

# **An exploratory study of gambling operators' use of social media and the latent messages conveyed**

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## **Abstract**

Advertisements for gambling products have historically been restricted due to their potential to normalize gambling and contribute to excessive gambling behaviours among vulnerable populations. However, social media enables gambling operators to promote products and brands with fewer constraints than in traditional forms of media. This study investigated how social media is used by gambling operators to promote gambling activities including an analysis of the latent messages that are conveyed. A representative sample of major land-based and online gambling venues and operators, including casinos, clubs, hotels, lottery and wagering operators ( $n = 101$ ), was obtained. Websites and social media profiles of gambling operators were audited to investigate the types of social media used, content of promotions, and prevalence of responsible gambling messaging. The results showed that Facebook and Twitter were the dominant platforms used, most commonly by casinos and online wagering operators. A key finding was that online gambling operators included gambling content in conjunction with related news and events, as well as unrelated content, as way of normalizing gambling within a broader social context. Unlike land-based gambling promotions, responsible gambling information tended not to feature in operators' posts and profiles. The key messages propagated in social media gambling promotions were positively framed, and tended to encourage gambling using a range of cross-promotional tactics to emphasize the winning aspect of gambling. The implications of freely accessible and pervasive gambling promotions via social media are discussed with respect to the general community as well as vulnerable populations.

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### **An exploratory study of gambling operators' use of social media and the latent messages conveyed**

Most jurisdictions have introduced regulation and codes of conduct to govern advertising of gambling products due to recognition that gambling is an adult activity that is related to significant risks, particularly for vulnerable members of the community, such as young people and problem gamblers (Monaghan, Derevensky, & Sklar, 2008). Many advertising standards and regulations have not been updated to refer specifically to social media use by gambling operators. Thus, gambling operators face few restrictions in using social media to promote potentially risky products and may be utilizing practices likely to impact negatively on vulnerable populations. However, little research has examined the use of social media to promote gambling products and brands. Therefore, this study aimed to address two research questions: 1) how do gambling operators use social media to promote gambling activities?; and 2) what latent messages are conveyed?

#### **Impact of Gambling Marketing**

The consumption continuum and marketing cues conceptual framework holds that marketing cues can influence an individual's progression towards excessive and problematic, or addictive, use (Martin et al., 2013). For example, frequently presented marketing cues may normalize potentially risky products by portraying their use in many everyday situations. Marketing often attempts to elicit emotive responses, such as triggering memories of pleasant or exciting times while also attempting to evoke consumer loyalty. The impact of marketing on consumption may be particularly important in online gambling which is often available to consumers on a continuous basis with only limited means to prevent exposure (Hing, Vitartas & Lamont, 2013; Lamont, Hing, & Gainsbury, 2011; McMullan, 2011; Monaghan & Derevensky, 2008; Monaghan et al., 2009). The impact of online advertising may account for the finding that Internet gamblers were significantly more likely to increase their gambling in response to promotions (29%) than were non-interactive gamblers (23%) (Hing, Gainsbury, Blaszczynski, Wood, Lubman, & Russell, 2014).

The powerful impact of advertising has been examined in several public health domains, including alcohol, tobacco, and junk food consumption. The objective of any commercial advertisement is to capture consumer attention, convey positive attitudes towards the product, and encourage the adoption of the messages espoused. Many studies have found that advertising can have a significant effect on people's behaviours and attitudes to increase uptake and consumption of tobacco, (Biener & Siegel, 2000; Freeman, Chapman, & Rimmer, 2008), alcohol (Mart, 2011; Smith & Foxcroft, 2009), and junk food (Effertz, Franke, &

Teichert, 2014). For example, a study found that children aged 11-12 years exposed to high levels of advertising for alcohol from multiple sources were twice as likely to drink alcohol a year later than those at lower levels of advertising exposure (Collins, Ellickson, McCaffrey, & Hambarsoomians, 2007). This research has been used to support restrictions on advertising of harmful products (Monaghan, Derevensky, & Sklar, 2009).

Consistent with Martin et al.'s (2013) theoretical framework, studies have found that gambling advertisements and specific promotions have a greater impact to encourage gambling amongst problem gamblers as compared to non-problem gamblers (Binde, 2009; Grant & Kim, 2001; Gainsbury, Russell, Wood, Hing, Blaszczynski, in press; Hing, Cherney, Blaszczynski, Gainsbury, & Lubman, 2014). A study of 2,799 Internet gamblers found that problem gamblers were significantly more likely to be influenced by promotions and incentives (e.g., free credit) provided by online gambling sites compared to non-problem and at-risk gamblers (Gainsbury, Russell, Wood, Hing, Blaszczynski, in press).

Children and adolescents are also thought to be vulnerable, to the effects of gambling advertising (Friend & Ladd, 2009; Korn, Hurson & Reynolds, 2005; Messerlian & Derevensky, 2006; Monaghan et al., 2008). It has been argued that the high level of exposure to gambling marketing in society has led to its normalisation and perception as an acceptable, harmless, and credible activity (Moore & Ohtsuka, 1999). Similar to other advertising research, studies have found that advertising exposure can shape youth gambling attitudes, intentions and behaviours (Derevensky et al., 2007; Felsher, Derevensky, & Gupta, 2004; Hing, Vitartas et al., 2014). In a study with British young adult online gamblers, 40% cited advertising and 21% cited practice games as a primary reason to gamble online (Griffiths & Barnes, 2007), demonstrating the potential impact of exposure to marketing cues. However, few advertising studies have considered social media use by gambling operators.

### **The growth of social media and social networks**

The Internet has evolved rapidly, often leaving policy makers and regulators far behind innovative commercial products and offerings. Social media refers to sites and platforms that allow the sharing of information and media material by users, two-way communication between users and companies, and other facilities that allow social communication. Recent estimates suggest that approximately 26% of the world's population are active social network users, including 56% of North Americans, and more than 43% of populations in Western Europe, Oceania, South America and East Asia (We Are Social, 2014). Australia is one of the most 'connected' countries, with 89% of the population having a social network account that is used for an average of two hours per day (We Are Social, 2014). Youth, including adolescents have the highest use of the Internet and social media, with 72% using the Internet more than once a day (Raco, 2014). The bulk of social media users are individuals; however, social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter allow companies to establish brand pages, which users can 'like' or 'follow' to receive updates and

content. Any activity that users engage with on brand pages may then appear in the news feeds of their Facebook connections, either directly through users sharing content, or indirectly through paid promotions by companies to targeted individuals and their connections.

Given the potential influence of social media in marketing, it is not surprising that alcohol and gambling companies are now using social media to engage with consumers. One study of marketing on social networking sites among leading UK alcohol brands identified a range of strategies used, including competitions, games, discussions of real-world events, and invitations to drink (Nicholls, 2012). The author concluded that the blurring of user-generated material and brand promotion, as well as online and offline activities, normalized alcohol use for both banal and special occasions to make the brand and product part of users' everyday lives (Nicholls, 2012). An analysis of Twitter profiles of alcohol companies found that they made extensive references to popular topics like sport and social events in attempts to have Tweets viewed by a wider audience (Dadich et al., 2013). Previous international research suggests that gambling operators are most strongly engaged with Facebook and Twitter, with an average of 62,084 likes and 30,594 followers across the UK's top 10 betting sites (QuBit, 2012). As an example, Paddy Power, a large online wagering organisation, asserted that, in 2013, they had over 1.7 million Facebook fans and Twitter followers, half of whom were existing customers (Lauchlan, 2013).

Despite the use of social media by alcohol and gambling companies, its regulation as a form of advertising is unclear. For example, it is uncertain whether requirements for Australian gambling advertisements to contain a warning to gamble responsibly apply to social media messaging. According to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, companies must still abide by the basic advertising codes of conduct on social media; for example they cannot make false or misleading claims (ACCC, 2014). Furthermore, companies may be held responsible for all posts, including public comments made by others on their social media pages, including those that are false or likely to mislead or deceive consumers. However, the Advertising Standards Bureau advises that not all material on an advertiser's Facebook page will necessarily be considered advertising or marketing communications, although branded material will be subject to the Code of Ethics (Advertising Standards Bureau, 2013). Furthermore, the content of gambling advertisements is regulated at a state-level, making it unclear who has responsibility to ensure promotions on a site available nationally abide by responsible gambling standards. The lack of clear and legally binding regulations relating to social media may lead some companies to experiment with these platforms more liberally than they may use traditional advertising media.

### **The present study**

This is the first study to specifically examine the use of social media for marketing purposes by gambling companies. Although the potential impact of social media and online promotion of gambling has been raised as possible causes for concern (King, Delfabbro, &

Griffiths, 2010; Lee, Lemanski, & Jun, 2008; Monaghan et al., 2009; McMullan & Kervin, 2012), very few studies have been conducted to provide a starting point to guide policy change. For these reasons, this study was designed to provide a comprehensive appraisal of how social media is being used by the Australian gambling industry and the latent content that is being conveyed to the online community.

## **Methods**

### **Sampling Procedure**

The audit was conducted over four weeks in October 2013. The sample comprised 101 sites operating in Australia. The audit included all casino and lottery operators in Australia, the 10 largest electronic gaming machine (EGM) venues in each state and territory and the largest wagering providers (based on total annual turnover sourced from official regulatory sites in each State or Territory that provides annual gambling turnover statistics). EGM venues were selected from each jurisdiction (except Western Australia where EGMs are not available outside of casinos) based on the total number of EGMs in each venue (as indicated by official 2012 figures reported by regulators). EGM venues ranged from those with only 40 machines (e.g., South Australia) to those with over 1,000 machines in New South Wales. The largest operators were chosen as these were considered most likely to have a social media presence. This study was not designed to be representative of the extent to which all gambling venues are active on social media, but to investigate the use of social media by gambling operators that were active on these platforms.

### **Audit Process**

The Australian-facing websites and social media pages for all operators were accessed using a desktop personal computer and via an iOS smartphone device to detect any comparative differences (e.g., structure, breadth, and positioning of content). Operator websites were accessed first and links followed to social media profiles. The audit was completed by one author and verified by two other authors to ensure consistency and accuracy. The audit recorded the following information:

- Name and owner of the gambling operation/venue;
- Types of gambling offered;
- Use of social media (Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, YouTube, Google+) for promotions and communication with followers;
- Level of social media interest (number of likes, subscribers, and followers);
- Type of content promoted via social media platforms;
- Nature and use of responsible gambling messages via social media.

A thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2008) then identified the latent messages conveyed by these social media promotions. Given the exploratory nature of this research, this analysis focused on capturing the range of messages conveyed rather than on quantifying their occurrence.

## Results

### Sample Characteristics

The 101 operators were distributed across all Australian jurisdictions. Table 1 summarises the types of operators investigated. EGM venues were hotels and clubs providing EGMs; lottery providers offered products through retail venues and online sites; and online wagering referred to sites/agencies providing either online or a combination of retail and online wagering services. Only operators licensed and regulated within Australia were included.

**Table 1.**

Number of gambling operators sampled by type and jurisdictions in which they are licensed to operate

	Casinos	EGM venues	Lottery providers	Online wagering operators	TOTAL
NSW	1	10	1	0	12
QLD	4	10	1	0	15
VIC	1	10	0	0	11
SA	1	10	1	0	12
TAS	2	10	0	0	12
ACT	1	10	0	1	12
NT	2	10	0	0	12
WA	1	0	1	0	2
National	0	0	2	11	2
TOTAL	13	70	6	12	101

Almost all operators offered a variety of gambling products. Casinos typically provided EGMs, race and sports betting, poker, keno, and table games, whereas the EGM venues typically provided sports and race betting and keno as well as EGMs. Most betting agencies and sites only provided access to wagering products. In some instances, a single operator offered betting as well as lottery, although this was typically through a different site or retailer.

### Use of Social Media

The majority of the operators (87%) had a Facebook page and around half had a Twitter account (Table 2). Less than one-third self-promoted using YouTube, although the majority of online wagering operators used this platform. One in 10 operators used Google+, with higher use by betting agencies. Other social media sites were uncommonly used. Facebook use was generally consistent across different operator types, whereas online betting agencies and lottery providers more commonly used Twitter. Use of social media was highest

amongst online wagering sites, followed by casino operators and then EGM venues,  $F(3, 83) = 12.59, p < .05$ .

**Table 2.**

Number and percentage of each venue type indicating social media use

	N	Facebook N (%)	Twitter N (%)	Pinterest N (%)	Instagram N (%)	YouTube N (%)	Google+ N (%)
Casinos	13	11 (84.6)	7 (53.8)	0 (0.0)	1 (7.7)	6 (46.2)	0 (0.0)
EGM venues	70	61 (87.1)	29 (41.4)	0 (0.0)	2 (2.9)	13 (18.6)	2 (2.9)
Lottery	6	4 (66.7)	5 (83.3)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (16.7)	1 (16.7)
Betting agencies	12	11 (91.7)	11 (91.2)	0 (0.0)	1 (8.3)	10 (83.3)	7 (58.3)
Overall	101	87 (84.6)	52 (51.1)	0 (0.0)	4 (4.0)	30 (29.7)	10 (9.9)

Note that the percentages are not additive across the table.

To indicate the ‘reach’ of this social media activity, the number of Facebook and Twitter followers was recorded (Table 3). The number of Facebook followers (as designated by ‘likes’) was extremely diverse ranging from 28 to 428,225 with a median of 1,534. Twitter follower numbers ranged from 1 to 68,766 (Median = 611). The highest number of Facebook ‘likes’ was observed for a club in NSW, whereas the highest number of Twitter followers was for an online bookmaker. Twitter follower numbers were found to be significantly higher for online wagering sites than the other operator types,  $F(3, 47) = 6.49, p < .001$ . Betting agencies also had the highest number of Facebook fans on average, followed by lottery operators and casinos. Engagement with gambling operators was much lower on Twitter, with EGM venues following betting agencies in terms of average follower numbers, followed by casinos.

**Table 3.**

Means and standard deviations of Facebook and Twitter followers across gambling operator type

	Facebook N	Facebook M (SD)	Twitter N	Twitter M (SD)
Casinos	11	20,918 (27,566)	7	1,234 (1,354)
EGM venues	61	4,577 (16,966)	29	1,476 (4,844)
Lottery	4	40,466 (32,380)	5	1,049 (305)
Betting agencies	11	101,204 (129,225)	11	16,653 (20,455)
Overall	87	20,511 (57,437)	52	4,683 (11,716)

## Social Media and Promotional Content

Information posted on Facebook and Twitter was inspected to examine content promoted or discussed via the respective social media channels. Many operators posted the same or similar content across various social media platforms, or linked between these. This was particularly the case for Facebook and Twitter linking to YouTube videos.

Operators differed in their social media strategies with a variety of content posted. Types of content posted on social media included: information about the venue/operator; promoting gambling products and special offers; competitions and promotions; promoting gambling wins by customers; features to assist betting; betting tips; sports and racing news; in-venue events; food and beverage; encouraging customer engagement; links to sports teams; promoting community engagement, as well as non-gambling related content.

*Information about the venue/operator:*

Most operators used the ‘About’ tab on Facebook to describe their venue including information on gambling facilities as well as other non-gambling services available, contact details, and hours of operation.

*Promoting gambling products and offers:*

Social media was used to promote gambling products and specific events to encourage users to place bets. Posts involved text and graphics that illustrate the types of gambling products available, how to use these, potential returns, and types of customers who use the products. For example, a Facebook post by SkyCity Darwin read: “Baccarat, give it a go? Easy to play, glamorous and fast-moving baccarat (pronounced bah-kah-rah) is largely a game of chance. It’s a great introduction to casino card games, and for many people continues as one of their favourites. You simply bet on which of two hands will win and watch the game unfold. The cards are all dealt according to a fixed set of rules. It’s that easy. Open from 12pm daily” (SkyCity Darwin Facebook page, Jan 12, 2014). The basic information provided and suggestion of an ‘introduction’ to casino games suggests that the post is attempting to appeal to new customers. Another example is Tatts.com’s post “Grab your entry in tonight’s Powerball draw for a chance to change it all with \$6,000,000” (Tatts.com Facebook page, Feb 6, 2014), accompanied by a link to the Powerball page and a graphic with a large text 6 MILLION. Online betting operators often posted odds, such as “Money for Penrith at halftime. They are \$1.45 in live betting” accompanied by a link to the betting site (TomWaterhouse.com Twitter, Aug 18, 2014). Land-based venues often posted information about in-venue events, such as bingo tournaments and jackpots to be won.

*Posts about competitions and promotions:*

Promotions were typically offered in an attempt to encourage particular behaviour, such as downloading an app, visiting a venue, or placing a bet. For example, Betfair Australia posted details of a competition to win a trip to Wimbledon by placing a “minimum \$10 multi on the Australian Open. T&Cs apply” (Betfair Australia Facebook post, Jan 13, 2014).



Competitions and promotions were also a method of encouraging user engagement both on social media platforms and within venues. For example, clubs posted about member draws that required members to be in the venue to win.

#### *Promoting gambling wins:*

Operators posted details of significant wins, although these were typically anonymous and did not disclose details of the winning individual. For example, Lotterywest highlighted the occurrence of two large wins in the same region in a six week period “#Lotto luck strikes #Balcatta twice in 6wks” (Lotterywest Twitter, Aug 18, 2014). Similarly, Redcliffe Leagues Club posted “CONGRATULATIONS to the Redcliff Leagues Club member who this afternoon took home a whopping \$3.1 million jackpot with a 10/10 Keno pick!!” (Facebook, Aug 16, 2014).

#### *Promoting features to assist with betting:*

Operators posted information about their services and facilities, including betting and payment options. For example, SkyCity Adelaide Casino promotes a new payment system to make gambling easier (“Enjoy the ease and convenience of our pay and play systems. From traditional coin to our new pre paid Casino Cash Card, we’ve got it covered for you!” accompanied by a video Facebook, Jun 3, 2014). Similarly, Ladbrokes used Twitter to promote the use of a specialised ATM card to withdraw funds directly from a user’s account (“Your Cash in a Flash ... Withdraw your winnings from any ATM in Australia with our game-changing Ladbrokes Card” accompanied by a video. Twitter, Aug 18, 2014).

#### *Betting tips:*

Many wagering operators used social media to provide links to betting tips. These generally included posts and videos from ‘experts’ suggesting appropriate bets and favourable odds (e.g., “Check out the @therealalbigmarn’s tips and all the best bets in his #NRL Round 23 preview [link]” Tweet by Sportingbet Aust. Aug 13, 2014). Offering betting tips is a method to encourage wagering. Another example is provided by Bet365 which is also indicative of how YouTube videos are used in conjunction with Twitter messages to provide betting tips (“Some last minute tips from Sam and Steve? #bet365update [link to YouTube]”, Aug 18, 2014).

#### *Sports and racing news*

News and updates on sports and racing events were often posted on social media. These did not always specifically mention or suggest betting, but rather encourage users to follow the betting operator if they are interested in updates about sports and racing events and potentially normalise the integration of betting with these events. Twitter was particularly used for multiple event updates, for example throughout a match (e.g., “Field Goal!!!! Matt Moylan puts Penrith up with 1:31 remaining” TomWaterhouse.com Twitter, Aug 19, 2014).

Facebook posts were used less frequently to post notices about each event. This is consistent with the use of these different social media platforms, with Twitter being more time and context dependent and a platform for ‘conversations’ and updates, while Facebook is a less dynamic platform.

*Promoting in-venue events:*

Many land-based venues used social media to promote in-house events. These included drawing users’ attention to special or regular weekly events. These sorts of posts used social media as a notice board, rather than encouraging interaction with users. For example, a boxing match promotion by the Mounties Club in NSW was linked with the provision of food and beverages as well as gambling opportunities (“Live Main event Boxing – Sakio Bika v Anthony Direll 2. Undercards Live from 11am tomorrow in the TAB PLUS \$9,50 Coffee Club Burgers” accompanied by a promotional picture of the fighters and event details, Facebook, Aug 16, 2014). Other examples are from the Canberra Labor Club showing a trivia night (Facebook, Aug 19, 2014), and a Facebook post by The Juniors – Kingsford promoting hosting children’s parties at the venue (Aug 19, 2014).

*Promoting food and beverages:*

Similar to the in-venue event posts, land-based venues often promoted food and beverage offerings and specials. These typically included pictures and were designed to encourage venue visitation and promotion of restaurants, bars, special offers and events. For example, a picture of steak was posted by Crown Melbourne on Facebook: “Who could say no to Koko’s head chef’s recommendation of the melt in your mouth Australian Kobe-style Wagu beef. Book a table for tonight (link to restaurant website)” (Aug 16, 2014).

*Encouraging customer engagement:*

Many venues and operators fostered customer engagement on social media through encouraging users to follow, like, and share their own content posted. Operators also engaged directly with individuals, replying to and retweeting content posted by other users. For example, a Twitter post and photo from a customer was re-tweeted by The Star casino in Sydney “Thanks @TheStarSydney, great dinner #balla with @..” (Jul 19, 2014). Another example was observed of a conversation between a customer with Bet365 on Twitter; in this case, responding to a query about cashing out and providing assistance (Aug 17, 2014).

*Links to sports teams*

Venues with links and/or sponsorship arrangements with sporting teams generally used social media to promote and discuss these and related events. For example a Facebook post by Parramatta Leagues Club “Who’s excited for the game tonight? #Top8 here we come! (Aug 15, 2014)” and a Twitter post from the Canterbury Bulldogs “Who does

@ANZStadium really belong to? We find out next Sunday when we take on @TheParraEels! #claimyourstadium” (Jun 9, 2014).

*Promoting community engagement:*

These posts included promoting community events or highlighting their own community contributions. For example, a Twitter post by Canberra Southern Cross Club promotes how venue proceeds are used to benefit other organisations in the community (“\$1.5 million in funding from #Canberra Southern Cross Club helps 360 groups!”, Aug 21, 2014). Similarly, Caloundra RSL promoted a community and Returned Services League event to the public via Facebook using a picture of a war memorial and text about the Vietnam Veterans Day event to be held at the RSL (Aug 18, 2014).

*Non-gambling content:*

Many gambling operators posted content that was not directly related to gambling, but was designed to be engaging, humorous, and encourage likes and sharing among user networks. For example, cartoons and images were often used to make jokes about the frenetic and mundane chaos as well as the drudgery of family life, with betting presented as a superior alternative option (e.g., a Facebook post by IASbet.com featuring a photo of a man surrounded by children thinking about being at the race with the caption “Where would you rather be”, May 16, 2013). A Facebook post by Sportsbet from a press conference by Wests Tigers with a graphic inserted in a safety card design showing a player “lie down, try not to cry, cry a lot” (Aug 16, 2013) was liked by 3,301 users at the time of the study, demonstrating the high coverage social media posts can receive within users’ networks.

## **Responsible Gambling**

Inspection of the social media profiles found little evidence of responsible gambling information or messages (apart from the ‘Gamble Responsibly’ slogan) being posted on some Twitter or Google+ pages. Only a minority of operators (n=12, 11.9%) had any information about responsible gambling or problem gambling services on their social media profiles. Five casinos included responsible gambling messages posted in the ‘About’ tab on their Facebook page and four included the gambling helpline. One wagering provider included a visible link to responsible gambling information and a treatment provider at the top of its Facebook page, three provided a problem gambling helpline, while another included information about its responsible gambling code of practice. A few operators included small responsible gambling warnings or messages at the bottom of promotions posted on their Facebook page, including one EGM venue, three online wagering providers, and two lottery providers.

Some operators include responsible gambling warnings within posts although these were generally very small making them illegible for practical purposes (for example when graphics were posted that may have been designed as in-venue signage the responsible

gambling information at the bottom cannot be read). Another example was a Facebook post by Tatts.com highlighting a large and impending lottery draw using Facebook. The responsible gambling message is visible, but very small relative to the promotion (Feb 6, 2014). Some operators did make posts specifically about responsible gambling. For example, Sportsbet.com.au tweeted “Manage your gambling by learning more about how to spend your money responsibly” linked to the responsible gambling information on their dedicated website (Jun 4, 2014). Similarly, Betfair Australia tweeted “We are committed to endorsing responsible wagering as well as promoting awareness of problem gambling” with a link to Responsible Gambling Awareness Week (Aug 18, 2014).

### **Latent Messages**

Several latent messages were identified from the preceding analysis that may heighten potential public health risks posed by gambling promotion through social media. These may inform future studies by highlighting salient variables worthy of further examination to assess their impact on gambling behaviour and problem gambling.

*Raising awareness.* Gambling operators used social media to convey information about their brand, products, types of bets and betting events which is likely to raise awareness of gambling options amongst the general public, and particularly amongst future users such as youth.

*Glamorising gambling.* Overwhelmingly positive messages about gambling were conveyed, with gambling presented by some posts as glamorous, exciting, fun and action-packed.

*Emphasising ease of use.* Several posts attempted to simplify and facilitate product use by explaining how to bet on certain products, providing easier payment systems, and by generally promoting how quick and easy it is to bet.

*Encouraging new use.* Some posts were clearly aimed at encouraging new use by emphasising the ease of trialling a certain product, positioning it as a good introduction to other gambling products, and by advocating that novices ‘give it a go’.

*Emphasising winning.* This message was conveyed through promoting jackpot and prize amounts, good odds of winning, and recent large wins.

*Encouraging venue patronage.* Several posts promoted in-venue events, products and services, including members’ prize draws, boxing matches and food and beverage facilities. While these did not promote gambling *per se*, increased patronage enhances gambling opportunities for venue patrons.

*Encouraging betting.* While explicit messages to gamble were uncommon, some messages such as the provision of expert tips may be considered to encourage gambling.

*Aligning gambling with sport.* This occurred through the linking of bets with sporting events and on-field play, and through leveraging off sports fans’ interests and team loyalties especially where competitions, teams, and stadia are sponsored by gambling companies.

*Brand engagement.* Non-gambling-related content was used to encourage social media users to follow, like, and share messages, presumably to build brand engagement.

*Promoting community benefits of gambling.* This was attempted through publicising community benefits provided by gambling operators, and by associating the brand with positive events, financial support, and donations.

*Limited warning messages.* The audit revealed little conspicuous incorporation of responsible gambling messages or provision of information on responsible gambling or problem gambling.

## **Discussion**

The present study entails the first attempt to quantify features of social media presence among a broad range of popular gambling operators in Australia. The results showed that the majority of these operators had some social media presence, which is consistent with other large Australian businesses (Yellow Pages, 2013). The most popular social media platform used by gambling operators was Facebook, which is the most heavily used social media site among Australians (Raco, 2014). Betting agencies had the highest social media presence, probably because their core business is online and strategies to engage existing and new customers are practical when products can also be offered through online and mobile platforms. Use of social media also aligned with demographics of potential customers. Younger adults are more likely to be active social media users (Raco, 2014). This is consistent with the younger profile of wagerers, particularly sports bettors, who are more likely to gamble on these activities online and offline than the general population (Gainsbury, Russell, & Blaszczynski, 2014). EGM providers engaged in more limited use of social media, which may reflect tighter restrictions on advertising EGMs in some Australian jurisdictions, and the generally older profile of EGM users who may be less likely to engage with social media (Gainsbury, Russell, Blaszczynski, & Hing, N, 2014).

The results showed that the social media reach of gambling operators was considerable. The mean number of Facebook followers among the 11 betting agencies considered was over 100,000, with over 16,000 Twitter followers on average. Updated data were gathered from the social media monitoring site Socialbakers in November, 2014. Four gambling operators were listed in the top 100 brands on Twitter in Australia, including Sportsbet which had the 4<sup>th</sup> most popular corporate Twitter account. Ladbrokes.com.au had the 79<sup>th</sup> YouTube brand in Australia with 268 subscribers and 1,885,931 video views. Within the gambling category, Tomwaterhouse.com online betting operator was ranked 62<sup>nd</sup> on Facebook internationally with 119,284 followers and 97% of its fan base located within Australia. Two other international betting companies that operate in Australia (Ladbrokes and Unibet) were ranked higher, but Australians made up less than 2% of their followers. Additionally, these statistics do not account for the large number of users connected to these

followers who may have seen posted content in their news feed. Exposure to content posted on social media potentially goes well beyond those who elect to follow various brands.

Several latent messages were identified in this analysis. Consistent with previous gambling advertising research, gambling was depicted in an overwhelmingly positive light (Derevensky et al., 2007; Korn et al., 2005; Lamont et al., 2011; McMullan, 2011; McMullan & Miller, 2010; Monaghan et al., 2008). Some posts portrayed gambling as glamorous, exciting and fun, while others emphasised gambling winnings and winners to add to its appeal. Community benefits made possible by gambling revenues also enhanced this positive portrayal. Previous research has found that young people in particular perceive these types of messages as conveying that gambling provides easy money, fun, enjoyment and an entertaining lifestyle, requiring none of the effort of school or a job (Derevensky et al., 2007). This may be particularly the case where such messages are not counterbalanced by product warnings or information about problem gambling and responsible gambling, which were rarely provided in the current study.

Another message promoted in the posts examined was gambling's 'natural' alignment with sport. A trend towards the 'sportification of gambling' and the 'gamblification of sport' (McMullan, 2011, p. 4) has prompted concerns that this alignment contributes to the normalization of gambling, particularly within the young male sub-culture (Hing et al., 2013; Lamont et al., 2011; McMullan, 2011). This is particularly concerning, given that young adult males are the socio-demographic group most at risk for gambling problems (Delfabbro, Lahm & Grabosky, 2005; Gainsbury, Russell, Hing, Wood, Lubman, & Blaszczynski, 2014; Huang & Boyer, 2007; Messerlian, Derevensky, & Gupta, 2005; Volberg, Gupta, Griffiths, Ólason, & Delfabbro, 2010). Alignment of gambling with sport is thought to convey the message that gambling is a way to demonstrate team loyalty, masculinity, sporting knowledge, and skill and that gambling like sport is healthy harmless fun (Hing et al., 2013; Lamont et al., 2011; Monaghan et al., 2009).

It has been argued that digital marketing strategies have the potential to embed brands in the lives and lifestyles of consumers, creating a relationship between individuals and brands (Jernigan & O'Hara, 2004). Social media marketing can reinforce social norms and over-represent attitudes among fans, followers and their peers, even when products are not explicitly promoted (Martin et al., 2013; Nicholls, 2012). Consequentially, even limited use of social media by gambling operators may have a considerable impact in terms of promoting brands and products and influencing consumer behaviour in various contexts (Cotte & Latour, 2009).

Practices by operators in the current study which encourage potential sharing of social media posts may facilitate exposure of vulnerable populations to gambling marketing. Operators can enact age restrictions such that their pages cannot be 'liked' by individuals whose stated age is less than 18 and can also prevent users from sharing posts with underage users. However, it is easy for users to falsify their age with no age checks conducted by

Facebook, or age requirements on other sites such as Twitter. One study suggests that 38% of minors on Facebook are under the 13-year-old age requirement and over half of 12-year-olds surveyed in Europe said that they used a social network site (Consumer Reports, 2012; Livingstone, Haddon, Gorzig, & Olafsson, 2011). When falsifying their age children may immediately state that they are 18, allowing them to access content without restrictions. This raises concerns related to the degree to which social media may provide a ‘soft’ (i.e., unrestricted) entry that covertly acculturates youth to the processes and mentalities of an adult world of gambling (King, Delfabbro, & Griffiths, 2010; Monaghan et al., 2008). Gambling advertising can shape gambling youth attitudes, intentions and behaviours (Derevensky et al., 2007; Hing, Vitartas et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2008). While the current study found no evidence that gambling operators are directly appealing to youth through social media, alcohol tobacco, and junk food research point to the importance that marketers of addictive products place on building brand awareness and engagement amongst the youth starter market (Anderson et al., 2009; Freeman et al., 2014; Sparks, 1999). The few restrictions on social media use, inherent difficulties of monitoring it, as well as the widespread use of social media amongst youth, suggest that ongoing research is needed to monitor the impacts of gambling marketing via social media on young people.

Several types of messages identified in the current study overtly encouraged gambling, either by exhorting new users to try gambling products or facilitating and promoting betting by existing consumers. This social media use may influence users at various stages of gambling engagement, from low users who may be encouraged by a promotional offer to place a single bet, to frequent users who may be unable to resist their urges to gamble more than is affordable (Abrams, Monti, Carey, Pinto, & Jacobus, 1988; Martin et al., 2013). Previous studies have found that gambling advertising has limited success in converting non-users to users, but is most effective in increasing usage amongst high involvement consumers, particularly problem gamblers (Binde, 2014; Derevensky et al., 2007; Hing, Cherney et al., 2014). Unlike self-exclusion programs that allow individuals to opt out from receiving promotions from gambling operators, individuals with gambling problems are unable to opt out of content shared by their connections or advertisements on social media. The uptake of social media to promote gambling products and brands, as documented in this study, along with the difficulties of avoiding this marketing, suggest that triggers, reminders and inducements to gamble for this vulnerable population may be exacerbated by social media.

The audit revealed a noticeable lack of responsible gambling content on social network pages and content posted by Australian gambling operators. As many operators did not use social media to promote gambling products or services, such as EGM venues which instead promoted in-venue non-gambling events, responsible gambling messages may not be considered necessary. Additionally, as social media allows operators to interact with customers in relatively new ways, advertising codes of conduct do not specify that

responsible gambling messages be included on social media content. Despite this, a small number of operators included responsible gambling messages. However, these were generally small, difficult to read or hidden away from the main page and not promoted to users. A few operators did post specific information about responsible gambling, although these were infrequent.

## **Conclusions**

Current regulations largely fail to consider and specifically control marketing via social networking. Notably, most operators did not incorporate responsible gambling messaging into their use of social media, despite this being a requirement of most jurisdictional advertising codes of conduct. However, operators did appear to be abiding by codes of conduct with regard to avoiding depicting unrealistic expectations of winning or by misleading or deceiving consumers into thinking that gambling is a form of financial investment. There was also little evidence that operators were promoting alcohol use, encouraging excessive gambling, or encouraging gambling in vulnerable groups such as amongst younger age cohorts.

This research aimed to provide an initial description of gambling operators' use of social media to inform further debate and research. Given that research in this area remains in its infancy, it would appear inappropriate to make policy recommendations at the present time. Instead, the audit and identification of latent messages can inform further research to understand the impact of social media use by gambling operators on consumers' uptake of gambling and the extent to which this might influence problems with gambling. For example, research could investigate consumer engagement with gambling operators on social media, and what impact this has on gambling behaviour. The next step to extend the current results would be to conduct a survey of Internet users with the aim to determine how consumers react to exposure to gambling companies via social media and the impact of these marketing techniques on gambling. Consideration is also needed to determine what actions by commercial operators on social media should be classified as marketing and/or advertising. The use of social media to promote responsible gambling should be explored to challenge social norms around gambling and encourage the reduction of gambling-related harms. The impact of social media promotion of gambling on youth and problem gamblers also warrants particular attention.

## **Conflict of Interest**

SG and NH have worked on research grants funded by Australian gambling operators through their institutions. SG and NH have spoken at industry-funded conferences with travel costs paid. The authors have no other real or perceived financial or non-financial conflicts of interests directly or indirectly related to this research to declare. PD and DK have no conflicts of interest to declare.



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