

Evaluating the Role of Social Marketing Campaigns to Prevent Youth Gambling Problems

A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Gambling among adolescents is a growing public health concern. To date, social marketing as a strategy to address problem gambling among youth has not been widely used.

Methods: A qualitative study through the use of focus groups was conducted to explore adolescents' exposure to existing prevention campaigns and their message content and communication strategy preferences for a youth gambling social marketing campaign.

Findings: Participants prefer that youth gambling ads depict real-life stories, use an emotional appeal and portray the negative consequences associated with gambling problems. They further recommend illustrating the basic facts of gambling using simple messages that raise awareness without making a judgement. Participants caution against the "don't do it" approach, suggesting it does not reflect the current youth gambling culture.

Conclusion: This study should serve as a starting point for the development of a gambling prevention social marketing campaign. Targeting variables and campaign strategies highlighted should be considered in the early stages of development and tested along the way.

MeSH terms: Adolescent; gambling; social marketing

Children and adolescents are exposed to a growing number of pressures from parents, peers, the media, and society. As a result, youth are frequently confronted with competing and conflicting messages promoting adult lifestyle choices.¹ The availability and promotion of alcohol and tobacco products, and the accessibility of gambling venues, coupled with the media's glamorization of adult behaviours are placing adolescents at increased risk for the development of a number of risky behaviours. Gambling has only recently emerged as a significant public health issue.^{2,3} Despite the negative impact problem gambling poses on individuals and society, there have been few widespread prevention campaigns specifically targeting youth.⁴ As well, little attention has been paid to the untapped resource of social marketing, despite the fact that as a planned process of social change, it has been a powerful tool in the development of comprehensive health promotion strategies that positively influence health.⁵ As such, social marketing may be an effective prevention tool for minimizing youth gambling problems.

Focus groups were conducted to explore adolescents' exposure to social marketing campaigns aimed at reducing alcohol and tobacco use, and identify the features of those campaigns that participants considered most effective. This qualitative study further uncovered the message content and characteristics that youth revealed as being the most effective in raising awareness and communicating the risks associated with excessive gambling.

METHODS

Participants

A total of 30 focus groups were conducted in nine participating schools. Seven of the nine schools served youth from rural and small towns in southeastern Ontario and two of the nine schools served youth from urban/suburban Montreal. The sample consisted of 175 participants, ages 12-18 years (see Table 1).

Procedure

Upon ethical approval from McGill University, consent forms and letters describing the purpose of the focus groups were distributed to parents via the participating schools prior to students' participa-

La traduction du résumé se trouve à la fin de l'article.

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tion.* All participation was voluntary and students were assured confidentiality.

Focus groups were conducted during the school day and were one class period in duration. One researcher moderated the discussion using a topic guide and a second researcher took notes on verbal and non-verbal communications.† Additional questions were added as new issues of confirmation or disconfirmation arose. Data collection was conducted until saturation was reached.‡ A digital recording device was used to audiotape focus group discussions. The digital recordings were transcribed verbatim by a research assistant and verified by a researcher.

A comprehensive analysis of the focus group dialogues was conducted by two different researchers in multiple stages using a theme-building approach. In the first stage, the transcribed dialogues were read in order to begin to identify general themes and recognize emerging patterns. The dialogues were reread using a colour-coding system to identify the main research areas that were derived from the topic guide. The transcriptions were then organized so that the sequence of the dialogue was reformatted by question rather than by group. Reading of the transcriptions was completed using the reformatted text in order to identify key points and subthemes that emerged. Words and phrases that typified a theme were highlighted and key phrases and patterns were documented.

Two researchers independently performed the analysis in order to identify key ideas and subthemes that arose from within groups and across different groups, and to identify areas where there was no agreement on a specific subtheme. Following multiple readings, a table was developed in order to document subthemes, quotes, and disconfirming cases. Upon completion of the table, an interpretation of the patterns of responses by theme was compiled by drawing links between and within responses from different groups. After the analysis was completed, both researchers met to compile and compare notes. Project valida-

* The sample was drawn in multi-stages: first, by recruiting all English school boards in Quebec and in eastern and southeastern Ontario (sampling frame); second, by recruiting schools within participating school boards; and third, by recruiting students/parents consenting to participate in the focus groups.

† Both researchers were from McGill and had no prior relationship with participants.

tion was addressed by combining the two researchers' analysis of the transcriptions.‡ There was considerable agreement between researchers on subthemes and links drawn. In a number of cases, a subtheme was broadened or reorganized in order to incorporate additional links made by individual researchers.

FINDINGS

Theme one: Exposure to prevention campaigns

Tobacco Prevention

Tobacco prevention messages were among the most visible and memorable reported by the adolescents. The majority of participants were able to easily recall the *Stupid.ca* advertisements, a campaign airing across Ontario at the time of the study. Many participants cited the positive aspects of these advertisements and were able to describe the content in great detail. Participants reacted positively to the use of humour as a means of conveying smoking prevention messages. Many adolescents reported fatigue with the typical tobacco prevention ads employed in the past. The innovative nature of reaching youth through humour in a witty manner appeared to be a successful element of this campaign. While for the most part participants reacted positively to the *Stupid.ca* advertisements, some groups raised concern that a few of these ads used humour in an over-exaggerated manner.

Drinking and Driving Campaigns

Campaigns aimed at preventing driving under the influence of alcohol were the second most recalled advertisements. Many of the drinking and driving ads depicted the consequences of drinking that go beyond the individual. Many ads incorporated strong emotional appeal as the strategy of communicating the message. Overall, it appeared that participants were affected emotionally by the Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) campaign, and this may be one reason for its lasting impression. While the use of strong emotions could be considered a positive component of the drinking and driving ads, some participants described feeling disturbed and uncomfortable with seeing images of serious accidents and death.

TABLE 1
Sample by Gender and Grade Level

Grade	Male	Female	Totals (%)
7	18	17	35 (20)
8	13	13	26 (15)
9	22	17	39 (22)
10	9	12	21 (12)
11	16	9	25 (14)
12	17	12	29 (17)
Total: N	95	80	N=175

Influence of Prevention Campaigns

Overall, when asked about the influence of prevention messages on attitudes and behaviour, the majority of participants stated that they were not directly affected. However, they did perceive the benefit of implementing prevention campaigns as they believed they offered useful information and helped youth make more educated decisions.

Participants were vocal about what they disliked about social marketing campaigns. The main concerns raised were:

- Campaigns that did not present a balanced perspective. Youth discussed their frustration with biased messages that focused on the harmful aspects of the behaviour and found most of these ads to be unrealistic.
- Campaigns using the "don't do it" approach were not successful in transmitting prevention messages. Rather, this technique may encourage the opposite desired reaction. Some participants stated that authoritative messages triggered rebellious or defiant behaviour.
- Youth described developing a fatigue to advertisements as a result of over-exposure. Participants perceived that repetitive ads, those shown over too lengthy a period or ads that youth described as "dragging on," lose their effectiveness.

Theme two: Message content and approach for gambling prevention

Negative Effects

Participants suggested that gambling prevention campaigns demonstrate the harmful effects of excessive gambling behaviour. Youth identified three primary categories of consequences: those affecting the individual; problems affecting family and friends; and significant financial concerns.

Participants perceived that showing personal negative consequences would have the greatest impact in a gambling prevention campaign. These included feelings of depression, losing sleep, missing school or work,

and developing other addictions. However, some groups stated that teens don't think or care about the short- or long-term personal consequences, but rather live for the present.

Many groups also suggested depicting the harm that could be caused to family and friends attributable to a gambling problem. While some youth felt that the emotional harm caused by conflict and tension, lying, stealing, and reduced quality time with family and friends would be an effective campaign strategy, others highlighted the financial impact a teenager's gambling habit can have on loved ones. Many participants stated that they are more affected by how their actions could hurt their friends or family.

Financial consequences were also raised by participants. Showing the losses a teenager or adult could encounter as a result of a gambling problem is reported to be an important element to feature in a campaign. Participants suggested providing examples of how money spent on gambling could be used for more constructive endeavours.

Industry Manipulation

Presenting the extent to which the government profits from the gambling industry may be used as one approach in a social marketing campaign, according to some focus group participants. Participants reported that teenagers do not like being taken advantage of by government and feel discontent with the industry profiting from individuals' losses.

"You should also discuss industry-manipulation...how they lure us to gamble and make so much money off gambling." Female, grade 10

Interestingly, while participants felt industry manipulation was an important point, they believed that many youth who gamble are underage and do not necessarily wager on provincially-regulated games, but rather on what they referred to as "street" gambling. As such, a number of adolescents reported that provincially-run forms of gambling may not reflect the true nature of the youth gambling culture. While important, some groups believed this point should not be a priority of a social marketing campaign.

Denormalization

There was some support for using a denormalization approach to gambling prevention, however, for the most part, participants believe this is not an effective method.

Those individuals that found this strategy to be effective thought it could help counter-balance the multitude of advertisements, television shows and other media messages that promote and encourage gambling. They stated that denormalization could illustrate that there are more losers than winners. Older participants suggested that a younger audience may be more influenced by a "gambling is not cool" message.

"Grades 7 and 8 are more impressionable and worried about what's not cool, the uncool will have a backlash with the older teens." Male, grade 10

Unexpectedly, several groups suggested a responsible gambling message as being a more appropriate strategy, given that it would better reflect the reality of youth gambling.

"I would respect a very honest ad – one that was more about responsible gambling as opposed to an ad saying 'don't do it'. You have to respect people's decisions and if you show them respect by not telling them what to do they will be more likely to listen." Male, grade 11

Real Life Stories

The idea of using real stories featuring adolescents who have been affected by gambling problems was widely endorsed by most participants. Specifically, they recommended having guest speakers share their personal stories on ads or during school assemblies. Participants viewed using real stories that touch upon the audience's emotions as an effective method, especially since they stated that many adolescents view themselves as invincible. It was suggested that depicting real life stories may dispel the myth that adolescents are not negatively affected by gambling problems.

Use of Statistics

Another popular suggestion made by participants was the idea of using statistics to inform youth regarding basic facts on youth gambling. Many proposed showing the odds of winning as a means to convey the reality that the majority of players lose. Participants were also interested in knowing the prevalence of gambling problems among teens. However, they stressed the importance of using statistics in a meaningful context.

Tone: Fear and Shock

Some participants believed that the use of fear and shock in moderation may be

an effective strategy in capturing the audience's attention. However, many groups cautioned against using excessive fear tactics, as this strategy could result in adolescents rejecting the message altogether.

"Although we don't like tobacco ads which totally scare people, I still think it's good to scare people a little bit in these ads – but don't overdo it!" Male, grade 9

Theme three: Appropriate media for campaigns

Television

Television was considered the most popular medium discussed. An overwhelming number of participants agreed that television should be the primary method to reach the largest audience. However, some adolescents noted that television is already saturated by commercials, making it difficult for prevention messages to have any impact.

Radio

The second most popular medium recommended by youth was the use of radio for gambling prevention campaigns – airing ads on popular radio music channels. However, adolescents still believe there is an advantage to using television as it is better able to depict emotions through both visuals and sound.

Magazines

Using magazines as a vehicle to implement a social marketing campaign for gambling prevention received only limited support from focus group members. The primary reasons discussed were that adolescents generally do not pay attention to print ads and there are too many types of magazines to know which one to target.

Websites/Internet

The majority of participants stated that gambling prevention advertisements on the Internet would be highly ineffective. In general, they reported that Internet ads are annoying, especially "pop-ups". Some suggested that it would be very challenging to have gambling prevention messages on the web as it would be difficult to counter-balance the thousands of ads/pop-ups that promote Internet gambling.

DISCUSSION

This study provided rich and valuable data from which to begin to explore and understand the salient issues in the development of media-based gambling prevention campaigns. While the humour-based ads in the *Stupid.ca* campaign received positive feedback, based on the present analysis, the majority of focus group participants preferred that gambling prevention advertisements focus on real life stories and depict the negative consequences associated with gambling behaviour.

The study findings support the use of negative effects for all age groups, both genders, particularly when combining this with a balanced emotional appeal. The phenomenon, "negative effects," is broader than health consequences and includes harm caused to family and friends as well as financial/monetary consequences. Contrary to previous findings,⁴ however, denormalization did not receive extensive support as a gambling prevention strategy, except perhaps among younger participants.

An industry manipulation strategy may be valuable in future campaigns, yet at present, raising awareness of gambling issues, communicating the risks and consequences, and providing basic facts appear to be more pertinent. In particular, more work is needed in basic education/awareness; it would seem that industry manipulation tactics are better left to second-tier campaigns.

The main caution for the development of any campaign includes avoiding messages that are patronizing, moralistic, and those that discourage the behaviour outright. Adolescents appear to be highly sensitive to the "don't do it" approach, preferring messages that are balanced and that communicate the risks associated with excessive gambling in light of current youth culture. Fear or hard-hitting messages are not recommended for gambling prevention as adolescents are critical of exaggerated risk communication and do not recognize the imminent danger in gambling.

Finally, television advertisements, while expensive to implement, are the most widely endorsed medium for gambling prevention. Despite adolescents' criticism

of being bombarded by television ads in general, the majority still suggest that TV would be the best method for reaching youth. The amount of exposure would need to be carefully monitored as adolescents are susceptible to habituation and overexposure.

A number of limitations to this study are worthy of note and results should be considered in light of these methodological concerns. First, given that the sample was not randomly selected, biases may be present. However, researchers did include the full range of possible cases in order to enhance the conceptual generalizability of the findings. Second, two forms of response bias, social desirability and acquiescence bias should be taken into account. The fact that focus groups were conducted with pre-formed groups (i.e., classes), where participants had pre-existing relationships with others in the group, likely contributed to the latter's responding in a socially desirable manner. Further, participants may have had a tendency to agree or respond in a manner similar to their peers or acquiesce with opinions or statements presented.

Social marketing campaigns as a strategy for primary prevention remain a valuable tool in increasing knowledge, raising awareness and possibly influencing attitudes about gambling in general and problem gambling in particular. The important findings of this study should serve as a starting point for the development of a gambling prevention campaign. Targeting variables and campaign strategies highlighted in this article should be considered

in the early stages of development and tested along the way. Adolescents should be consulted throughout the process. It is clear that adolescents today are better informed and more media savvy than in the past and researchers have the opportunity to tap into this knowledge and the youth culture. In order to be effective, however, social marketing as a public health strategy needs to be part of an integrated youth gambling prevention approach which includes the implementation of healthy public policy as well as the development of school-based prevention programs.

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RÉSUMÉ

Contexte : Les jeux de hasard chez les adolescents sont un problème croissant pour la santé publique. Jusqu'à maintenant, on n'a pas beaucoup utilisé le marketing social en tant que stratégie pour résoudre le problème du jeu chez les jeunes.

Méthode : Nous avons mené une étude qualitative faisant appel à des groupes de discussion pour analyser l'exposition des adolescents aux campagnes de prévention actuelles et à leurs messages, et leurs préférences en matière de stratégies de communication pour une campagne de marketing social sur les jeunes et le jeu.

Constatations : Les participants préfèrent les annonces qui présentent des histoires vécues, qui font appel aux émotions et qui parlent des conséquences négatives des problèmes de jeu. Ils recommandent d'illustrer les faits essentiels sur le jeu par des messages simples qui sensibilisent sans porter de jugement. Les participants mettent en garde contre l'approche d'interdiction, qui ne reflète pas selon eux la culture actuelle des jeunes joueurs.

Conclusion : Cette étude pourrait être le point de départ de l'élaboration d'une campagne de marketing social sur la prévention du jeu. Les variables de ciblage et les stratégies de campagne indiquées dans l'étude pourraient être envisagées aux premiers stades de l'élaboration et testées en cours de route.