All in! The commercial advertising of offshore gambling on television

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Abstract

There is a paucity of research on the advertising of gambling, especially the intensely marketed Internet poker and blackjack games. This study examines ads that aired on cable television in one Canadian jurisdiction. Using quantitative and qualitative methods, we analyze 64 distinct commercials that aired 904 times over a 6-month period. Our findings show that these ads target audiences along age, gender, and ethnic lines and mobilize celebrities, excitement, and humour as persuasive techniques to promote the view that on-line gambling is an entertainment experience in which skill prevails over luck, winning dominates losing, fantasy overshadows reality, leisure trumps work, and the potential for personal change eclipses the routines of everyday life. We conclude that the e-gambling advertising assemblage, with its high-volume exposure, attractiveness, pervasiveness, and repetitiveness of messaging is now an embedded feature of everyday life that is especially connected to popular sport culture and to the fun ethic of contemporary consumer culture.

Keywords: gambling, advertising, marketing, on-line poker, television, Canada

Introduction

Advertising has been called the simplest communication, "the cave art" of the 21st century that makes consumption a top-of-mind behaviour. Like cultural myths, ads aim to impress, stimulate, and persuade. If an ad taps into a modern myth, the response may be obvious, quick, and subconscious. On the other hand, more and more ads are complex and artful, requiring careful study of how they do what they do and how they create new metaphors for viewers that persist long after the ads have been shown. Advertising in this view is a cultural game in which advertisers are challenged to map values of images onto products and viewers are challenged to use their cognitive competencies to interact with the messages they see or hear (Pateman, 1983).

In this article, we study television advertising, limiting our inquiries to remote gambling in Atlantic Canada. Widespread gambling advertising, of course, is a relatively recent phenomenon and this growth is even more dramatic for Internet products that only became available in the mid-1990s. Not surprisingly, there are few studies of gambling advertising here or elsewhere that look specifically at remote gambling advertising (Binde, 2007a, 2008; Clotfelter & Cook, 1989; Derevensky et al., 2007; Griffiths, 2005; Korn, Hurson, & Reynolds, 2003; McMullan & Miller, 2008; Zangeneh, Griffiths, & Parke, 2008). We examine a convenience sample of 64 distinct ads that played or

replayed 904 times during 509 hours of recorded play time over a 6-month period from January to July 2007. Our purpose is to examine the social features and master messages of these ads and to study the connections between remote television gambling advertising and broader meanings and resources of contemporary consumer culture. The paper is organized as follows: first, we discuss the role of commercial advertising in consumer society; next, we explain our methods; following that, we provide a detailed analysis of the commercials, examining both quantitative and qualitative data; finally, we discuss the dominant themes of primarily poker and blackjack advertising in the wider context of what we call the *sportification* and the *ethic of fun* surrounding contemporary forms of gambling.

Advertising and Commercial Culture

It is now common to hear or see many advertisements a day enjoining people to "take a chance," "share the dream," "get in the game," "live the thrill," "become a millionaire," and "go all in." As Binde (2008, p. 2) observes, commercial advertising for gambling "seems to be everywhere, flooding us from all directions." Moreover, these messages are read, seen, or heard at a "flash" and usually anticipated by audiences; we know that sooner or later, we will see them in the course of watching a television show (Chapman & Egger, 1983, p. 168; Myers, 1983, pp. 207-208). Like myths, advertisements invoke responses that are swift and subconscious, or, like puzzles, they enjoin reactions that are cognitively challenging. In Pateman's (1983, p. 201) words, ads are not normally dull or boring; people actively engage with advertisements mostly because they are funny, defiant, intelligent, and "visually pleasurable."

Advertising exists along a continuum bound by rhetoric and propaganda at either pole and employs tactics that are both expressive and programmatic. It is a form of communication that invests goods with meaning on the one hand and integrates these same products into a culture of buying on the other (Goffman, 1976). Every individual advertisement, therefore, is a ritual enactment that manifests the larger phenomenon of advertising as a cultural system. The formal properties of such rituals include repetition, acting, staging, stylization, and the affirmation of shared values. At a most basic level, ads sell social needs, desires, and statuses to people. But the content of ads is almost always framed by knowledge of other cultural signs and symbols that already mean something to consumers (Pateman, 1980, pp. 607-609; Sherry, 1987, pp. 443-446). Books, newspapers, magazines, films, television programs, the performing arts, music, radio shows, charity draws, and reality television increasingly valorize gambling to their audiences as exciting and glitzy and connect it to a wider world of glamour, fame, success, entertainment, and attractive living (Griffiths & Wood, 2000). Newspapers and movies portray gambling much more frequently than they did in the past, primarily through images in which fantastic wins, happy endings, and magician-like skills predominate (Binde, 2007b; McMullan & Mullen, 2002; Turner, Fritz, & Zangeneh, 2007). Quiz games linked to television programs advertise gambling over the telephone to boost their ratings and provide viewers with an interactive consumer experience involving lottery-like formats, virtual wagering, and trivia competitions (Griffiths, 2007).

New information communication technologies and the computer permit continuous gambling and endless promotions on-line, and the near future promises spontaneous betting during sporting and cultural events such as wagering on whether someone will score from a penalty shot in Olympic hockey or be eliminated from the latest round of *American Idol*. Gambling corporations now promote their products with other consumer goods and services, such as telecommunications, the media, travel, leisure, and entertainment, and associate the proceeds of gambling with public education, cultural programs, and social welfare. Schools, hospitals, churches, and charities, for example, rely more and more on gambling to raise capital, thus extending the cultural reach and social legitimacy of gambling by embedding it further into the routines of everyday life (Korn, 2007). Parents increasingly model gambling to their children by teaching them how to gamble, by financing their gambling activities, and by buying gambling products for them, and young co-workers entering the workforce often play daily and weekly draws hoping against all odds that they will dance the happy dance of the next millionaire (Derevensky et al., 2007; Messerlian, Derevensky, & Gupta, 2005). Indeed, in two recent Canadian studies, gambling was not even thought of as risky behaviour by young people; it was ranked below hitchhiking alone, cheating on a test, dating on the Internet, shoplifting, and skipping work, and it was regarded as much a common feature of everyday life as drinking, smoking, and driving an automobile (D-Code, 2006, pp. 11-12; Korn et al., 2003, p. 23).

Thus, gambling ads interact and intersect with other forms of cultural production and consumption in society to derive meaning and enhance credibility (Elliott, 1999). Alcohol and tobacco advertising, for example, have been especially crafted to mirror dominant representations of youth lifestyles as selling points. McCreanor, Greenaway, Barnes, Borell, and Gregory (2005, p. 257) found that beer and vodka advertisers tried to sell their products as inherent to adolescent culture by sponsoring fashion events, popular dances, and creative competitions on their Web sites. Gray, Amus, and Currie (1997) revealed that fashion spreads in magazines in the 1990s played to the reader by portraying body "looks" that tapped into and reflected back the mythology that young people identified with and aspired to — the mythology of being "noticeable" and "someone" as a result of smoking cigarettes. Marlow (2001, pp. 42-43) discovered that cigarette advertising on billboards capitalized on the theme of youthful dissent and escapism. Joe Camel, the ultra-cool guy, was the epitome of "attitude" in the ads, an urban expression of choice and defiance against middle-class values that seduced teens into smoking, even if it harmed them. He was expressed in his own youthful rebellion as simply above all sensible advice. Taylor (2000, pp. 339-344) reported that visual codes, spoken texts, and written words in ads were entwined with other forms of cultural production to sell liquor to youth. Perfume and designer drinks, for example, were promoted through coded references to club culture (e.g., fun, dancing, music, sexuality) and to a wider secondary language of pleasure and excitement that drew from familiar words, signs, and symbols of drug culture; connected these products to their cultural referents; and sold alcohol and cosmetics back to consumers as versions of their own needs and desires. Walsh and Gentile (2007, pp. 5-8) found that "frogs sold beer." By using emotional messaging and targeting consumers with humour, heroes, and repetitive exposure, they discovered that beer ads worked best when they slipped underneath the

radar of awareness and young consumers were not conscious that they were being affected by persuasion techniques. Korn et al. (2003) and Derevensky et al. (2007) found this to be true with gambling where it was both portrayed and received as reasonable, exciting, and natural because thinking about the product was identified with its cultural signifiers — instant fame, wealth, and a worry-free life. Indeed, a recent Swedish study discovered that a one-sided focus on "winning, fun, and excitement" in gambling ads was connected to diverse cultural values such as hope, freedom and self-expression, and altruism (Binde, 2008).

When it comes to gambling advertising in Canada, approximately $943 million, or 6% of all gambling revenue, in 2005 to 2006 was spent on advertising, promotion, and marketing, but this does not include remote advertising, which is estimated to be in the tens of millions of dollars worldwide (Binde, 2008; Canadian Gaming Association, 2007). Indeed, the on-line gambling industry now generates worldwide revenues of about US $15 to 18 billion from registered sites and several more billion from so-called wild or unregulated sites (CERT-LEXSI, 2006; Christiansen, 2004; Rex & Jackson, 2008; Stewart, 2006). Their advertisements flow freely across national borders, avoiding or evading the few regulations placed on them by local overseers for their own products. In Canada, a definitive governmental policy stance on Internet gambling has yet to be declared; Rex and Jackson (2008) recently observed that "while [Internet gambling in Canada] may not be legal, it still exists."

Television programming via satellite, cable, or Internet sources, the subject of this paper, for example, introduced gambling in Canada in a manner that took advantage of the loopholes in the gaming and betting provisions of the Criminal Code. Many TV stations and sponsors withdrew television advertisements that promoted real money gambling sites and replaced them with ads for dot-net Web sites on the grounds that such sites required "no consideration to play," because the players took "no risk or loss, and therefore there is no gambling and the Code is not violated" (Lipton & Weber, 2006, p. 4). These dot-net sites, nevertheless, provide cash accounts, incentives and bonuses to gamble, and a daily diet of ads urging people to consume gambling products by practising on-line. They offer tutelage and mentorship, competitive tournaments and anticipatory socialization to gamble, motives and rationales to gamble, much valued recruitment lists for real gambling sites, and brand loyalty in a competitive market where regulation and trust are in short supply. As Zangeneh et al. (2008, p. 146) rightly observe, "companies that invest in the future by acquiring customers now to build a brand successfully…will almost certainly come to dominate Internet gambling." Advertising plays a crucial role in fostering trust between operators and players by promoting a professional look and feel to Web sites and by dispelling fears of cheating, theft, or fraud. Similar to Web site design and infrastructure, easy access and availability, technical reliability, and interactive customer services, advertising is an initiative that operators hope will enhance the relative comfort of gambling on-line by tapping into and honing the motivations — relaxation, competition, excitement, winning, escaping boredom and worries, developing skills, and feeling lucky — of players and by guaranteeing them and future customers reputational security (Griffiths, 2003; Wood & Griffiths, 2008; Wood, Parke, & Griffiths, 2007).

This study explores the relatively recent world of remote gambling advertising as a form of cultural communication. We ask several questions: What is achieved by an ad for Internet gambling? What meanings, messages, and usages are prominent in remote gambling advertising? Do these gambling ads make use of the cultural capital of their audiences in selling gambling to consumers? What are the wider cultural referents that shape on-line gambling ads?

Methodology

Content analysis is utilized in this study because it is a "method of studying and analyzing communications in a systematic, objective, and quantitative manner for the purpose of measuring certain message variables" (Dominick, 1978, pp. 106–107) and because it is well suited to explore the classic questions of communications research: "who says what, to whom, why, how and with what effect" (Maxfield & Babbie, 2001, p. 329). Content analysis is a relatively unobtrusive way of analyzing social relations through texts, which, when combined with qualitative techniques, allows for patterns of meaning, tonality, and messaging to be explored and analyzed (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 62; Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994, p. 464; Neuman, 2003, p. 313; Riffe & Freitag, 1997). Two "ways of seeing" are used in this study. On the one hand, we counted and analyzed the literal sounds, images, and texts of advertisement discourse. On the other hand, we emphasized the cultural context of the production of advertisements and their signifying capacity for registering and reregistering latent, ironic, or contradictory messages in commercials (Banks, 2001; Jones, 1996; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). As van Dijk (1993, p. 254) puts it, the exercise of persuasion is often cognitive; "content analysis shows how managing the minds of others is essentially a function of text and talk."

The ad sources that informed our analysis were drawn from cable television stations rather than from satellite outlets because two thirds of all Nova Scotian households own cablevision (Statistics Canada, 2006). We sampled as follows: First, programs dedicated to gambling activities were taped daily from 5 p.m. to 8 a.m. from January 1, 2007, to February 28, 2007, because it was anticipated that these programs would reveal a large number of gambling commercials and provide us with early insight about their content. Second, prime time programs were taped every day from 8 p.m. to 11 p.m. from March 1 to April 30, 2007, because they were shown when the largest and most diverse viewing audiences were available. Six prime time networks were chosen and rotated on a weekly basis. To obtain a national balance in the sample, we chose three Canadian and three American channels in this order: CBC, NBC, ATV, CBS, Global, ABC[i]. Finally, sports programs were taped every day at 8 p.m. to 11 p.m. on weeknights and at 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. on weekends from May 1 to July 2, 2007. These programs aired on the four available cable channels (RSE, TSN, The Golf Channel, The Score[ii]) and were rotated on a weekly basis over the 2-month period.

Our 6-month sample of coverage identified 461 television programs that played on 11 television networks, resulting in the acquisition of 64 distinct remote television commercials that played during 509 hours of recorded play time. Each commercial was named and coded for variables surrounding ad content, design, target audience, master themes, and responsible gambling messages. The authors developed a codebook along with operational definitions of all variables. Both authors independently viewed each ad twice, resulting in a 100% agreement on all dichotomous variables. When a variable could not be sharply distinguished, as in thematic messages, both authors viewed each ad several more times until consensus was reached (Agres, Edell, & Dubitsky, 1990; Chen, Grube, Bersanin, Waiters, & Keefe, 2005; Dejong & Hoffman, 2000; Gulas & Weinberger, 2006; Tellis, 2004). A caveat, however, is called for. Content analysis is best at uncovering the preferred messages of the senders of the ads at the representational level. It does not evaluate how the messages were received by audiences nor account for how attitudes, beliefs, or behaviours were affected by advertising. These tasks will be undertaken in future focus group and interview studies.

Results

Advertising remote e-gambling
The majority of the 64 ads that promoted blackjack and poker did so on dedicated gambling shows (33.4%), sports shows (30.2%), dramas (12.6%), entertainment shows (7.8%), and comedies (7.2%). Of the 461 television shows, the top 4 in terms of frequency were programs that highlighted poker: *Poker After Dark* (7.2%), *Poker Super Stars* (3.9%), *Ultimate Poker Challenge* (3%), and *World Heads Up Poker Championship* (3%). If we consider television broadcast vendors, NBC showed the greatest percentage (18.7%) of the 461 programs that aired, followed closely by three sports channels: RSE (17.8%), The Score (14.3%), and TSN (11.1%). Forty-four percent of all television programs contained a gambling advertisement, averaging three ads per program. In total, 57 (89%) of the 64 ads were produced by on-line gambling providers. Of the 19 different advertisers, 14 (73%) were on-line enterprises offering sites to learn and play poker for free in what they called anonymous, convenient, and secure environments.

Advertisers, advertisements, and audiences
Overall, there were 904 showings of the 64 gambling commercials, with each one lasting about 30 seconds. The placement time varied over a 24-hour period. The majority of ads aired between 8 p.m. and midnight (40%), followed by midnight to 4 a.m. (24.6%), 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. (18.7%), noon to 4 p.m. (14%), and 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. (1.6%). The median time of day that the ads aired was 5:55 p.m. Ten of the 64 ads accounted for over half of all commercial airtime (54.6%). The most frequent corporate advertiser was FullTiltPoker.net, who accounted for almost 30% of the advertising action. Many of these advertisements signified that potential on-line players could become close and trusted friends with the experts if they heeded their advice. Other advertisements in their arsenal, however, signified the opposite message: New players were encouraged to believe that they could actually beat professional gamblers at their own game. These commercials

used emotions around the contingency of competition and the suddenness of winning to focus attention, encourage motivation, and fix memory. Such commercials mobilized images of authority and of subversion to invest products with credibility and to suggest that ordinary players can mentor other players and be successful at gambling, approaches that have been particularly powerful with youthful consumers because these approaches endorse the maxims that people are likely to be influenced by celebrity associations and by people of similar ages and temperaments (Walsh & Gentile, 2007, p. 10).

The second most frequent advertiser, PokerStars.net (14.1%), and the fourth most frequent, Bet21.net (7.8%), took a slightly different approach. They relied on direct endorsements from celebrity gamblers. The PokerStars.net commercials were introduced with piping music normally associated with regal events. Important messages were forthcoming. The camera next showed the reigning poker stars with the "World Series of Poker Champion" credentials posted below their names. The players then revealed particular "mysteries" of the games to their attentive subjects. Aspiring players were depicted as shocked and awed by the talent and royalty of the famous, and the viewers' eyes and ears were simultaneously drawn to the brand names of poker play flashing across the screen. It was also not uncommon to see and hear famous players sparring, joking, and talking animatedly with each other as to who had the "best game," the "best face," and the "best moves." In one notable ad, "Reeves Versus Williamson," Monica Reeves, a blackjack pro, and Robert Williamson III, a poker pro, played to notions of youthful masculinity and femininity by using a series of verbal stereotypes, suggestive gestures, and seductive visuals to question each other's game and to poke fun across gender lines. Viewers were invited to consider which subject position they preferred, the cocky male poker player who was going to eliminate the "nice girl" at her own game or the "kiss my bottom" blackjack beauty who was going to eliminate "poker boy" because he arrogantly assumed that poker players were better than blackjack players. The power of these commercials was in the pervasive and persuasive use of catchy scenarios, attractive virtual habitats, split screens, dynamic action frames, and culturally attuned linguistic tropes to encourage viewers to connect with a series of portrayals of card-based gambling linked to competition, pleasure, learning, and camaraderie, making only low-key references to the product, usually in the final frame of the ad.

The types of gambling products most often put into advertisements were on-line poker (71.9%) and on-line blackjack (12.5%), followed by lotteries (6.3%), sports betting (4.7%), casino games (3.1%), and horse racing (1.6%). Although one in every five commercials was slotted for a general audience, the main target was undoubtedly males (75%) between the ages of approximately 19 and 35 (67.2%), many of whom were thought to have gambled previously (46.9%). Less than 10% of the ads were aimed at females (9.4%). In fact, the average number of males included in a commercial was seven, whereas for females it was one. In one commercial, casino gambling was likened to a "testosterone injection"; in two others, poker tournaments were only for "men who take risks" and for those who "play to bluff"; and in a fourth, "putting on a game face" was akin to readying for war, "attack force delta." The masculine manner was bolstered by a lexical strategy that established a male mood and tonality: Fully 84.4% of voiceovers were male and the exhortations in their voices were to beat, bamboozle, and

destroy. Furthermore, women were sexualized in about 11% of the commercials. One ad, "Pinch**,**" featured a young woman in a red bikini promoting an "absolute dream package" for poker play. She is joined by a male (Scott) who cannot stop pinching himself because he won access to play for millions of dollars in prize money. Scott suddenly pinches the woman's bottom. She cries out, smiles, and tells Scott to pinch himself while simultaneously encouraging the viewer to "live the dream" because "this is for real!"

Caucasians constituted the majority of visible faces in the advertisements; 396 of the 528 people shown were Caucasian. Moreover, as the age of the intended audience increased, the less frequent were these age groups in the advertisements: ages 19 to 35 (67.2%); ages 36 to 60 (17.2%); ages 60 and over (3.1%). However, this pattern did not hold true for adolescents; they seemed to be the direct intended target in only 4.7% of the commercials. Nevertheless, advertisements often presented a storyline that focused on youth and young adults as potential gamblers and cultivated a "cool look" for the gambling experience. For example, the commercial "Laak And Stann" highlighted two young adult gamblers who were laden with cultural signifiers: sleek clothes, hard talk, defiant hand gestures, and cold gazes. Their expressive body language was dramatized and serialized to move, excite, and exemplify so as to make poker play attractive and appealing to potential youthful audiences. In the commercial "B Ball Picks," the ad lexicon evinced a slang-like sub-cultural quality; words like "hardwood" rather than "court," "drop your B Ball picks," rather than "place your basketball bets," and "still in the money" rather than "it's not too late to place a bet" were conversational expressions that invited young players to appreciate the popular, coded life world of the regular gambler.

Targeted males were represented as "established" gamblers (46.9%) in about half of the ads. Phrases such as "get better," "learn more," and "get greater" were frequent verbal inducements that promoted skills and conjured dreams; the ads proclaimed that by practising for free on particular Web sites, anyone who played could be just like the legendary winners of poker and blackjack. But novices learning to gamble were also regularly targeted by the ads (32.8%). These commercials were akin to classroom scenarios. They offered recruitment information, betting instructions, social engineering skills, fraternity, and emblematic status with the pros. The visual syntax and the verbal language of the ads engaged the audience through role-playing, satirical competition, and in-joking and promised fame and fortune.

Image, tone, and text
To attract audiences, advertisers designed their commercials carefully. The majority of visual frames, which averaged 15 per commercial, dramatized close-up camera positioning in 54 of the 64 ads. These frames evoked the emotional responses of gamblers and the sentient features of their games. Cards, dice, and chips were shuffled, rolled, counted, stacked, and seductively thrown in the air and on tables to enjoin the viewer to experience the pleasure of play, and pots were pushed, pulled, and coddled to signal the promise and benefits of successful wagering. For example, in the commercials "I Call, I'm All In," and "When You're Beat You're Beat," facial intensity was constructed and calibrated to reveal the inner thought processes of players, ensuring that

the viewers "felt" and "knew" the seriousness of the games being played and the intensity of the players' actions in winning or losing. The commercial "We Play to Bluff" was especially forceful. Here, the entire visual focus was on freeing the images from the confines of the ad frame by cropping the face from the nose to the hairline. The images featured the eyes of the characters that looked past the audience, opening up for consideration whatever the viewer imagined he or she saw. The verbal anchorage, however, echoed the messages of self-expression, freedom from constraint, and what the future might be. The voiceover went on: "We play to bluff; to bamboozle, beat, and beguile; to dupe and delude; to suck in, sabotage, trap, and track; to hook and hoax; to fake, feign, and fool; and to do it all against the best." When the camera positioning favoured medium shots, which occurred in 46 of the 64 ads, viewers were still drawn to the faces of famous personalities, but environments were also foregrounded for dramatic effect. Long camera shots that stressed environment over people or objects were deployed in only 9 of the 64 ads, and they were usually combined with a medley of close-up or medium frames. The commercial "Fast Track Your Pro Experience" was typical. Here, a baseball field with trees and hills behind it was the main focus of the ad. But this frame faded as the camera position turned to medium and close-up shots of gamblers carefully layering the casino environment onto the baseball field, suggesting a link between sports and poker, and highlighting the primacy of the felt table over the baseball diamond.

In addition to camera position, the pace of the advertisements, based on frame movement, speech, music, and graphics, was also a way in which advertisers communicated their messages to viewers. Fully half of the advertisements were fast-paced. The commercials "Win a Poker Game With a Famous Poker Player" and "Play Poker on Television" each displayed about two dozen frames embedded in frantic voiceovers, frenetic high-speed moving graphics, and loud intense guitar music. Similar to rock videos, the ambience was raucous and the appeal was to a compendium of bodily senses — the exotic sight, sound, and touch of gambling and the anticipation of winning. But, slow-paced ads were almost as frequent as fast-paced ads, as was evident in the commercials "Luck" and "When You're Beat You're Beat." Here, gamblers and their cards, chips, and dice were filmed in slow motion and the voiceover was solemn and reassuring. Soft music played quietly in the background. Playing poker and blackjack was a warm cognitive experience calling out for studious observation, careful contemplation, and strategic action.

To constitute their message, advertisers relied on sound, colour, and language. Music, electronically enhanced sounds, and ambient sounds were part and parcel of many gambling commercials. Music was the most prevalent sound found in the ads (90.6%) and was generally used as a backdrop to enhance action, emotion, or mood. Ambient or naturally occurring sounds were also frequent in the ads (50.0%) and were typically produced to simulate the gambling environment. For instance, in the commercials "I'm All In" and "We Play to Bluff," the acoustics of chips and cards hitting the poker table were highlighted to increase the proximity of the viewer to the game and to emphasize the dramatic quality of play. Electronically enhanced sounds were less frequent (20.3%) in the commercials and were mostly used to contrast or manipulate other sounds. An effective example of this effect was in the ad "Steroid Injection." Here, a needle was

plunged into a bottle of steroids and the liquid was drawn quietly into a syringe. This noiseless procedure was suddenly acoustically enhanced with the player driving the needle through several playing cards into the casino table to send the powerful message that blackjack play was like steroid use, "all juiced up!"

Colour was an important feature of the commercials, although there was no singular pattern of preference. Advertisements revealed use of bright (46.9%), dark (31.3%), neutral (12.5%), or contrasting (9.4%) colours to signify mood and meaning for their products. Almost half of the commercials deployed bright colours and graphic displays for dramatic effect. For example, in the two "Cursing" commercials, 16 poker players, each coded in vivid colour schemes, were shown reacting to losing and winning. The verbal anchorage in the ad referenced a dark mood of apparent disappointment, but the visual syntax highlighted brilliant positive red, blue, green, and yellow hues that became more prominent with each passing frame. The contrasting tones and pictures effectively signified the risks, emotions, and thrills associated with gambling and steered the viewer to perceive the message as a whole. At the centre of the flow of depicted movement was the on-line player fixed at a computer, a still and clear solid identity in a world of vivid global image motion. Some ads went further and combined colourful graphics with appeals to loyalty as in the three "Play for Team Canada" ads, one of which encouraged gambling because "your country needs you!" We find it interesting that 31% of the ads also featured dark colour schemes, most notably FullTiltPoker.net. Here, shades of black and gray were combined to simulate the apparent mystery of the casino environment and dramatize the suspense of table play. Scenes of sombre seriousness intermingled with scenes of joyful delight to promote the authenticity, pleasure, and timelessness of gambling at cards.

Words were also a prominent feature of gambling ads, with each commercial averaging 60 words of text. Advertisers preferred conversational (51.6%) or neutral vocabularies (46.9%) rather than intellectual or specialized languages. Conversational language consisted of slang and colloquialisms. Many of these commercials deployed vernacular such as *kinda*, *yeah*, *hey*, *wannabe*, *feelin'*, *somethin'*, and *talkin'*, emphasizing convivial competition; used words such as *beat*, *bamboozle*, and *suck in*, stressing a carefree "take me as I am" attitude; or hyped the jargon associated with the tools, techniques, and bravado of card games, indicating a "devil-take-care" mindset. Neutral language, in contrast, presented gambling in a matter-of-fact diction. Celebrities and the careful use of voiceovers created a *broadcast* tone and format in which the appeal was mental rather than emotional, informational rather than entertaining, and mundane rather than sensationalistic in style. Yet, excitement was present in many of the commercials (59.4%), and it typically appealed to viewers' expectations about economic gain or sold hope by promising that skill could tame chance even for the underdog gambler. For example, the fast-paced vocabulary in the ad "Win $2,000 Dollars Every Month" signalled the advantages of on-line play: "Improve your skills," "get better," "take on the Score T.V. personalities in bounty tournaments." Like a barker at a carnival, the voiceover proclaimed ScorePoker.com had it all; the games were many, the choices were dizzying, and the action was dazzling.

Almost half of the commercials used humour (45.3%) as a persuasive mechanism. A poker-playing dog barked out how many cards he wanted from the dealer; an obnoxious poker player sprayed half-eaten chips on his betting buddies; a bebop man with dark sunglasses and a headset went all in, turned to a female player, and said "your play John," oblivious to both aural and ocular sensibilities; a woman practised her bluffing skills on her partner by insisting incredulously that a car accident was caused by a meteor falling on it; a woman returned home to find her place in a state of chaos, taken over by a cast of international characters (and their animals) looking for a quick game of poker; and a mom kicked butt on-line by beating a long list of international players from Vietnam, Africa, Canada, Japan, Mexico, and Europe. Of course, more subtle significations — backslapping, mimicking, and good-natured mocking — were also marshalled to conjure enjoyment and inspire likeability in on-line gambling. A small number of ads emphasized the virtues of patience in gambling (14.1%) or mobilized emotions such as pride (7.8%), sympathy (4.7%), or anxiety (4.7%) as weapons of mass persuasion. These commercials typically framed loyalty, frustration, and loss as representations in the narratives to subvert them by humour or replace them by wins and thrills.

Master messages

Certain master messages predominated, leaked into one another, and depended on each other for the generation and communication of meaning. The narratives of skill, normalization, gain, personal transformation, and retreatism were often entwined within single ads and signified overlapping or multiple messages, even though we discuss them separately for analytical purposes. Although poker and blackjack mix skill and chance in practice, the ads used a multitude of images to exaggerate the former to the exclusion of the latter. Just over half of the commercials pitched the idea that gambling was a matter of skill rather than luck (53.1%). Some represented this idea explicitly. In "Horseshoe," a young man opened a magic-like box with a horseshoe inside, picked it up and drew a small sabre from a sheath, said "to heck with luck," cut the horseshoe in half, flipped the sabre in his hand, asserted "this game is about skill," and threw two playing cards in the air and impaled them on the wall with his sabre. Other ads were more implicit, making frequent references to practice, strategy, and intelligence. For example, in "Multiple Personalities," different personas were recommended for poker play; tactics such as mixing up play, being unpredictable, and keeping competitors guessing about the real person at the table were signalled as skills that ensured winning outcomes. Together, these types of representations mobilized the view that card gambling was a predictable behaviour and over-exaggerated confidence in the player's own skills. The messages were that bad luck will not prevail, playing longer will change the odds favourably, and that anyone can control the outcomes of gambling.

A second master message evident in the gambling ads was normalization (50%). E-commercials depicted gambling as a routine behaviour rather than an occasional leisure event. They cultivated the impression that everyone is playing all the time, and everywhere. They portrayed average people gathering at night, on the weekend, and during lunch hours to gamble and portrayed gambling as eternally reoccurring in transnational and multicultural contexts. Advertising availability and gambling participation went hand in hand with increasing awareness of the games, their locations,

and their features and exhorting potential players to consume poker and blackjack, thus increasing the potential for overall gambling participation. The effects of advertising in this regard may help explain the difficulty that clinicians have in distinguishing pathological from non-pathological adolescent gamblers. Advertising, it would seem, has naturalized gambling to the point that these visual codes now operate across cultural forms and are appropriated and rearticulated by commercial concerns so that early age measures of disorders are not easily identifiable because naturalization has eroded many important cultural benchmarks of measurement (Shaffer, LaBrie, Scanlan, & Cummings, 1994).

The promise of winning was a third major message in the ads. Almost two of every five (37.5%) commercials emphasized the potential for material gain. Some ads were subtle in sending this message, as when voiceovers reminded viewers that "we play for the legends, and for the unknowns who dream of winning it all," or when they coached entry into "major poker tournaments against the best pros in Vegas" to win unknown cash and prizes. These ads played on the ambiguity of economic gain, fantasizing monetary success rather than asserting exact dollar values, and enjoined viewers to dream the dream of personal riches. Many ads, however, were overt and exact. Thousands and millions of dollars in cash or prizes were promised as the spoils of gambling. These prizes were promoted with loud audible voiceovers and large, bold flashing textual messages promising viewers that they could win "$2000 in cash and prizes every month," they could win "one of over 400 daily prizes," or they could be among "10 Canadians who will win millions of dollars in cash and prizes." These messages were designed to foster the primacy of wins, winning, and winners by massaging the viewer's altruistic instincts ("share the dream"), appealing to their self-interest ("it could be you"), or convincing them they had nothing to lose ("everyone is a winner") (Binde, 2008; Griffiths, 2005). The commercials played on impulsivity, suggested the likelihood of early and substantial wins, and encouraged arousal and excitement through gambling while simultaneously concealing the large number of losers who were also watching and playing.

A fourth master message conveyed by the advertisements was social transformation (42.2%). In addition to the accumulation of wealth, the ads promoted the idea that gambling was a positive life-changing force that could alter people's social status from a social loser to a popular high-net-worth person with an abundance of attractive, talented friends. The commercial "Bracelets," for example, established a dialogic relationship between image and consumer, playfully engaging viewers to accept the principle that the more gambling bracelets you were able to win and display on your arm, the more friends you would attract and maintain. Similarly, the "Dress Like Me" ad assured the audience that a winning hand was an existential event capable of redefining popularity. It used irony to try to persuade the viewer that an unappealing "geek" figure, who dressed exactly like a "cool" dude across from him at the poker table, could switch places if he went all in and won the game. Many ads entailed an interactive component that invoked turn taking and role identification as selling techniques. "Win a round of golf with a hockey great" and countless other prizes and rewards inspired viewers to visualize elevated social status as a result of rubbing shoulders with cultural icons. Textual

references such as "you can be an aspiring poker star," "you could become the next world champion," and "click here for a chance to be Canada's next poker champ" signified the possibility of sudden life changes emanating from gambling.

A fifth important narrative indicated in the ads was retreatism (26.6%). These commercials proclaimed a reprieve from the everyday world of work, family, and friends, while promoting alternate means to social and financial success. Several advertisements straightforwardly promoted gambling as a fast and easy alternative to work. This antinomian theme, also found in lottery, cigarette, and alcohol advertising, encouraged fantasies that replaced the drudgery of work with the beatitudes of gambling. Some poker ads, for example, proclaimed "no work or training required" to succeed at gambling; "passion, grit, and knowledge" is what separated the amateur apprentice from the journeyman professional. Viewers, the ads insisted, should "fast track their pro experiences," join the world of fateful encounters, and revel in the rituals of courage and gallantry that gambling supplies. Phrases such as "hassle free," "no commitment," and "free and easy" evinced a virtual environment where gambling removed people from the subordination of others; allowed them to escape into a place far away from the dullness and repetition of daily tasks; and invited them to enjoy independence, honour, fame, and fortune. One advertisement, "Boardroom Versus Poker Table," suggested that the two sites were similar but with a twist. At these tables, "we go all in; we are fully leveraged," stated the voiceover. Risk and reward at the digital table was like that on a corporate spreadsheet, but gambling, the viewer was told, was more rewarding because the poker tables never closed and conference calls were not welcome. Why work when you could play for a living and why return to work when the suspense, conflict, and uncertainty of life were easier to manage on-line, were powerful messages that echoed through about one quarter of the ads.

Discussion

Advertising, sport culture, and the fun ethic
As noted earlier, youth culture, club culture, fashion culture, and drug culture and their related usages are paramount in selling beer, liquor, and tobacco worldwide. The coded references that were deployed to sell remote gambling products were, however, different and included sports culture and the fun ethic. Four points are important in regard to sport in gambling advertising. First, the sheer volume and frequency of gambling programs, charity poker competitions, and interactive on-line tournaments seen on ESPN's *World Series of Poker*, Bravo's *Celebrity Poker Showdown*, NBC's *Poker After Dark*, and Roger's *All in Afternoons*, for example, amounted to an intense ad exposure campaign. Internet poker and blackjack have been designed and presented as if they were sporting activities in their own right and successful players have been packaged as if they were the equivalents of football, baseball, or hockey heroes. Furthermore, the use of imagery associated with media sport communication — play-by-play announcers, action replays, elimination rounds, repeat showings day and night, player interviews, expert commentators, and end-of-game analysis — along with the use of sport-related terms — tournaments, marathons, championships, classics, legends, faceoffs, and world series —

have effectively branded on-line card-based gambling as a sporting product where skill, strategies, tactics, and competitive spirit predominates over luck of the draw, which is either downplayed or dismissed.

Second, e-gambling has advertised and promoted gambling by directly sponsoring poker and blackjack sites and products at actual sports events and/or on television broadcasts of such events. This sponsorship has included reaching people by putting posters in bars during the National Football League (NFL) playoffs, running billboard ads during college basketball tournaments, displaying racy billboard-style ads featuring models on the sides of trucks parked in the lots outside NFL games, and posting Web site addresses on women's swimsuit wear (Kesmodel, 2005, p. 1). Gambling programs, in turn, have directed their audiences to view upcoming sport programs such as hockey playoff games, baseball World Series events, soccer qualifiers, and football championships on their commercial time slots. The *sportification* of gambling and the *gamblification* of sports in remote television advertising is increasingly intergenerational in its effects, with younger people learning about gambling through sports programming or viewing point-of-sale ads at sport venues. As Dyall, Tse, and Kingi (2007, p. 6) note, "engagement and support of gambling" by sport icons, formats, and usages has had a greater impact on youth because it has created community-wide legitimacy to participate in wagering at an earlier age overall.

Third, the messaging in offshore television gambling has actively constituted an emergent sport-related referent system inside actual advertising content. Gambling radio scripts, billboard displays, Web site banners, television sounds and images, and the use of sport signs such as footballs, hockey pucks, goal lines, goal posts, the commands of quarterbacks, the shouts of hockey players, the sounds of skates on ice, golf greens, stadiums, and the roar of spectators in advertisements have come together to associate winning at gambling with winning at sports. The sportification content brings Internet gambling products to consumers in new ways while simultaneously sanitizing the negative impressions of gambling by connecting them to popular culturally approved users, uses, and ideals: "The Molson Canadian Hockey Shootout," "Tryouts for Team Canada are going on Now," and "Drop your B-Ball picks every week" were not just ad teasers to stimulate excitement; they were appeals, especially to those who might otherwise be unfamiliar with or oppose poker and blackjack, to view them as savoury activities where the fun of playing at the virtual tables was like the fun of playing at the big games on grass or ice.

Finally, e-gambling has advertised its products as worthy providers for sport and cultural events proper. Sportingbet PLC, which runs Sportsbook.ca, for example, has sponsored a top American rodeo rider, a professional woman's volleyball duo, a number of prize fights on cable TV's Home Box Office (HBO), and an Arena Football League team (Kesmodel, 2005, p. 5). Resorting to sport icons in their advertising has been prevalent, with noted sport figures forming their own distinct gambling competitions, offering their legendary status as personal prizes for worthwhile tournament winners, and playing for good causes at special on-line tournaments sponsored by e-gambling providers. The sales pitch throughout has been to a wider culturally approved sensibility in which the many

meanings associated with sport culture have been borrowed and reformatted to form an elaborate interdependent system of product connotation for both gambling and sport to coexist "naturally" and to encourage consumers to enjoy and experience the myth of gambling as sport as at once both plausible and far fetched (Barthes, 1973).

The advertisement of e-gambling was also embedded in a second series of emerging signs and symbols — the fun ethic — that bolstered its overall messages of persuasion as a cultural production. E-gambling advertising has been a tremendous creator and devourer of symbols to convince consumers that their lives are lives half-lived unless they play poker on-line or enter the latest blackjack tournament for cash and prizes. On-line gambling consumption has been linked to a series of signifiers that indexed fun and fantasy more generally — attractive software programs, state-of-the-art graphics, rewarding sweepstakes, and "free, free, free" tournaments — that encouraged winning and winners and money and money making. These signifiers, in turn, were connected to a wider embedded meta-language of pleasure, notoriety, and excitement, which gambling actively played upon for its social legitimacy. As Binde (2008, p. 18) astutely notes, "gambling and advertising have a common denominator: fantasies, and to be precise, fantasies about becoming happy."

This exhortation for fun and fantasy is particularly obvious in the rebranding of poker and blackjack as newly packaged "designer" products. By the mid-1990s, the new information communication technologies had transformed card games into flashy, colourful products that were easy to access and always available. Television advertising and gambling programming were central to this product make-over. Poker and blackjack were linked to glamour, mateship, and fame, where the lexicon of on-line play produced a discourse of e-gambling that was associated with skill, competition, and good times. Blackjack was more than a card game; it was a lifestyle choice and even an opportunity to visit a tropical island paradise. Logging on to a poker site was not only gaming, but it was the promise of a future career and an opportunity to join a new subculture filled with adventure.

The power of the re-branding campaign turned on its ability to reinvigorate poker and blackjack as virtual products for primarily youthful males and then extend the product reach to the other gender (women-only challenges) and racial market niches (Black- and Asian-only tournaments). These tangible qualities were especially inviting to young people because they tapped into the familiar and expanding world of digital living and consumption with flair and credibility. Not unlike club culture or drug culture for alcohol and tobacco consumption, the advertising of e-gambling capitalized on the cultural capital of youthful consumption — argot, clothes, attitudes, looks, sports — and sold it back to young consumers as desired gambling commodities. These e-gambling ads did not directly target children or young adolescents. Actors, models, and winners were not usually teenagers. But many of the images were youthful and many of the ads aired at times or on programs directly attractive to youth. Most important, many ads tried to connect to certain lifestyle characteristics and social identity themes that blended into a relatively youthful world enamoured with wanting to be "cool" and independent, getting ahead fast, looking for shortcuts to success, finding quick fixes to problems, and

overcoming the fears of the future. Adolescents were a constant *bye-catch* of inestimable value and many providers, such as Party Poker, developed market saturation strategies by providing free software, free games, free bonuses, free tournaments, and convertible credit to cash accounts to attract and hold their customers and build their future brand names (Zangeneh et al., 2008, p. 146).

Conclusion

In sum, remote gambling ads evinced a complex assemblage of communication styles, tones, texts, sounds, images, appeals, and messages. These ads employed a wide range of rhetorical and psychological techniques: constant exposure; high-end graphics; stimulating music; interesting copy; expert camera work; professional voice narration; intriguing colour schemes; exciting background locations; attractive young models; celebrities; and buying factors such as humour, fame, fantasy, and entertainment to capture consumer attention and sell their own particular gambling products. In this sense, gambling advertisements were models *of* and models *for* an idealized image of on-line gambling. Often mythical and sometimes informational, they organized experiences for their audiences that prompted purchasing and socialized people into a new culture of gambling consumption. E-gambling is perhaps the latest example of how basic needs and desires have been sold back to consumers as intangible products: a wishful winning way of life, the latest competitive sport, or an attractive recreational event not unlike horse riding, hang gliding, or mountaineering. Weigh the risks and consider the enjoyment of e-gambling, the ads proclaimed, but not it would seem against the potential dangers and pitfalls, because they were sadly absent in much commercial advertising.

Responsible gambling messages were present in only one in four of the ads and typically took the form of age advisories that were located at the bottom of the screen in small lettering that was barely visible (and only for a second or two at that). Only two ads offered odds of winning information and none provided cautionary warnings. More troubling perhaps were some of the overlaps and connections between the messages of gambling advertising and factors that research has shown contributes to excessive at-risk gambling, especially among adolescents: the association between winning and continuous play ("but there's always another hand"; "if you practise enough you can become like Joe Hasham"); between impulse buying and loss of control over rational decision making ("Play for Team Canada … Your country needs you"); between overconfidence in skill and the propensity to chase losses ("to heck with luck … this game is about skill"; "luck can't explain why final tables have so many familiar faces"); between excitement, the pursuit of sensation, and the production or maintenance of dissociative experiences ("we play to bluff; to bamboozle, beat, and beguile; to dupe and delude; to suck in, sabotage, trap, and track; to hook and hoax; to fake, feign, and fool; and do it all against the best"); and between myth making, faulty thinking, and the real statistical probabilities of economic success and social mobility from gambling ("you could be the next world champion of poker"; "click to enter for a chance to be Canada's next poker champ"; "you can be an aspiring poker star") (Delfabbro, 2004; Delfabbro, Lahn, & Grabosky, 2006; Derevensky et al., 2007; May, Whelan, Meyers, & Steenbergh,

2005; Messerlian et al., 2005; Skinner, Biscope, Murray, & Korn, 2004; Turner & Horbay, 2004). This is not to suggest that gambling advertisers engaged in a planned thought control program for young people. Rather, they honed powerful techniques of mass persuasion to move consumers to try their products by appealing to the mental shortcuts of the mind and the cultural signs, symbols, and rituals of sports, pleasure, and entertainment without considering how their image-making might impact the potential for problem gambling among their growing number of youthful recruits.

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[i] The three Canadian channels are: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Global, and Atlantic Television (ATV [now CTV Atlantic]). The three American channels are: National Broadcasting Company (NBC), Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), and American Broadcasting Company (ABC).

[ii] Rogers Sportsnet East (RSE), The Sports Network (TSN)