Engaging Youth About Gambling Using the Internet

The YouthBet.Net Website

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ABSTRACT

Objective: YouthBet.net's (www.youthbet.net) goal is to prevent gambling problems among youth through an interactive, multimedia website based on a public health approach.

Participants: YouthBet.net was designed by youth for youth. A youth working group spent several months designing the look and feel of the site to ensure that it would appeal to youth aged 10-19. In total, 34 youth from the Greater Toronto Area participated in the first 3 phases of the usability testing of the site using Video Capture of User Site Interaction methodology.

Setting: Urban Toronto.

Intervention: Utilizing public health strategies such as health promotion, harm reduction and problem prevention, YouthBet.net features games, information and help resources to protect youth from gambling-related harm.

Outcomes: Youth participants indicated that they liked the interactive way gambling information was presented via realistic games and quizzes, often citing that YouthBet.net would be a fun and educational tool to be used by teachers in the classroom. Participants had no difficulties navigating the site, finding content and playing games. Additionally, all youth said that they would return to the site and would recommend it to a friend if they were having a problem with gambling.

Conclusion: YouthBet.net is one of the first comprehensive websites designed for youth gambling. Findings from this research will inform future health promotion, harm reduction and problem prevention efforts for youth gambling using Internet technology.

MeSH terms: Gambling; health promotion; adolescent; Internet

PARTICIPANTS, SETTING AND INTERVENTION

YouthBet.net development

The Internet provides innovative ways of engaging youth in health assessment and behaviour change. Since 1995, TeenNet research at the University of Toronto (www.TeenNet.ca) has focussed on using technology for engaging youth in health promotion. Youth are involved in all
The action research model ensures that cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. Male and female youth of various ages and ensuring that the website is responsive to the working group) to obtain feedback for

checks’ were held with youth (not part of region.

variety of backgrounds in the Toronto representing the interests of youth from a related interests and youth-serving agencies including organizations with gambling-related areas (school yard, school, back alley, corner store, casino) and two designated for resources and help (community centre and library).

A public health perspective is incorporated through multiple interventions that address a range of gambling behaviours and problems. Interventions were designed to support youth with issues related to gambling, such as money management, time management and relationships. The strategies and tools, summarized in Table II, are based on key health behaviour concepts, including the: health belief model, theory of reasoned action/planned behaviour, social learning/social cognitive theory, self-determination theory, and trans-theoretical model. These concepts are integrated in a Likelihood of Action index.

Included in the “tool kit” are public health interventions on: time management, money management, general risk perception, decision-making skills, odds/randomness and probability, gambling self-assessment, and minimizing negative con-

* Community partners include: the Responsible Gambling Council (Ontario), the Substance Abuse Program for African Canadian and Caribbean Youth, the YMCA Youth Gambling Project, St. Stephen’s Community Centre, and Davenport-Perth Neighbourhood Centre.
sequences (Table III). In addition, there is an ethical commitment to ensure that resources are available for those youth who have identified a problem. A telephone in each location provides phone numbers for two organizations that youth can contact (Kids Help Phone and the Ontario Gambling Helpline) if they have concerns about their own gambling or someone else’s gambling behaviour. A range of information on gambling, including the gambling industry, and statistics has been embedded throughout the site. This is intended to help youth have a better understanding of the gambling phenomena and related issues.

The evaluation of YouthBet.Net includes usability testing every 12 months. The aim is to investigate what youth think of the site’s design, layout, navigation, graphical interface, and the interactive way content is presented in games and quizzes. This paper presents results from the first three phases. Usability studies do not examine how the site may affect or change gambling attitudes or behaviour.

**Participants**

A general rule in usability testing is that 5 participants will unearth 80% of issues.20,21 Recent literature suggests that more than 5 participants are needed.22,23 Accordingly, our study recruited 34 youth in three phases:

- **Phase I (2003):** 8 youth (5 male, 3 female) aged 17-22 years
- **Phase II (2004):** 13 (8 male, 5 female) aged 13-19 years
- **Phase III (2005):** 13 youth (6 male, 7 female) aged 13-19 years.

The 2003 youth were recruited through the YouthBet project. In 2004 and 2005, a recruitment company in Toronto recruited participants, targeting those aged 13-22 years; approximately even numbers of males and females; various ethnic and cultural backgrounds; living in diverse socioeconomic neighbourhoods in Toronto. Participants were compensated $20-$30, depending on age, and refreshments were provided. Youth were required to sign a consent form and in Phase Two and Three, parents of youth under the age of 18 years were also required to sign a consent form. In Phase One, parental consent was not required as the youth organization had parental consent for the youth to participate in organization activities. An ethics protocol was approved by the Human Subjects Ethics Review Committee, University of Toronto.

**Video capture of user site interaction**

*Video Capture of User Site Interaction* methodology is based on a technique used by Eysenbeck and Kohler24 and Hansen et al.25 It is accomplished via a small electronic device connected between the computer’s video card and monitor, and provides a video signal recorded onto a standard

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**TABLE II**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy: Health Promotion</th>
<th>Intervention: Time Management</th>
<th>Tools</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Concept</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Risk Perception</td>
<td>Time of Your Life</td>
<td>Risky Business</td>
<td>Promote balanced time management in relation to gambling and other activities</td>
<td>Contemplation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money Management</td>
<td>Lets Spend Your Money</td>
<td></td>
<td>Explore the concept of risk and the individual perception of risk</td>
<td>Decision balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision-making Skills</td>
<td>1. Wanna Bet scenarios</td>
<td></td>
<td>Simulate gambling in a safe environment where youth can choose whether or not to gamble their money</td>
<td>Susceptibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. To Change or Not to Change</td>
<td></td>
<td>Highlight decisions and consequences of gambling in three main areas: relationships, money/valuable and personal feelings</td>
<td>Sevency</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Primary Prevention**

- Odds/Randomness and Probability: Odds/Randomness and Probability
  - Demonstrate and teach the principles of odds/randomness and probability
  - Precontemplation
  - Consciousness raising
  - Capability

**Secondary Prevention**

- Self-assessment (SOGS-RA): Are You At Risk?
  - Provide youth with the opportunity to assess their level of gambling and their risk of developing gambling problems
  - Contemplation
  - Preparation
  - Action
  - Susceptibility
  - Self-efficacy

**Harm Reduction**

- Minimizing Negative Consequences:
  - If you gamble, do it safely and in low-risk settings
  - Provide tips and information for people concerned about their own gambling or someone else’s gambling
  - Action
  - Capability
  - Self-efficacy

**Linkages to Treatment Resources (Referral)**

- Ontario Problem Gambling Helpline & Kid’s Help Phone
  - Provide resources that youth can contact if they are concerned about their gambling or someone else’s gambling
  - Action
  - Capability
  - Self-efficacy

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* Health Belief Model (Strecher and Rosenstock, 1997)
† Theory of Reasoned Action/Planned Behavior (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen, 1991)
‡ Social Learning/Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1997; Baranowski, Perry and Parcel, 1997)
§ Self Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000)
|| Transtheoretical Model (Prochaska, DiClemente and Norcross; 1992)
Participants were asked to work through a demo section of the site while they surfed YouthBet.net. A ‘think aloud protocol’ was used where participants were asked to narrate what they were thinking and doing as they surfed the site. Video and audio data of the users’ voices to be recorded on the videotape as they surf the site. A ‘think aloud protocol’ was used where participants were asked to narrate what they were thinking and doing while they surfed YouthBet.net. Participants were asked to work through 12 questions and scenarios related to all major sections of the site.

Participants were interviewed one-on-one for 15–20 minutes post surfing to ascertain what they thought of site design, navigation, engagement and appeal, relevance, and satisfaction with the website. They were required to complete a demographic and Internet usage survey before they started, and a short satisfaction survey after. Video and audio data of the users’ site surfing experience were analyzed as one data set. Interviews were analyzed separately using a simple thematic analysis process. Preliminary results from all sources were combined according to major themes using an inductive qualitative approach.

**OUTCOMES**

A synopsis of main findings is given in Table IV. Over the 3 phases of the process evaluation of YouthBet.net, all 34 youth recruited for the usability testing completed the required tasks. Participants had no difficulties navigating the site, finding content and playing games. Youth indicated that they liked the interactive way gambling information was presented via realistic games and quizzes: “I think [the quizzes and games]... gave me a little more information other than just reading some of the facts... This was a little more realistic”. They had no difficulties with the navigation systems, both menu-based and graphical, and felt the design, layout and content were appropriate and appealing. Participants said it was not the type of site they would surf for fun, but indicated they would recommend it to a friend and would return to YouthBet.net if they needed information, had a problem, or knew someone with a gambling problem: “Well, if I knew people were having problems with gambling, then sure I would recommend this site, because it gives a lot of information about gambling... Like the games, showed me a lot”.

Participants felt like they learned something about gambling on the website. They said that there was a lot of information on the site, that the games were a fun way of learning, and that they learned where to go...
ENGAGING YOUTH ABOUT GAMBLING

TABLE IV
Key Findings From Usability Analyses

Overall Site
- Liked the interactive way gambling information was presented via realistic games and quizzes.
- Felt the design was fun and educational if used by teachers in a classroom.
- Said they would return to YouthBet.net and that they would recommend it to a friend.

Quizzes
- Felt registration for the games and quizzes was not a deterrent for playing and the video data showed that the majority of participants had no difficulties registering.
- Understood the purpose of the Slots game and said that the game made them feel bad when they were losing lots of money.
- Liked the interactivity, the graphics and colours of the quizzes. However, all of the participants liked Risky Business over Are You At Risk? (based on SOGS-RA). This finding identified an area that the designers will be working on in the future.
- Indicated that they learned something about gambling from the YouthBet website; that the site contained a lot of useful information; that the games were a fun way of learning; and that they now knew where to go for help if they need it.

Participants indicated that: they learned something about gambling from the YouthBet website; the site contained a lot of useful information; the games were a fun way of learning; and they now know where to go for help if they need it. “I definitely learned a thing or two. I never really thought of all that as gambling. Like even just making a little bet with something. I thought there was a lot of information that would be useful.”; “It made it very easy to see what types of gambling problems there are, where you could go for help, what risks or signs to look for. It did help if someone wanted that information.”

When asked whether they thought the YouthBet website will have an influence on their gambling behaviour, many commented that it had either made them realize they gambled too much, or helped to increase their awareness around what gambling is. “It’s made me more aware of what gambling is. That betting someone to do something is considered gambling I guess.”

Phase Three concentrated on the quizzes and games. Overwhelmingly, the youth liked the interactivity of the site, including the graphics and colours of the quizzes. However, the participants liked Risky Business over Are You At Risk? (based on SOGS-RA). This finding identified an area that the designers will be working on in the future: “The other one [Are You At Risk] was more plain...So, it wasn’t really appealing.”

Participants indicated that: they learned something about gambling from the YouthBet website; the site contained a lot of useful information; the games were a fun way of learning; and they now know where to go for help if they need it. “It made it very easy to see what types of gambling problems there are, where you could go for help, what risks or signs to look for.”

One of the main aims of the usability testing is to identify navigation, design, layout, technical and functionality issues. The two main findings were that registration for the games and quizzes was not a deterrent for playing, and the majority of participants had no difficulties registering – an improvement over previous phases wherein some youth had difficulty registering. Video data showed that the participants had no problem playing the Slots game and they understood the purpose of the game. Several commented that the game made them feel bad when they were losing lots of money. Participants liked the quizzes but had suggestions for improvement: a) reducing the number of questions in ‘Are You At Risk?’; b) indicating how many questions are in each quiz so that the users know before they start; c) simplifying the result tables; d) repositioning ‘next’ buttons; and e) rewording results pages so that participants can easily distinguish between their actual results and the professional opinion based on their results.

DISCUSSION

YouthBet.net represents one of the first comprehensive websites designed for youth gambling. Its uniqueness lies in its public health approach that addresses the continuum of youth gambling behaviour inter-
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