

Impact advertising has on problem gambling media essay



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The role of advertising as a possible stimulus of gambling and contributor to problem gambling has been the subject of a great deal of speculation in recent years. There are claims from various lobby groups that advertising has both contributed to a widespread cultural acceptance of gambling and that it creates unrealistic hopes of winning that may trigger a gambling addiction (Griffiths, 2005). Despite concerns, new laws to de-regulate the advertising of the gambling industry came into effect in September 2007. These position gambling and gaming as a part of leisure activity (Powell & Tapp, 2009) and for the first time permit gambling operators to advertise on television. The early adverts appearing after deregulation positioned gambling as a social norm, highlighting it as both popular and fun. In recognition of the potential detrimental consequences of gambling liberalisation, this paper seeks to investigate the current advertising practices in the gambling industry and how the messages and images, contained within them, key into the motivational factors known to perpetuate problem gambling. A review of the extant empirical evidence documenting the role of advertising on gambling behaviours is included, with a special focus on the impact on pathological and youth gambling.

Why people gamble

Gambling is the process of placing something of value, most commonly money, at risk in the hopes of gaining something of greater value (Bellegarde & Potenza, 2010). For as long as people have been gambling, some have persisted in gambling despite experiencing serious adverse consequences related to their gambling. For example, archaeological evidence suggests that Mayans (~3500 years ago) continued to gamble

despite losing their property and wagering their wives and children (Hill & Clark, 2001). This excessive gambling is now classified as a psychiatric disorder, known as pathological gambling, which is a progressive and chronic disorder that encompasses an unrelenting failure to resist impulses to gamble and where this “maladaptive behaviour disrupts, or damages personal, family or vocational pursuits” (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Studies of gamblers and pathological gamblers have not identified a consistent motive to start serious gambling (Murray, 1993) although several factors are implicated in the literature: demonstrating ones worth, getting approval and social acceptance from others, rebelling, relieving negative and painful events/emotions (eg: anger, depression, frustration and anxiety), hoping to win, participation due to social reasons, trying to beat the odds, participating in a favourable activity and to experience excitement (eg to reduce boredom), passing time and having fun (for review see Raylu & Oei, 2002). Consensus among researchers is that certain personality traits, such as sensation seeking and impulsivity, may act as risk factors for the development of pathological gambling. In addition, evidence suggests that irrational thinking plays a significant role, with gamblers holding a set of false and erroneous beliefs that help to maintain their gambling behaviours despite heavy losses. Summarised in table 1, these fall into two categories: believing they can influence the outcome of the game or believing they can correctly predict the outcome (Toneatto, 1999). Considerable new evidence suggests a neurobiological aetiology for pathological gambling, including hemispheric abnormalities and dysfunctional neurotransmitter systems (for review see Bellegarde & Potenza, 2010).

Table 1. Gambling relevant cognitive distortions (taken from Toneatto, 1999)

Type of cognitive distortion**Definition/example**

Magnification of gambling skills and minimization of other gambler's skills

Overestimation of one's own ability to win and underestimating other's ability to win

Superstitious beliefs

Talismanic

Behavioural

Cognitive

Obtaining ways to manipulate gambling outcomes

Possession of certain object such as rabbit's foot

Specific action or ritual

Certain mental states such as prayer or having a positive attitude

Interpretive biases

Internal/external attributions

Gambler's fallacy

Reframed losses

Hindsight bias

Attributing successes to one's own skill and failures to others influences or luck

Expecting that series of losses will be corrected by series of wins

Believing that engaging in more frequent involvement, increased persistence and elevated monetary risk might recoup lost money.

Appraising gambling decisions as correct or incorrect based on whether they result in wins or losses (i. e., deciding that a gambling choice was correct since they actually did win, thus, strengthening their beliefs that they are skilled gamblers and have the ability to predict wins). Losses may be reframed in hindsight as an outcome which the gambler could have predicted and, thus, avoided

Temporal telescoping

Believing that wins are actually nearer – may lead them to sit at one machine for hours, believing that they are going to eventually win

Selective memory

Recalling wins more easily than losses and thus expecting to win at games where they have lost previously

Predictive skill

Believing that they have the skill of making accurate predictions regarding gambling based on salient cues (e. g.: weather)

Illusion of control over luck

Luck as an uncontrollable variable

Luck as a controllable variable

Luck as a trait variable

Luck as a contagion

Believing that luck fluctuates between periods of good and bad and cannot be manipulated directly so they wait for periods of good luck

Believing luck can be manipulated by superstitious beliefs

Believing that they are good at only some games (they may deduce that luck from a series of prominent wins at an unfamiliar game)

Interpreting good luck or success in other areas of life as signs that they will also success at gambling. They may also believe other gamblers affect their luck and, thus, avoid gamblers that are loosing

Illusory correlations

Perceiving illusory correlations and assigning causality to salient features of environment that they feel correlate with gambling outcomes (e. g. Gamble only when they think they are likely to win)

Both the 1999 and 2006 prevalence surveys classified 0.6% of the UK adult population as pathological gamblers (Sproston, Erens, & Orford, 2000; Wardle, Sproston, Orford, Erens, & Griffiths, 2007). Moodie and Hastings (2008) however suggest that a low response rate results in an under estimation of the true figure. Moreover, as the negative consequences of problem gambling typically extend to at least 5 significant others and also the community at large, pathological gambling remains an important, if somewhat overlooked societal concern (Gordon & Moodie, 2009).

Although most forms of gambling are restricted to adults, increasing evidence suggests younger people also involved in gambling activities. Research from Canada, the US, the UK, Norway and Australia shows that 63-82% of teenagers gamble each year, 4-7% of adolescents exhibit serious patterns of pathological gambling and 10-15% are at risk for developing or returning to pathological gambling (Delfabbro & Thrupp, 2003; Monaghan, Derevensky, & Sklar, 2008; Johansson & Gotestam, 2003). The high rates of problem gambling among young people, significantly higher than the adult population, are of particular concern from both the strong associations found between problem gambling and other maladaptive behaviours and research suggesting pathological gambling behaviours typically develop during teenage years. Ironically, in a recent study of Canadian youth, gambling was not even thought of as risky, ranking below hitchhiking alone, cheating on a test, dating on the internet, shoplifting and skipping work (D-Code Inc, 2006 taken from McMullan & Miller, 2010).

Gambling advertisements in the media

The advertising of the gambling industry goes well beyond the common marketing modalities of television, radio and print ads. Its high profile includes sponsorship of professional athletes, sports teams, celebrities and popular public events (Friend & Ladd, 2009). Additional to direct advertising, gambling is more openly included than in the past in the cinema, television and books. It is generally projected in a positive light in which fantastic wins, happy endings, success, entertainment and attractive living predominate (Turner, Fritz, & Zangeneh, 2007; McMullan & Miller, 2010). According to the cultivation theory, excessive exposure to media messages cultivates attitudes consistent with the media-projected version of reality (McQuail & Windahl, 1993). Similarly, it has been suggested that the advertising of gambling has an impact on the beliefs and behaviours of individuals towards gambling as well as attitudes towards seeking help for gambling problems. In the remainder of this section I shall discuss current theories of what the impact of these issues could be and in the following section detail the existing empirical evidence supporting these claims.

It is generally assumed that advertising contributes to the prevalence of pathological gambling by increasing the exposure to and availability of gambling (Hastings, Anderson, Cooke, & Gordon, 2005). The two principal effects of these in turn are: (1) the recruitment of new players, some of whom are subject to pathological gambling and (2) the intensification of established gambling habits (see Binde, 2007). Indirectly supporting this is a study by Grun and McKeigue (2000), in which it was found that the introduction of the UK national lottery had led to a significant increase in the

incidence of excessive gambling, as defined as spending more than 10 per cent of household income per week on gambling in low-income households. An additional aspect of gambling advertising that the messages it contains can mirror many of the motivational factors and/or cognitive distortions associated with pathological gambling. As Landman & Petty (2000) suggested in the context of lottery gambling, "marketing stimulates and exploits counterfactual thinking to get customers' attention, change their thinking, and arouse their emotions, all in the service of inducing them to do what they perhaps would otherwise not do, that is buy lottery tickets". The reader is referred to three recent and very comprehensive Canadian studies (McMullan and Miller, 2008; McMullan and Miller, 2009; McMullan and Miller, 2010) that discuss these factors in detail, though for completeness a brief summary is included below:

Overconfidence in ones owns skill – The majority (53%) of adverts exaggerated skill over luck. For example one ad contained the quote "to heck with luck...this game is about skill" while another contained "luck can't explain why final tables have so many familiar faces."

Sensation-seeking personality – The advertisement theme often emphasised excitement, such as "enjoy new thrills everyday all summer long" and "we play to bluff, to bamboozle, beat, and beguile; to dupe and delude; to suck in, sabotage, trap and track; to hook and hoax; to fake, feign and fool; and do it all against the best"

Normalisation of the gambling experience- 50% of advertisements depicted gambling as a routine and common rather than an occasional leisure or

entertainment event. For example, one advert likened gambling to buying groceries.

The association between continuous play and winning – Messages such as, “keep scratching”, “but there’s always another hand” and “if you practise enough you can play like Joe Hasham (a professional poker player)” imply a link between continuous play and higher chances of winning.

Escapism- 27% promoted gambling as a reprieve from the everyday world of work, family and responsibility. Here phrases like “hassle free”, “no commitment”, “free and easy” and “play your way to paradise” evinced a place where one removed oneself from the subordination of others, escaped into a time free from the dullness and repetition of daily tasks and enjoyed honour, fame and fortune

Misrepresentation of the odds of winning – Phrases such as, “the more you visit, the better your chances” and “odds of having a great time are definitely in your favour” promote irrational beliefs about the chances of winning. Yet, less than 5% of ads offered odds of winning and none provided cautionary warnings related to risk and harm.

Impulsivity – Many adds contained impulsive messages such as “play for team Canada...your country need you”

In addition to the short term impacts, Binde (2007) warns that gambling advertising may have long term social impacts. Advertising is often regarded as a powerful influence on social attitudes and values, typically in an undesirable way by influencing selfishness, materialism and irrationality. In

this respect gambling advertising is assumed to reinforce: the idea that money brings happiness, the thinking that easy money is preferable to hard work and the general perception that gambling is a perfectly normal and acceptable form of entertainment for everyone. It is argued that the consequence of these social impacts make pathological gambling more prevalent.

Although most legal systems prohibit minors from taking part in most regulated forms of gambling, the resources and perhaps motivation to control underage gambling are limited, and young people are increasingly exposed to messages from a broad range of media which endorse, promote, and glamorise gambling. While the industry denies that gambling advertising and promotions target young people, there is contrary evidence which makes this look doubtful. For example in the USA, the Maryland State Lottery launched a new lottery ticket that offered I-Tune® gift cards and downloadable access codes for free music (Lenhart & Madden, 2005). This is worrying, not only due to the aforementioned link between adolescent gambling and the development of pathological gambling, but also because youth appear to be particularly vulnerable to the effects of advertising. A range of studies have documented that young children do not understand the influences in advertising (John, 1999; Strasburger, 2001). Young children (below 8) typically view advertising as fun and entertaining and do not consider the possible biases of the information presented. A recent comprehensive analysis of gambling marketing published by Monaghan, Derevensky, & Sklar (2008), highlights several areas that may impact on the gambling behaviours of children and adolescents. These include the use of

humour, bright and flashy images, celebrity endorsements, provocative females and company branded merchandise (eg: hats and t-shirts) (Derevensky, Gupta, Messerlian, & Mansour, 2009). According to the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) of persuasion indirect forms of advertising such as in-store promotions, use of celebrities and promotional items influence consumers through automatic, minimally attentive processes, which may be even more effective than more directive strategies at associating products with images or good times. A study of sixth grade children (11-12) found that the odds of drinking alcohol were nearly double for those who owned items that advertised alcohol even after controlling for other variables (Collins, Ellickson, McCaffrey, & Hambarsoomians, 2007); it is likely that these findings would extrapolate to gambling. Additionally, advertisements that contain messages inferring that gambling can lead to a happier lifestyle are likely to be attractive to teenagers who are often thought to be in a transitional developmental period between childhood and adulthood and are typically searching for their identity and sexuality. This is recognised as stressful period of life where escape and fantasy help relieve feelings of inadequacy. Adolescents are also attempting to engage in more adult-type behaviours which makes them particularly vulnerable to advertising messages. Monaghan et al. (2008) also draws attention to the use of practice websites which inflate payout rates relative to the standard money sites (Sevigny, Coutier, Pelletier, & Ladouceur, 2005). Young people accustomed to winning readily switch to money sites, where they do not experience the same success. Use of the practice websites have been referred to as a “ Trojan Horse Strategy” used by gambling sites to lure in potential new gamers (Moses, 2006); a notion bolstered by a recent study <https://assignbuster.com/impact-advertising-has-on-problem-gambling-media-essay/>

sampling British young adult gamers, in which 21% cited practice games as their primary reason for use of online gambling (Griffiths & Barnes, 2007).

Empirical evidence for the impact of gambling advertising on gambling behaviours

It is widely acknowledged that the media have a powerful effect on peoples' behaviours and attitudes and that to capture attention, convey positive attitudes towards the product, and encourage the messages espoused is the objective of any commercial advertisement. (Monaghan, Derevensky, & Sklar, 2008). Although there are few academic studies that have investigated the effects of advertising on gambling behaviour a small number of questionnaire based studies has documented an impact. For example, several studies have reported that people who gamble more than average recall seeing more gambling advertising than others do (Abbott, Williams, & Volber, 1999; Amey, 2001; Carlson & Moore, 1998; Stranahan & O'Malley-Borg, 1998). It is not clear whether this covariance is because those who inadvertently view gambling advertising are persuaded to gamble more than the average or are preferentially interested in gambling hence more attentive to such advertising. Other studies asked respondents how they have been influenced by gambling advertising. For example, in a sample of American clinically assessed pathological gamblers 46% reported that the urge to gamble was triggered by advertising on billboards, television and radio (Grant & Kim, 2001). No other phenomenon was identified as a trigger to that extent. Similar results were reported in a study of Canadian female gamblers who had concerns about their gambling but were not in treatment (Boughton & Brewster, 2002) and recently, Griffith and Barnes (2007)

reported that 40% of British young adult online gamblers did so as a result of advertising. On the other hand several Canadian studies were unable to confirm that advertising is a trigger for pathological gambling (Hodgins & el-Guebaly, 2004; Hodgins & Peden, 2005). This was also apparent in a limited correlation was reported in a recent study in Sweden, Binde (2009) that qualitatively explored the impact of gambling advertising on problem gambling by interviewing current or past problem gamblers following the viewing of numerous examples of gambling advertisements. A quarter of the participants reported that gambling advertising had no impact on their problems; slightly over half of them reported that advertising had a marginal impact and one fifth reported a tangible impact. It is important to note that none considered advertising to be the primary cause of their gambling problem. However, these advertisements appeared to serve as triggers to continue gambling and were perceived to be a deterrent to their decision to gamble less or stop gambling. It is worth noting that the above studies, in which participants were asked to assess the impact of advertising on their propensity to gamble, might have several limitations. It is not clear to what extent the method of self-assessment identifies actual influence on gambling behaviour. Psychological research has shown that advertising influences people such that they are largely unaware of the imposed suggestion. It has been proposed that the most effective influence occurs when the subject in question is consciously attending to the intent of the advertisement. In an effort to curb their habit by avoidance, problem gamblers may accentuate attention to gambling advertising. Thus gamblers tend to report a greater exposure to gambling advertisements than non-gamblers.

Another limitation is that the admission of being easily influenced by persuasive messages has many negative connotations and participants may, therefore, rate the influence of such messages to be higher on others than on themselves. This phenomenon, known as the third person effect, has been documented in the perceived influence of gambling advertising (Yuon, Faber, & Shah, 2000). When respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement that lottery advertisements had a powerful effect on them and others. The mean score reported on impact to self was 2.09 compared to 3.78 for impact on others; thus, individuals considered lottery advertising to have a smaller effect on themselves than the rest of the population.

Econometric evidence demonstrates a similarly divided body of findings on the impact of advertising on gambling sales. Zhang (2004) reported that advertising impacted lottery sales directly in three American states; a 1% increase in advertising spending had an increase in product sales of between 0.1% and 0.24% (reference taken from Binde, 2007). Conversely a similar study, in the state of Colorado, found no significant effect of TV and radio advertising on lottery sales (Heinens, 1999). It is likely that conflicting results such as these may result from differences in advertising efficiency. A saying in the advertising industry is that “only half of advertising works, but we don’t know which half” (see Binde, 2007).

So the literature suggests that there are no compelling statistics on the perpetuation of problem gambling by advertising in adults. However, a strong reported relationship exists between youth gambling and advertising.

Adolescents are frequently exposed to gambling advertisements most often
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through television (96%), followed closely by the internet (93%), whilst advertisements on billboards, in newspapers and magazines are also commonly accessed (Derevensky, Sklar, Gupta, Messerlian, Laroche, & Mansour, 2007; Felsher, Derevensky, & Gupta, 2004). The primary messages of these advertisements are perceived to be that gambling leads to winning and that it is fun, enjoyable and part of a worry-free and entertaining lifestyle, requiring none of the real efforts of school (Derevensky et al., 2007). Worryingly, several studies indicate that gambling advertisements appear to have a significant influence on young people. Wood and Griffiths (2001) report that the views younger people held about gambling were radically changed by high levels of advertising. Derevensky et al. (2007) found that 42% of youth report that gambling advertisements make them want to try gambling and 61% imagine or dream about what they could buy with their winnings and an earlier study found 39% of adolescents would be more likely to purchase a lottery ticket after viewing an advertisement (Felsher, Derevensky, & Gupta, 2004). Additionally, primary school children shown a videotaped model winning in a gambling activity took significantly more risks when they played than those shown a losing player (Tremblay, Huffman, & Drabman, 1998). Recently, Derevensky, Sklar, Gupta and Messerlian (2010) examined the effect of advertising on youth already experiencing gambling problems. They made three key observations: (1) A large percentage of youth report that gambling advertising prompt them to gamble, (2) The more severe the gambling problem the greater exposure to gambling advertisements and (3) Individuals experiencing gambling problems were more vulnerable to the suggestions to keep playing and that success is imminent. Rather than promoting the initiation of gambling for

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non-gamblers, gambling advertisements served the function of maintaining and reinforcing established gambling habits, beliefs and behaviours, reinforcing the recently reported results by Binde (2009) with adult pathological gamblers in treatment.

Discussion

In summary, the advertising of the gambling industry comprises a complex assemblage of communication styles and messages that may encourage many of the misconceptions and distorted cognitions held by problem gamblers. Yet, sufficient empirical evidence to confirm a direct impact of advertising on the prevalence of pathological gambling is lacking at present. Some studies report that pathological gamblers recall being exposed to more gambling advertisements, while others indicate that pathological gamblers are influenced more by advertising than non-problem gamblers and this may contribute to their excessive gambling by thwarting their efforts to cut down. On the other hand, others document that advertising has little or no impact. As Binde (2007) sums up, “on the basis of available factors, it can be inferred that advertising indeed increases the prevalence of problem gambling but its effect is less than those of other factors”. A worrying picture, however, is emerging in respect to the effect gambling advertising has on young people. Although gambling advertisements do not directly target children, they often contain images and styles that promote youthfulness and connect with the mindset of young people. Research into this field is still limited, but initial findings indicate that such advertisements may play a role in initiating and maintaining problematic gambling behaviours in adolescents. Therefore, despite the paucity of extant

literature, the government should heed the warning that gambling advertising could have a sizable impact on pathological gambling and, therefore, society as a whole.

Given the recent lifting of restrictions on gambling advertising, there is a pressing need for critical research into the its effects on gambling behaviours; research that is not bound by the serious methodological limitations and that brings to light the precise aspects of the advertising that cause the most harm. This should enable appropriate legislation to come in that attenuates the perpetuation of pathological gambling by advertising without reducing the revenue stream derived from gambling taxation. In this regard, Monaghan et al. (2008) outline several guidelines to regulate the gambling advertising and protect the vulnerable population from harm. Research on alcohol consumption confirms the beneficial effects that advertising restrictions can have on drink related problems (Hacker & Stuart, 1995; Saffer & Dave, 2002). However, given the pervasive nature of gambling in the media, it will be difficult to limit gambling exposure effectively. Some watershed restrictions are in place in the UK, with many forms of advertising banned before 9pm. Yet, campaigns for bingo and the National Lottery are permitted and it is warned that these exceptions only promote the message that certain forms of gambling are acceptable, thus undermining attempts to raise awareness about the possible detrimental impacts of gambling (Monaghan et al., 2008). Rather than shielding children and problem gamblers from exposure to gambling products and premises, Gordon and Moodie (2009) propose the use of social marketing to shift the public perception of gambling. They recommend a campaign that both

frames gambling as a public health issue and corrects the many misperceptions regarding gambling, including expenditure and the true odds of winning. Such a campaign is already in existence in New Zealand, known as the 'Kiwi Lives' campaign, and initial evaluation suggest that it can be effective. However, Gordon and Moodie (2009) highlight many challenges facing the implementation of something similar in the UK, largely based on the lack of money earmarked for the prevention or minimisation of pathological gambling.