



New Developments in Gambling Marketing: the Rise of Social Media Ads and Its Effect on Youth

Raffaello Rossi¹ · Agnes Nairn²

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Abstract

Purpose of Review Propelled by the rise of online and social media, gambling marketing has developed extremely fast, moving far beyond traditional techniques. Policy makers need to ensure that children and young people are protected in this space but it is hard for empirical research to keep pace with industry developments. This article aims to provide some direction to policymakers and the scientific community, by reviewing what literature there is on social media gambling marketing and its effects on children.

Recent Findings Research suggests that exposure to social media gambling advertising is high in volume and reach; that gambling ads are more appealing to young people than to adults; and that advertising portrays gambling as a harmless and fun activity with few warnings of potential health dangers. Most gambling brands' followers on social media are under 25 years old and current regulations are not entirely fit for purpose.

Summary Social media gambling ads are booming with high rates of exposure to children and young persons. Paid-for ads target specific young people (with tempting but complex financial incentives), whilst organic ads thrive by being shared across youth user networks. The effects on children and young people are worrisome. Gambling accounts are using content marketing, in particular, to create humorous and seemingly harmless posts to target young people who have not fully developed advertising recognition skills. As regulators struggle to keep up, there are concerns that young people are particularly influenced by these ads, and may be lured into gambling.

Keywords Gambling advertising · Gambling promotion · Children · Youth · Policy · Consumer protection

Introduction

In 2005, the UK put itself at the global forefront of deregulation by opening up the gambling market and, along with it, advertising for sports betting, online betting and poker [1]. This arguably normalised betting across the UK for young and old alike. The result is almost unquestioning social acceptance of both new opportunities for gambling (e.g.

loot boxes, esports betting, gambling on your smartphone), and entirely new forms of digital and social media gambling ads. Yet, some of those new ways of advertising are beginning to attract criticism with comparisons to the *wild west* [2]. A key concern is that regulations are just not keeping up with industry developments and that children may be the ones most exposed to harm. Indeed, the influential WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission argued that “*new technologies are exacerbating and creating new threats to children that are not well understood. Gambling is a potentially large and unaddressed public health challenge for children.*” [3]. Recognising these challenges and the urgent need to update their laws, the UK Government has announced a review of the Gambling Act 2005 to “*ensure gambling laws are fit for the digital age*” [4].

The combination of novel social media gambling marketing; and ethical and practical challenges in research with children, has resulted in a lack of empirical data to inform policy makers. We are lacking even basic metrics such as

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✉ Raffaello Rossi
raffaello.rossi@bristol.ac.uk
Agnes Nairn
agnes.nairn@bristol.ac.uk

¹ University of Bristol, Howard House, Queens Avenue, Bristol BS8 1SD, UK

² University of Bristol, 5 Tyndall Avenue, Bristol BS8 1UD, UK

children's exposure to gambling ads or, indeed, whether ads deliberately target children [5]. Since social media advertising spend is unlikely to slow down in the foreseeable future, this article aims to provide direction to policymakers and the scientific community, by reviewing what literature there is on social media gambling ads and its effect on youth. First, we will report on the sheer size of social media gambling marketing. Next, we will review new forms of social media gambling advertising and examine how these may affect young people. Finally, we will draw some conclusions for policymakers, and researchers.

The Boom of Social Media Gambling Ads

Social media advertising is booming. Global social media advertising spend tripled from \$51bn in 2017 to \$183bn in 2021 and is projected to reach \$385bn by 2027 [6]. In the UK, the gambling industry has increased its marketing spend by 56% since 2014 to £1.5bn (\$1.9bn) in 2017 with the lion's share (£896 m) being spent on digital advertising, including £149 m directly going into social media marketing [7]. Thus social media gambling advertising spend is close to the industry's TV advertising spend (£234). However, two things are worthy of note: the first, the most recent numbers are from 2017 and have most likely increased substantially since then; and second, social media ads are considerably cheaper to launch [8] and thus, result in more adverts per dollar. Indeed, limited evidence available suggests a huge volume of social media gambling ads [9–11••]. For example, on Twitter the five largest online betting operators in the UK — Ladbrokes, Bet365, Coral, Betfred, and Paddy Power — sent 19,100 tweets within 8 months (i.e. 78 each per day) [11••].

The high volume of gambling ads on social media inevitably results in young people's high exposure [12, 13, 14••, 15–18]. A study from 2021 found that 63.3% of adults (over the age of 25) reported seeing gambling ads on social media at least once a week, rising to 72.4% for 18–24-year-olds [14••]. Whilst mass marketing takes a scatter gun approach, blasting a wide audience with the hope of hitting a few, social media marketing is a more targeted tool. Whilst gambling companies certainly target young men on social media, young people can also offer themselves up as targets by following gambling accounts. What is even more worrying, though, is the high level of self-reported exposure by children. The UK Gambling Commission found that 37% of 11–16-year-olds said they had been exposed to gambling ads on social media [19], whilst other research found that 45.7% of 11–17-year-olds reported seeing gambling ads at least once per week [14••]. The high — and therefore potentially illegal exposure to gambling ads for minors — is not only problematic because it normalises gambling [20], but also

because repeated exposure to a stimulus leads to an increasingly positive attitude towards this stimulus — the so-called *mere-exposure effect* [21]. This effect has been reaffirmed in many experiments over the past decades [22]. So whether or not individuals report noticing such adverts, high exposure builds subconscious positive relationships to advertised brands [23].

The industry's high-volume advertising strategy seems to work, as the number of gambling account followers on social media is substantial, with the most prolific accounts having over 650,000 followers [9, 11••]. Mirroring the high youth ad exposure, the share of young followers of gambling accounts on Twitter is similarly high with 7% of followers being under 16, and 66% of followers being between 16 and 23 [11••]. So around 71% of all followers of gambling accounts are under 24 and repeatedly exposed to their ads.

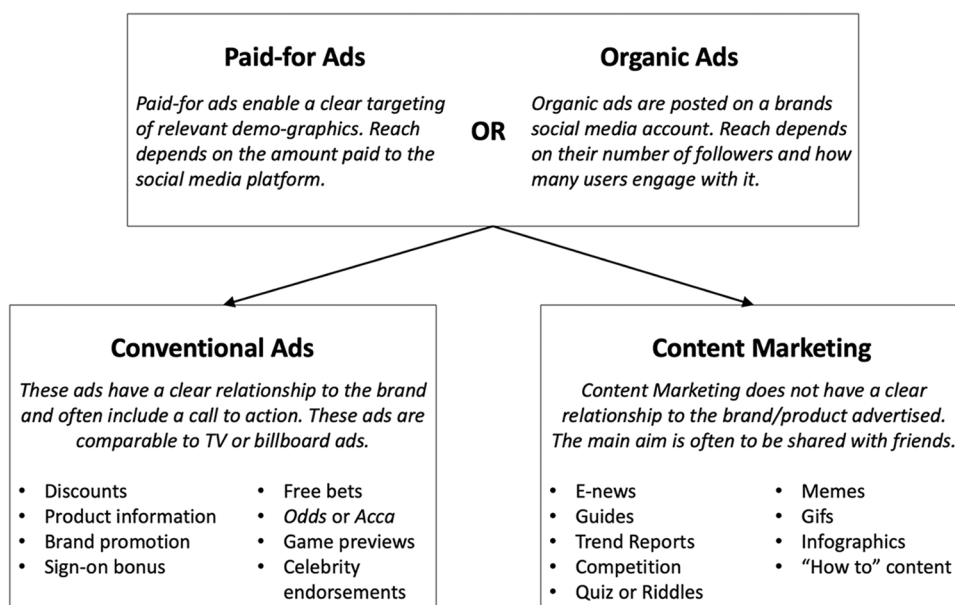
New Forms of Advertising

Although advertising has been around for hundreds of years [24], social media has created entirely new forms and mechanisms. Social media users are not only the recipients of content, but they are also content creators and distributors by inventing, sharing, commenting or liking posts [25]. This user-generated mechanism has totally changed the advertising landscape. Figure 1 summarises the main social media advertising techniques. On a basic level, social media ads can be classified into paid-for and organic [26]. Paid-for advertising allows precise targeting of consumers based on demographics or shared information [27] whilst the number of people who will see these adverts largely depends on ad spend. Although such paid-for advertising can be in the form of content marketing (see explanation below), it tends to focus on conventional advertising content with a specific selling proposition or call to action. Organic advertising, on the other hand, usually depends on highly appealing content (content marketing) that individuals will want to share across their networks. In the first instance, it is a call to distribute rather than a call to buy.

Paid-for Social Media Gambling Ads

Similar to paid-for offline gambling ads, paid-for online advertising is usually used to create brand awareness or to highlight financial incentives or appealing odds designed to encourage immediate gambling [28••]. These tend to have a very strong link to sports [29]. Social media seems to exacerbate some of the negative effects of the incentives in these ads. The financial incentives are snappier (thus quickly appealing) but also complex (thus hard for young people to truly understand). Younger children find it hard to understand the concept of odds as this requires

Fig. 1 Flow chart of modern social media gambling advertising techniques



a grasp of probability which is not usually introduced into the school curriculum below the age of 12. Children instead see the presentation of odds in sports betting as factual information like the outcome of a match [30]. They certainly do not see it as advertising an opportunity that may or not come about. This might help explain why such adverts are more appealing to children and young persons than to adults [14]. Adults who understand that you can win or lose are more sceptical. These issues are amplified by short word limits in social media (e.g. Twitter 280 characters per post) which mean that explanations are curtailed and thus lack the clarity needed for children to have a chance of understanding. Some enticements to open a gambling account were found to include over seven different pieces of eligibility information (e.g. “Deposit £10 — play with £50. Min deposit £10. Max sports bonus £20. 5× wagering, min odds (4/5). £20 casino bonus added. 40× wagering to release casino bonus, new consumers only”), making it unlikely that users — particularly younger users — will process the messaging, before opening an account [11].

A second problem derives from the close relationship between sports and gambling. Many social media ads are time sensitive, relating to a game currently played, or a special offer with limited time validity. This increases pressure to act fast [11]. The ongoing development of the brain until the age of around 25 years means that children and young people experience more intense urges, but still lack the ability to resist which results in more emotionally driven and impulsive behaviour [31]. This is highly problematic. Repeated exposure to time-sensitive gambling offers are more likely to result in action — such as opening an account or placing a bet.

Third, there are concerns over social responsibility messages in social media gambling ads such as age restriction warnings, or harm reduction messages [11, 32]. Although such messages have been criticised widely as being ineffective in reducing gambling [33, 34], from an advertising processing point of view, it could be argued that, without these messages, it would be even harder to recognise the dangerous nature of gambling ads and it is likely that gambling will continue to be normalised as a fun and harmless activity. Indeed, 75% of children in an Australian study perceive sports betting as a normal part of sport [35]. The lack of social responsibility messages on gambling ads is especially concerning for young people who are still developing media and advertising literacy, and struggle to recognise persuasive attempts [36].

Finally, it is concerning that if users fall into a targeted segment either by actively following gambling accounts or by being in one of the targeted demographics (e.g. young, male football fans), they are highly likely to be bombarded with gambling ads — especially, of course, if they have also been flagged as having an interest in gambling or sports [12]. The repeated, targeted exposure to paid-for gambling ads on social media may well be luring young people into gambling.

Organic Social Media Gambling Ads

In contrast to paid-for ads, organic advertising reach depends on the number of followers a brand has and the number of ‘shares’ or ‘retweets’ a post achieves — metrics that have to be “earned” by way of content creativity [37]. Good content will be shared or even go viral, thus disseminating the message into completely new audience networks, making

shareability a key objective of modern advertising strategies. This is why content marketing is booming. Content marketing aims to engage current and potential consumer bases with content not necessarily related to the product/brand [38]. It is about “developing stories that inform and entertain and compel customers to act — without actually telling them to” [39]. This could be posting competitions, memes, funny pictures of cats, how-to content, or fascinating infographics — anything goes as long as it makes the user feel good and gets them to share the ad [37]. Content marketing has been booming as key form of organic ads almost since the advent of social media and it is extensively used by gambling brands [10]. Examples include PaddyPower’s comparison of football players to The Simpsons characters, or their satirical video clip of the W.H.O. advising non-England fans to stay indoors after the England beat Germany in the football championship [40]. A large-scale study into the UK gambling advertising ecosystem on Twitter found that of 888,745 gambling ads over 40% were classified as content marketing [11••] — making it to a major part of gambling brands’ advertising strategy.

Effects on Children

Whilst most gambling content marketing ads are designed to make the receiver giggle, there are severe concerns over their effect on children. Although gambling content marketing uses a variety of different techniques [41] as shown in Fig. 1, they tend to have something in common: they seem very inconspicuous, innocent and harmless despite being adverts for a highly addictive product. Indeed, this may function as a bait — luring users into engaging with the account without actually knowing that it is a gambling account [14••, 40, 41]. Gambling advertisers make particularly heavy use of ‘insider sentiments’ — which is the use of an ‘in joke’ or niche expert information to enhance the feeling of belonging to a special club/group [41]. The use of this technique by esports gambling adverts is particularly worrisome given the young age of esports fans [42]. Adolescence is a crucial phase in the search for activities and attributes which form identity [43] — often via the means of consumption [44]. Gambling providers use this developmental vulnerability by designing insider sentiments so that the narratives and stories in many esports tweets are almost entirely meaningless for non-gamers or older audiences because they are closely related to youth culture [42]. Beyond this insider-driven humour, news, emojis or memes are very unlikely to trigger feelings of “be careful — this is a gambling ad”.

A recent study required 650 participants aged 11–78 to rate the valence and intensity of their emotions on seeing a range of gambling adverts [14••]. These two dimensions were then transformed into one scale that was used as a proxy for “appeal” — a key concept of current UK

gambling advertising regulations in protecting children from gambling ads that are (potentially inadvertently) targeted at them: “Gambling marketing communication must not be (...) of strong appeal to children or young persons” [45]. By using the term “appeal”, the researchers used the same terminology as the regulators and thus, aimed to decrease issues in interpreting the results for policy purposes. The research found that gambling content marketing was almost 4 times more appealing to 11–24-year-olds than to older adults [14••]. What is more, 11 out of 12 gambling content marketing ads were found to trigger positive emotions in children and young persons, whilst only 7 out of 12 triggered them in adults. Creating these positive emotions toward gambling ads and brands is not only likely to further normalise gambling as a harmless activity, but may entice children and young persons to start following gambling accounts. With over half of UK gambling account followers being under the age of 24 — with 41,000 followers under 16 [11••], this is a serious concern to consider.

Content marketing tweets are hard to identify as advertising and advertisers have little incentive to make them more recognisable. In one study, of around 400 gambling content marketing ads on Twitter, none had any kind of labelling clarifying their commercial nature [41]. The same study found that of 352,406 gambling content marketing ads, only 657 (0.19%) included some sort of gambling-related warning (T&C apply, responsible gambling, or age restrictions). Without any pointers (such as an advertising label, or T&Cs, or gamble responsibly), it is nearly impossible to immediately understand the commercial nature of the ad or the potential harms [46]. To process advertising in a mature manner, individuals need the ability to recognise the persuasive intent of advertising and apply this knowledge cognitively [36]. This means that individuals need to understand that marketing messages want to sell something, in order to put up protective heuristics [47]. Without recognising the ads, however, they are nearly defenceless against the persuasive attempt.

Policy Responses

The concerns around gambling content marketing and its effect on young people are real but the key problem is that advertising regulations have not kept up. The UK advertising regulator, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) until very recently argued that content marketing posts “do not amount to ‘advertising’ as defined by the CAP Code (...) because they are editorial in nature” [48]. This meant that gambling advertisers could do whatever they wanted within gambling content marketing, as none of the existing advertising regulations would need to be followed. They could include children in their ads, or even use content that is obviously appealing to them. However, after

substantial pressure from research publications [14••, 40, 41], a debate about this research in the UK House of Lords [49] and an episode of a popular consumer-interest TV show about gambling content marketing [50], the ASA have made a U-turn and brought gambling content marketing under their remit. They have also stated that the limited cases not deemed to be under their remit, would be referred to the UK Gambling Commission to consider under their policy [51]. Whilst this is welcomed news for the gambling advertising sphere in the UK, we are not aware of any similar provisions in other countries, leaving gambling content marketing to operate elsewhere.

Conclusions and Future Directions

In this review, we found that of the advent of social media advertising substantially increased the volume of gambling ads — with high rates of exposure, not only to adults, but also to children and young persons. The effects on youth are worrisome. Whilst paid-for ads are used to target specific target groups (often with tempting financial incentives), organic ads thrive by being shared across a multitude of user networks. Gambling content marketing has created a cascade of humorous and seemingly harmless posts by gambling accounts along with potentially harmful effects on young people who have not fully developed advertising recognition skills. Taken together, these advertising strategies can lure children into positive relationships with gambling accounts and perhaps into gambling itself. Policy makers have just started to catch up with these fast developments. New techniques, such as content marketing remain un-regulated in most jurisdictions and little research focuses on the effects of social media gambling advertising on children.

Moving forward, it seems that much needs to be done to a gain better understanding how children are affected by social media gambling ads. Too rarely are children included in this research, and more research is needed to overcome self-reporting limitations. Experiential, big-data and behavioural research designs might help the latter. Policymakers have lots to catch-up with, too. Most current advertising regulations pre-exist social media and are ill-equipped to deal with these new forms of advertising. Social media specific regulations will most likely be needed to actually crack down on gambling ads that lure young people into gambling.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Human and Animal Rights and Informed Consent This article does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by any of the authors.

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- Of major importance

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