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The nature and framing of gambling consequences in advertising

Davide C. Orazi^{*}, Jing Lei¹, Liliana L. Bove²

Department of Management and Marketing, The University of Melbourne, Level 10, 198 Berkeley Street, VIC 3010, Australia

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the impact of the nature and framing of gambling consequences in responsible gambling advertisements. Two experimental studies are conducted to assess (1) the construal level of gambling consequences, and (2) the influence of the nature and framing of gambling consequences on advertising effectiveness for both recreational and problem gamblers. The results show that, compared to material consequences, social consequences are at a higher construal level and are more effective in reducing the propensity to gamble. This differential impact of social versus material consequences is stronger among problem gamblers (vs. recreational gamblers) and when the consequences are presented as losses (vs. gains). Implications for public health agencies and social marketers are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Compulsive consumption behaviors are persistent and hard to control. The chronic urge to satisfy a short-term goal is one of the major determinants of such behaviors, ultimately leading to negative consequences (Workman & Paper, 2010). Problem gambling, for example, is a compulsive consumption behavior characterized by the difficulty in limiting the amount of money and time spent on gambling (Pallesen, Mitsem, Kvale, Johnsen, & Molde, 2005). The average accumulated debt for problem gamblers in the U.S. is substantive. For instance, problem gamblers in Wisconsin accumulate an average of US\$39,000 in debt before seeking help, and figures in Illinois are even higher, with an average debt of US\$114,000 (Thompson, Gazel, & Rickman, 1996). In addition, problem gamblers are predisposed to violent behaviors, divorce (Korman et al., 2008), and other harmful consumption behaviors, such as smoking, binge-drinking and drug abuse (Hodgins, Peden, & Cassidy, 2005; Thomas, Piterman, & Jackson, 2008).

As a means to avoid these undesirable outcomes, social marketing communications are used to raise awareness of the risks associated with compulsive consumption (Duhachek, Agrawal, & Han, 2012) and to encourage an attitude of moderation (Scammon et al., 2011). In this research, we define an attitude of moderation as a level of gambling activity that does not lead systematically to negative consequences (i.e., recreational gambling: see Ferris & Wynne, 2001). But compulsive consumption behaviors are notoriously difficult to change. The chronic

urge for satisfaction impairs self-control (de Ruiter, Oosterlaan, Veltman, van den Brink, & Goudriaan, 2012) and hinders the ability to recognize the implicit trade-offs between short-term (e.g., enjoyment) and long-term goals (e.g., financial security), decreasing the likelihood of transition toward moderation (Scammon et al., 2011).

This research examines how trade-offs can be made more salient in the minds of compulsive consumers by leveraging the advertising elements defining the nature and the framing of behavioral consequences. The nature of the consequences describes the aspect of personal interests (e.g., money, family) that will be affected if the consumer performs a specific action. Gambling, for example, may result in different types of adverse consequences such as financial loss and social embarrassment (Hodgins et al., 2005; Muñoz, Chebat, & Suissa, 2010). The framing of consequences refers to whether the message is presented as a loss or gain (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). For instance, the same responsible gambling message may be framed as a loss (e.g., gambling will lead to losses of up to US\$50,000 a year), or as a gain (e.g., refraining from gambling will lead to savings of up to US\$50,000 a year). Little research has systematically examined how the nature and framing of consequences influence message effectiveness for different types of audience (e.g., recreational and problem gamblers).

The present research tests whether construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010) can be used to categorize behavioral consequences as either high or low construal, depending on the level of cognitive effort required to recall or imagine the consequence. The study then examines the relative impact of the nature of the consequences on attitudes toward gambling and intentions to gamble. It also explores the differential impacts of social and material consequences on different types of gamblers, as the same advertisement may function as both a preventative message for recreational gamblers and a corrective message for problem gamblers (Andreasen, 2012). This research also investigates

^{*} Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 3 9035 5607; fax: +61 3 9049 4293.

E-mail addresses: davide.orazi@unimelb.edu.au (D.C. Orazi), leij@unimelb.edu.au (J. Lei), lbove@unimelb.edu.au (L.L. Bove).

¹ Tel.: +61 3 9035 5516; fax: +61 3 9049 4293.

² Tel.: +61 3 9035 5; fax: +61 3 9049 4293.

whether the impact of the nature of the consequences is moderated by how they are framed as losses or gains.

Two experimental studies are conducted to test the proposed predictions. The findings of study 1 show that social consequences are at a higher construal level than material consequences. The results of study 2 shows that message effectiveness depends on not only what consequence is depicted, but also a) the type of gambling behavior of the audience and b) the way the message is framed.

The next section develops the hypotheses for both studies. Each study is described in turn including the method, analyses and respective findings. The article then provides a discussion of the overall results outlining their contribution to the existing literature. Finally the implications of the findings for social marketers and public health agencies involved in the design of responsible gambling advertisements are made clear.

2. Theoretical development and hypotheses

2.1. The construal level and main effect of the nature of the consequences

Messages aimed at changing a compulsive behavior typically motivate a behavioral change by describing the negative consequences stemming from that behavior. These consequences may be physical such as injury or death, material such as the loss of money or a home, or social as with social disruption and shame (Muñoz, Chebat, & Borges, 2013; Shehryar & Hunt, 2005). Little research, however, has systematically compared the impact of different types of consequences on message persuasiveness. One exception is Shehryar and Hunt (2005), who compare the persuasiveness of death versus non-death-related consequences (e.g., serious injury and arrest) using Terror Management Theory (TMT: Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997). Although befitting the drink-driving context investigated by the authors, TMT is only applicable when death is a realistic outcome of the compulsive behavior.

This research presents a more generalizable classification of behavioral consequences based on construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Construal level theory contends that people form abstract representations of objects and events that are not readily accessible through sensory perception. The nature of these abstract representations—named *construals*—depends on their psychological distance, anchored to the individual's experience and familiarity with the event represented (Bar-Anan, Liberman, & Trope, 2006). That is, the higher the psychological distance from an object or an event, the higher the construal level required to form an abstract representation of that object or event. Psychological distance can be hypothetical, temporal, spatial, and social (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Events occurring with certainty, immediacy, and in a familiar space are perceived to be psychologically close. Conversely, events occurring with ambiguity, at a later point in time and in an unfamiliar space are perceived as psychologically distant (Goodman & Malkoc, 2012).

Contextualizing construal level theory to gambling consequences, the psychological distance of a consequence represents the extent to which the audience can identify with a gambling-related outcome. Previous research suggests that material and social consequences are two common outcomes associated with problem gambling (Hodgins et al., 2005; Muñoz et al., 2010). Material consequences refer to the loss or gain of money and properties (Muñoz et al., 2010), whereas social consequences refer to the exclusion (vs. acceptance) or disruption (vs. harmony) of social circles relevant to the individual (Arthur & Quester, 2004; Shehryar & Hunt, 2005).

This study proposes that material consequences are at a low construal level, whereas social consequences are at a high construal level. Material consequences are a certain and direct outcome of the gambling behavior, as when you gamble, you either win or lose. These clear-cut outcomes are usually immediate and fast-paced (Rockloff & Dyer, 2007), and mostly take place in the environment of the consumption

behavior such as a casino, racetrack or online gambling website (Kushner et al., 2008). Because psychological distance depends on the individual's experience and familiarity with the event represented (Bar-Anan et al., 2006), the more the event is perceived as certain, familiar, and immediate, the closer the psychological distance. Consistent with this line of reasoning, since gamblers frequently experience material consequences in the immediate environment of gambling; such consequences are likely to be perceived as concrete and psychologically close. Conversely, social consequences are an uncertain and indirect outcome of gambling. The gambling act itself does not produce immediate social consequences as these may take time to develop. Social consequences also take place in settings not necessarily linked to gambling, detaching such consequences from the gambling experience. As such social consequences are likely to be perceived as abstract and psychologically distant such that:

H1. Social consequences are at a higher construal level than material consequences.

Psychological distance influences how people construe events and take decisions (Goodman & Malkoc, 2012). Processing events and outcomes that are psychologically distant requires greater cognitive effort than processing those that are psychologically close (Trope & Liberman, 2010). In turn, converging evidence shows that greater cognitive elaboration of a message results in greater attitude change (Bohner & Dickel, 2011; Muñoz et al., 2010; Muñoz et al., 2013). Hypothesis 1 proposes that material consequences are at a low construal level whereas social consequences are at a higher construal level. Given the higher construal level of social consequences and the associated higher level of cognitive elaboration, it is proposed that:

H2. In comparison to material consequences, social consequences are more effective in reducing a) positive attitudes toward gambling and b) intentions to gamble.

2.2. Nature of the consequences \times type of gambler

The same responsible gambling message may serve a preventative or corrective function depending on the target audience (Andreasen, 2012). Recreational gamblers are those whose gambling behavior does not systematically lead to adverse consequences. In contrast, problem gamblers are those whose gambling behavior systematically creates negative consequences for them, their social networks and society as a whole (Ferris & Wynne, 2001). Research in gambling classifies gamblers into recreational or problem types using the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI: Smith & Wynne, 2002).

Research has not examined to date how gambling-related consequences are appraised by the two types of gamblers. Hypothesis 2 predicts social consequences are more effective than material consequences in reducing positive attitudes towards gambling and intentions to gamble and these effects are likely to be moderated by type of gambler. Since problem gamblers (vs. recreational gamblers) frequently engage in gambling behavior (Lole, Gonsalvez, Barry, & Blaszczynski, 2014), they are highly experienced with consequences directly related to gambling, such as material gains or losses. This high exposure to material consequences is expected to reduce problem gamblers' sensitivity toward such consequences. In addition, material consequences are an intrinsic component of gambling. Problem gamblers tend to believe they can always win back what they have previously lost (Smith & Wynne, 2002). This perceived ease of recouping lost money may also contribute to the reduction in sensitivity to material losses. Therefore the depiction of material consequences is expected to be less effective for problem gamblers (vs. recreational gamblers).

Social consequences, on the other hand, are not an intrinsic component of the gambling behavior. That is, while each gambling behavior will result in a material win or loss, not all gambling behaviors will

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