

Gamble Responsibly: Social Responsibility or Ethical Dilemma?

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Government responses to the global COVID-19 pandemic have been characterised by lockdown restrictions in Australia and around the world. This has led to the disruption of national and international sporting events including the English Premier League (EPL), Tokyo Olympic Games, Australian National Rugby League (NRL) and Australian Football League (AFL). At the same time, land based physical gambling venues, such as pubs and betting agencies, have experienced long and disruptive closures resulting in limited access for gamblers. In this unprecedented environment, it would be reasonable to expect gambling levels may have receded because of gamblers not being able to access these venues. However, this article finds evidence in Australia that the opposite is true and raises questions of ethical behaviour in the promotion of gambling by online sports betting agencies.

Since 2008, Australia has seen rapid growth in the marketing of online sports betting. In 2015, [the gambling industry spent \\$147 million on advertising](#), a significant increase from its 2012 advertising spend of \$45 million. [Financial reports from 2020](#) reveal that Australia's Tabcorp retail turnover was down 279 percent to \$5.4 billion but that its digital turnover was a staggering \$7.1 billion. Sportsbet and Ladbrokes, who are foreign owned, reported a 45 and 43 percent lift in profits of around \$200 million up until June. Despite evidence that gambling leads to a range of financial, social, and health issues, gambling is promoted as a fun and entertaining leisure activity and the increasing profits indicate that these communication objectives are being achieved.

Marketing communications are generally targeted at young male sports gamblers using emotional appeals that create a perception of peer belonging and mateship. Recurring themes include excitement, power, wealth, adventure, happiness, sports fan rituals, alcohol, humour and team identification. [Research by Lopez-Gonzalez, Griffiths & Jimenez-Murcia \(2020\)](#) concludes sports betting is a socially constructed product that attaches meaning and cultural significance between betting and sports. This symbolic association is evident in the NRL and AFL with betting communications firmly embedded in television broadcasts via a saturated push of gambling promotion. The sports betting industry magnifies the attractiveness of gambling via team sponsorships, uniform naming rights, advertising during commercial breaks and endorsements by high profile sporting stars.

The heavy presence of gambling promotions on television broadcasts has seen a [recent shift to regulate](#) how gambling is advertised during sporting events. However, if sports betting organisations are operating within the law, should they be required to provide moral guidance to their customers? The phrase “Gamble Responsibly” is commonly featured in sports betting advertisements with an underlying theme of personal control. While this example suggests some moral steps have been taken, it raises questions whether betting agencies are doing enough to curb problem gambling and whether they have a broader ethical and social responsibility to do more, particularly during the current pandemic.

One potential impact of the pandemic is in the form of consumer behaviour and how consumers have changed their behaviour in response to these unprecedented times. The pandemic has created many everyday dilemmas for consumers, and marketers from many industries have strategically evolved their approach to changing consumer behaviour. In its way, the sports betting industry has also responded to the pandemic and associated changes of behaviour of its target markets. [Researcher, Rebecca Jenkinson](#), attributes isolation and boredom as key reasons young men are gambling more during the pandemic. The ethical question is whether their behaviour is further influenced by being exposed to a saturation of ads and promotions that often act as a motivation or trigger that influences decision making. The evidence indicates that sports betting marketers are adapting their approach and strategically framing their communications to appeal to their target market. So, why might this be construed to be unethical?

[According to Nielsen](#), the Australian gambling industry spent \$271.3 million dollars on advertising in 2020. The increase in advertising spend is confronting but there are some variables that need to be factored into this discussion. Firstly, over the past decade there has been significant growth and there are now around 70 online sport betting providers. The top five advertisers by spend, between January to September 2020, were Sportsbet, Ladbrokes, Pointbet, Neds and BetEasy. This growth in competitors and increase in advertising spend is evidence of the competition between companies to position themselves in a growth market. Secondly, the advertising modes have expanded beyond the traditional advertising mediums and have expanded into social media including general networking (Facebook), blogging (Twitter), and exchange of temporary content (Instagram, Snap chat). An ethical concern here is that current regulations have focused on the traditional media outlet of television with limited regulations in relation to social media platforms.

On the consumer side, the growth in online betting participation amongst young men, during the first year of the pandemic is evident. A [survey by the Australian Gambling Research Centre \(AGRC\)](#) identified young men spent significantly more money on online betting during the pandemic. According to the study, the median monthly dollar amount increased from \$687 to \$1,075 despite increasing job losses. The research, from a sample of just over 2000 gamblers, also showed men aged between 18 to 34 accounted for 79 percent of new online betting accounts opened during June and July in 2020. The survey also took place in a period when the NRL, AFL and EPL all returned, after a period in exile, with fixtures now being spread throughout the week rather than on weekends alone.

The above evidence indicates there may be a cause-and-effect correlation between online sports betting advertising and participation. However, the over-emphasis on the likelihood of winning with a negligible focus on the risks involved is problematic from an ethical perspective. The positive framing of sports betting as a fun and entertaining activity serves to normalise the industry with an objective of increasing interest and participation. In this context, the collective actions of the sports betting industry to warn their customers to “gamble responsibly” offers a distorted image of gambling reconstructed as a socially acceptable endeavour. Despite scientific evidence that demonstrates gambling is an activity that has potentially harmful outcomes, online sport betting is still open for everyone.

In the current wave of lockdowns, sporting competitions have once again been disrupted, relocated, and rescheduled but the games go on. With over-the-counter gambling outlets still closed in some Australian States, the online sports betting providers are willing and able to fill the void. With spring being the traditional peak time for gambling advertising in Australia (the NRL and AFL finals, and the horse racing Spring Carnival usually take place at this time), online sports betting companies are set to continue raking in the profits with gambling industry revenue [forecast to rise by \\$5.3 billion](#) over the next five years. With venues closed at various stages of the pandemic, the sports betting industry has framed the online sports betting as an appealing and easily accessible alternative option. The reason this may be deemed to be unethical is because the premeditated words to gamble responsibly make the sports betting industry appear to be socially responsible. However, the significant and increased spending on advertising, and the continued strong growth in sports betting revenues, somewhat contradicts this position.



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