

## Social Marketing and Problem Gambling: A Critical Perspective

The paper provides a timely reminder of the role of policy levers, harm-minimisation and health promotion in addressing important public health issues such as gambling, and a stark warning that gambling-related harm remains a much neglected concern. It also describes three interrelated factors marking out today's gambling problems from those of the past:

- extensive distribution channels have greatly increased accessibility;
- technological innovation is out-stripping control efforts;
- it has become an international phenomenon.

In short, gambling is part of a growing global industry driven by powerful multinational corporations. These efforts are built on marketing. The authors briefly allude to marketing, as part of the solution, but we instead focus on its role as part of the problem. In the process we reinforce their argument that the public health response to gambling can learn much from tobacco control.

The role of commercial marketing in smoking ([1,2](#)) – and indeed drinking and dietary problems ([3,4](#)) - has long been recognised; and policy makers have responded accordingly. For instance the UK has completely banned tobacco advertising and put restrictions on the promotion of energy dense foods, whilst the French Loi Evin severely limits alcohol sponsorship and advertising.

It is notable, however, that the role of marketing in encouraging gambling - and hence problem gambling – receives little attention. This may reflect the fact that the bete noir of gambling, the gaming machine, is not heavily advertised. However, advertising is only one component of the 'marketing mix', which also includes price (low affordability of machines facilitates high supply and demand), promotion (extends beyond advertising to include wide-ranging promotional strategies; even the alluring sights and sounds of machines act as a potent form of promotion), placement (best summarised as ubiquity) and product (machine design and market positioning).

Tobacco control has long recognised this broad definition of marketing, and the need to critically assess it. If we start with advertising, convergent evidence from time-series studies, cross-sectional and prospective research, and systematic reviews has

been amassed to show that tobacco advertising increases the likelihood of adolescent smoking (5). This makes radical policy options much more attractive to decision makers. By contrast, evidence concerning the role of advertising on gambling consumption and related problems is both scant and lacking in methodological rigour (6). It is perhaps not surprising therefore that the policy response, in most countries, has not been to restrict, but to *liberalise* gambling advertising.

Transfers from tobacco control can also be made concerning other elements of the marketing mix. The effect of price has long been understood and tobacco products have deliberately been made more expensive through taxation. In the case of alcohol, general taxation has been supplemented by its application to specific products (e.g. alcopops in Australia) and the consideration of minimum pricing to control irresponsible promotions in Scotland (7). Similar research and related policies should be considered for gambling products.

The idea of generic packaging, currently being seriously considered by the UK Government for cigarettes, can also transfer to gambling. Researchers could investigate whether the alluring sights and sounds mentioned above have a disproportionate influence on young people, for instance, or encourage reckless gambling by all users. Alternatively, do they mislead gamblers into thinking the rewards are greater than they really are, or do they even have a hypnotic effect? What would be achieved by removal of all colours and sounds associated with, for example, gaming machines, and for the mandating of large health-type warnings? As the industry expends enormous effort identifying what colours and sounds enhance the attractiveness of gaming machines their removal may subsequently decrease their appeal. And despite the failure of the gambling research community to pay greater attention to what signage and what messages could prove effective deterrents, an inverse relationship between size and effectiveness of messages has been found for both alcohol and tobacco products (8,9,10) and, as such, this may hold similar promise for gambling products (11). The answers to these research questions become the foundation of effective policy. Even smokefree legislation is applicable to gambling if we think in terms of distribution.

Tobacco, then, demonstrates the need to think about researching and, if necessary, regulating, the whole panoply of marketing effort that goes into promoting gambling. This fits with the author's recommendation to use social marketing, but it expands its scope by applying Lazer and Kelly's (12) definition of the discipline:

*“Social marketing is concerned with the application of marketing knowledge, concepts, and techniques to enhance social as well as economic ends. It is also concerned with analysis of the social consequence of marketing policies, decisions and activities.”*

In short, it reminds us that effective social marketers keep a critical eye on their commercial cousins.

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