Gambling advertising and problem gambling: A content analysis of TV adverts from the
2018 World Cup

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Abstract: Policy makers interested in regulation of the gambling industry have predominantly focused on the frequency with which UK consumers are exposed to gambling marketing. Less attention has been paid to the content of gambling advertising, even though current regulatory codes state that gambling advertising content should not harm nor exploit problem gamblers or other vulnerable persons. Here, we investigate the content of “request-a-bet” TV adverts shown during the 2018 World Cup in the UK. Request-a-bet products allow gamblers to create their own bets with large potential payoffs, which are two established risk factors for problem gamblers. Overall, we found that 46 request-a-bet adverts were shown over 32 relevant soccer matches. Several adverts were designed to nudge gamblers through multiple channels toward bets with large potential payoffs, which problem gamblers might find especially alluring, and which yield high profit margins for the bookmakers. These results highlight relatively neglected concerns about advertising content which are relevant to the regulation of UK gambling advertising.

Keywords: gambling marketing, soccer, illusion of control, overweighting of small probabilities

INTRODUCTION

Current UK regulations require gambling advertising to be “socially responsible,” which means that marketers should take steps to prevent problem gamblers and other vulnerable persons “from being harmed or exploited by advertising that features or promotes gambling,” (BCAP, 2018), p.4. The 2018 soccer World Cup was a watershed moment for the visibility of gambling advertising in the UK’s public awareness. Overall, 17% of TV adverts shown over the World Cup were for gambling (Duncan, Davies, & Sweney, 2018). This came after some earlier high-profile findings, showing that gambling logos and branding can be seen prominently in the BBC’s soccer coverage (Cassidy & Ovenden, 2017). Although the BBC is a non-commercial broadcaster, which does not directly feature TV advertising, many UK club soccer teams are sponsored by gambling companies (Lopez-Gonzalez & Griffiths, 2017), which leads to visible gambling branding (Cassidy & Ovenden, 2017). Some 86% of UK adults recently stated that they see gambling as a normal part of sport (Djohari, Weston, Cassidy, Wemyss, & Thomas, 2019). This may explain why the British bookmaking industry recently agreed to “whistle-to-whistle” restrictions on televised gambling advertising during live sport (Kelner, 2018). However, in terms of social responsibility, it is not only the frequency of gambling advertising that matters, but also the content of that advertising. given the established biases which problem gamblers typically display (Walker, 1992). The current paper addresses this relatively neglected aspect of gambling advertising by analyzing the content of advertisements displayed during the 2018 World Cup.

The risks involved in gambling depends on the properties of probability theory and statistical randomness. The majority of gambling opportunities are not, mathematically, in the gambler’s best interests (Sklansky & Malmuth, 1998); however, most people are not adept at probabilistic calculations (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Problem gamblers in particular tend to hold a number of mistaken beliefs about probability. For example, many problem gamblers

tend to persist in the “gambler’s fallacy,” the belief that if a flipped coin has shown heads on the last three flips, that it is more likely to show tails on the next flip (Walker, 1992).

Moreover, problem gamblers tend to disproportionately hold two mistaken beliefs : the “illusion of control” (Goodie & Fortune, 2013) and the “overweighting of small probabilities” (Kyonka & Schutte, 2018). Thus, even if people gain utility from the act of gambling in itself, decisions as to whether purchase a particular gambling product may be misinformed by inaccurate perceptions of the product’s attractiveness.

The illusion of control refers to the fact that many problem gamblers think they have more control over fundamentally random events than they really do. For example, a problem gambler might incorrectly believe that throwing a pair of dice softly will increase their chances of rolling low numbers (Henslin, 1967). A number of new sports betting products have recently been brought to market which increase the extent to which sports bettors can modify or customize their bets, seeming to capitalize on this illusion of control. For example, “request-a-bet” products allow gamblers to request odds on bets that can combine several events together, for example through the social network Twitter (Newall, Walasek, Vázquez Kiesel, Ludvig, & Meyer, 2019). Request-a-bet products are primarily useful for this service of combining multiple events to create bets with long odds (high potential payoffs), compared to the bets with shorter odds that are already available on bookmakers’ websites. These bets with short odds tend to have the lowest bookmaker profit margins (Hassanniakalager & Newall, 2019). By comparison, the analyzed sample of request-a-bet odds produced an average bookmaker profit margin of 43.7% (Newall et al., 2019), which is far higher than the profit margin on conventional soccer bets (Constantinou & Fenton, 2013). Furthermore, a recent cross-sectional survey of online sports bettors found that 16.0% of respondents who had customized a bet were current problem gamblers, compared to only 6.7% of respondents who had not (Newall, Cassidy, Walasek, Ludvig, & Meyer, 2019).

People also have a general tendency toward overweighting the risk of small probability events, such as a terrorist attack or a plane crash (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). The purchase of lottery tickets is also consistent with this overweighting of low-probability events, given the very low chances of winning a life-changing amount of money. Problem gamblers consistently overweight these small probability outcomes to a greater extent than non-problem gamblers, as shown by a recent meta-analysis (Kyonka & Schutte, 2018). In sports betting, a bet with long odds (and a high potential payoff) is equivalent to saying that the bet has a small probability of happening, given the inverse relationship between odds and probability (Cortis, 2015). An analysis of the “live-odds” gambling adverts shown over the 2018 World Cup found that the bets advertised on TV during that tournament had on average longer odds than the bets advertised during the previous 2014 World Cup (Newall, Thobhani, Walasek, & Meyer, 2019). Additionally, the analysis of request-a-bet odds revealed that the average bookmaker profit margin increased from 43.7% to 74.6% when considering only the bets with the highest potential payoffs of £30 or more per £1 risked (Newall et al., 2019).

Overall, this suggests that gambling adverts which feature either betting products which promote an illusion of control, or which feature bets with high potential payoffs, are relevant to the highlighted BCAP gambling advertising regulation, given the credible possibility that problem gamblers may be exploited by products which take advantage of the illusion of control or of overweighting small probability events (BCAP, 2018). This paper’s goal is therefore to review the content of request-a-bet advertising shown on TV in the UK for the 2018 World Cup with this regulation in mind.

METHOD

All 32 World Cup 2018 matches shown on the commercial broadcaster ITV (which does show advertisements) were retrospectively viewed and recorded via the service Box of

Broadcasts. Request-a-bet gambling adverts were shown either before the match, during the half-time break, or after the match ended.

The following variables relevant to this study were coded by a research assistant blind to this study's goals:

Match. The two teams that were playing in the televised match.

Segment. Whether each advert was shown pre-match, during the half-time break, or after the match had ended.

Bookmaker. Which bookmaker showed the request-a-bet advert.

Live-odds. Whether the request-a-bet advert also displayed betting odds on a currently available bet (Newall et al., 2019).

Financial incentive. Whether the request-a-bet advert also displayed some potential financial incentive, such as a higher potential payoff than what a bettor could normally expect (Newall et al., 2019)

Summary. A short textual summary of the advert's content.

Key offer. Details of either the live-odds or financial incentive offered to viewers.

The data for this paper can be downloaded from <https://osf.io/8dscv/>.

For a list of coded variables not relevant to this study see Newall, Thobhani, Walasek, and Meyer (2019). The consistency of this coding was checked by comparing the results against an independent coder's results (Duncan et al., 2018). This second coder only recorded the content of gambling adverts shown from immediately before the match until immediately after. In contrast, the first coder recorded all request-a-bet advertising shown throughout the soccer match's broadcast, including match build-up and post-match analysis. Thus, a simple

comparison of inter-rater agreement across the two datasets was not appropriate. This second coder, however, found only two adverts originally missed by the first coder (4.55% of sample), suggesting that the collected data provides high coverage of all gambling advertising of interest.

Because this study did not involve any human participants, ethical approval was not required.

RESULTS

Six bookmakers advertised request-a-bet services, showing a total of 46 adverts over 32 televised matches, as shown in Table 1. Overall, 26 adverts were shown pre-match, 9 at half-time, and 11 after the match had ended. The maximum number of request-a-bet adverts shown during any individual match was three.

[Table 1 about here]

Bookmakers Betfred and Sky Bet advertised nine and seven request-a-bet adverts each. These adverts simply informed viewers about their request-a-bet product. Beyond the inherent nature of request-a-bet products -- that these allow gamblers to create their own bets with potentially long odds -- these two bookmakers' adverts did not promote any features that might be considered relevant to problem gamblers.

Next, the three bookmakers Bet Victor, Coral and Ladbrokes all advertised five request-a-bet adverts each, and all of these adverts featured financial incentives. Bet Victor's key offer over these five adverts is summarized as follows, "Stake £1 to win up to £1,000,000. Place £1+ Single Bet on World Cup; Winning Qualifying Bet with biggest odds wins." This financial incentive increases the potential payoff to a request-a-bet bet, and so is relevant to problem gamblers' overweighting of small probabilities (Kyonka & Schutte,

2018). However, this incentive is offered to the winning bet with the longest (biggest) odds, which nudges consumer toward small probability bets, which actually have the highest bookmaker profit margin out of any request-a-bet bets (Newall et al., 2019). Similarly, three of Coral's adverts provided financial incentives of up to £25,000 to the winning bet with the longest (biggest) odds, an offer which is again a targeted nudge toward small probability bets. Coral's two other adverts offered a free £1 request-a-bet bet to customers. Ladbrokes's five financial incentive bets offered free bets on losing bets of up to £10, on several different betting markets including their request-a-bet Twitter hashtag #GetAPrice.

Finally, William Hill's advertisements featured request-a-bet products more frequently than any other bookmaker, showing 15 relevant adverts. William Hill's adverts mentioned how with their request-a-bet Twitter hashtag (#yourodds), customers were able to create and bet on their own markets. These adverts then always featured a live-odds betting adverts, for example, "Brazil to win, Neymar to score, both teams to score and Xhaka to be carded Odds of 18-to-1." These live-odds have been analyzed in depth elsewhere (Newall et al., 2019), but most importantly for the current study's goals, featured longer average odds than were shown during the previous World Cup (Newall, 2015).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Overall, we found that 46 request-a-bet adverts were shown over 32 relevant soccer matches. Several adverts were designed to nudge gamblers through multiple channels toward bets with large potential payoffs, which problem gamblers might find especially alluring. For example, two bookmakers advertised financial incentive nudging gamblers towards the highest potential payoff bets, which problem gamblers have an established bias towards (Kyonka & Schutte, 2018), and which actually have the very highest profit margins out of any request-a-bet bets (Newall et al., 2019).

The UK's Advertising Standards Agency, which enforces BCAP codes, originally ruled that a request-a-bet advert shown by Sky Bet contravened BCAP codes, due to its implication that sports knowledge can lead to gambling success (Gallagher, 2019). However, this ruling was later changed. Overall, the current results suggest that greater attention when enforcing these codes should be paid to the established psychological biases and susceptibilities of problem gamblers.

The current paper is limited by only looking at adverts around one class of gambling products and during one televised tournament. Future research should explore similar issues in other media formats, such as online, where five times as much money was spent by gambling firms in 2018 than was spent on TV advertising (GambleAware, 2018). Future research should also explore the extent to which similar issues occur in gambling advertising in other countries.

The findings of the present paper fit within a broader emerging narrative of how the gambling industry interacts with consumers who exhibit established probabilistic biases drawn from the behavioral science literature (Newall, 2019). Recently, researchers and policy makers have focused predominantly on the frequency of gambling advertising and marketing on UK television (Cassidy & Ovenden, 2017; Duncan et al., 2018). However, BCAP gambling advertising regulations also cover the content of gambling adverts (BCAP, 2018), and arguably this is an issue that has received less attention in the gambling literature. Sports bettors who customize their bets are known to be over twice as likely to be current problem gamblers than sports bettors who do not (Newall et al., 2019). Request-a-bet products, therefore, do seem potentially harmful to problem gamblers, given this attraction and request-a-bets' very high bookmaker profit margins (Newall et al., 2019).

Table 1. Content analysis of request-a-bet adverts shown over the 2018 soccer World Cup.

Number of adverts shown over 32 matches on the commercial broadcaster ITV.

Adverts shown	Betfred	Bet Victor	Coral	Ladbrokes	Sky Bet	William Hill
Total number of request-a-bet adverts	9	5	5	5	7	15
Number of financial incentives advertised	0	5 (example: "Stake £1 to win up to £1,000,000. Place £1+ Single Bet on World Cup; Winning Qualifying Bet with biggest odds wins.")	5 (examples: "Win a share of £25,000. Biggest odds winners win cash prizes!", and "£1 free build your bet for all customers on any world cup match today.")	5 (example: "Free bet if you lose. Up to £10 on First, Last and Anytime Goalscorer, Correct score & #GetAPrice markets.")	0	0
Number of betting odds advertised	0	0	0	0	0	15 (example: "Brazil to win, Neymar to score, both teams to score and Xhaka to be carded Odds of 18-to-1")

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