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Exploring the Impact of Gambling Advertising: An Interview Study of Problem Gamblers

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Abstract *This study qualitatively explored the impact of gambling advertising on problem gambling by interviewing twenty-five people with current or past gambling problems. Interviews were relatively long and involved the participants' viewing numerous examples of gambling advertising. 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. However, none considered advertising to be a main cause of their gambling problems. The negative self-perceived impact was primarily that advertising triggered impulses to gamble. Advertising thus increased already high involvement in gambling and/or made it harder to stick to a decision to gamble less or not at all.*

Keywords Problem gambling, Advertising, Media, Addiction, Conditioning

Introduction

In Sweden, the issue of gambling advertising is often brought up when problem gambling is discussed. On one hand, it is claimed that advertising contributes substantially to problem gambling; this argument has an intuitive appeal since there is plenty of such advertising and anyone who followed all these exhortations to gamble would certainly do so excessively. On the other hand, it is claimed that those addicted to gambling play excessively because of their pathological urges and not because of any messages in mass media. The ethics of state-owned companies heavily promoting gambling is also discussed, as well as whether or not gambling advertising should be more strictly regulated. Gambling advertising is a controversial issue in other countries as well, such as Great Britain (Griffiths 2005), Canada (Poulin 2006), and the U.S.A. (Clotfelter and Cook 1989; Gehring 1999; Jones 2001; Shenk 1995).

Little is known, however, of the actual impact of gambling advertising on problem gambling (Binde 2007a; Griffiths 2005). From a marketing perspective, it is evident that all gambling advertising aims to make people engage more in specific gambling activities or in gambling with the company promoted. Some advertising is likely to be successful, especially if new games, attractive offers, and big payouts are presented. People can be induced to play more than usual and try games that they have not played before. However, not all advertising increases sales relative to some earlier point in time, especially not on a mature market in which media space already is dense with promotional messages; advertisers may be content with simply maintaining the volume of sales. Furthermore, some advertising, in particular that for Internet gambling, aims primarily to attract customers from other companies rather than to induce neophytes to try a specific game or old customers to play more. Such advertising may thus be considered successful by specific companies, even if the total turnaround in a sector of the gambling market is constant or even decreasing. Thus, common knowledge in marketing tells us that it is far from evident that all gambling advertising will make people play more, thereby affecting the prevalence of problem gambling—assuming, that is, that the total consumption model is valid for gambling (Lund 2008).

There appear to be no population studies of the impact of gambling advertising on problem gambling, which is not surprising since such studies seem very difficult to carry out (Binde 2007a). The effect of advertising on the sales of gambling products must be measured over time and compared with variations in the prevalence of problem gambling, taking into account the volumes of advertising for different gambling activities, the relative riskiness of these activities in terms of creating and sustaining gambling problems, and controlling for all other factors that might affect the prevalence of gambling problems.

Some quantitative studies have found a connection between positive attitude towards gambling and relatively high recall of having seen gambling advertising (Amey 2001; Carlson and Moore 1998; Clotfelter and Cook 1989; Lee et al. 2008; Miller and Mizerski 1998; Stranahan and O'Malley Borg 1998). Such studies, however, say little about causality: it may be that attitudes are formed by viewing advertising, but it may as well be that those who already have a positive attitude towards gambling pay more attention to gambling advertising and therefore are more likely to recall having seen it.

A few quantitative studies include examination of self-perceived advertising impact among problem gamblers (Boughton and Brewster 2002; Grant and Kim 2001) and among problem gamblers versus non-problem gamblers (Bonke 2007; Jonsson et al. 2003). The results of these studies, which will be further discussed below, indicate that problem gamblers report being more stimulated to gamble by advertising than do non-problem gamblers. However, far from all problem gamblers included in the studies report advertising having a significant impact on the extent of their gambling. For example, a Swedish study found that only 5% of those who had ever had a gambling problem (and 3% of those who had never had one) reported that they had been influenced “quite a lot” or “very much” by gambling advertising (Jonsson et al. 2003).

The Present Study

The study presented here qualitatively explored the impact of gambling advertising on problem gambling by interviewing people with a current or past gambling problem. It was assumed that problem gamblers can to some extent tell what influence gambling advertising has had on their problems. No similar study seems to have previously been conducted.

In 2005–2006, 25 individuals were recruited from two self-help organizations for problem gamblers and two treatment centers specializing in problem gambling. Twenty of the participants were men and five were women, which corresponds well to the proportions of men and women among Swedish problem gamblers, 78.5% and 21.5%, respectively (Rönnerberg et al. 1999). Twenty-one of the participants had quit gambling recently or in past years, while four still gambled. Six individuals had mainly had problems with slot machines, four with casino gambling, two with Internet poker, two with horse betting, two with bingo, two with sports betting, one with Internet casinos, one with live poker, and five with many kinds of gambling activities. The participants' accounts of severe gambling problems and a compulsive desire to gamble, which eventually forced them to seek help, makes it is very likely, although no formal assessment was made, that all of them fulfilled the DSM-IV criteria for pathological gambling (American Psychiatric Association 1994).

Interviews were semi-structured and varied in length between 35 min and 75 min, with an average of 58 min. After an introduction about the principles of informed consent and anonymity guiding the study, an interview consisted of four parts. First, the participant was asked to describe briefly what activities his or her gambling problems concerned, and how the problems had begun, progressed, and finally led to help being sought. Second, the person was asked to describe the self-perceived impact of advertising on the gambling problems. In particular, concrete examples of such eventual impact were requested. Third, the participant was shown 30 examples of gambling advertising. The examples included a wide variety of gambling activities and media types; they consisted of actual print and mailshot advertising as well as letter-size images of advertising posters and promotions on television (screen photos) and the Internet (screen shots). This was typically the most time consuming part of the interview. Viewing the examples often recalled past experiences of viewing gambling advertising, gave rise to thoughts about gambling with and without problems, and elicited emotional reactions. Finally, the participant was asked to describe his or her attitude towards gambling advertising in Sweden more generally.

All interviews were recorded and most of the content was typed verbatim into Atlas TI (Scientific Software Development), a computer program for the analysis of qualitative data, and coded with key words. None of the participants was offered any compensation, but two of them had their travel costs covered.

Findings

Self-perceived Impact of Gambling Advertising

The self-perceived impact of advertising on gambling problems was categorized as none, marginal, or tangible. In all but two borderline cases between marginal and tangible, the categorization appeared unproblematic; one of the borderline cases was eventually assigned to the “marginal” and the other to the “tangible” category. “Impact” refers to the extent to which gambling advertising, according to the person interviewed, has had a negative influence on his or her gambling problems by increasing the involvement in gambling and/ or making it harder to stick to a decision to gamble less or not at all. In contrast to a “marginal” impact, a “tangible” advertising impact is evident and non-negligible, but does not necessarily imply that the impact has been large relative to other factors contributing to problem gambling or difficulties keeping to a decision not to gamble. None of the participants considered advertising to be a main cause of their gambling problems.

According to this categorization, a quarter of the participants (six individuals) stated that gambling advertising had no impact on their problems. Slightly over half of them (14 individuals) reported a marginal impact of advertising, while one fifth (five individuals) reported a tangible impact.

The “No Impact” Participants

The participants in the “no impact” category said that advertising had nothing to do with their gambling problems. One of them was a female bingo player who started to play in her youth to escape emotional problems and since then had played bingo excessively for 25 years. Two were male casino gamblers who had long histories of playing within reasonable limits, one of them at low-limit table games in restaurants and the other at horse and sports betting. When a casino opened in their home town, they started to play there and quite soon lost control over their gambling, chasing losses and spending large sums of money. Although the casino advertises in print media, including the regional newspaper, they said that these ads had nothing to do with their excessive casino gambling.

Two individuals had problems exclusively with illegal poker machines and one person both with illegal slot machines and with legal video lottery terminals (VLTs) run by the state-owned gambling company. Naturally enough, there is no promotion of illegal machines. The legal VLTs are promoted in no other way than by signage outside the restaurants where they are located, a form of promotion that meant nothing to this participant.

The “Marginal Impact” Participants

One participant in the “marginal impact” category was a slot machine gambler who played excessively and thereby ruined his finances, going deeply into debt. Advertising had nothing to do with his excessive slot machine gambling, which started as a result of a big win and was thereafter sustained by his use of gambling to escape problems and anxiety. However, on several occasions when there was advertising for huge jackpots in pick-seven horse betting, he bet about a thousand kronor each time (about USD 150 or EUR 100) in the hope of winning big money that would allow him to repay all the debts incurred because of his slot machine gambling. He has not felt tempted by gambling advertising since he quit. This is a typical case of marginal impact: gambling advertising increased the involvement in gambling, but seen in the larger context of the person’s problems, the impact was marginal and made no perceivable difference.

A similar case is that of the female problem gambler who was inspired by advertising to switch for a while from bingo to horse betting in the hope of making some money—or at least not losing as much time and money—but who returned to playing bingo when this did not happen. Some other participants reported being induced by advertising to gamble somewhat more in their favorite ways: various forms of sports and horse betting, casino gambling, and Internet poker.

Another kind of marginal impact may occur when someone tries to cut down on or refrain from gambling. Two individuals who played excessively on the state-owned gambling company’s VLTs reported that the signs outside restaurants offering VLTs had sometimes induced them to enter these places to gamble. When trying to cut down on or quit gambling, they could sometimes not resist the impulse to gamble when they saw such signs. One of them said that advertising for instant lottery tickets made him feel that *he would like* to buy a ticket, but that the signs in the street advertising the VLTs made him feel that *he* had

to gamble. Two of the sports gamblers who had quit reported being tempted by advertising, one of them resisting the impulse to gamble, the other one sometimes not. One of the Internet poker players said that television advertising for Internet poker had no impact while he was playing, but that after he had quit it was one thing that made him crave playing.

The “Tangible Impact” Participants

One participant in the “tangible impact” category said that the massive amount of promotion of Internet poker, together with all other mass media coverage of poker, contributed to his relapse into problem gambling. He said that it was very hard for him to get his mind off gambling and resist the impulse to play, because the media carried so much poker coverage and advertising for casinos and Internet poker companies. After having quit again after the relapse, he still feels tempted by newspaper advertising for poker tournaments at the casino in his home town.

Another of the poker players also reported that gambling advertising was very tempting, not only advertising for poker but also for other forms of gambling. He feels that it is extremely hard to keep to his decision not to gamble and is really worried that he will be unable to resist impulses to gamble induced by advertising. Therefore, he takes care to avoid viewing gambling commercials on television.

A middle-aged female participant had long-standing problems with many kinds of gambling, which eventually escalated to the point where she was completely entangled in a web of embezzling and lies. She worked hard in a family business, had many duties in her humdrum life, and gambled to get some excitement and relief from her everyday chores and problems. She felt very easily influenced by gambling advertising and, in retrospect, concluded that advertising had a “very big impact” on her gambling. She reacted strongly to all jackpot announcements and was induced by advertising to switch from one game to another. When some new type of game was introduced and heavily promoted, she played it in the hope that it would be the perfect one for her, finally bringing her some big winnings. Despite many years of heavy gambling, she had never won any significant amount. She recalled that while she was trying to cut down on excessive gambling, she was often unable to resist impulses to gamble induced by street and window advertising.

The fourth person in the “tangible impact” category was a man who had long identified himself as a “gambler” but more recently instead saw himself as a “gambling addict.” He had been gambling heavily all his adult life. His favorite form of gambling was horse betting and, with respect to that, he felt that advertising had little impact. Because of his great interest in horse betting, he already knew about everything conveyed in the promotional material, such as big events, special offers, and huge jackpots in the pick-seven betting game. However, he claimed that advertising for sports betting “absolutely” made him gamble “much more.” He was especially attracted by advertising that announced “extra money in the pot” for sports betting, meaning that at the moment the odds were slightly more favorable to the players than usual (although certainly not in *favor* of the players). On such occasions, he bet huge sums in the belief that he had a really good chance of making big money. Now that he has quit gambling, sports betting advertising presents a “sore temptation.”

The fifth person who reported a “tangible” impact of advertising was a young woman who out of curiosity and for fun started to play the slots at Internet casinos. Very soon, her gambling ran out of control. In the evenings, she escaped the stress and troubles of everyday life with her laptop computer in the corner of a sofa, playing Internet slots and dreaming about

hitting a big jackpot. She tried to cut down on gambling, but could not. Finally, after she had gambled away all her money, she sought help to be able to quit. She says that advertising for Internet gambling had an “enormous” impact on her while she was gambling, influencing her “very strongly.” Such advertising turned her thoughts to gambling, and she recalls logging on to Internet gambling sites in direct response to viewing it. Having been able to abstain from gambling for 5 months, she had a relapse that she clearly remembers was triggered by a television commercial for Internet gambling. When she happened to view it, she felt that it would be so fun to gamble just a little and thought that her 5-month abstinence proved that she now was in control of her gambling. She started to play the Internet slots and gambled out of control for several weeks until she was able to quit again.

The Participants’ Own Explanations of Their Problems

When asked about the history of their gambling problems, the participants mainly mentioned three basic causes of their problems: personality factors, the structure of machine and casino gambling, and the availability of gambling in society. As mentioned, none of the interviewees considered advertising to be a main cause of their gambling problems. The personality factors they typically mentioned were: 1) feeling high levels of stress and anxiety, and using gambling to cope with such feelings, or 2) being restless, competitive, or sensation seeking, and enjoying the eventfulness and risk taking in gambling. The structure of slot machine and casino gambling (mainly roulette), which makes playing repetitive, absorbing, and exciting, was described as able to trap one “in a treadmill,” as having an inherent “satanic” and “evil” power, as causing a shift from playing for fun to playing “compulsively,” and making one “addicted” to gambling like an alcoholic to alcohol. Regarding the availability of gambling, it was pointed out that opportunities for gambling are readily available in restaurants and many stores as well as in international-style casinos, which were introduced in Sweden in 2001–2003.

Gambling Type and Impact

Types of gambling with a relatively high risk for problem gambling and promoted by massive advertising have the strongest negative impacts. In Sweden, this means Internet poker, Internet casinos, and horse and sports betting. Usually, it is advertising for the problem gambler’s preferred game that presents the strongest temptation, by reminding him or her of the game. However, some of the interviewees said that advertising for other kinds of gambling could influence them as well. For example, Internet poker advertising enticed one person to visit a casino, and advertising for a lotto jackpot inspired another person to bet more heavily than usual on the horses.

Impact Mechanism

Advertising seems to influence problem gamblers primarily by reminding them of gambling, either of their preferred type or in general. Influence is typically exerted as follows: A problem gambler, thinking about something other than gambling, happens to see gambling advertising; this turns his or her mind to gambling, igniting a desire to gamble. Thus, advertising primarily appears as a quite uncomplicated trigger of impulses to gamble.

The impulse to gamble may be perceived in various ways. In several cases, the feelings were conflicting: a desire to gamble was accompanied by a more rational aversion to the addictive power of gambling and all the troubles that come from excessive involvement in it.

However, some of the interviewees said that the irrational thought had occurred to them that, if they were to gamble, they might be luckier than in the past.

The participants in the study rarely identified specific messages in gambling advertising that had a greater impact on them than did other messages. Some mentioned advertising for jackpots and “extra money in the pot.” Such advertising entices its audience with outsize wins and suggests that at the moment playing could be extra profitable. It reinforces the illusion that it is easy to win, either by being lucky in games of chance or by being a skillful gambler. For the problem gambler chasing losses, jackpot advertising entices by offering a golden opportunity to recoup all that has been lost. Advertising in such a way relates to some of the patterns of thought and behavior regarded as typical of problem gambling.

Impact at Different Stages of Having Gambling Problems

Except for some individuals who had gambled excessively from their youth, most participants in the study said that there was once a time when they had gambled little or moderately under full control. Then followed a period of increasing involvement in gambling, to the point when it was clearly excessive and causing problems. This period was typically initiated by trying a new kind of gambling, a significant win, or starting to use gambling to escape problems. During that time of escalating gambling involvement, advertising could worsen the problem by inducing some participants to gamble even more. Advertising constantly reminded them of gambling: new games, huge jackpots, special offers, poker tournaments, and so on. The impulses to gamble became more frequent and gambling more intense. When gambling problems are very severe, however, then advertising appears to have little impact: Then the person is so deeply involved in gambling and getting money for gambling that little else matters. The content of newspapers and television is of little interest. The person's excessive gambling is driven by its own destructive force and logic.

As the harms of gambling become evident, the person tries to gamble less or quit entirely. He or she may succeed in that for a while, but often there is a relapse into excessive gambling and new attempts to take control. In the end, all of the twenty-five participants in this study sought help. While trying to gamble less or after having quit, many of the participants were still tempted by gambling advertising. This kind of impact was very obvious to several of them. They were trying to cut down on gambling or had quit, and were struggling against the desire to gamble; in that situation, they were hypersensitive to all that triggered impulses to gamble, including those that came from advertising.

Coping with Advertising

Avoidance was the most common way of coping with unwanted impulses and impressions from gambling advertising. The participants in the study mentioned the following coping strategies: not entering shops that offer gambling services, switching television channels when advertising is shown, avoiding sports coverage on television and in newspapers since gambling advertising often appears in that context, including gambling companies in their e-mail program's junk mail filter, renting television series on DVD rather than watching them when aired with commercial breaks, and throwing away postal advertising for lotteries unopened. Some participants describe how they coped intellectually with gambling advertising, such as by trying to think rationally when viewing it. For example, one person, who was tempted by advertising for Internet poker, resisted by thinking about the fact that he would not win in the long run and that, if he gave in to the temptation, he risked a relapse into excessive gambling.

Two of the participants said that when they had quit gambling, advertising had actually strengthened their resolve. One of them, a slot machine gambler, was not tempted by advertising, which instead made him think about the risks of gambling. The other person, who had an established social identity as a gambler, clearly remembered one time when he happened to see a television commercial promoting a jackpot on the pick-seven horse betting game. The commercial caused him to reflect on his situation and for the first time he fully realized that if he was ever going to end his problems, he should never again gamble.

Attitude Towards Advertising

Most participants who had quit gambling said that they had been bothered by advertising. They reported that gambling advertising, both for specific activities and in general, made them uneasy. Such feelings were usually aroused by aggressive advertising, i.e., advertising that is pushy, has a “hard-sell” tone, and appears without warning on television or is otherwise hard to avoid. The participants felt uneasy for a variety of reasons: the advertising stimulated the gambling impulse, they did not want to think about gambling since it had brought so much trouble, or they were disgusted by exhortations to gamble since they knew that gambling could ruin a person’s life.

However, eight of the participants in the study accepted gambling advertising without much reservation. At most, they questioned the wording of some ads and the volume of advertising for some games. Ten participants were moderately critical, criticizing the form and content of several types of advertising and favoring restrictions on gambling advertising. Seven participants were strongly critical, expressing aversion to most or all forms of gambling advertising; they would prefer that it be outlawed or at least severely restricted.

Gambling advertising was criticized on several grounds: for aggravating gambling problems in society, spreading unsound values, and being misleading. Some thought that the state was behaving immorally by allowing state-owned gambling companies to advertise widely, despite the known harm caused by excessive gambling. However, some participants expressed positive views of advertising, stating, for example, that Swedish gambling advertising is responsible and innocent compared with such advertising by foreign companies, that much of it is entertaining and fun, and that it sometimes emphasizes positive and social sides of gambling.

Discussion

Advertising Impact and Problem Gambling Severity

Since only people with gambling problems so severe that they had sought help were interviewed, this study says little about the impact of gambling advertising on those with less severe problems. However, the results of the study can be compared with those of other studies including examination of the self-perceived impact of advertising. Table 1 presents data from a number of such studies, including the present one.

It should be kept in mind that the information presented in Table 1 originates from studies conducted in different countries, that several samples are non-random, that both the items dealing with advertising impact and the response formats are dissimilar, and that the studies differ in other ways as well. Nevertheless, it seems permissible to make the general observation that the more severe the gambling problems, the larger the self-perceived negative impacts of gambling advertising tend to be. There are two possible explanations for this, one less and the other more plausible.

Table 1 Advertising impact and problem gambling severity

Study (Country)	Participants (N)	Average SOGS ^a score	Item & response	Percent
Bonke 2007 (Denmark)	Gamblers without any problems (270)	0 ^b	Wishes to gamble more because of: -Television commercials for gambling -Other gambling advertising	11% 6%
- " -	Risk and problem gamblers, NODS ^d lifetime score 1+ (183)	1.7 ^c	Wishes to gamble more because of: -Television commercials for gambling -Other gambling advertising	20% 14%
Jonsson et al. 2003 (Sweden)	Gamblers without problems (151)	0.23 ^e	Gambling more often or spent more money on gambling because of advertising: -Yes, somewhat -Yes, quite a lot/very much	19% 3%
- " -	Problem gamblers, SOGS lifetime score 3+ (151)	2.48 ^e	Gambling more often or spent more money on gambling because of advertising: -Yes, somewhat -Yes, quite a lot/very much	23% 5%
Boughton and Brewster 2002 (Canada)	Women who had concerns about their gambling (365) ^g	7.8 ^e	Urges to gamble (triggers), exposure to ads: -Very or extremely important	20%
This study (Sweden)	Problem gamblers who had sought help (25) ^g	>10 ^f	Impact of gambling advertising: -Marginal -Tangible	56% 20%
Grant and Kim 2001 (USA)	Pathological gamblers in treatment (131) ^g	14.1 ^e	Triggers to gambling behavior/urges: -Ads about gambling	46%

^aSouth Oaks Gambling Screen (Lesieur and Blume 1987), ^bNODS lifetime score, ^cApproximate NODS lifetime score, exact figure not reported, ^dNORC DSM Screen for Problem Gambling (Gambling Impact and Behavior Study 1999, Appendix A), ^ePast year score, ^fEstimate based on typical SOGS scores for pathological gamblers in treatment, ^gNon-random samples

First, gambling advertising is a major factor contributing to gambling problems, which would mean that the more severe the problem, the more likely it is that the person has been influenced by gambling advertising. This explanation is not very plausible. Although some of the participants in the present study reported that gambling advertising had a tangible negative impact on their problems, none of them judged advertising to be a major cause of the problems. More generally, if there were such a strong relationship between advertising and gambling problems, it would have been observed when comparing problem gambling prevalence between jurisdictions allowing different extents of gambling advertising (Binde 2007a).

Second, the more severe a person's gambling problems, the greater his or her awareness of actually having a problem, and consequently the more sensitive the person tends to be to anything that triggers an impulse and desire to gamble, including advertising. This explanation is more plausible and confirmed by several of the participants in this study. When trying to cut down on excessive gambling, or after having recently quit, the participants became hypersensitive to gambling advertising. As one of the participants remarked, "The advertising becomes more and more obvious when you don't want to see it—there's something strange about that ..."

Stimuli, Response, and Persuasion

The typical mechanism by which advertising influences problem gamblers is to give rise to impulses to gamble. Such an influence is what can be expected, according to neurobiological models of gambling addiction (Crockford et al. 2005; Goudriaan et al. 2004; Potenza et al. 2003) as well as conditioning models (Haracz et al. 1999). The problem gambler is exposed to a stimuli (gambling advertising), which produces an impulse to gamble, and if this impulse is not acted on, craving for gambling is felt. Craving ends immediately if the person gambles or subsides slowly if the person is able to resist the impulse and endure the unpleasant state of craving (Tavares et al. 2005).

Gambling advertising uses an array of psychological and rhetorical devices (Binde 2005; Clotfelter and Cook 1989, ch. 10; Korn et al. 2003)—such as presenting lucky winners, suggesting that skill is more important in sport betting than is actually the case, and associating gambling with a wide variety of positive social and cultural values—but about this the participants in the study said little. It may be that ingenious persuasive messages in advertising stimulate the demand for gambling among the general public, but that problem gamblers react primarily to specific cues in advertising that relate directly to the specific aspects of gambling that reinforced their excessive involvement in it.

Several of the participants, who had quit gambling, described how they had been tempted by advertising and had difficulties resisting the impulse and craving for gambling aroused by it. They perceived this as negative, increasing the risk of relapse. This heightened risk is the reason why in this study such temptations have been considered a negative impact of gambling advertising, regardless of whether or not the temptation actually led to a relapse. However, from a behavioral perspective, consistently resisting cue-induced impulses will eventually lead to the extinction of the conditioned behavior. Thus, it might be argued that problem gamblers abstaining from gambling would actually be helped to put the problems behind them more quickly by viewing gambling advertising, resisting impulses to gamble, and enduring the unpleasant feelings of craving. This would be similar to cue-exposure therapy, a method used for treating addictions such as alcoholism (Drummond and Glautier 1994), which has been tested with good results on problem gamblers (Oakes et al. 2008; Symes and Nicki 1997). This study cannot determine whether or not gambling advertising has such an effect. If there is a beneficial cue-exposure effect on problem gamblers trying to abstain, it is unlikely that the participants would have been aware of it, separating the subtle positive changes it might bring about from everything else that influenced their progress along the often winding path to recovery. In any case, it seems unlikely that such a possible positive effect of advertising on some problem gamblers would outweigh its negative effects in terms of contributing to problem gambling in society.

Attitude to and Self-perceived Impact of Gambling Advertising

Colleagues discussing the design of this study in its planning stage expressed the worry that participants would be influenced by the anti-gambling sentiments supposed to characterize self-help groups. The participants, it was argued, would be critical of gambling advertising and blame it for their problems. It was feared that a self-selection bias, favoring the most critical individuals who wished to make their voices heard, would make this problem even worse. As made clear above, however, only a minority of the participants (seven individuals out of twenty-five) were strongly critical of gambling advertising; the others had only a moderately critical attitude (ten individuals) or even accepted most of gambling advertising without much criticism (eight individuals).

Furthermore, among the participants in the study, there is no correlation between the self-perceived impact of gambling advertising and attitude towards such advertising. Of the seven participants who were strongly critical of gambling advertising, only one reported tangible self-perceived negative impact from advertising, four reported marginal impact, and two reported no impact. Of the eight participants who accepted gambling advertising without much reservation, one reported tangible advertising impact, five reported marginal impact, and one reported no impact.

There is, however, an evident correlation between critical attitudes towards gambling advertising and the belief that it affects other people negatively. This is as expected, since an obvious reason for being critical is the belief that gambling advertising affects people negatively. Thus, the study sample was not dominated by highly vocal critics of gambling advertising, and it seems that the interviews succeeded in separating the general attitude towards gambling advertising of a participant from his or her self-perceived assessment of advertising impact.

Conclusion

This study has several limitations. Since the study is exploratory, qualitative, and uses a non-random sample, it does not say much about the frequency of the phenomena investigated. However, the proportion of participants in the sample experiencing negative advertising impact fits well with the results of the few previous studies that provide figures on frequency, indicating that the more severe the gambling problems, the more likely there will be a self-perceived negative impact of gambling advertising.

Sample size was relatively small and a larger sample would probably have revealed further aspects of advertising impact. In particular, age and gender issues, as well as differences relating to type of gambling engaged in, could have been further explored.

The study has relied largely on retrospective verbal accounts, which are known not to correspond exactly to actual past events. However, the interviews focused on asking for concrete examples of advertising impact that could be recalled, rather than on asking the person to reconstruct some psychological impact mechanism of the past. Furthermore, the most extensive part of the interview consisted of viewing advertising examples, which elicited comments and emotional reactions in the present.

The participants were all probable pathological gamblers with problems so severe that they had sought help. Besides what these people retrospectively told us about themselves, the study says nothing about the impact of advertising on people with mild and developing gambling problems. However, it might be that in severe cases, like those of the interviewees, the characteristic features of gambling problems emerge most clearly (cf. Brown 1988, pp.

230–231), including the impact of gambling advertising. An issue that preferably should be investigated further is in what way advertising messages may reinforce risk behaviors and cognitions of gamblers not yet experiencing any greater problems. Knowledge about such potentially risky advertising would be valuable for gambling companies wishing to promote their products more responsibly.

The study was concerned with the conscious and relatively short-term impact of advertising on gambling problems and thus does not tell us much about unconscious and relatively long-term impact. It is known that repetitive brand advertising perceived at a low level of attention influences consumer choice, perhaps more than does advertising conveying a specific message that is supposed to be consciously evaluated by target consumers (Heath 2000; Heath et al. 2006). In the long term, advertising can be expected to influence attitudes in society towards product categories and the lifestyles associated with commercial brands. However, it is contested whether this influence is great, having the power to change attitudes in society, or marginal, to some small degree amplifying attitude change already underway. In Swedish public debate, it is commonly argued that the past 10 years of massive gambling advertising have contributed to making gambling of all forms, and at a high level of personal involvement, more acceptable in society. If this is true, it may be speculated that the threshold has been raised for the degree of involvement in gambling likely to provoke criticism from others and advice to cut down on gambling. Such a shift in the social acceptance of gambling is likely to lead to an increase of problem gambling.

Despite these limitations, this study has given new insight into how gambling advertising is perceived by problem gamblers and how it may influence their involvement in gambling. The strength of the study is that it builds on relatively exhaustive interviews, which include participants commenting on a large sample of gambling advertising, that provide understanding of the impact of gambling advertising in different contexts and on people who have problems with different types of gambling. The main conclusion of the study is that gambling advertising contributes to the gambling problems of some individuals by arousing in them hard-to-resist impulses to gamble.

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