student (there were three of them), sitting in the same room in front of their own laptops, playing on the same virtual 'table'. The settings on online poker sites does not make it easy for people to

choose to be on the same table; in fact it seems obvious that the website intends for you not to do so. “New” tables always pop up and the empty seats are listed and usually filled very quickly. Thus, they would choose a table and register at the same time, if someone’s internet was lagging and it was not likely they can get on the same table they would quickly un-register and recuperate their buy-in money so they can find another table.

It was a very social event in that as the game progressed, they would constantly communicate with each other. An example of a conversation went as such:

John: “Damn it!!!! He got real lucky he had that ace on the river”.

Peter: “(laughs). You shouldn’t have gone all in with the pair Queen”.

John: “I was just betting on the odds! You would’ve done the same thing”

Other comments were made, sometimes on how unlucky they were all getting, other times on the behaviors of other online players. Online “bullies”, those who go raise bets by a lot because they have many chips and scare other players into folding, are particularly disliked. Some of the participants also engaged in foul talk online, during an observation, one of the guys decided to make obscenely rude comments to an unknown player on the table. There is a chat box where virtual players can type comments, and they began firing rude comments back and forth.

I discovered that online gambling, in particular online poker, is a very competitive activity. Whether it was a competition with their friends, or with unknown virtual players, there is a sense of competition. On one occasion, students who were playing online poker together discussed their relative rankings. They came in respectively second, third and fourth; the ‘winner’ of the group was very excited to have “ruled the game”. On another occasion, during lunch, the topic of poker came up and a student started discussing his loss during an online poker session with virtual players the day before. Zac: “Man...I dominated yesterday.

I was like fourth, but I won like 2000 chips 'cause I had a higher flush." When I observed them playing in the same room, I saw them try to peek at each other's screens to see their hands when the other is not looking.

However, despite the competitiveness, I also observed that online poker playing together could sometimes be a team effort. "We put in 50,000 tonight, if we get first and second, we could make 15,000". The 50,000 refers to the 10,000 they each had to pay for the buy-in amount. The groups often lend their broke members play money so they can continue to stay in the game. However, members who fail to repay the money are made fun of, albeit in a playful manner. Tyler's friends make fun of him for always managing to get on the final table yet being unable to finish in a place that pays money.

Despite the fact that all of my interviewees rejected the notion that online gambling negatively affected their academic lives, I noticed on more than one occasion various members being distracted from their work due to online gambling. From my observation and interviews, online gambling sessions are usually spontaneous. Sometimes a group of friends agree on playing "tonight", yet there is almost never a defined time or proper invitations. Who is playing depends on whether they happened to be around, or whether they receive call or a message asking them to participate soon or immediately. For instance, Zac is usually working on this laptop when people arrive to the room. As they set up their laptops, Zac indicates that he has too much work and does not want to play. However other members cajole him until he gives in.

Although online poker can be seen as a social activity, one incident made me wonder whether it is a less genuine form of social interaction compared to real poker. Brenda had suggested one night that they play real poker, with chips like they used to, instead of online poker. Her suggestion was not met with much enthusiasm. When I asked her why she wanted to play real poker, she said she prefers it because "playing on the screen is fun but real poker

is just more fun.” When I asked for a fuller explanation, she thought for a while and said, “when we’re playing together with chips, everyone is focused on the game, but with playing online everyone is sort of doing their own thing at the same time.” I have indeed noticed during my observations that most of the subjects are engaged in a second activity on their computers other than playing online poker. Usually they are surfing the net, some watch television shows and some play video games. The settings of the online poker website is such that when it is your turn to play your hand, the poker screen will pop up in front of all the other screens, and thus there is no need to constantly check the poker site as you will be notified when it is your turn. Thus, the amount of interaction varies depending on how many people are on the same table and how focused they are on the game.

## **DISCUSSION**

My results highlight about the role online gambling has in the lives of my interviewees at Kenyon College. Online poker is the most prevalent type of online gambling amongst students I have interviewed. Sport gambling is the next most common; three out of my eight interviewees having participated in it before, betting on football and baseball. Money, unlike results from past empirical research, does not appear to be an important factor in my interviewees’ decision to online gamble. All the participants denied that money was the main reason for gambling online. This could be because they are cautious and are not willing to bet with real stakes. This could also be due to the fact that generally speaking, students who attend Kenyon are wealthy and do not feel as financially strained as others. However, as money is a sensitive issue, one cannot rule out the possibility that some interviewees may conceal the role money plays in their decisions or refuse to admit that they gambled for money and lost.

It was common to find that the students gamble to relieve boredom and for excitement. Some gamble to procrastinate from work. Using Devereux and Bloch's functionalist view of gambling to put this in context, students' gambling can be thought of as rejecting the social structure which in this case is college and the work that comes along with it. Gambling can be seen as providing the thrill that the students seek. All of the participant observation I engaged in occurred during the night on a weekday, when the students were bored and did not have much else to do, or did not feel like doing the work they were supposed to do.

Erving Goffman's action analysis of gambling can also be applied very adeptly to my observations. Goffman saw gambling as an activity where someone takes risk and can demonstrate character. I can understand the competition I observed by putting it in context as students trying to demonstrate skill and composure, such as when they get to the final table. The participants always praise each other for going all in (betting all their chips) on a good hand, even if the outcome was not desirable, they would still be praised for doing what they "had to do." If you get a good hand, you cannot sit back and play conservatively, even if there is the risk that the other person has a better hand you must take the risk. People who always play conservative are deemed as ones who can never come first place in a tournament. Thus, it was very evident to me that online gambling can be a very competitive activity where one can be judged by how they play their hands and thus how they compose themselves as people. The students who engage in online gambling may do so because they like demonstrating their character, and thus the social rewards of this activity is high for them.

Merton's anomie and alienation does not apply as well to my results. Students who gamble do not report being frustrated or powerless; they are mainly happy with their social and academic lives. However, it could be argued though that students are not integrated into the workforce yet and have not experienced working in menial jobs. Also, as entertainment and escape from boredom are some of the most common answers students gave as to why

they choose to online gamble, it suggests that students may be gambling to escape from the daily routines of life.

The Marxian view that gambling creates false consciousness over real societal problems does not apply to this case. Students do not think that online gambling diverts their attention from other parts of their lives. There are students whom I have interviewed who were very active in their academic and social lives, and were members of varsity sport teams and other organizations. As the students are not spending all of their free time in online gambling and are still active in other parts of their lives, I would conclude that gambling is not creating false consciousness. It is possible however, that students could be distracted by this activity and are less productive at school and in their lives without realizing or admitting to it. In fact, I did observe students being distracted from their academic work on some occasions.

As I was only able to interview one female in my research, I cannot draw any statements about gender. It may not be due to the lack of females who gamble online, as the snowballing technique may not have captured those who do. However, the fact that my one female interviewee only gambled socially may be related to the theory mentioned in my literature review, that women are socialized into different ways of play and activities (Williams et. al. 2009, Donaghue & Fallon 2003). However, as my female interviewee was as competitive as the men, the findings of King et. al. (1991) that males are more competitive than females does not apply to my study.

I found that although some students had friends who have experienced problems with gambling, and others have heard of people with the same experiences, they describe these occurrences as anomalies and not something that would ever happen to them. They were usually unable to provide any answers as to why they believe that this happened to their friends. This may be because the students I interviewed were generally cautious with their

money when they gambled online, none of them have placed bets over \$50 online, and they do not do it often either.

Although online gambling has been found to be a form of socializing, one may question whether it replaces more genuine interaction. This resonates with the concern that society has on whether online messaging or online social networks take away from real life interaction. I believe that one cannot easily argue that online socializing replaces more “genuine” forms of interaction because the definition of what is genuine is subjective. However, it may be true that this generation is used to a lot of external stimulation and are adept at multitasking. Thus socializing whilst engaging in a personal activity, like playing online poker whilst surfing the internet or being at a party and texting on a cell phone, is not that uncommon.

## **CONCLUSION**

With this study I offer an exploration of the role of online gambling amongst students here at Kenyon College. I wanted to find out who gambles, why they do it, what this activity means to them and how it affects their lives. I do believe that my study offered insights into who gambles online at Kenyon college, and what online gambling means to them. Students did not play to win money, but rather for fun and to escape boredom. I found that online gambling not only provides individual entertainment, but it is also a very social activity.

This study is different than similar studies carried out at larger universities because Kenyon college is a very small college situated in a rural area. Thus, it might have been easier for me to obtain interviewees as many people know or at least know what activities other people engage in. It may not be fair to compare students who gamble online frequently at Kenyon with those at larger universities because at Kenyon, the choices for entertainment are much more constricted due to our location.

I will say that in order to improve this study, it is important for me to obtain a participant sample that is more reflective of the student population. My participant sample represented male students a lot more heavily than female students, I believe that this is in part due to the fact that there are more male students who gamble, but it is also a result of my snowballing technique. If I had originally known more female students who participate in online gambling, it may have resulted in being able to find more females to interview. My participant sample also included many more upper-class students than underclassmen; again I believe that it is based on my snowballing technique. Upperclassmen tend to know more people of the same year, thus the referrals I was getting will have this inherent bias. A more representative population sample would include both genders, with students from different grades. I could have also sent a mass email to students on campus to recruit more interviewees, as this would lead me to groups or individuals that I would not have reached through snowballing. This may be a possible way to gather data that is more diverse.

I believe that further research needs to be done on online gambling in universities. Although I did not find online gambling to be a problem amongst students, it has been reported to be an issue in other cases. Through preliminary research, we have come to understand online gambling in more depth, however current data is still unable to sufficiently provide any conclusive results. It is important to continue to carry out research in this direction because if problem gambling is found to be an issue, universities and colleges can work to prevent or provide support to those who are in need.

**APPENDIX A****Informed Consent for Participation in Online Gambling at Kenyon College Study**

You are being asked to participate in a study to learn more about Online Gambling at Kenyon College. This study is being conducted by Zerlina Leung, an undergraduate student in the Sociology department at Kenyon College. During this interview, I will ask you about your experience with online gambling.

This interview will be tape recorded. In order to participate in this project you must be 18 years old or over. Your participation in this project is completely voluntary; the decision to participate is up to you and no one else. You may choose not to answer certain questions. The information you provide will be kept confidential to the extent of the law. To protect your privacy only your title (as a freshman/sophomore/junior/senior student) will be revealed in any transcripts written. The only possible risk I can foresee is slight emotional discomfort in answering questions. A direct benefit of participation in this study is the opportunity to talk with an interested listener and to think reflexively on how and to what extent online gambling influences your life. The information obtained by this study will only be used or presented within the sociology department at Kenyon College for the purposes of the Senior Comps.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Zerlina Leung at (740)263-1192 at any time. You may also contact Jennifer Johnson of the Sociology Department at Kenyon College at [johnsonj@kenyon.edu](mailto:johnsonj@kenyon.edu) with questions about your rights as a participant in this study. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB office at 740.427.5748 or [peelle@kenyon.edu](mailto:peelle@kenyon.edu).

Please sign to agree that you have read the consent form, fully understand it and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this completed form.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Interviewer

Date

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Interview prompts**

*Demographics:* Gender, Year

*Questions and specific prompts:*

Tell me about your experience with online gambling...

Why do you gamble online?

What do you think about online gambling as an activity?

Tell me about your social life here at Kenyon...

Tell me about your academic life here at Kenyon...

*Specific prompts :*

What type of online gambling activity do you participate in (regardless of whether you put real money on it)?

When did you start gambling?

What influenced you to start?

How often do you gamble a week, and for how long?

How much have you won and lost in the past month?

Why do you gamble online?

What is your attitude towards online gambling?

Do any of your friends or family gamble?

If yes, have any of them experienced any problems with gambling?

Tell me about your social life at school..

Do you participate in any activities or sports?

What do you do in your free time?

Tell me about your academic life...

Do you think that online gambling has an influence on your life here at Kenyon?

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