The effect of gambling marketing and advertising on children, young people, and vulnerable adults

What this report is about

This report examined the impact of gambling marketing and advertisements on children, young adults, and vulnerable groups in the UK. Children and young adults were those aged 11 to 24. Vulnerable groups included people with low finances; people who have trouble understanding information; people with gambling problems; and people with mental health problems. This report was commissioned by GambleAware and builds on Dr. Per Binde's 2014 review of research on gambling advertising. Two research groups conducted the studies. Ipsos MORI led the first group. The University of Stirling led the second. Ipsos MORI wrote this report.

The research aimed to address three objectives. The first was to see if these groups' attitudes towards gambling are affected by gambling advertisements. The second was to examine the tone and content of gambling advertising and marketing. This was explored to see how gambling advertising potentially affected children, young adults, and vulnerable groups. The third was to identify specific themes and features of gambling advertisements. This was done to identify content that may be particularly risky to children, young adults, and vulnerable groups.

What was done?

The research groups conducted many different types of studies. The first was reviewing the current literature from 2013–2018. This provided an overview of the most important studies on gambling advertisements. The second was media monitoring, including the press, radio, and television. This was done to see where and how gambling was advertised.

Why is this report important?

This report summarized the impact of gambling advertisements on children, young adults, and vulnerable groups in the UK. Through many different types of studies, concerns were found about gambling advertisements. The report highlighted the increase of gambling advertisements in recent years. The increase was found on both traditional and new media such as Twitter. Gambling advertisements affected people's attitudes and future gambling behaviour. The report made recommendations on how to reduce the harms of gambling advertising and protect young people and vulnerable groups. It also identified future research areas to better understand the impact of gambling advertising.

In the third study, the researchers created 11 online avatars. Online avatars are fake profiles with different personalities. The different personalities included a child under 13, a child under 18 who was a sports fan, and an adult with a gambling problem. The avatars were sent to visit different online sites. In total, they visited 150 different sites every day for 34 days. The sites included the top 100 sites, top 20 children's sites, top 20 sports sites, four gambling help sites and others. The researchers tracked all advertisements shown to the avatars. This allowed the researchers to see if gambling advertisements were targeted to specific individuals.

The fourth research study involved social media. This study looked at how often and how much gambling was advertised and marketed on social media, including Facebook and Twitter. The researchers also

looked at the presence of children and young people on Twitter. To do so, they collected and analyzed 888,000 Tweets from 417 gambling related accounts. The researchers also collected details of 825,000 people who followed the gambling accounts, and 1.6 million Tweets that mentioned those accounts.

Next, the researchers looked in-depth at gambling-related advertising in traditional media and Twitter. Traditional media included television and print ads. They examined the tone, format, and content of the advertisements. This was done to examine if and how much the advertisements reached and appealed to children, young people, and vulnerable groups. The advertisements were coded into six main areas. The first was general information. The second was design features. The third was content. The fourth looked at customer protection information. The fifth included gambling information. The sixth and last area looked at messages about gambling behaviour and outcomes.

The sixth study looked at the frequency of gambling references in 10 different sporting events. The sporting events were broadcast on radio and television in the UK. Gambling reference was defined as any gambling or gambling brand lasting one second or more. It could be displayed during the sporting event or commercial break.

The seventh research study was a survey of children and young people. The study was conducted to examine exposure to and impact of gambling advertisements. The children and young people were a representative sample in the UK. They were participants from two previous national studies. The survey was done by mail, online, or by telephone. A total of 1,091 participants from 912 households completed the study. The response rate was 33%.

The eight and ninth studies were focus groups and in-depth diary studies. Children, young adults, and vulnerable groups took part. These studies provided a detailed understanding of the impact of being exposed to gambling advertising. In total, 28 children and young people took part in the diary study. The diary study also included 32 vulnerable adults. 13 focus groups and four in-depth interviews were

conducted. A total of 83 participants took part in the focus groups or interviews. This included 62 young people aged 11–24, 13 adults with mental health difficulties, and 8 adults with problem gambling.

What you need to know

The findings were summarized in five main sections. The first section reported where and how often gambling advertising occurs. The second summarized the main themes and features of gambling marketing. The third reported on how much children, young people, and vulnerable groups were exposed to gambling advertising. The fourth section was on what types of gambling advertisements were particularly risky. Finally, the fifth section summarized the impacts of gambling advertisements.

Where and how often did gambling advertising occur?

Gambling advertisements had increased in volume in recent years. The amount of money spent on gambling advertisement had also increased by 24% from 2015 to 2018. Gambling is advertised at all times of the day. Advertisements appear in the morning on radio. They also appear in the afternoon and evening on TV. Most gambling accounts were found to send at least one Tweet between 1–5am.

Sports is an important context for gambling advertisements. For example, sports betting was the most common advertisement shown to the online avatars. Different sports had different amounts of gambling advertisements. Gambling advertising was common during football matches. It was less common for rugby and tennis, and none was found for Formula 1. Advertisement for sports betting was less common online. Lotteries spent the most on advertising. The researchers also found an increase in gambling advertising for eSports. They identified 44 accounts that sent 26,573 Tweets on eSports gambling to at least 9,000 followers in 2018.

What were the main themes and features used to market gambling?

Gambling advertisements included many features to convince customers to gamble. These included time-

limited offers and promotion of specific odds. They also included free or matched bets. Some advertisements targeted new customers. 51% of advertisements encouraged immediate gambling.

Many themes and features were used to market gambling. Some advertisements did not make specific gambling reference. These advertisements were mostly on social media to build brand loyalty.

Gambling advertisements were associated with a wide variety of topics to promote gambling. The most popular was linking specific bets to sports. Other topics included the use of humour, celebrities, and previous winners.

How much were children, young people, and vulnerable groups exposed to gambling advertising?

No gambling advertisement was found on children's media. But, all participants, including children reported high exposure to advertisements. They all felt that gambling advertisements were everywhere. Only 4% of 11–24-year-olds did not report exposure to gambling advertisements in the past month. 85% of 11–24-year-olds reported seeing gambling advertisements on television. This was followed by 70% on high street shops and 66% on social media.

Exposure on TV was not limited to sports viewing. Social media gambling advertisements were mostly through video, while watching clips on YouTube or scrolling Facebook. Gambling advertisements were also common on promotional window displays in shops.

There was a high level of brand awareness and recognition of gambling companies. In the survey, participants knew more than 7 of 10 gambling brands on average. Participants in the focus groups recognized 8 of 9 logos.

An estimated 41,000 children under 16 followed and engaged with gambling accounts on Twitter. In total, children made up 6% of the total followers of gambling accounts. This increased to 17% if including eSports gambling accounts. Children were responsible for 13,000 replies or re-tweets of gambling content.

Exposure to gambling also occurred through family and friends, often starting at a young age. This included picking numbers for the lottery or selecting horses for racing. So, the attitudes and behaviours of family and friends were linked to gambling exposure.

Two ways to reduce exposure to gambling advertising in children and young people were identified. The first is to improve age screening tools on social media. This will limit who can follow gambling-related accounts. Second, companies can make better use of technology to block people who are likely to be children from seeing gambling content.

What type of gambling advertisements were particularly risky?

The researchers found that it is difficult to categorize what advertisement appeals to young people. Yet, several features were found that could be appealing. The use of memorable songs, catchphrases, colours, characters and celebrities could appeal to all participant groups. Showcasing gambling knowledge/skill could appeal more to high-risk gamblers. Presenting gambling as being fun could attract both young people and vulnerable adults. Financial offers and presenting previous winners could also be appealing.

Understanding of safe and responsible gambling messages was mixed. Children and young people thought gambling could be enjoyable. But their knowledge of the risks of gambling was mixed. Children under 16 were more likely to not know how gambling odds worked. All participants wanted advertisements to better highlight the risks of gambling.

Three features were found that could appeal specifically to children and young people. The first was the language used. The second was graphic designs such as being cartoon-like. The third was messages about fun, excitement, and non-stop playing. Gambling advertisements on Twitter were more likely to contain these features. This was largely due to the use of images and animations.

Special financial offers were common features of gambling advertisements. These were thought to be attractive to all groups, particularly those with little understanding of gambling. The most common promotional offer was free or matched bets. This was found in 44% of traditional media and 47% of Twitter advertisements. Time-limited offers could encourage immediate and frequent gambling.

Concerns about gambling advertisements included no labels to identify gambling content on Twitter. The minimal number of messages on the risks of gambling was a concern. As was the lack of messaging on gambling safety. Not being clear on the conditions of free bets and promotions was also a concern.

What was the impact of gambling advertisements?

Gambling advertisements were found to have both a direct and indirect impact on future gambling. Some participants reported that advertisements led them to gamble. This was more the case for frequent gamblers and people with problem gambling. Children and young people engaged less with gambling advertising. But, the advertisements did increase awareness. Gambling advertisements might not lead to an immediate desire to gamble, but they could lead to a wide range of emotional responses. For example, advertisements could normalize gambling and create the impression that gambling is low risk.

Gambling advertisements increased the chances that young people would gamble in the future. Greater exposure, engagement, and awareness of gambling brands increased future gambling. Other factors were also important, particularly parent and peer gambling attitudes and behaviours. Also, older children were more likely to gamble in the future.

Who is it intended for?

This report is intended for gambling regulators to help regulate gambling advertisements. This report can also be used by researchers to give more evidence to the impact of gambling advertisements.

What does the report recommend?

Based on the results, the researchers made several recommendations. The first is to reduce exposure to gambling advertising for young people and vulnerable groups. This may include restricting gambling advertising in public places and not just child-friendly places. Technology, like adtech, can be used to minimize the risk of exposure to gambling advertising. The second is to reduce the appeal of advertisements. This includes regulating common advertising features such as the emphasis on fun and low risk. The third is to include more responsible gambling messages to protect consumers. The fourth is to improve education about the risks of gambling. The last is to continue research on the impact of gambling advertisements. In particular, longitudinal studies are needed to understand the impact over time.

About the researchers

Ipsos MORI is a market research company in the UK.

Citation

Ipsos MORI (2020). *Final Synthesis Report: the effect of gambling marketing and advertising on children, young people and vulnerable adults.* Available from: https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/publication/documents/2020-03/gambling-marketing-advertising-effect-young-people-final-report.pdf

Study funding

The research questions were set by the Responsible Gambling Strategy Board, who are independent advisors to the Gambling Commission. The project was commissioned by GambleAware through a competitive funding process.

Gambling Research Exchange (GREO)

Gambling Research Exchange (GREO) has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. GREO is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization that aims to eliminate harm from gambling. Our goal is to support evidence-informed decision making in responsible gambling and policies to reduce harm from gambling. Learn more about GREO by visiting greo.ca or emailing info@greo.ca.