

Analysis of the report *Gambling advertising: a critical research review* by Per Binde (University of Gothenburg) for the Responsible Gambling Trust

This is a short briefing document which outlines several problems and issues concerning the report *Gambling Advertising: a critical research review* by Dr Per Binde (referred to hereafter as “The Review”). Commenting on The Review at its time of release in April 2014, Marc Etches, the Chief Executive of the Responsible Gambling Trust, said:

“There has been a marked increase in the amount of gambling advertising on our televisions since a change to the law came into force in 2007... in order to understand the impact of advertising on problem gambling we first need to assess what evidence is available and how best to conduct research that will deliver reliable and meaningful results. This report is a necessary and very useful first step as we consider how to best shape our future research programme in this area.”

This briefing document assesses several areas where The Review appears to fall short of providing high-quality guidance to the government and the advertising authorities to enable them to shape policy on the regulation of gambling advertising.

Timeliness of the review

Dr Binde points out that he wrote a report on gambling advertising in 2005 which included a review of the literature using extensive searches in publication databases and on the internet. While the literature search was updated for the new report using a Google Scholar search in 2013, this is not as rigorous a procedure as a new systematic search for literature (although Binde argues that it “is based on an extensive knowledge of the literature that has accumulated over years of involvement in this research field”). The non-comprehensive nature of the study, and also the fact that no literature more recent than 2013 is included, means that the results may lack relevance in the current UK context – especially given the rapid increase in gambling advertising expenditure since 2013¹ and the degree of technological innovation in advertising (social media etc.) since then.

¹ A recent article in the Guardian notes that “Companies offering sports betting, bingo, online casino games and poker spent £118.5m on TV spots in 2015, compared with £81.2m in 2012 (figures compiled for the Guardian by Nielsen)”. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/jul/15/betting-firms-spent-half-a-billion-pounds-on-tv-adverts-since-2012>

Modes and types of advertising included

The Review includes print media, television and billboard advertising, and advertising on web pages, but it doesn't include social media advertising and related activity by bookmakers on social media (e.g. Twitter accounts, Facebook feeds etc) which is one of the fastest growing areas of advertising spending. In 2005 when Binde's earlier report was written, television advertising of most forms of gambling was still illegal (it became legal in 2007) and social media as we know it today did not exist. These omissions of new advertising modes mean that the review misses out a lot of the current UK gambling advertising activity.

The Review also says nothing about relatively new forms of online and betting shop gambling (e.g. in-play betting).

Dr Binde is aware of the omission, as outlined on p7 of The Review:

"The marketing of products and brands is embedded in the flow of communication on the internet, being part of, for example, social interaction, games, "social gaming", sport events ("live odds"), online quizzes, user-uploaded videos, celebrity web pages and discussion forums. The distinction between non-commercial and commercial communication is fuzzier than ever. Since there is yet little empirical research into these modes of marketing, they will not be covered in this report. However, future study of gambling marketing needs to pay attention to them; this becomes the first recommendation for future research in this report."

Definition of 'problem gambling'

The stated aim of The Review (p5) is that "[it] provides a critical review of research on gambling advertising, with particular attention to studies that concern the impact of such advertising on participation in gambling and the prevalence of problem gambling". However, in practice the report seems to focus only on problem gambling and not on any wider measure of harm (e.g. at-risk gambling). Similarly there is no evidence presented on the impact of gambling advertising on the overall prevalence of gambling, either across the population as a whole or in subgroups who might be thought to be the most vulnerable (e.g. young adults; unemployed people; etc.)

Geographical scope

Relatively little of the literature covered in The Review is specific to the UK. Over the last 15 years or so, the UK gambling sector has experienced some changes in the

composition of and extent of gambling behaviour, and large-scale growth in advertising expenditure, which are at least partially a result of regulatory changes, for example:

- The legalisation of TV advertising for a much wider range of gambling activities than before in the Gambling Act 2005 (effective from 2007 onwards)
- The growth of Fixed Odds Betting Terminals since their introduction into UK Licensed Betting Outlets in the early 2000s to a point where they have become the primary source of onsite revenue for bookmakers.
- Huge growth in the relatively unregulated remote gambling subsector.

While not all these changes to the gambling sector are unique to the UK, the precise timing and implementation of the changes is country-specific to a large extent. This raises an obvious question as to whether a Review based on international evidence, with only limited UK-specific content, is useful for assessing recent developments in the UK gambling sector.

The conclusions GambleAware wanted?

Because The Review is essentially an updated version of previous work from Per Binde, GambleAware were likely to be aware of the previous research by him in 2005 and 2007-09 (which he says reached similar conclusions – i.e. that there is no proven strong link between gambling advertising and strong gambling.) There is thus a danger that Binde was chosen to conduct this review because GambleAware – which is an industry-funded body – didn't want conclusions which would upset the bookmakers too much.

Misleading conclusions on the relationship between advertising and problem gambling

The Review suggests that “it is very unlikely that advertising is a major cause of problem gambling.” The reasons given rely on simple correlations between problem gambling rates and expenditure across countries, for example:

- 1) In some countries (e.g. Sweden) the forms of gambling that are heavily promoted by advertising (e.g. lotteries) have low prevalence of problem gambling, whereas the forms with a high prevalence rate are promoted little or not at all.

- 2) There is no obvious scatterplot correlation between the prevalence of problem gambling and advertising spending across countries.
- 3) A meta-study of 202 problem gambling prevalence studies reveals a downward trend in problem gambling despite increased expenditure.

None of these reasons are conclusive: there could be many factors affecting the rates of problem gambling in a country (e.g. cultural factors, the number and location of gambling outlets, availability and speed of internet access, the quality of public health services for addressing problem gambling and gambling addiction, etc.) Without controlling for these additional factors (for example, in a cross-country multiple regression analysis) it is impossible to draw any conclusions from the lack of correlation between advertising expenditure amounts and the extent of problem gambling across countries, or from overall trends in gambling expenditure compared to overall trends in problem gambling rates. In other words The Review draws misleading conclusions on the (lack of) a relationship between gambling advertising and problem gambling, based on an overly simplistic analytical framework.

Lack of follow-up research

Dr Binde suggests several areas that are high priorities for further research, e.g.:

- **Surveying the volume and forms of advertising:** “Recurrent measurements [of the volume and forms of advertising] give valuable insight into trends in the gambling market and provide basic facts about the extent and forms of advertising as well as people’s exposure to it, giving perspective to discussions and research findings on its impact on problem gambling.”
- **Self-rated impact of gambling advertising:** “Valuable insights can be gained into what kinds of advertising, if any, may have a negative impact on vulnerable groups, such as youth, “at risk” gamblers and people who already have a gambling problem.”
- **Self-report studies of perception of advertising:** “Studies of perception of and attitudes towards gambling advertising have the potential to provide valuable insights into how advertising messages of various kinds are perceived and understood by different groups of people”.
- **Advertising codes and risk factors for problem gambling.** “It is a high priority to perform systematic and comprehensive reviews of how risk factors for problem gambling relate to themes and messages in gambling advertising... and how these motivations may turn into forces that drive excessive involvement”.

Considering the report was available in early 2014, there has only been minimal progress towards further research goals². Without this additional analysis, the conclusions of The Review must be regarded as cursory and incomplete at best.

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² Specifically, since The Review was completed there has been some work done on estimating the total volume of television advertising by gambling companies in the UK, and in July 2017 the RGT announced an invitation to tender for research looking at the impact of gambling on vulnerable groups.