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ADOPTING A RESPONSIBLE AND TRANSPARENT APPROACH

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Background

There is considerable discussion of the regulatory landscape around gambling advertising, including the role of social media influencers (SMIs). There is much less discussion of the ethical bases upon which safer gambling can be promoted, particularly as it relates to protecting vulnerable customers from the undue influence of SMIs. This paper looks at the ethics of gambling marketing.

We should start by saying that we adopt a consequentialist framework. In other words, we consider the morality of any act in relation to its outcomes. The morally right acts are those that maximise good outcomes and minimise bad ones. This contrasts with moral frameworks which value rights and responsibilities outside of their consequences. So, any concerns about gambling must show up in the harms caused, and do not reside a judgement about the morality of gambling abstracted from its impact.

Gambling is a legitimate adult pastime that is played out in myriad ways; online and land-based, in casino games and sports books, and from bingo to horse racing. We can now add in e-sports, blurred lines between gambling and gaming (including skins, loot-boxes and in-app purchases) and the marketing efforts of SMIs. The range of social media platforms also present challenges around regulation (self- or platform) as well as tone and content.

Harms would be minimised from banning gambling. But so too would any benefits. And those who argue in favour of rights are likely to recoil at the constraints on liberty from an outright ban. We are necessarily navigating our way through an ethical minefield. In a rapidly changing world of technology and knowledge, the right decision today might be the wrong one tomorrow. The first step to effective ethics is to recognise this ambivalence and uncertainty.

Ethical considerations have become more important recently with the change from CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) to the more robust ESG (Environmental, Social & Governance). With the ESG frameworks, come more stringent reporting procedures and an increased requirement for transparency. The gambling industry can define an ethical framework to address some of the challenges raised by several advocacy groups, such as those in public health or representing the families of those harmed by problematic gambling.

Promoting responsible gambling

In one sense, the ethics are clear: campaigns should not mislead customers into believing that gambling can be a successful (or easy) way to make money, and should not be associated with an affluent lifestyle in adverts. As a result, most operators focus on the message that having a bet adds an element of fun and entertainment rather than focusing on the win.

Delivering messaging around safer play has led to a balancing act for operators between good practice and corporate profits. [Research carried out by the University of Bournemouth](#) states: “We discovered a dilemma that the corporate side faces – the dilemma of responsibility and fear of disturbing user/customer experience – a long-standing dilemma within the business literature of companies engaging with social responsibility and making a commercial success.”

Regulated operators have demonstrated their commitment to carrying safer gambling messages, but there is still a question of how effective those messages are – or whether they just pay lip service. A number of different slogans have been used to promote safer gambling, for example, ‘*when the fun stops, stop*’ while the phrase ‘*no harm caused*’ was heavily criticised by the UK’s [Advertising Standards Authority](#).

Operators are also encouraged to carry messages and share resources for individuals seeking help or information about problem gambling. Traditionally this has referenced GamCare, Gamble Aware, GamStop, Gamban, Gordon Moody and select others, though this may well change with the changes in funding when the statutory levy begins in full. Companies are required to carry warnings in their advertising which promote awareness about the potential harms caused by gambling. [Operators have been instructed](#) that they should avoid misleading claims about their products, as well as the odds of winning or losing.

Most forms of gambling, however, offer little indication of the odds involved in playing a particular game, nor the level of difficulty or risk involved. [A trial 'chilli' test](#) was applied by one operator for customers to understand the 'ferocity' of a game but this has not been replicated. Transparent communication about the risks and odds associated with gambling are essential to meet ethical standards.

The challenges

The main ethical challenges relate to: 1) vulnerable customers; and 2) illegal sites. In 2022 the Gambling Commission updated its guidance on interactions with customers online. This focused on the requirement for gambling companies to identify vulnerable customers as part of the "identify, act, evaluate" policy. While this was a step forward, the document offered no specific guidance on how vulnerable customers could or should be identified.

Digital interactions offer fewer opportunities to identify where a customer might be vulnerable, either in the short- or long-term. Some groups e.g. the under-18s or those who may have self-excluded or could feature higher on the PGSI index are easier to identify and thus exclude from targeted campaigns. But [breaches have occurred](#), including a [promotion around the Melbourne Cup](#) that was sent to more than 700 customers who had self-excluded. The issue of targeting vulnerable individuals was [debated in Parliament](#) earlier this year.

Legal and illegal sites can appear identical to a customer at first sight – intentionally so. But black market sites lack safer gambling messages, age restrictions and pathways to aftercare that are found on their legal counterparts. Andrew Rhodes, Chief Executive of the UK Gambling Commission [stated in February 2025](#) that the proliferation of illegal gambling sites had been immense. He explained: "over 102,000 suspicious domains had been reported to Google in the current financial year, with 64,000 of these removed by the search engine giant."

Alongside a lack of safer gambling messaging is the increase in the use of crypto currencies and blockchain to facilitate illegal gambling, as well as knock-on concerns around money laundering and bypassing regulation and Know Your Customer processes. While the use of crypto currencies is legal in the UK, operators must seek approval from the Gambling Commission before entering the market.

Nonetheless, according to [recent research by Frontier Economics](#): "Behavioural pulls with black market sites: Better bonuses/free bets (34.5% of users cited this); Ease of account setup (32.3%); Anonymity (30.9%); More flexible payment options (29.6%); and Avoiding self-exclusion measures (17.5%)."

Influencer influence

The rise in the number of social media platforms, number of users, and the negative publicity around those platforms e.g., relating to misinformation, security breaches and failure to moderate offensive content has led to mistrust among many users. A lack of transparency around SMIs and their relationship with companies has contributed to this mistrust. [Research from the University of Portsmouth](#) find that concerns around SMIs include "issues such as misinformation, endorsement of dangerous products, unrealistic beauty standards, the fostering of a comparison culture, deceptive consumption, and privacy risks."

Influencer marketing is growing fast. It is projected to reach an estimated \$480 billion by 2027, as companies increasingly rely on SMIs to promote products and build reputation and awareness with their customers. The lack of regulation in grey and black market gambling engenders a more relaxed approach to influencer guidelines. According to [research carried out in 2025 by the charity Deal Me Out](#): "If any content creator is playing on the Black Market, they are monetarily significantly advantaged versus any creator operating within the regulated market."

The increased regulation of licensed gambling, while creating a more transparent market for operators and customers, has in many areas led to frustrations over a perceived misdirection of regulatory efforts, particularly around affordability checks. Consumers are migrating to the black market and, as the research notes, "Content creators, celebrities, and affiliates play a key role in promoting crypto casinos, driving mass migration of consumers."

The relationship between influencer and operator

Influencer marketing is a more recent model for advertising in the gambling industry. An influencer's appeal to the client lies in the breadth and size of their audience; to the follower, their appeal lies in their content and personality. In fact, behavioural science tells us that the messenger is far more important than the message. We believe people far more if they are "like us" ([MINDSPACE framework, Dolan et al](#)), and while the quality of a message is important, if delivered by the 'wrong' messenger it can underperform or even fail.

Algorithms within social media platforms means that gambling content will be recommended and pushed into the feeds of non-followers and as such, provide a powerful method of reaching new customers and markets. Using famous sports players and celebrities to advertise gambling products is not a new concept, but the delivery channel is becoming increasingly sophisticated at targeting. In a recent article titled '[The New Face of Gambling: How Influencers are Changing the Game](#)' the following advantages were noted:

- **Increased brand visibility and credibility:** Influencers bring a ready-made audience, and when they endorse a gambling brand, it gains instant visibility and credibility within that influencer's niche. Followers are more likely to trust recommendations from influencers they admire.
- **Building a targeted and engaged audience:** Influencers have the power to attract highly targeted audiences. For example, a sports betting influencer will draw in sports enthusiasts, creating a pool of potential customers who are already interested in the product being promoted.
- **Leveraging influencer expertise and authenticity:** Influencers are often experts in their respective fields. When they discuss gambling strategies or share insights, it adds value and authenticity to their content. This expertise resonates with their audience, driving engagement and conversions.

As a result, there has been a significant rise in influencer marketing over the last few years. The [international body of gaming experts, IMGL](#), states that the annual growth of the influencer industry has been 46.9 per cent, with notable increases in the gambling and gaming industries. It states in a report that influencer marketing has a high ROI but notes concerns. "The intersection of influencer marketing, gaming, and gambling raises several legal and ethical concerns."

The report recognises the constraints caused by affordability checks and notes the increasing appeal of the Black Market as a result. "Regulators must take notice; where influencers are playing, consumers follow. This is true of all gaming and gambling related online content. With almost all content creators playing on the Black Market, it is only a matter of time before migration to the Black Market, in particular Crypto Casinos, is the new normality."

Full disclosure of the relationship between company and social media influencer should be made transparent for the avoidance of doubt of the nature of the relationship and any financial or other benefits for posting. This is essential for trust between influencer and followers. It is important, however, to be alert to the possibility of disclosure being used by influencers to enhance their reputation and reach by dint of their explicit association with a reputable company. This reminds us that all interventions must be tested and refined before full roll out.

Any sponsorship or partnership should be fully explained – in line with ASA standards for wider advertising. Influencer content could take many forms, but the most common are: sponsored posts on a blog or social media platform; videos and podcasts; competitions, giveaways and prize or discount promotions. Often the content will look like the operator's organic content in look and feel, and tone of voice, so clear indication of the relationship and context of the content is essential.

This includes using appropriate language to describe when something is an advertisement, is sponsored or is promoted in partnership with an organisation. This can help audiences – particularly younger viewers – to be aware of what they are being shown as well as understand the risks involved in following gambling-related material.

Putting a clear framework in place for influencers is an opportunity to promote responsible gambling and to share advice with the audience around these themes; however, that is based on the influencers themselves

being sufficiently educated in terms of the products which they are advertising as well as the ethical standards which should be associated with these. If there is a lack of education around potential gambling harms, then social media influencers may consciously or unconsciously become part of the issue around a lack of ethical or responsible behaviour.

A code of conduct

Although guidance around many of the areas being highlighted exists, there is a lack of a centralised framework or set of criteria for regulating the component parts, especially within the context of a rapidly changing marketplace since the [Gambling Act \(2005\)](#). Advances in technology, innovation and invention in gambling products and services, plus a new generation of tech-savvy players, means there is a drastic need to improve on current legislation. It is also important for the parties involved – social media influencers, gambling companies and digital platforms – to agree about what is legal or illegal, and what is ethical and responsible.

Against this background, there is discussion about whether a code of conduct could be developed and instituted to impact on the flow of customers to unregulated markets. In the very least, it should instil caution and greater scrutiny around online content and its intended audience. A clear code of conduct could prevent further migration to unregulated operators. It should reflect sensible regulation, a balance between safer gambling, protection of vulnerable groups and ethical behaviour, without unnecessary constraints on the industry or the consumer,

Any regulatory framework or code of conduct which is introduced needs to be simple and practical for all stakeholders - and should also be enforceable. A system of kite-marking and certification is recommended; while this is a voluntary scheme, the benefits of quality assurance and increased consumer confidence should provide a compelling business case.

Agreement on what ethical and 'good' behaviour looks like needs to be the result of stakeholder consultation and agreed upon as an industry. Consideration will need to be given to the balance between ESG and ethical marketing practices alongside the broader business strategy. There also needs to be consensus on how to enforce the framework.

A working relationship with the social media platforms (Instagram, X, TikTok, Snapchat and so on) is preferred. The platforms have different rules and regulations around the nature of content carried, advertising rules and regulations and the power to stop publication of some materials when necessary. Looking at black market gambling specifically, though, it is less clearcut where the responsibility lies.

The platforms host the content but do not publish it, in line with the online safety act, and they can only remove material if asked to by external organisations. Some gamers and gamblers are now using Discord which avoids these constraints. Working with the gambling and marketing sectors on building increased transparency and better standards is of benefit to the platforms, not least in terms of public perception.

Conclusion

Ethical frameworks matter in gambling advertising as elsewhere. Responsible advertising practices require clear disclosure of risks, honest representation of odds and potential outcomes, and targeted restrictions to prevent exposure to vulnerable populations, particularly minors and those with gambling disorders.

Transparent communication about terms and conditions, bonus requirements, and withdrawal policies helps consumers make informed decisions while building trust between operators and customers. Without these ethical standards, advertising can exploit psychological vulnerabilities and create unrealistic expectations that lead to problem gambling behaviours.

This is particularly important in the context of social media influencers: the messenger matters more than the message, and influencers can have significant sway with their audience, so the relationship between influencer and operator must be clearly defined. We must also be alert to the unintended consequences of interventions and adopt an iterative test and learn approach in their roll-out.

When gambling advertising lacks transparency or employs deceptive practices, it drives consumers toward unregulated black market operators who may appear more trustworthy by comparison. Licensed operators who engage in misleading advertising undermine the credibility of the entire regulated market, making illegal alternatives seem more appealing to consumers who feel deceived. Furthermore, heavy-handed advertising restrictions without industry input can push operators toward less regulated channels or encourage consumers to seek out offshore platforms that operate outside consumer protection frameworks.

A balanced approach that emphasises ethical advertising standards while maintaining reasonable access to regulated gambling options helps ensure that consumers remain within the safety of licensed, monitored gambling environments rather than turning to potentially dangerous black market alternatives.

A code of conduct for influencers, supported and endorsed by the influencers, industry and regulators has the potential to move us towards a more ethical market in gambling, where vulnerable consumers are protected and black markets are limited.

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