

Gambling & Media

How has media changed the gambling industry and why should we be talking about it?



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The continuous advancement in technology and media has changed many industries, including gambling. With the increased capabilities of media, new gambling opportunities have been made available and new advertisement techniques are being used to promote these opportunities. This raises concern as research has emphasized the strength of advertising on influencing people's beliefs, attitudes and behaviors and youth are believed to be particularly vulnerable to the impacts of advertising (Grier & Kumanyika, 2009). There are current regulations in place to protect youth from the impact of advertising related to gambling, however there may be an opportunity for more to be done.

Why should we discuss gambling and media together?

Media is a communication tool that can be used to persuade, inform or entertain an audience. Traditional forms of media include radio, television and magazines (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). However, as society and technology evolve so do our media forms. Today, popular forms of media include social media and social networking platforms, video games, the internet and podcasts. Although media has, and continues to evolve, one constant element across all mediums is advertisements. Advertisements are paid messages used to inform or influence an audience (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) and as with the development of media, advertising techniques have also evolved across time. Many, if not all industries are impacted by the expansion of new media forms and advertising techniques. The gambling and gaming industries are no exception. With new forms of media have come new gambling opportunities such as social media games, loot boxes unlocking, and e-sports betting. Furthermore, the advancement in advertising techniques



available to gambling and gaming companies has allowed gambling opportunities to be promoted more widely across media forms.

The YMCA of Greater Toronto's Youth Gambling Awareness Program (YGAP) believes it is important to discuss gambling and media together. The Youth Gambling Awareness Program has developed and implemented two workshops to disseminate knowledge and build relevant skills. The Media Literacy workshop strives to raise awareness on gambling advertisements and promote the development of critical thinking skills necessary to analyze advertisements. The Game-Bling workshop outlines the various gambling opportunities that are found in different media forms, such as through video games and on social media. Particular concern is paid to youth populations as they are at greater risk for developing problem gambling (Friend & Ladd, 2009) and may be more susceptible to the influence of advertising as they form their ideas about the world around them (Grier & Kumanyika, 2010).

A limited number of studies have been conducted to explore the impact of gambling advertisements on youth. However, the conclusions drawn from these studies have been significant. First, youth report that advertisements portray gambling as easy, fun, life-changing, rewarding, and as an opportunity to socialize (Korn, 2005). This is of concern as these are the same motivations that lead youth to participate in gambling and portray it as a risk-free activity (Korn, 2005). Another study found that participants who reported more exposure to TV gambling shows (i.e. World Series of Poker, Celebrity Poker Show Down, etc.) and gambling advertisements had more positive attitudes towards both TV gambling shows and gambling advertisements. The same study found that participants who had more exposure to anti-gambling news stories had more negative attitudes towards TV gambling shows and online gambling advertisements, thus



demonstrating the impact of advertisements on one's attitudes about a product (Lee et al., 2008). Lastly, a study found that gambling advertisements increase the availability of gambling activities by raising the audience's awareness of available gambling activities, in addition to modifying attitudes about these activities (Hastings et al., 2005).

Furthermore, there has been research to support that gambling advertisements do not only influence one's beliefs and attitudes about gambling, but they also influence behaviors. One study found that 42% of youth reported that gambling advertisements made them want to try gambling and 61% of youth imagined what they could buy with their winnings (Derevensky, 2007). Furthermore, 39% of youth were more likely to purchase a lottery ticket after viewing a lottery advertisement (Felsher et al., 2004). Some researchers have suggested that gambling advertisements not only promote the participation in gambling activities but may also influence one's participation in other aspects of their life. The media presents gambling as an alternative to hard-work and as an easy way to secure an ideal future (Griffiths, 2005) (National Gambling Impact Study Commission, 1999). This belief may encourage youth to neglect other important life pursuits such as education and employment in order to pursue gambling (Griffiths, 2005) (National Gambling Impact Study Commission, 1999).

Lastly, a study with approximately 6,000 participants found that as gambling advertising exposure increased so did participants' gambling-related attitudes, participants interest in gambling, participants' knowledge of gambling options and participants' knowledge of gambling providers (Griffiths, 2017). This study, in combination with the other research mentioned, allows us to conclude that gambling advertisements have the ability to influence beliefs, attitudes and behaviors related to gambling.



Similar findings have been reported in the tobacco and alcohol industries. For example, a study found that young adolescents who were exposed to high levels of advertising for alcohol were subsequently 50% more likely to drink and 36% more likely to have intentions to drink in the upcoming year in comparison to those with lower levels of advertising exposure (Griffiths, 2005). Another study was conducted in Australia that found children between the ages of 12 and 14 reported that they preferred the cigarette brand that sponsored their state's major league football competition (Pritchard, 1992). In response to the effectiveness of advertising on influencing one's beliefs, attitudes and behaviors, Ontario has established and enforced advertising guidelines for gambling, alcohol, and tobacco. However, despite these requirements, gambling advertisements are still pervasive in society as the regulations do not apply to all possible global advertising opportunities. Gambling advertisements normalize the behavior and promote gambling as an acceptable, harmless activity with little to no consequences (Moore & Ohtsuka, 1999). Research by Bestman and colleagues indicated that children's gambling consumption patterns and intentions are influenced by socialization factors including marketing influence, family members' opinions and cultural values (2017). This demonstrates the interconnectedness of one's intentions, familial or cultural values and the influence of media and marketing on all factors. For these reasons, it is imperative to discuss media within the context of gambling to ensure that awareness is raised, and critical thinking skills are promoted.



How have gambling advertising techniques changed?

With the expansion and advancement of media, the gambling industry has gained access to more diverse advertising opportunities. Below, several of the new advertising techniques have been outlined including social media advertising, influencer marketing, and sports partnerships.

Social media advertising is a relatively broad term that includes any form of advertising on a social media platform (Brooks, 2019). Each social media platform has advertising opportunities, but they vary slightly depending on the platform. For example, companies can pay to have advertisements displayed on Instagram Stories or on the Instagram Main feed. Companies can also pay to have 5 second advertisements shown within a YouTube video or have an advertisement display on the sidebar during the entire video. On these platforms, advertisements are often placed based on the specific demographic that the advertiser is looking to target (Grier & Kumanyika, 2009). This is called targeted advertising, and it allows companies to advertise their product to a specific demographic (i.e. age, gender, location). The advertisement is then only broadcasted on social media to consumers within that population (Grier & Kumanyika, 2009). Advertisers can also target particular groups based on their previous buying history or internet behavior. This is referred to as behavioral targeting (Grier & Kumanyika, 2009). Companies within the gambling industry may use targeting advertising to ensure that they are reaching populations that are of legal age to participate in gambling activities within that region, as this is an advertising regulation within Canada. These same companies may use behavioral tracking to promote additional gambling opportunities to consumers based on the previous websites they've visited. For example, if an individual uses free online poker sites,



they may begin to see advertisements to play on the pay-for poker sites or if an individual looks at sport league scores online, they may begin to see advertisements for sports betting platforms.

Influencer marketing is a type of social media marketing where individuals with a digital following are paid to promote or endorse particular products or brands. Influencer marketing occurs across social media platforms, including Instagram, Snap Chat, Facebook, Twitter and TikTok (Lou & Yuan, 2018). Influencer marketing is effective for a number of reasons. Most notably, there is an increased exposure and accessibility to influencers because of the consistent use of social media. Viewers report an increased trust towards the influencer, which can lead to increased purchases (Lou & Yuan, 2018). Viewers report influencers to be more persuasive in comparison to celebrity endorsers because of this increased trust (Lou & Yuan, 2018). Influencer marketing is often considered a form of targeted advertising because influencers generally have a distinct audience and brands may choose to work with an influencer based on their audience. There have been some instances of influencer marketing being used to promote gambling-related opportunities, such as mystery boxes. Mystery boxes are physical boxes filled with unknown items that can be purchased online. There are specific websites dedicated to selling mystery boxes. However, other popular retailers such as Amazon and eBay, sell them online as well. Based on the Youth Gambling Awareness Program's definition of gambling, which is risking something of value on a chance-based outcome, ordering mystery boxes is considered gambling because you are risking something of value on an outcome outside of your control. In December of 2018, Jake Paul posted a YouTube video titled "I spent \$5,000 ON MYSTERY BOXES and you WON'T believe WHAT I GOT...(insane)". Jake Paul is a well-known influencer who produces content on various social media platforms with an extremely large fan base of youth. On YouTube



alone, Jake Paul has 19.8 million subscribers and this mystery box video had 3,180,021 views on YouTube as of March 27th, 2020. In his video on December 30th, 2018 Jake demonstrates how viewers can order a mystery box from “Mysterybrand.net” (YouTube, 2018). When the package arrives, he shows what he received in his mystery box, which included multiple pairs of high-end shoes, an Apple watch and an iPhone. As per online requirements, Jake Paul does disclose that this video is an advertisement meaning that the company “Mysterybrand.net” paid him to discuss the mystery box in his video (YouTube, 2018). Therefore, it is worth questioning whether all customers who purchase a Mystery Box from this company will receive items of such high value or if Jake Paul received these items because it was for an advertisement. Jake Paul’s video is an example of how influencer marketing was used to promote a gambling opportunity to youth.

Sport partnerships are another advertising opportunity that has continued to grow in popularity. Major sport leagues and teams have established partnerships with major gambling companies. The output of each partnership varies depending on the parties involved but often the partnership allows for promotional opportunities including logos on jerseys, posts on team social media pages, signage within the stadium, and celebrity endorsements. The benefits are often mutually beneficial, as both parties benefit from the enhanced promotion by the other party. For instance, the National Basketball Association and MGM have a partnership where MGM sponsors the summer basketball league and has their logo on all summer basketball league signage (MGM, 2018). Some teams within the National Hockey League are also in a partnership with MGM, where teams will tweet the “over and under” statistics regarding particular players on their team (Brink, 2019). Lastly, MGM utilizes official NHL branding on land-based and digital sport betting offerings within the United States and leverages promotional opportunities within



the NHL's marquee events, including the Stanley Cup Playoffs and the NHL Winter Classic (Rosen, 2018). Some researchers believe that partnerships between sport leagues and gambling organizations normalize gambling and make gambling an integral component to watching the sport (Hing et al., 2013). Hing and colleagues report that a symbiotic relationship is created between the sport and the act of betting which capitalizes on the fan's loyalty (2013). Additional research has been conducted to explore the impact of gambling advertisements during sporting events. In Australia, researchers found that three out of four children between the ages of 8 and 16 who watch sports can name at least one betting company and 1 in 4 children can name four or more betting companies (Pitt et al., 2016). This research concluded that sport partnerships increase youths' exposure and therefore, awareness of sports wagering. This contributes to the perception of normalization and promotes the idea that sport wagering can make watching the sport more fun, which influences wagering consumption intentions in youth (Pitt et al., 2016).

How have gambling opportunities changed as media has advanced?

It is not only gambling advertisement techniques that have evolved with the expansion of media. Available gambling opportunities have also increased. As previously discussed, online mystery boxes are one example of a new gambling opportunity that has developed alongside the expansion of the internet. Although not an exhaustive list, several additional examples of gambling opportunities including loot boxes, freemium models, and e-sports betting have been outlined below.



Loot Boxes

A loot box is a virtual container that contains a random in-game item (Zendle & Cairns, 2018). Players can use in-game currency, or in some cases real-world money, to unlock loot boxes. The player never knows what is inside the loot box prior to purchasing it. The item inside the loot box may be lesser, equal or greater value than what the loot box was purchased for (Drummond & Sauer, 2018). The item inside the loot box may be purely cosmetic and allow the player to change their in-game aesthetic or it may be an item that can improve the player's in-game performance (Drummond & Sauer, 2018). Loot boxes use a variable ratio reinforcement schedule which leads players to repeat the behavior of purchasing loot boxes with the hope of acquiring a valuable item (Drummond & Sauer, 2018). As per Canada's legal definition of gambling, 3 elements are required for an activity to be considered gambling:

1. Consideration: the payment of something is required to play the game
2. Chance: the outcome of the game turns on chance, not skill
3. Prize: money, money's worth or something of real-world/tangible value is awarded based on game play

Structurally and psychologically, loot box unlocking is very similar to gambling (Drummond & Sauer, 2018). However, loot box unlocking does not meet all of the requirements necessary to be classified legally as gambling within Canada. Loot box purchases in Canada do not constitute gambling because it is claimed that the prize acquired within the game is not money or considered "money's worth". However, within various games and on third party sites, virtual items that are acquired within video games can be sold for real world money. Belgium is one



country that has identified loot box unlocking as gambling and has since banned loot boxes from video games within their country (Zendle & Cairns, 2018).

This has significant implications for regulations and restrictions within video games. Drummond and Sauer mention that youth may be at an increased vulnerability to the gambling mechanisms and behaviors learned from these mechanics due to their underdeveloped impulse control (2018). Youth may also be drawn to participate in monetary forms of gambling after being exposed to simulated gambling because simulated gambling creates a disconnect between virtual and real-world currency (Drummond & Sauer, 2018). A recent study by Zendle and Cairns found that as severity of problem gambling symptoms increased, so did the amount of money spent on loot boxes (2018). The same study found that non-problem gamblers spent the least amount of money on loot boxes (Zendle & Cairns, 2018). These findings suggest that there is a serious and potentially dangerous relationship between loot boxes and problem gambling, and further exploration is required to ensure that appropriate regulations are put in place.

Freemium Model Games

Freemium model games are social network apps that are free to download and play but include optional in-game purchases (Gainsbury et al., 2016). Freemium model games can become gambling if a player is paying for a chance to advance in the game and the outcome is outside of their control. There are also virtual casino-style games that utilize the freemium model as they are free to download but include optional in-game purchases (Gainsbury et al., 2016). The odds of winning are often misrepresented in the free version of casino-style games. The games engineer early big wins in the 'free-play' model and winning the jackpot or bonuses are made easier. These free casino-style games with more favorable player outcomes may encourage the



transition to real money gambling. Players often don't realize that payouts on the free sites are inflated and that the odds of winning are in the favor of the player, meaning the player will experience the thrill of winning more often. Players may then fall into the Gambler's Fallacy. Once a player believes they are successful at a game, they can be easily tempted to pay-to-play in order to feel continued success or accomplishment by winning real money, and so they transition to the pay-to play-sites. In fact, multiple studies have shown that individuals who engage in simulated or practice gambling games are more likely to gamble than those who do not. Preliminary evidence suggests that around 20% of adults and adolescents who play on free 'gambling' sites move to online commercial gambling in an attempt to win money (Gainsbury et al., 2015). This is a second example of how with the expansion of media, such as social networking apps, has led to increased gambling opportunities.

Esports Betting

Esports are professional multiplayer video game competitions that take place in large venues and are promoted through online streaming platforms (Greer et al., 2019). As with other professional sports, esports have "skilled players, large audiences and fan bases, institutionalization via leagues and governing bodies, tournaments at various levels, corporate sponsorships, advertising, media coverage, merchandising, player scholarships, prizes and celebrity status for its athletes" (Greer et al., 2019). Viewers are able to place bets on various aspects of the competition through formal (i.e. betting websites) or informal means (i.e. between friends) with real world money, virtual currency or virtual items of value, such as skins (Griffiths, 2017). The Esports industry has grown tremendously in the past few years, as has the Esports betting industry. The global Esports audience for 2019 was estimated to be 454 million viewers



with revenues of 1.1 billion when excluding Esports gambling (Greer et al., 2019). It was predicted that real money betting on Esports will reach 10 billion USD in 2020 (Griffiths, 2017). Although regulated, licensed gambling sites offer Esports betting opportunities for adults, there is concern that some third-party betting websites permit underage users to place bets with virtual items, such as skins, on their platforms. Skins are in-game virtual items that are predominantly cosmetic. They range in rarity and value and can be bought or sold for real world currency on third party websites (Griffiths, 2017). There are risks associated with this activity, as some of the sites are unregulated. This advancement is blurring the lines between gambling and gaming (Greer et al., 2019). Additional research is required to better understand the psychosocial impact of Esports betting on youth and to ensure adequate regulations are established globally.

How are gambling advertisements currently regulated?

As previously mentioned, gambling advertisement regulations currently exist in response to the growing research that demonstrates the impact of advertising on youth's attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. Within Canada, provincial governments are responsible for the oversight of the gambling industry in their province, meaning that there is variability between provinces on the regulations that are in place.

Within Ontario, the Alcohol and Gaming Commission of Ontario is responsible for outlining the marketing and advertising standards for the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation. The standards outline various limitations to advertising and marketing communications to ensure that underage people and self-excluded people are not targeted by



their advertising efforts. Some of the regulations are listed below, however this list is not exhaustive. Gambling advertisements:

- Should not include underage individuals in the marketing materials
- Should not include language that will primarily appeal to minors
- Should not appear on billboards or outdoor displays that are directly adjacent to schools or youth-oriented locations
- Should not include cartoon figures, symbols, role models or celebrity entertainer endorsers who primarily appeal to minors
- Cannot include misleading communications
- Cannot imply that gambling is required for social acceptance
- Cannot encourage gambling as a way to recover from past losses

More information on the advertising regulations for Ontario can be found here:

<https://about.olg.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/RG-Marketing-Advertising-Standard-May-2017.pdf>

Similar to Canada, gambling in the United States is overseen and regulated by state governments. This means that there is variability between states on the laws and regulations pertaining to lottery, casino gambling, sports betting, gambling advertising, and online gambling. The American Gaming Association represents the casino industry in the United States and has outlined similar gambling advertisement restrictions as the Canadian requirements listed above (AGA, 2019). However, additional marketing regulations in the United States are variable by state and activity.



How can someone stay safe if they choose to gamble or game?

Harm reduction is an evidence-based approach that strives to reduce the negative or harmful implications of a given behavior (GREO, 2017). The negative impacts of gambling may affect the individual, their family, friends and larger community. For this reason, harm reduction strategies should be implemented at all levels. The Youth Gambling Awareness Program utilizes a harm reduction focused approach when discussing gambling and media with participants across Ontario. In YGAP's Media Impact workshop, reoccurring themes in gambling advertisements are discussed. For example, lottery advertisements depict iconic symbols of luxurious indulgence such as mansions, sports cars, or tropical beaches. Glamour, social status and lifestyle appeals are among the most common dream themes to run through these ads presenting consumers with an easy choice to make; the purchase of a lottery ticket to enjoy the indulgences made possible by a big lottery win. Moreover, lifestyle advertisements tend to imply a resulting freedom from everyday financial worries and stress. The reality is that gambling is a high risk and low reward activity, but gambling advertisements heavily emphasize the potential rewards. The Youth Gambling Awareness Program promotes the development of media literacy skills and critical thinking skills as harm reduction strategies. Furthermore, YGAP invites participants to question the intent behind gambling advertisements, to observe what information is present and what is missing, and to pay attention to the impact of the specific advertising techniques that are employed.

Currently, there are policies and procedures that pertain specifically to protecting youth from the harms associated with participating in gambling activities, such as age limits. There are also regulations placed on gambling related advertisements to protect youth. As mentioned



before, gambling advertisements cannot be found directly adjacent to schools or youth-oriented locations, they cannot be based primarily on content that is relevant to youth or use individuals in advertisements that appear to be youth.

Despite these existing regulations on advertising, these regulations fall short of protecting all minors from the negative impacts of gambling advertisements. Additional regulations can be implemented at this time to further protect youth. Monaghan and colleagues found gambling advertisements had a significant impact on youth's behaviors, attitudes and beliefs about gambling and outlined further regulations (2008). Although their research was conducted 12 years ago, their recommendations are highly relevant today and provide examples of valuable next steps to protect youth. Some of their recommendations include the following:

- Companies that generate revenue from gambling should not be able to promote or advertise their name, product, brand or logo through the sponsorship of sporting events or teams
- Pay-for and free gambling sites should be under the same advertising restrictions as other gambling products
- Free gambling websites should not have advertisements or direct links to online gambling sites, and they should be required to have the same pay out rate
- All information on advertisements should be accurate and a visible warning statement about the risks should be included
- Regulations should be mandatory, enforced and continually evaluated by an independent regulatory body (Monaghan et al., 2008).



As outlined by Monaghan and colleagues, there is a need for implementation and evaluation of regulations on new gambling forms and advertising techniques to protect youth and vulnerable consumers (2008). Due to the lasting, significant impacts of problem gambling on individuals, families and communities, it is important for society to find ways to reduce the harm associated with gambling and to protect vulnerable people from the adverse impacts.

Concluding Thoughts

Because of the reported impact of advertising on youth and the continual advancement in media forms, it is imperative that youth and their networks have the necessary skills and knowledge to reduce the harms related to these activities and make informed decisions. The YMCA of Greater Toronto's Youth Gambling Awareness Program offers two workshops to specifically address the blurred lines between gambling and gaming, and to promote the development of critical thinking and media literacy skills. In case of interest or for more information, please visit

<https://ymcagta.org/youth-programs/youth-gambling-awareness-program>.



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