Underage Players – Keeping them out and Keeping your Reputation
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BBC news recently reported a study conducted by NCH[1], GamCare[2] and CitizenCard[3] where a sixteen year old girl was able to successfully register play-for-real accounts on many gambling websites by using her Solo[4] card and falsifying her age during the online registration process. The study covered gambling websites based both in the UK and in offshore jurisdictions such as Alderney and Gibraltar. Not surprisingly, the study caused a great embarrassment to many well-known UK names.

This is not necessarily a bad situation. It should be recognized that these types of studies are very important for the gambling industry, and they should be treated as welcome and positive. Any form of problem gambling is bad for business, as it draws negative attention to the industry as a whole, and studies such as this give us the means to identify and act upon problem gambling.

Some would suggest that the issue stemming from this study is that underage players can obtain credit or debit cards. On the contrary, the more relevant concern is that many gambling websites are not employing identity verification systems to check the age of these cardholders, thus allowing underage players to register play-for-real accounts.

Identity verification systems can come in many forms. The most common solution among socially responsible gambling website operators is to make use of readily available third-party systems, such as Experian[5] and VerifyME[6]. These systems work by searching available governmental and financial database records to find evidence that the personal information submitted by the player during the account registration process corresponds to correct known values. For example, evidence such as a credit rating or inclusion in an electoral role will prove that the player is of the required age.

It is true that identity verification systems are not 100% effective. No individual system can ever be perfect, but there are ways to improve the effectiveness of the overall process. Many operators have chosen to make use of multiple identity verification systems to simultaneously search for falsified information during player account registration. One system could potentially pick up on something that the other has missed, and if both systems pick up on the same problem (which is most likely to be the case) then so much the better.

So how do we ensure that gambling website operators employ identity verification systems? The answer is regulation. A socially responsible jurisdiction should have in place regulatory standards requiring gambling to be conducted in a manner that is fair, safe, secure and auditable, and these standards should address issues such as underage gambling. A minimum age for account registration should be stipulated and strictly enforced by the regulatory body. Finally, a testing regime should be put in place to verify that operators have correctly designed and implemented their gambling websites, including their identity verification systems.

Operators in respected jurisdictions surely do not intend to grant play-for-real accounts to underage players; however, best intentions are not enough. This is why regulation is so critical for any respected jurisdiction.

To date, regulated jurisdictions such as Alderney[7] have been highly successful in keeping out underage players. The study conducted by NCH, GamCare and CitizenCard cited only seven gambling websites that successfully rejected the underage player; four of which operate from the jurisdiction of Alderney. In fact, every online casino hosted from the jurisdiction of Alderney was cited as having rejected the underage player.
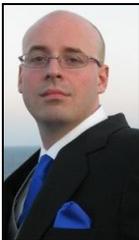
When operators implement identify verification systems to comply with regulatory age requirements, gambling websites can in many ways become more effective than land-based casinos at rejecting underage players. Unlike land-based casinos, identity verification systems cannot be fooled by players that look or act older than they really are. The online registration process ensures that each and every player is checked for their identity before they are allowed to begin wagering. In addition, gambling websites maintain detailed electronic logs of each player's wagering activity, ensuring that repudiation is possible in the event that it is required.

In summary, it is in the best interest of the operator and Jurisdiction alike to detect any underage players attempting to register with the gambling websites and deny them an account. The meagre profits that could be realized from a handful of underage players pales in comparison to the risk of bad publicity and the potential to jeopardize the operator's gaming license, not to mention the reputation of the industry as a whole.

Footnotes

[1] National Children's Home (NCH), a leading children's charity, runs more than 500 projects for UK's most vulnerable children, young people and their families, and in doing so supports over 140,000 people. For further information visit www.nch.org.uk.

[2] GamCare, a leading authority on the social impact of gambling, is a registered charity and has a commitment to promote responsible attitudes to gambling and to work for the provision of proper care for those who have been harmed by gambling dependency. For further information visit www.gamcare.org.uk.

[3] CitizenCard is a non-profit identity scheme, which offers anyone a Home Office-recognized ID card. CitizenCard's 'interactiveAgeCheck' accredits websites that authenticate the age and ID of their users. For further information visit www.citizencard.com.

[4] Solo is part of the Switch Card Scheme, one of the world's leading domestic payment systems. Like its sister card Switch, Solo is a fully electronic debit card. However, with Solo every transaction is authorized, so cardholders can only spend what is available in their account. For further information visit www.solocard.co.uk.

[5] Experian offers an automated online software package for identity verification. For further information visit www.experian.com.

[6] VerifyME is an age and identity verification service that integrates a government-issued ID database check, algorithms and web-based signature capture. For further information visit www.verifymyidentification.com.

[7] Alderney's Internet gambling operations are regulated by the Alderney Gambling Control Commission (AGCC). For further information visit http://www.gamblingcontrol.org.

Bio

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