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Curtailing gambling advertising and the effect on participation

Baidu - China's premier online search engine - last year found itself in the firing line as a result of online operators using Baidu to host and advertise illegal gambling services. Professor Mark Griffiths of Nottingham Trent University assesses the Baidu situation and the response of the Chinese authorities, and questions whether curtailing gaming advertisements truly mitigates participation in gambling.

An article in the Beijing News reported that online gambling companies were hacking legitimate corporate adverts on Baidu and that clicking on the links sent users to illegal gambling sites¹. In addition, a media investigation suggested that Baidu was fully aware of its association with the illegal operators and that the money offered by the operators was too good to turn down, and that regional sales divisions allegedly accepted the money because of Baidu management's "aggressive revenue targets," according to a news report on CalvinAyre.com: 'The gambling banner ads in question had a tendency to appear on mainstream sites starting in the late evening before disappearing in the morning, leaving non-controversial ads in their place. Sources said this was likely because "there are fewer censors' watching during off-peak hours²."

More specifically, the links that were hacked only became operational between 11pm and 9am. Baidu claimed that it had no knowledge of the hackers and provided information to the authorities claiming it had blocked 8,623 illegal gambling sites in the first quarter of 2016 and in the same period had prevented 7,239 gambling keywords from appearing in its search engine results³. Baidu has since said that it is providing all the information that it can to help police track down the perpetrators.

While the hacking of legitimate sites by illegal gambling companies is a serious criminal matter, this particular case raises a number of assumptions, the most important being that Chinese authorities appear to view online gambling as inherently bad, and that online advertising of gambling causes

negative detriments to its citizens. Over the last 15 years I have published many studies concerning online gambling including secondary analysis of nationally representative online gambling data from the British Gambling Prevalence Surveys ('BGPS')^{4, 5, 6}. However, most of the published research talks about 'online gamblers' as if everyone is totally clear as to what is being referred to when findings are reported.

Many of the published research studies in the area (including many of my own) have compared 'online gamblers' and 'offline gamblers.' For instance, in our secondary analyses of the BGPS 2007 data⁷, online gamblers were simply defined as anyone who had gambled online (e.g., gambled at an online casino, used an online betting exchange, had made a bet online, etc.) but excluded those who had bought online lottery tickets. Our research reported that the problem gambling prevalence rate amongst those who had gambled online was 5% compared to 0.5% for those who had never gambled online. This led to the conclusion that either gambling via an online medium is more 'dangerous' and/or problem-inducing for gamblers than land-based gambling, and/or that vulnerable gamblers may be more susceptible to developing problems online because of factors such as 24/7 access and convenience factors⁸.

But what exactly is an online gambler? This question may appear somewhat strange and/or self-evident. In fact, many of you reading this may have already reached the conclusion that it is obvious what an online gambler is (i.e., someone who has gambled online). However, those of us who carry out research

into online gambling have to be very specific and operationally define what we mean by an 'online gambler' in every piece of research that we carry out. For instance, is it right to call someone who gambles a few times a year at an online casino but also gambles on slot machines every week at an amusement arcade an 'online casino gambler'?

One of the main problems with this is that online gamblers typically gamble offline also. In the 2007 BGPS, of the 9,003 participants, a small minority (476 people) reported gambling online in the past year. Of these, only nine people didn't take part in any other kind of 'offline' gambling activity. In other words, the vast majority of online gamblers (98%) also gambled offline. These data suggest that in Britain, 'online only' gambling is a low prevalence activity (i.e. 5% of BGPS respondents had gambled online in the last year but only 0.1% had only gambled online in the past year).

More recently, a secondary analysis of these online gambling data from the third BGPS was carried out⁹. The most recent BGPS comprised 7,756 adult gamblers. Approximately one in seven respondents (14%) had gambled online in the past year (i.e., had gambled on at least one gambling activity such as gambling at online casinos and/or playing the lottery online). However, for the first time ever, four new groups of gamblers were created for comparison. These were those that:

- Gambled offline only (i.e., had gambled on at least one activity such as buying a lottery ticket in a shop or playing roulette at an offline casino but hadn't gambled online in the past year).

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continued

- Gambled online only (i.e., had gambled on at least one activity such as gambling on a betting exchange or gambling at an online casino but hadn't gambled offline in the past year).
- Gambled both online and offline but on different activities (i.e., had gambled on at least one activity online and one activity offline but these were different activities such as gambling on a slot machine in an amusement arcade and playing blackjack in an online casino).
- Gambled both online and offline but on the same activities (i.e., had gambled on at least one activity both online and offline such as gambling at both an online and offline casino).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, of all gamblers, the largest group was those who gambled offline only (80.5%) and the smallest group was those who gambled online only (2.1%). Of far more interest were the rates of problem gambling among these four groups. The highest prevalence rates of problem gambling were amongst mixed mode gamblers who gambled on different activities (4.3%), followed by mixed mode gamblers who gambled on the same activities (2.4%), those who only gambled offline (0.9%), and those who only gambled online (0%).

The most interesting statistic is arguably the fact that there was not a single case of problem or pathological gambling among those gamblers who only gambled online. Extreme caution must be given as the player base for 'online only' gamblers is very small when compared to the other groups.

In relation to advertising, there is relatively little scientific evidence that advertising directly influences gambling participation and problem gambling.

Last year, my research colleagues and I published one of the largest studies ever conducted on gambling advertising¹⁰. It involved more than 6,000 people and examined three specific dimensions of gambling advertising impacts: gambling-related attitudes, interest, and behaviour ('involvement'); knowledge about gambling options and providers ('knowledge'); and the degree to which people are aware of gambling advertising ('awareness').

We compared the responses from problem gamblers against those of recreational (non-problem) gamblers. We found that problem gamblers were more likely than recreational gamblers to agree that gambling advertising increased their gambling involvement and knowledge, and that they were more aware of gambling advertising. In simple terms, our study showed that gambling advertising has a greater impact on problem gamblers than recreational gamblers. This indirectly supports previous research showing that problem gamblers often mention that gambling advertising acts as a trigger to their gambling.

Overall, the small body of research on the relationship between gambling advertising and problem gambling has few definitive conclusions. If gambling advertising does have an effect, it appears to impact specific groups (such as problem gamblers) but most of this research uses self-reported data that has been shown to be unreliable among gamblers¹¹. At best, the scientific research only hints at the potential dangers of gambling ads. It would appear that the Chinese authorities' stance on gambling is perhaps overly restrictive and that the measures taken against online gambling and associated advertising is not necessarily based on empirical evidence.

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