RESEARCH QUESTIONS
Do descriptive or injunctive norms influence one’s gambling frequency? If so, are gamblers more influenced by family/friends or other college peers?

PURPOSE
Social norms theory states that two perceptual norms can influence behaviour: descriptive and injunctive. Descriptive norms are the perceived prevalence of behaviours among others, while injunctive norms are the perceived approval of behaviours by others. The purpose of the current study was to examine the impact of descriptive and injunctive norms on gambling behaviour in two different samples: close others (friends/family) and distally related others (college students).

HYPOTHESIS
Based on previous literature, it was hypothesized that the effects of descriptive norms on gambling behaviour would not be differentiated based on proximity of the normative referent. That is, greater perceptions of other’s gambling frequency would be positively related to the participants’ own gambling frequency and problems. However, the effects of injunctive norms on gambling behaviour were expected to be differentiated based on proximity, with family and friend’s approval positively associated with gambling frequency.

PARTICIPANTS
The sample contained 239 undergraduate students (149 males; mean age of 19.7 years old). According to the South Oaks Gambling Screen (SOGS), 67.2% were non-problem gamblers, 22.7% were moderate risk gamblers, and 10.1% were probable pathological gamblers. All participants reported engaging in at least one gambling activity monthly (76.9% reported at least one game weekly).

PROCEDURE
Participants completed a paper and pencil questionnaire that included norm and gambling measures.

MAIN OUTCOME MEASURES
Gambling severity was assessed with the SOGS to screen for pathological gambling and one question addressed gambling frequency. Two questionnaires (Gambling Quantity and Perceived Norms Scale and a social network scale) were used to evaluate perceived descriptive norms about gambling behaviours, each referring to a different reference group (friends/family or college peers). Similarly, two questionnaires (Gambling Attitudes and Injunctive Norms Scale and the Gambling Injunctive Norms Scale were used to measure perceived injunctive norms.

KEY RESULTS
As expected, the descriptive norms were not correlated with gambling frequency when the normative referent was close (family and friends) or far (college peers). Injunctive norms (approval from others) were correlated with gambling frequency (not with gambling pathology), but only for close referents (family and friends). A multiple regression analysis revealed that when the referent group was family/friends, there was a significant effect of injunctive norms in predicting gambling frequency, but not descriptive norms. Conversely, when the referent group was college students, there was a significant main effect of descriptive norms on predicting gambling frequency, but not injunctive norms. In terms of predicting gambling problems, the results showed a significant effect of descriptive norms, but not injunctive, for both referent groups.

LIMITATIONS
One limitation was that family and friend’s injunctive and descriptive norms were assessed using a different scale than the college student’s referent group. In addition, there was no measure of actual approval from the other students or gambling frequency and it might be the case that gambler’s perceptions are not accurate representations of the attitudes and behaviours of their peers. Lastly, because the sample contained mostly frequent gamblers, the results may only generalize only to frequent gamblers.

CONCLUSIONS
This study was the first to examine the interaction between injunctive and descriptive norms on gambling frequency. The interaction showed that when the referent was family or friends gambling frequency was predicted by injunctive norms (not descriptive norms), however when the referent was another college student gambling frequency was predicted by descriptive norms (not injunctive norms). When predicting gambling problems, only descriptive norms were significant predictors regardless of referent group. These results suggest that people are influenced by their perceptions of others engaging in gambling behaviour and that these perceptions are strongly associated with gambling problems. The results also suggest that only descriptive norms perpetuate one’s gambling problems, specifically when the referent is family or a friend.

KEYWORDS: social norms, gambling, gambling frequency, assessment

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