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Tossing and Turning: Understanding Why Gambling Gets Us Hooked

Gambling is an addictive practice that has been a part of human history since as long ago as 2300bc (Taylor *The History of Gambling*). Potenza et al. define gambling as the act of “placing something of value at risk in the hopes of gaining something of greater value” (721). We often find ourselves getting swept away by the enticing nature of these games of chance. The issue with this, however, is that gambling seems to have an innately negative effect on our wellbeing. Studies by Potenza et al. have shown that gambling can often be paired with a number of mental, social, and financial troubles, and yet humans continue to roll the dice. What is it about gambling that seems to capture human interest? By examining psychological factors such as the Gambler’s Fallacy and Loss Aversion, I will be able to determine what it is that keeps the players so heavily invested in the practice. Furthermore, by examining the practices and strategies utilized by casinos and other gambling establishments, I will be able to explain why it is that gambling continues to see support and remains profitable.

Gambling is a versatile pastime. It is able to pander to a variety of ages, skill levels, and financial standings. A bet can be as simple as offering up one’s seat at a table to as costly as one’s deed to one’s home. But how does that friendly wager reach the severity of a life altering exchange? The Gambler’s Fallacy is a psychological phenomenon that may answer that question. To more easily understand the gambler’s fallacy I will first explain the concept of the

small numbers fallacy. The small numbers fallacy is the belief that small samples of data are just as likely to accurately represent the true population distribution of random events as large samples of data (Oppenheimer 326). This line of thinking has also been termed as hasty generalization and primarily labels the reaching of a conclusion without sufficient or extensive evidence in order to back such claims. The gambler's fallacy uses this line of thinking as its foundation. Oppenheimer defines the gambler's fallacy as the belief that a streak is more likely to end than chance would dictate (Oppenheimer 326). It is a combination of the two fallacies that serves to fuel one's desire to continue gambling. Due to the expectations set by the gambler's fallacy and faulty line of thinking provided by the small numbers fallacy as a support to these expectations, gamblers continue to bet and wager with the unrealistic expectation of an outcome that is contradictory to what probability dictates will occur. Studies by Oppenheimer were conducted in which participants were told a story and asked to determine how many trials were conducted prior to the participant's being told about the story. One story used was about a woman playing miniature golf and either getting a hole in one, or taking four strokes to reach that same hole. Two different endings were given to the story and randomly distributed among the participants who were tasked with deciding how many attempts it would take before their assigned ending would be achieved. All participants who received the "rare" ending reported a higher amount of attempts being required than those who received the "normal" ending. This demonstrates both the gambler's fallacy and the small numbers fallacy due to the fact that, prior to being given any actual details on how many attempts were required for each ending, it was immediately assumed that the more unlikely event would take place after a larger number of attempts. In essence, it was believed that more attempts meant a higher likelihood of occurrence.

Even though this line of thinking is flawed, gamblers continue to adhere to this logic due to another contributing psychological factor, loss aversion.

Loss is a difficult thing to accept. When something is lost we often attempt to regain or replace it. This is the foundation of loss aversion. According to Heshmat, loss aversion is the fundamental fear of loss, and is the result of being more acutely affected by loss compared to gain (citation). This idea relies on the assumption that negative emotions elicit stronger responses than positive emotions. When applied to gambling, the idea becomes a pushing factor. Loss aversion explains the desire to continue even after suffering loss. Gamblers are continuing not because of what they stand to gain, this is at best an attracting factor, but because of what they stand to lose if they do not continue. The fear of loss forces them to continue in order to regain or replace what they have lost once they have suffered a loss.

Combining the concepts of the gambler's fallacy with loss aversion, we can now clearly put together a picture of why we are able to convince ourselves to keep gambling despite sustaining heavy loss. Once the gambler experiences a loss, loss aversion occurs. The gambler now feels as though they must continue playing in fear of permanently losing what they have wagered. Gambler's fallacy takes place during a string of losses preventing the gambler from stopping due to the faulty logic that increasing the number of attempts will eventually increase the likelihood of a favourable outcome. The two concepts interweave and create a vicious cycle of loss.

The gambler is not the only one at fault when it comes to repeat returns. Governments also encourage the act of gambling despite its adverse affects on problem gamblers and society as a whole. Governments promote legal gambling on the basis that it provides local jobs, and diversifies the economy by bringing in money from tourists and visitors (Seelig 99). But it is

becoming increasingly clear that the government's highest point of interest lies in the profits. In the fiscal year of 1995-96, gambling made up a total of seven percent of total provincial profits on its own (Seelig 98). Despite what the government may say about its stance on gambling, it is clear that the government continues to reap the benefits and profits from problem gamblers and casual players alike. Their support can be seen through the active funding of the gambling establishments themselves.

Casinos employ a diverse range of tactics in order to keep us playing. From the staff to the very layout of the casino itself, the entire experience has been tailored in such a way that the gambler is compelled to keep spending. One of the first ways that casinos alter the environment is to skew the gambler's sense of time. Casinos can often be found without windows or clocks. This is more than an aesthetic choice; it keeps the gambler, sometimes literally, in the dark. By hiding the passage of time gamblers can quickly become unaware of just how long they have spent inside the casino. The longer the players spend in the casino, the more likely they are to continue playing. Prolonged lack of exposure to light also affects the circadian rhythm making it difficult for the body to ascertain when it is tired and when it needs to sleep due to its reliance of a light-dark cycle (Duffy 296). This inhibiting of the circadian rhythm prevents gamblers from needing to take breaks leads to an increase in time spent gambling.

Another one of the many ways the casino experience is tailored is through the use of chips instead of cash. By using chips casinos are able to reduce the value of money in the mind of the gambler, primarily due to the fact that a piece of plastic symbolically holds less value than physical dollar bills (Mullenix 2020). By using chips, casinos are also able to further reduce the value of money by assigning values to colour (Mullenix 2020). If a gambler were to collect a large amount of a single type of chip they would begin to place value on the chips preventing

them from desiring to bet. By assigning different values to different chips casinos are able to trivialize any amount of money to a single, easily expendable chip. The entire point of the chip system is to make it easy for gamblers to let go of their cash. By devaluing the gambler's money the casino is more easily able to secure the gambler's attention and make the gambler drop their mental guard.

While there are still plenty of alterations that are made to ensnare gamblers, we can already see that casinos are both clever and subtle in their methods. When both the establishment and the government are designed in such a way that gambling is able to thrive, it is no wonder that the practice remains prevalent to this day.

In conclusion, gambling is made addictive not only by the establishments where it takes place but also by the gambler themselves. We are able to trick ourselves using faulty logic that keeps us hooked to the games. Even when we face loss, the gambler's fallacy ensures us that continued play will yield profit, and due to loss aversion we fear that stopping means that what we invested into the bet will never be regained. Our government shuns the idea of gambling but continues to profit and fund the various casinos and businesses that encourage the self-destructive behaviour that gambling may lead to. When it comes to gambling we may know the cost, but that does not stop us from rolling the dice.

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