



“I can sit on the beach and punt through my mobile phone”: The influence of physical and online environments on the gambling risk behaviours of young men



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ABSTRACT

Gambling is rapidly emerging as an important public health issue, with gambling products causing considerable health and social harms to individuals, families and communities. Whilst researchers have raised concerns about online wagering environments, few studies have sought to explore how factors within different gambling environments (both online and land-based) may be influencing the wagering, and more broadly the gambling risk behaviours of young men. Using semi-structured interviews with 50 Australian men (20–37 years) who gambled on sport, we explored the ways in which online and land-based environments may be risk-promoting settings for gambling. This included the appeal factors associated with gambling in these environments, factors that encouraged individuals to gamble, and factors that encouraged individuals to engage in different, and more harmful types of gambling. Interviews were conducted over the course of a year (April 2015 – April 2016). We identified a number of situational and structural factors that promoted risky gambling environments for young men. In the online environment, gambling products had become exceedingly easy to access through mobile technologies, with young men subscribing to multiple accounts to access industry promotions. The intangibility of money within online environments impacted upon risk perceptions. In land-based environments, the social rituals associated with peer group behaviour and sport influenced risky patterns of gambling. The presence of both gambling and alcohol in pub environments led individuals to gamble more than they normally would, and on products that they would not normally gamble on. Land-based venues also facilitated access to multiple forms of gambling under the one roof. We identified a number of factors in both land and online environments that when combined, created risk-promoting settings for gambling among young men. By exploring these contextual conditions that give rise to gambling harm, we are better able to advocate for effective public health responses in creating environments that prevent harmful gambling.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Gambling is rapidly emerging as an important global public

health issue, with gambling products causing considerable health and social harms for individuals, their families, and the broader community [Thomas and Thomas, 2015]. Researchers argue that the harms associated with gambling are on a par with the harms associated with major depressive disorder, and substance use and dependence [Browne et al., 2016], and have documented numerous links between harmful gambling and a range of health and social issues [Korman et al., 2008; Williams et al., 2012; Suomi et al., 2013; Rudd and Thomas, 2015; Markham et al., 2016]. While it is difficult to determine causal direction, research has demonstrated that problem gamblers experience significant comorbidities relating to other mental health problems [Lorains et al., 2011; Martin et al.,

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2014; Cook et al., 2015], and dependence on other substances [McGrath and Barrett, 2009; Liu et al., 2009; Cowlishaw et al., 2014]. Research also shows that some population subgroups, including older adults, young men, and children, are more vulnerable to developing harm with a range of different gambling products [Kerber et al., 2008; Thomas et al., 2012a; Pitt et al., 2016].

When considering the causes of gambling harm, the vast majority of research to date has focused on the individual drivers of gambling behaviour [Blaszczynski et al., 2004]. This research has predominantly been driven by addiction frameworks [Dell et al., 1981], which consider problem gambling as an impulse control disorder with clear genetic, psychological, or individual (ir)responsibility drivers for problematic behaviour [Castellani and Rugle, 1995; Steel and Blaszczynski, 1998]. This individualised research focus has also meant that many of the proposed minimised strategies for gambling harm have been based on personal responsibility approaches. These approaches assume that with the appropriate information or education, and assuming that they do not have any substantial comorbidities, gamblers are able to make sensible and informed choices about their engagement in gambling [Blaszczynski et al., 2004]. While these individualised responses to harm minimisation in the form of 'responsible gambling' initiatives have been significantly supported by governments and the gambling industry [Miller et al., 2016], they have been criticised for failing to comprehensively address the harms associated with gambling products and their proliferation in different physical and online environments [Orford, 2005; Reith, 2007; Young et al., 2011; Thomas et al., 2015]. Social scientists and public health researchers have increasingly advocated for research that recognises the socio-cultural, environmental, and commercial determinants of gambling harm [Korn et al., 2003; Adams and Rossen, 2012; Thomas and Thomas, 2015], and public health policy responses that take a comprehensive approach to the prevention of gambling harm [Thomas et al., 2016].

1.2. The expansion of gambling opportunities

Despite the recognised harms associated with gambling, there have been clear expansions in the opportunities for individuals to engage in multiple forms of gambling in both land-based and online environments. There are numerous reasons for the rapid increase of gambling options, including government policies aimed at stimulating tourism, leisure and entertainment [Korn, 2000]; the advent of new technologies which provide global platforms for internet based gambling [Olason et al., 2011]; the ease with which gambling can be used as a source of revenue, including hypothecated taxation by governments [Pickernell et al., 2004]; and the effective political influence (primarily in the form of lobbying and political donations) that gambling industries use to promote their products and prevent regulatory reform [Millar and Nicholls, 2015].

While it is generally acknowledged that land-based forms of gambling such as Electronic Gambling Machines (EGMs) are the most harmful types of gambling for communities [Productivity Commission, 2010], gambling opportunities in online environments have attracted increasing attention from policy makers, public health practitioners, and researchers [Parliamentary Joint Select Committee on Gambling Reform, 2011; Thomas et al., 2012b]. Researchers have raised concerns about the ubiquitous nature of internet technologies, and how this may generate greater exposure and accessibility to gambling products for populations [Thomas et al., 2012b], thus increasing prevalence and risk. However, there is also some evidence that populations may 'adapt' to new products over time. In a meta-review analysis of problem gambling surveys in Australia and New Zealand, researchers found that while there was a strong statistical relationship between an

increase in problem gambling prevalence with per capita increases in EGMs, there was a decrease in prevalence over time with availability held constant, with researchers concluding that both access and adaptation were at work simultaneously [Storer et al., 2009]. While many countries are currently debating the extent to which different forms of gambling, such as sports wagering, should be legally introduced into the gambling 'mix' [Korn, 2000] there is limited research evidence about how these newer gambling products and the environment in which these products are offered, may impact upon the health and welfare of individuals, their families, and communities.

1.3. The Australian context

Australia has one of the most liberalised gambling policies in the world, with gambling opportunities ranging from venue based gambling, such as Electronic Gambling Machines (EGMs, pokies or slots) [Markham and Young, 2015], through to the more recent proliferation of online and mobile sports wagering [Thomas et al., 2012b]. Gambling is provided in a range of environments, some of which were designed primarily for gambling, and some designed for other activities, but which now also offer a range of gambling products. For example, land-based environments including casinos, pubs, and community based not-for-profit Clubs, provide access to multiple forms of gambling such as EGMs, sports, horse and greyhound wagering, keno, lotteries, table games, and poker tournaments, alongside other non-gambling activities. Online gambling platforms, operated in part by registered bookmakers, provide individuals with instantaneous gambling venues in their pockets via mobile phone technology and can be used in Australia for wagering on sports, horse and events based racing.

Online sports wagering is one of the few segments of the gambling market to have attracted increased participation in Australia [Hare, 2015]. The vast majority of individuals who wager on sports are young men, with recent prevalence studies showing that sports wagering participation rates for males in the Australian state of Victoria increased by 2.12% (6.53% in 2008 – 8.65% in 2014) [Hare, 2015]. Clinicians have also reported a rise in the number of young men seeking support and treatment as a result of their sports wagering behaviours, with an expectation that these numbers will continue to increase [Kerin, 2015]. These trends have largely mirrored a significant increase in advertising spend by the wagering industry. In 2015, \$236 million was spent on the advertising of gambling in Australia, an increase of 160% from 2011, with most of this advertising spend from sports wagering companies [Hickman and Bennett, 2016]. Research has shown that young men, aged 18–35 are the key target market for the wagering industry. For example, in a review of Australian sports wagering advertisements Deans and colleagues demonstrated that a significant proportion of marketing strategies aligned sports wagering with concepts of masculinity, peer group behaviours, and sports fan behaviours [Deans et al., 2016a]. However, the marketing for sports wagering is not limited to television based commercials, with the wagering industry employing a range of strategies – such as inducements, incentives, and credit extensions – to shape wagering beliefs and consumption patterns [Financial Counselling Australia, 2015]. Research has also demonstrated that young men feel more 'bombarded' and targeted by gambling marketing as compared to other population subgroups [Thomas et al., 2012a], with gambling becoming embedded within the peer group behaviours of young male sports fans [Deans et al., 2016b].

However, there are still clear gaps in understanding young men's wagering behaviours. First, studies examining the sports wagering behaviours of young men very rarely consider their broader gambling consumption patterns. For example, do young

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