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Broadening an understanding of problem gambling: The lifestyle consumption community of sports betting

Ross Gordon ^{a,*}, Lauren Gurrieri ^b, Michael Chapman ^c

^a Department of Management and Marketing, Faculty of Business and Economics, Macquarie University, North Ryde, Sydney, NSW 2019, Australia

^b Swinburne Business School, Swinburne University of Technology, Hawthorn, VIC 3122, Australia

^c Centre for Health Initiatives, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, NSW 2522, Australia

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a study offering insight and understanding of the emerging concept of lifestyle consumption community in the context of sports betting in Australia. Recent research has identified the utility of socio-cultural approaches for understanding gambling, broadening the scope of research beyond an individual psychology perspective. Heretofore, the concept of 'problem gambling' has mostly focused on pathological gamblers. However, scholars in the field have argued for a repositioning of the framing of gambling. This study utilizes an interpretivist research approach, featuring friendship group interviews with young adult non-pathological gamblers engaging in sports betting aged 18–30. The findings offer insights on the locus, power structure, purpose, marketing potential, time span, structure, and social position of lifestyle consumption communities. The utility of consumer culture theory research for offering a broader understanding of gambling is identified. Implications for marketing management, consumer culture theory, and ideas for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Gambling is an activity that has a long history (Bloch, 1951; Downs, 2010), and is a prominent feature of most cultures (McMillen, 1996). Gambling is a major feature of Australian society (McMillen & Eadington, 1986), with an estimation that over 80% of adults engage in gambling at some time (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2000). Gambling expenditure in Australia was estimated at \$19 billion in 2008–2009, an average of \$1500 per adult who gambled (Productivity Commission, 2010). Much research in the field focuses on pathological gambling – gamblers “unable to resist impulses to gamble which can lead to severe personal or social consequences” (Vorvick & Merrill, 2010). However, these figures suggest that the study of gambling from a broader social and consumer behavior perspective is warranted (Productivity Commission, 2010). Consumer research on gambling is in relative infancy, and understanding of consumption communities relating to gambling is only recently emerging.

This paper presents the findings from a qualitative study on how consumers interpret, navigate and participate in sports betting lifestyle consumption communities in Australia. The study explores how non-pathological gambling consumers negotiate their involvement in

lifestyle consumption communities (LCCs) – a recently proposed concept from the consumer culture theory (CCT) literature. For our study, the LCC of interest relates to sports betting in Australia. Interpretivist research broadening understanding of gambling as a social consumption practice has begun to emerge in the past 20 years. Cotte (1997) presents an innovative and holistic study on casino gamblers that identifies important emotional, hedonic, interpersonal, and communal drivers of gambling practices. In a later study of regular recreational online and casino gamblers, Cotte and Latour (2009) find that advances in technology, such as online gambling, and the gradual cultural acceptance of gambling present challenges to mitigating gambling harms, and have created an environment in which consumers are more immersed in gambling as an everyday consumption practice.

However, in the gambling research field, few studies have considered how consumption communities may be formed in relation to gambling (Nagel, Hinton, Thompson, & Spencer, 2011). Furthermore, given the recent emergence of the concept of LCCs in the consumer culture literature (Närvänen, Kartastenpää, & Kuusela, 2013), no studies have yet framed forms of gambling such as sports betting as a lifestyle consumption phenomenon. In addition, much existing research on gambling consumption has focused on pathological gamblers (Prentice & Woodside, 2013), and has been framed from addiction, or psychology of gambling, rather than consumer behavior perspectives (Casey, 2003; Reith, 2007). Our study builds on the broader socio-cultural perspective of gambling emerging in the field (Cotte, 1997; Korn, Gibbins, & Azmier, 2003) as a potentially harmful consumption behavior, by exploring the consumption processes

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 2 9850 8559.

E-mail addresses: ross.gordon@mq.edu.au (R. Gordon), lgurrieri@swin.edu.au (L. Gurrieri), mchapman@uow.edu.au (M. Chapman).

of non-pathological gamblers. Proponents of broader perspectives on gambling research identify that as gambling becomes more commonplace in many societies, the social, cultural and economic impacts are likely to increase (Reith, 2007). Therefore, research on topics such as the consumption of gambling among non-pathological gamblers and broader social and economic harms relating to gambling has been advocated (Gordon & Moodie, 2009; Korn et al., 2003;).

Our study advances knowledge in the following ways. Firstly, this is one of the first studies to utilize a consumer culture theory perspective to examine how consumers interpret, navigate and participate in gambling and specifically sports betting have consumption communities. Such insights may be of interest to consumer researchers, stakeholders in the gambling domain, and marketing managers. The study also makes a theoretical contribution to the CCT literature, by advancing understanding of and identifying the characteristics of LCCs. Furthermore, the study contributes towards a broader framing of gambling research, in this case from a consumer perspective; and also to a broader conceptualization of gambling as a harmful social consumption behavior.

The article begins by considering the literature on consumption communities and the LCC theoretical framework underpinning the present study. The research context relating to gambling consumption and specifically sports betting in Australia is then presented. The study methodology, located in the interpretivist qualitative research tradition, and featuring friendship group interviews with young adult consumers is then presented. The subsequent section presents the research findings, identifying key themes governing sports betting consumption communities. A discussion of the theoretical and practical implications for marketing management and consumer research is then offered. The article concludes by offering ideas for future inquiry.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Typologies of consumption communities

A community is a social unit of any size that commonly share conditions such as values, intent, beliefs, resources, preferences, needs, risks and consumption experiences that influence the identity and degree of cohesiveness of participants. The word community is derived from the Latin word *communitas* (things held in common). McMillan and Chavis (1986, p9) define a sense of community as a “feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that member’s needs be met through their commitment to be together”. Scholars have identified core elements of communities including locus (whether physical, virtual, emotional or consumption based co-location), sharing, joint action, social ties, and diversity (James, 2006; MacQueen et al., 2001).

Conceptualized by Boorstin (1973), *consumption communities* are identified as communities in which commonality of consumption is a present force. Recent years have witnessed increasing attention in consumer research on understanding marketplace and consumption communities (Canniford, 2011). Research in this area has identified how commercial brands can create or assimilate consumption communities and engage consumer members (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Such studies have also examined the various ways that consumers socialize and relate in consumer cultures, identifying how consumption can enhance the sense of connection among community members (Mathwick, Wiertz, & De Ruyter, 2008). Research on consumption communities is relevant for marketing management as such inquiry can offer insights on consumer meanings and value; and can help inform marketing activities (Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003). Research in this area is also important for gaining insight on consumer perspectives, experiences, expectancies, and representations of meaning relating to consumption that adds to the knowledge base of consumption as a social process (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Despite significant research interest, some lack of clarity remains concerning typologies, concepts, and descriptors of *consumption communities*. Recognizing this, Canniford (2011) presents a taxonomy of consumption communities identifying three main types: *subcultures of consumption*, *brand communities*, and *consumer tribes*. *Subcultures of consumption* concern communities that revolve around lifestyles and consumption experiences of various marginalized and deviant consumers (Goulding, Shankar, & Elliott, 2002). *Brand communities* relate to how consumers socialize in relation to a given brand, form communities that reflect the role and meaning of the brand in everyday life, and interaction between consumers and the brand (Muñiz & O’Guinn, 2001). *Consumer tribes* involve socialization processes through the shared use of goods and services rather than a particular brand that are often unmanaged, autonomous and driven by strange logic (Cova, Kozinets, & Shankar, 2007).

However, scholars acknowledge the complexity of consumption communities, identifying that consumers are often members of multiple forms of community (Beverland, Farrelly, & Qester, 2010), or that communities may not always be tied to one single consumption interest (Weijo, Hietanen, & Mattila, 2014). Furthermore, the possibility of hybridization, when consumption communities may display characteristics from more than one of the three community forms is acknowledged (Canniford, 2011). Recognizing the continuing development of understanding in this area, scholars have recently proposed a fourth form of consumption community: LCCs (Närvänen et al., 2013).

2.2. Lifestyle consumption communities

Lifestyle consumption communities are where a community revolves around a lifestyle interest instead of a single brand (brand community), or deviant or marginalized subculture (subcultures of consumption) (Närvänen et al., 2013). Community members are often faced with decisions about which consumption norms to conform to and which practices to adopt (Närvänen et al., 2013). Lifestyle consumption communities often feature heterogeneity rather than unison and uniformity (de Valck, van Bruggen, & Wierenga, 2009). Members may also engage in conflict and debate (Heinonen, 2011). However, despite these characteristics, LCCs still hold together and function communally (de Valck et al., 2009; Närvänen et al., 2013). *Lifestyle consumption communities* may also be managed, and contain rules, rituals and meanings (Närvänen et al., 2013); often absent from the autonomy and strange logic governing *consumer tribes*. As with Canniford (2011), we acknowledge the complexities and overlaps between these typologies of consumption communities that may result in coinciding or hybrid forms of communities. Whilst an increasingly established body of literature on *subcultures of consumption*, *brand communities*, and *consumer tribes* is evident, less knowledge exists on the rules, structures and processes governing LCCs. Therefore, the present study aims to contribute insights in this area.

We propose that the concept of LCC offers utility in understanding sports gambling consumption. The socio-cultural understanding of consumption offered by taking a CCT lens to study gambling can help broaden the scope of gambling research beyond a predominant individual psychology focus. Furthermore, through offering insight on socio-cultural influences on gambling behavior, such knowledge can help inform strategies such as responsible business practices by the gambling industry, and interventions that target the social dimensions of gambling rather than solely individuals, during a period when gambling appears to be transitioning to a common lifestyle pursuit. Indeed, scholars have theorized gambling as a lifestyle that is viewed by consumers as a means of socialization and enhancing self-worth, minimizing insecurity, and regulating fear (Walters, 1994). Research has recognized that gambling is becoming a more mainstream consumption activity, that in countries like Australia is common, widely accepted, and an established part of the social fabric (McMillen & Eadington, 1986; Mizerski, 2013).

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