

GAMBLING EXPANSION:
UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACTS OF THE ONTARIO GAMBLING EXPANSION ON
PEOPLE ENGAGED WITH GAMBLING SUPPORTS

By

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supports

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Executive Summary

Background

In April of 2022, the Ontario government had expanded the online gambling market increasing the availability of online gambling options. The expansion was intended to increase revenue within the province and give gamblers more choice in entertainment. Unfortunately, for those with a gambling problem, the gambling market expansion led to negative consequences. People experiencing problem gambling issues may experience a loss of control over their gambling behaviour which can lead to numerous negative consequences such as financial loss, loss of relationships, and mental health issues. People experiencing problem gambling issues can have intense urges to gamble that can lead them back to their gambling behaviour despite negative consequences. The intense urges that problem gamblers feel make them vulnerable to changes in accessibility to gambling options and make them more sensitive to gambling triggers. Increased accessibility can reduce problem gambler's ability to resist urges and increases in gambling triggers can increase the frequency of gambling urges. Therefore, the gambling market expansion which increased online gambling availability, and the resulting proliferation of gambling advertising could potentially lead to negative impacts on the problem gambling community.

Purpose

The question this project is seeking to answer is how did the expansion of online gambling and gambling advertising affect people seeking support for problem gambling? The purpose of this research project is to develop a richer understanding of how the Ontario gambling market changes have affected people experiencing problem gambling issues and those who support them.

Literature

A literature review was conducted to understand the potential negative impacts from online gambling and gambling advertising. The literature around online gambling impact highlighted the structures that cause negative consequences of online gambling such as instant access, continuous play and breadth of options. The literature on gambling advertising impact highlighted the impact on gambling frequency, youth gambling, and stigma. Key findings from the literature were used to develop the conceptual framework.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature three areas and several concepts were developed to guide the project. The first area developed was context, which was seeking to understand the new gambling context participants were navigating with three specific concepts of participant gambling history, gambling media, availability and ease of access to gambling options. The second area is impact, which was looking to understand how participants were impacted through

three key concepts of gambling impact, impact of stigma, and societal impact. The last area developed was to analyse supports to gain a greater understanding of participants experience with support structures in the province.

Methodology

To achieve the desired purpose of the project, the chosen methodology is qualitative and exploratory. Semi structured interviews were developed using the conceptual framework. Participants were selected using a registration list from an intensive problem gambling day treatment program run by a non-profit addiction agency located in Southern Ontario named ADAPT. Thirteen participants were recruited. All participants were interviewed using semi-structured interviews and recorded over Zoom. Transcripts were collected and analysed using thematic analysis to produce the findings.

Findings

Findings were sorted according to the conceptual framework. The new context that participants observed in the new gambling market was the excessive advertising environment and how easy gambling was to access. In the area of impact, participants noted that the new gambling market led to instant gambling, a constant reminder of gambling harms, prolonged gambling cycles, and increased gambling frequency. Gambling impacts were mostly focused on financial damage, damaged relationships and low self-esteem. Participants discussed how their feelings of self-stigma kept their gambling problem hidden. In the concept of societal impact, participants focused the risk to youth in the new gambling market and the normalisation of gambling amongst the Ontario populace. Lastly, in the analysis of support, participants recalled that supports they interacted with were overall positive in their recovery journeys.

Recommendations

The first recommendation is the restriction of advertising. As the participants mentioned in the findings, gambling advertising is widespread and is difficult to escape. Advertising could have adverse effects on people who have a gambling problem and may be potentially detrimental to vulnerable populations such as youth. Regulation of gambling advertising could focus on the amount of advertising that can be shown or when advertising could be shown especially around popular media such as sports. This can reduce the potential for vulnerable populations to develop a gambling problem and to reduce gambling triggers for people with problem gambling issues.

The second recommendation would be to highlight the potential risk of gambling to consumers. There are currently some responsible gambling messages but there is no specific messaging, at time of writing, that demonstrates the real risk of a gambling problem. Participants had suggested that gambling should have warning labels similar to cigarette packages. Highlighting the potential risk similarly to cigarette packaging could allow for more vulnerable

populations to make a more informed choice about the risk they are taking on when engaging with gambling.

Another recommendation would be to install a centralized self-exclusion system. Land based casinos in Ontario have a centralized self-exclusion system and are powerful tools in protecting people with problem gambling issues. Unfortunately, iGaming does not provide a centralized self-exclusion for its many gambling applications. Through the findings it has been reported by participants that if they self-excluded from one casino they would just move to another casino app which delayed their recovery. Harm could be reduced with the implementation of a centralized self-exclusion for iGaming gambling apps.

There is a large opportunity for further research on other populations in the current gambling market. The impact on youth specifically is an area of unknown in the Ontario gambling space. Very little research has accounted for the impact on youth and would be necessary to help create new prevention initiatives. There is also ample opportunity for research into potential differences between gender, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Socio-economic background could also be an area in which further research could be completed. Overall, there is a lot of room for further research in the area of problem gambling and the impact of the current gambling market in Ontario.

It is recommended that non-profits continue to advocate for further reforms and provide more education on gambling harms to their respective communities. Most non-profits are already doing this work, but it would be important to ensure that prevention material is updated to address current needs. Although non-profits can help to raise public consciousness there is a severe lack of gambling awareness on a large scale and help to reduce stigma. Unless larger media outlets come on board it will be difficult to raise significant awareness of gambling harms.

Introduction

Gambling has been formally recognized as a potential risk to individuals since its inclusion in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual Fourth edition (DSM-IV) in the year 1994 (Rennert et al., 2014). In the latest edition of the DSM, it is formally labelled as gambling disorder which is described as a “persistent and recurrent problematic gambling behavior leading to clinically significant impairment or distress” (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). According to the Centre of Addiction and Mental Health (2022), people with a gambling disorder can experience significant financial loss, poor mental health and loss of relationships amongst other potentially negative effects. Problem gambling is a broad term that is used to describe people who are gambling in a way that led to negative consequences in their life and are unable to stop gambling but may not qualify for a formal diagnosis of disordered gambling (Jazaeri & Habil, 2012). Problem gambling is recognized as a potential public health concern and is of interest to public health researchers to understand its potential impacts on communities.

COVID created an environment in which land-based casinos were not as readily accessible but online casinos provided instant access shifting the landscape of gambling before the Ontario gambling expansion. In April 2022, the Ontario government opened the online gambling market to private casinos which can operate and advertise in the same way as brick-and-mortar casinos and under new regulations of iGaming Ontario, share a portion of the profits with the province (Rocca, 2022). The expansion of the online gambling market offered immediate access to numerous gambling options to anyone with an internet connection increasing the availability of gambling.

Unlike land-based gambling, online gambling is available instantly. Immediate access is one of the key differences between online gambling and land-based gambling and is considered a potential risk factor to developing a problem gambling issue. Several studies have established and confirmed that greater accessibility to online gambling options is a potential risk factor to people developing a problem gambling issue as it decreases the time to decide to gamble leading to potentially riskier betting (Chóliz et al., 2021, p. 406; Gainsbury, 2015, p. 186; Gooding & Hing et al., 2022, p. 11; Hubert & Griffiths, 2018, p. 1220; Killick & Griffiths, 2021, p. 236; Williams et al., 2012, p. 19; Williams, 2024, p. 556). Previously the impact of accessibility was measured via the distance from a land-based casino. Online casinos are now accessible whenever there is an internet connection increasing the potential risk of problem gambling comparatively to land-based gambling.

The large increase in online gambling availability has changed the landscape of advertising. The influx of private casinos brought a large number of gambling commercials with a recent study noting that approximately 20% of professional hockey and basketball games had some sort of gambling advertisement (McMillan et al., 2024). The proliferation of gambling advertising has already led to some regulatory action. The Ontario government had placed a ban

on celebrities promoting gambling in February of 2024 to avoiding influencing minors (DeClerq, 2024). Through regulatory action, the Ontario government acknowledges the risk of gambling advertising on minors and moved to take action but, it highlights that advertising may have impacts on vulnerable populations

Purpose

The question this project is looking to answer is, how did the expansion of online gambling and gambling advertising affect people seeking support for problem gambling? The purpose of this research is to develop a better understanding of the how the changes resulting from the expansion the Ontario gambling market have affected those experiencing gambling addictions and those who provide support to these clients. This report first reviews some of the history of gambling and some of the literature reviewing the gambling market expansion and its impacts on problem gambling communities. In building on the literature review, and the concepts relevant for this study related to the gambling market, a conceptual framework is created to guide the project. The methodology and methods explain the research design and review the structure of the semi-structured interviews. The final section provides a profile of key findings and recommendations.

Client

The client for this project is ADAPT, which is a non-profit addictions agency located in Southern Ontario. ADAPT works with people experiencing problem gambling issues and provides counselling services to help them move forward in life. ADAPT also runs an intensive problem gambling day treatment program that is available to any person in Ontario. The findings from this project can help to augment the programming at ADAPT and support future program development to ensure their programming is meeting the needs of their clients in the current gambling market.

Background

Gambling has been regulated by the Ontario provincial government since the year 1975 through the establishment of the Ontario Lottery Corporation (OLC) which helped to establish the first regulated lottery systems within the province (OLG, 2016). Since 1975 Ontario had continued to expand lottery and gambling options throughout the province. Most notably the first large expansion of gambling options in the province came in 1994 when the first pilot casino in Windsor Ontario was introduced with a permanent casino being established in the year in 1998 (OLG, 2016). Many casinos were established permanently throughout the proceeding years increasing access to casino games (OLG, 2016). With the growing establishment of casinos across the province the Ontario Lottery Gaming corporation (OLG) launched new responsible gambling messaging in 2003 acknowledging the potential risks of gambling behaviour (OLG, 2016).

In March of 2012, the OLG was directed by the Ontario Ministry of Finance to increase OLG revenue (Toronto Public Health, 2012, p. 1). In the recommendations set out by the OLG the opening of a casino in Toronto was considered as a potential revenue source. As a result of this recommendation the Toronto Board of Health in co-operation with the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) investigated potential impacts of a new casino being offered in Toronto by reviewing the literature on gambling impacts. The report found that opening a new casino would increase the potential harm to Torontonians as they found that the availability and proximity of casinos were linked to increases in the rates of problem gambling (Toronto Public Health, 2012, pp 9-10). The increase in gambling harms due to the introduction of a casino is consistent in other areas (Philander, 2019). Ultimately, the casino proposal did not go through due to Toronto residents petitioning their city councillors to vote no, with one of the factors being the potential increase in problem gambling. The report established the potential impact of increased availability of gambling and potential problem gambling issues (CBC, 2013).

Through data collected by statistics Canada, rates of problem gambling across the country between the years of 2002-2018 had decreased overall (Williams et al., 2021, p. 491). There were several reasons given to suggest why the rates of problem gambling decreased such as increased awareness of harms, problem gambler's removing themselves from the gambling population, and the intervention of support agencies and government regulation (Williams et al., 2021, p. 491). Although it was found that problem gambling rates decreased overall, commercial gambling revenue per gambler had increased year over year, and because gambling revenue disproportionately derives from problem gamblers, it may suggest that problem gamblers are losing more money year over year (Williams et al., 2021, p. 492). This finding suggests that even though the general populace had experienced fewer gambling harms, those who had a problem gambling issue were potentially experiencing increased financial losses.

Overall, this research investigates the impact of the 2022 gambling market expansion on the problem gambling community who have been seeking treatment through the Day Treatment program at ADAPT. This population is important as many of these participants will have self-identified a problem gambling issue. Through the Day Treatment program, participants have started working through their issues with gambling, potentially offering greater insight as to how the market has impacted them on a deeper level. The findings may help with understanding the current challenges of the problem gambling community, help front line staff offer more effective support, help inform areas for further research and provide suggestions for regulatory bodies to provide healthier outcomes for both the problem gambling community and the public.

Literature Review

A literature review was conducted to summarize the key impacts of online gambling and gambling advertising. The review highlights key concepts that make online gambling impactful such as instant access, ease of access, continuous play, and breadth of gambling options. It also builds on other research McMillan et al., (2024) illustrating how gambling advertising has shifted and how gambling advertising has impacted other gambling markets. The review highlights the impact of gambling advertising on the problem gambling community, and concepts that contribute to that impact such as framing, oversaturation, normalisation and stigma. The literature review was conducted using Google scholar and University of Victoria's library. Key words such as "gambling", "gambling impact", "gambling advertising", and "gambling media" were used to help find relevant studies. The review would also follow areas of interest from literature previously reviewed, such as "framing" and "gambling normalisation" when reviewing gambling advertising literature.

Online Gambling Impacts

Online gambling has been available since approximately the early to mid 1990's starting with the purchasing of lottery tickets and eventually moving into sports and other forms of gambling (Williams et al., 2012, p. 3). Most countries started to offer domestic internet options but had limited access to non-domestic options with some countries making it illegal to bet on non-domestic online casinos (Williams et al., 2012, p. 8). Regulated online gambling options in Ontario have only been around since the year 2009 with online lottery purchases and then with the launch of the OLG online casino platform in 2015 (Williams et al., 2012, p.9; OLG, 2016). Other jurisdictions globally, have legalized online gambling options earlier than Ontario such as the United Kingdom, which liberalized the online gambling market in 2005 taking effect in 2007 (Davies, 2020). The expansion of online gambling options has progressed rapidly through the advancement of technology such as smartphones and greater access to high-speed internet.

Although online and land-based gambling share similar qualities there are several aspects that are unique to online gambling. Accessibility to land-based casino options has been associated with increased risk to people developing problem gambling issues (Philander, 2019; Toronto Public Health, 2012, pp 9-10). People with a problem gambling issue may have very strong urges which can lead to further engagement with gambling behaviour potentially leading to negative consequences. Land based casinos provide a built-in physical barrier to any person looking to gamble which is how far away the casino is from the individual. The distance could be only a few minutes travel time to a few hours depending on where the person is located. The travel time provides valuable time for people to reconsider their decision to gamble or potentially complicates the access to gambling allowing urges to eventually pass. Online gambling eliminates the physical barrier and offers an easy way to act on the urge allowing for more impulsive decision making increasing the likelihood of negative impacts (Hing et al., 2022, p. 11).

Ease of access to gambling and its effect on gambling populations was observed recently due to the COVID lockdowns. The COVID pandemic in the years of 2020-2022 led to lockdowns of many non-essential institutions such as casinos. As a result of casinos being shutdown due to COVID restrictions, almost a third of all Ontario gamblers were forced to abstain from gambling, and many of the people did not end up going back to gamble at the casinos after the shutdowns (Shaw et al., 2022, p. 391). For those folks who did end up going back to the casinos while COVID restrictions were in place, there were significant decreases detected on all gambling engagement measures such as gambling frequency, number of games played, and amount of financial loss due to gambling. These are some of the key risk factors associated with problem gambling (Shaw et al., 2022, p. 391).

The decrease in gambling related behaviour was also mirrored in problem gambling communities. It was observed that gambling related calls through Ontario helplines had decreased significantly, showing how the restriction on accessibility suggests a decrease in overall gambling and as a result a decrease in problem gambling (Turner et al., 2024, p. 711). Restrictions on the access to gambling options can help determine how much risk the problem gambling community is exposed to. Although some land-based gamblers either stopped or reduced their gambling some of the land-based gamblers moved to online gambling platforms with approximately 17% of land-based gamblers reporting they had moved online (Shaw et al., 2022, p. 391). COVID created an environment in which land-based casinos were not as readily accessible but online casinos provided instant access shifting the landscape of gambling before the Ontario gambling expansion.

Before the Ontario online gambling expansion of 2022, the Canadian government had passed legislation to legalize the use of single event sports betting. The 2021 legislation which passed as part of bill C-218, decriminalized single event sports betting which allowed people to bet on a single game or events within the game itself (Canada, 2021). Previously, all regulated sports gambling betting options had to be through a parlay which is essentially having to bet on a series of games instead of just one. This change in the legislation also allowed for in game sports betting which allowed people to bet during the game on player totals, outcomes within the game, and other events that could occur during the game. The Canadian government legalized the use of single event sports betting, and the provinces had to decide how to implement this system within their provincial gambling markets.

This change is notable as it could lead to continuous betting throughout games. Continuous play refers to games that allow a high frequency of betting through a gambling experience. This type of play was previously found in machines such as slots, blackjack and poker amongst others where a person could bet as frequently as they wanted to. The change from the parlay system of sports betting to the single event sports betting system allowed for sports gambling to be included in the category of continuous play. Continuous play is another risk associated with online gambling, and it has been noted that after the legalization of single event

sports betting a surge in calls to problem gambling helplines in Ontario followed (Ukhova et al., 2024, p. 4).

The increase in frequency of betting is associated with a higher risk of developing a problem gambling issue as opposed to discontinuous forms of gambling (Allami et al., 2021, p. 2975; Gooding & Williams, 2024, p. 556; Hing et al., 2022, p. 2; Killick and Griffiths, 2021, p. 223). Single event sports betting was legalized in 2021 which introduced continuous play in sports betting a year before the Ontario gambling expansion of 2022. Previously, people gambling on sports had one provincially regulated option in sports betting through the OLG on their platform Pro-line. After April of 2022 numerous private casinos and sports books offered similar services and incentives. At the time of writing, there are up to 50 operators and approximately 84 casinos offering similar single event sports betting and other continuous play type gambling (iGaming, 2022).

The large expansion of gambling options is a significant shift in the Ontario gambling market. Availability of different gambling types and different websites has created a completely new environment for those in the Ontario gambling community. The increase in gambling options could potentially create further risk as the breadth of potential gambling activities for those engaged in gambling could lead to more frequent betting overall. Gooding et al., (2024) noted that the breadth and variety of gambling that an individual engages with can be a risk factor in developing a problem gambling issue resulting in significant financial harm (p. 1215). This was also found recently in Pennsylvania after they had opened online gambling options in the state. According to the study, people who gambled on multiple platforms and multiple forms of online gambling was associated with increased gambling harms (Russell et al., 2024, p. 270). These findings have also been observed in other such studies and presents a significant link between participating in multiple gambling options and gambling harm (Costes et al., 2023, p. 18; Gooding & Williams, 2024, p. 556). The gambling expansion provides several gambling options for people. The variety of gambling options could be potentially detrimental to those vulnerable to problem gambling.

Overall, online gambling poses several risk factors that could potentially impact those with problem gambling issues. Some of the risks include instant access, continuous play, availability of different gambling options, and perceived gambling availability. All these risk factors have become common place in the new gambling environment. There is also concern that those who are land-based gamblers may have switched to online gambling due to COVID and the expansion of the online gambling market in 2022.

Gambling Advertising Impacts

Another observable change since the expansion of the gambling market has been the increase in gambling advertising. As the private market expanded, competition for market share increased significantly. As competition increased so did the amount of advertising for online casinos. A joint investigation between CBC Marketplace and UK based researchers observed

NHL and NBA games through Ontario broadcasts and recorded the frequency of gambling media. They found approximately 20% of the allotted time from the games featured some form of gambling advertisement (McMillan et al., 2024). Several gambling sportsbooks partnered with sports related media, offering not just advertising but also gambling content. The gambling content could be as simple as having a person from the gambling operator discuss gambling odds before a specific game or potential bets viewers could make. The gambling media landscape had increased dramatically, and many Ontarians were not pleased about the changes. According to an Ipsos poll from 2023, it found that approximately 48% of Ontarians surveyed felt that gambling advertising was excessive and needed to be restricted (Morasch, 2023).

Gambling marketing has been studied through a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods. Most of the research has been done in the UK and Australia as they had liberalised their markets well before Ontario and other gambling markets. In a qualitative exploratory study, Hinge et al. (2014), found that gambling advertising had a limited role in attracting new users but increased the gambling behaviour of existing gambling participants (p. 404-405). The effect on people who had a problem gambling issue was more pronounced when seeing gambling advertising leading to more gambling behaviour even though participants had a desire to stop (Hing et al., 2014, p. 405). Gainsbury et al., (2016), found similar findings as Hinge et al, (2014), that gambling marketing seemed to have a greater effect on those who are moderately at risk or higher for problem gambling issues as opposed to those who are low risk (p. 274). In a longitudinal study completed in Sweden by Samuelsson et al., (2018), found that gambling marketing had a deterring effect on participants persuading them to stay away from gambling (p. 519). It was noted in the same study that because of gambling advertising the same people being interviewed could potentially be triggered by gambling advertising depending on psychological well-being (Samuelsson et al., 2018, p. 519). These three studies were all before COVID and before the online gambling market had expanded fully but, the findings remain that gambling marketing has a significant impact on those experiencing gambling problems but could also have the effect of being a deterrent to continue to gamble. As noted by Samuelsson et al., (2018), the right gambling advertisement at the wrong time could spell trouble for those looking to stay away from gambling (p. 519).

In a rapid review conducted by Torrance et al., (2021), it was noted that research on gambling marketing between the years 2015 and 2020 remains underdeveloped in scope and methodological diversity with most of the research centering on UK and Australian markets (p. 10). In the same rapid review, it was evidenced that gambling advertising had grown to be more complex and interactive and that there was a lack of responsible gambling messaging which portrayed gambling as a risk (Torrance et al., 2021, p. 9). In a more recent exploration of structural changes in the online gambling market Hinge et al., (2022), found that due to increased competition amongst online casinos, gambling marketing had intensified across numerous platforms (p. 3). As found in previous studies, the combination of intense urges felt by folks struggling with problem gambling and the proliferation of gambling advertising led to higher risk

of engaging in harmful gambling behaviour (Hing et al., 2022, p. 11). Wardle et al., (2022), studied if gambling advertising in the UK led to increased rates of unplanned spending on gambling products and found that almost nine in ten of those experiencing problem gambling issues had unplanned gambling spend due to marketing (p. 4). Some of this marketing is also tied to the inducements offered by the gambling websites participants had signed up for previously. In separate qualitative studies participants noted that they were more likely to gamble due to inducements offered by online gambling apps and the more casinos they were signed up for the more inducements were offered leading to potentially more gambling (Hing et al., 2024, p. 1427; Killick & Griffiths, 2021, p. 227). Gambling marketing has advanced with new technologies and has become more complex and sophisticated as a result. The increase in marketing poses a potential risk factor for those experiencing gambling problems and could lead to unplanned spending which could increase financial harm.

Through the course of the literature review some of the research on gambling focused on messaging of gambling advertising and potential impacts of that messaging. The research tended to focus on the “Framing” of gambling which is defined as: “the choice of language and the setting of parameters within which gambling can be discussed.” (Nikkinen et al., 2022, p. 71). In a qualitative study of UK sports bettor’s perceptions by Killick and Griffiths, (2022), it was noted by participants that there was very little responsible gambling messaging highlighting the risk of gambling and the potential risk that may pose to young people (Killick and Griffiths, 2022, p. 810). Thus, the framing of gambling advertisements seen by participants in the UK study suggested that gambling is not being framed as a potential risk. A qualitative study conducted in Australia with young people focused on their reflections found that they saw advertisements framing gambling as a normal activity and a normal part of watching sports (Nyemcsok et al., 2021, p. 168). Normalisation could be potentially harmful to the population as it can downplay the risk involved with gambling and therefore potentially harm more people.

Oversaturation of gambling advertising may contribute to the perception of normalisation. Two qualitative studies from the UK and Australia analysing perceptions of adults on gambling advertising in their respective countries found that there was an oversaturation of gambling related advertising in which the participants felt they could not escape (Killick and Griffiths, 2022, p. 805; Thomas et al., 2012, p. 120). Oversaturation of gambling advertising can make it difficult for those experiencing gambling problems to avoid being triggered and having gambling urges. In a systemic review of advertising policies and its link to gambling related harms McGrane et al., (2023), found that the oversaturation of the gambling advertising led to a normalisation of gambling behaviour amongst youth and adolescent populations (p. 126). Nyemcsok et al., (2021), found similar results that young people perceived that the volume and content in advertising plays a role in normalizing gambling (p. 169). These studies highlight potential risk to youth and people engaged in problem gambling as the oversaturation of gambling advertisements could create an inescapable atmosphere and normalize gambling for younger people.

Marko et al., (2022), ran a critical qualitative study on gambler's perceptions of responsibility for gambling harm and found that a focus on responsible gambling framing creates a perception that gambling products are essentially unproblematic, and that any harms that may be associated with gambling are exceptional and can be minimised (p. 2). Marko et al., (2022), went on to report that: "Some participants commented that gamblers who made irresponsible decisions about gambling had a range of character flaws, including that they were "greedy", were "lacking willpower", or were "weak minded"" (p. 7). These flaws that participants held about folks engaging in problem gambling highlighted how stigma could be associated with the framing of responsible gambling. Stigma for problem gambling is found at similar levels to alcohol and other substance users (Hing and Russell, 2017, p. 416). Hing et al., (2016), found that many problem gamblers held self-stigmatized beliefs where individuals with a stigmatized condition internalize and apply perceived societal conceptions to themselves (p. 264). Self-stigma can be detrimental to those struggling with problem gambling as it could be a barrier to seeking help and potentially lead to many people waiting until there is a crisis before they engage with supports (Hing et al., 2016, p. 265). This researcher could not find how the normalization of gambling or how gambling advertising in general affected stigma or self stigma. It is an important question as to whether increased normalization of gambling effected stigma or self-stigma.

Overall, gambling advertising presents numerous risk factors that could be potentially harmful to those experience problems while gambling. Advertisements can be potential triggers to people experiencing gambling problems especially if they have moderate or more intensive problems. Gambling advertising has changed and become more sophisticated being found across multiple platforms as well as having inducements sent to the user through their gambling accounts. Oversaturation of gambling marketing can create an inescapable environment where those with gambling problems may experience a difficult time reducing potential. Oversaturation has the potential to normalize gambling and create potential risk to young people and non problem gamblers. It is important to note that many gambling advertisements are portrayed in a positive light or framed through a responsible gambling lens which may unintentionally place undue stigma on those experiencing gambling problems. These findings give greater understanding how gambling advertisements have affected other populations but there is a lack of information on how Ontario's current gambling advertisements are affecting problem gambling communities.

Summary

The two largest changes to the Ontario gambling market were the increased access to online gambling options and the proliferation of gambling advertising. There is a consensus amongst the literature that online gambling is more harmful to the gambling community because it is instantly accessible and promotes continuous play (Hing et al., 2022, p. 11; Allami et al., 2021, p. 2975). Gambling advertising was found to trigger a gambling cycle in people who had moderate to severe gambling problems thus increasing potential losses (Hing et al., 2014, p.

405). The oversaturation of gambling advertisements in markets such as Australia was shown to have a normalising effect and could be potentially harmful to youth indicating larger societal impact (McGrane et al., 2023, p.126). The framing of responsible gambling advertising could potentially move responsibility to the individual struggling with gambling problems and that could increase a sense of self-stigma (Marko et al., 2022, p. 7; Hing et al., 2016, p. 264). Taking these key insights into account, it is clear the context of Ontario gambling has changed as people are exposed to new risks that were not present in the previous market. This highlights the need to understand the experience of the problem gambling community as they navigated these changes. As a result, the literature highlights two key areas of study which is the new context of the current gambling market and the impacts associated with the new context.

Conceptual Framework:

Key Areas and Concepts in Understanding the Changes in Gambling Environment

The literature review helped in developing a set of areas and concepts to guide our research in better understanding the new gambling environment. The key areas which are illustrated in table 1 describe the context which highlights an individual's unique gambling history, types of gambling media available, and the availability and ease of access. A second key area includes the impacts on the individual's behavior, stigmas that affect their behavior, and the general societal impact. A third area includes the supports which are available and not available.

Table 1 - Concepts Used in Understanding the Changes the Gambling Environment

Areas and Concepts	Reasoning
I - Context	
An Individual's Unique Gambling history: Information about the participant's gambling history such as when they started gambling, what forms of gambling, and what led participants to support.	Create a greater understanding of how the participants relate to the gambling market and how their history with gambling may have shaped their perspective
Types of Gambling Media: Referring to all types of gambling media including advertisements, sports segments, and other media that references gambling	Develop a richer understanding of how participants are experiencing the change in gambling media and the related impacts
Availability and Ease of Access: Referring to the availability of online gambling options and how easily accessible are those options	Develop a richer understanding of how the expansion of online gambling options affected the participants' and their gambling behaviour
II - Impacts	
Gambling Impact: The consequences of the participants gambling behaviour	To understand how the participants' gambling behaviour impacted them and how that relates to the current gambling market

Impact of Stigma: Referring to the perceived stigma, that participants may or may not have endured and the related impact	Stigma is long associated with addiction issues and therefore may be affected by the large-scale change in the gambling market especially with a large change in media representation
Societal Impact: Participants' observations and insights into how the gambling market changes may impact society	As a result of their gambling behaviour, participants may have insight into how the current gambling market harms individuals and could potentially extrapolate how that may harm others in society
III- Support Analysis	
Education & Support: The support services participants had received to help their gambling behaviour and if those services are adequately addressing the changes to the market	The client of this project is a support service and would benefit from knowing the impact of their services. It is also important to understand if the current support services in the province are adequately addressing people's gambling concerns

As a result of the gambling market changing, there is little reference to the current Ontario gambling market in the literature. The first set of concepts in Table 1 help to provide context. Context is essential in helping to define the new environment and how that new environment effects gambling behaviour. There are three key concepts for contextual information. The first concept is the gambling history of the participants. This will help to understand what role gambling played in the individual's life. The themes collected from this concept will help to bring insight as to how participants were introduced to gambling and how they engaged with the behaviour.

The second concept when considering context is gambling media. Although most of the literature mentions gambling advertising it is important to capture the larger media apparatus that has formed in Ontario. There has been an expansion of gambling programs throughout the province but specifically in sports programming and podcasts in which gambling is being presented not as a specific advertisement but a topic of discussion. The literature found that gambling advertising had a small impact on the general populace but had a significant impact on those experiencing problem gambling issues increasing the amount that they gamble (Hing et al., 2014, p. 405). Therefore, it would be helpful to try and capture participants navigation through the gambling media landscape. This concept will explain how the media landscape has changed in the province and how that has affected participants.

Instant access to gambling is the key theme in the literature when studying online gambling and its impact. The instant access of gambling is a significant difference between online gambling and its traditional land-based alternative. Through the expansion of the gambling market there are many online casinos available each offering their own unique incentives. Participants will be navigating a new gambling environment in which there is greater availability of online gambling options and greater ease of access. The third concept in the area

of context is the availability of gambling casinos and ease of access. This will help to understand how participants are affected by this new environment.

Access to online gambling and gambling advertising has expanded potentially increasing negative impacts amongst the problem gambling community. However, there is a gap in understanding of how the Ontario gambling market has changed and how that has affected people with problem gambling issues. Although there are several studies on gambling advertising impact there is a gap in the literature when discussing new markets in North America. The current situation facing those with a problem gambling issue could be unique comparatively to other markets such as Australia and the United Kingdom. This creates an opportunity for exploration of the effect of the changes to online gambling access and increased gambling advertising.

The next area of focus is the impact of the changes in the gambling market. The first concept of this area is the impact of gambling on the participants. Problem gambling can produce a number of negative impacts. The changes in the gambling market may have produced impacts that are unique to the current market. These impacts could connect to the changes in gambling media and online availability. The insights that participants provide could give greater insight into how the current market is harming individuals.

The second concept comes from the literature review and the findings surrounding self-stigma. Self-stigma is a common problem amongst people struggling with problem gambling and is seen at similar levels as substance users (Hing and Russell, 2017, p. 416). Gambling media can play a role in framing gambling as a responsibility of the person with a problem gambling issue and can contribute to the perceived stigma a participant may encounter. This self-stigma may impact individuals as it can keep them from accessing help and support (Hing et al., 2016, p. 265). It is important to understand how the new gambling media market has affected individuals and their experience of stigma to understand how that impact may be impeding recovery.

The third concept concerns potential societal impacts due to the larger change in the gambling market. Some of the literature mentioned how there is a normalization effect with the influx of gambling media and especially amongst youth. Youth tend to see gambling behaviour as a normal hobby with little risk (Nyemcsok et al., 2021, p. 168). Potential participants may have insight into the normalization effect of gambling media and the larger societal impact that could be occurring as a result of the market change.

The last area is support analysis. Due to participants being a part of an intensive problem gambling day treatment program the last concept for the framework is education and support understanding participants' experience with support programs and what was helpful or unhelpful. This area is also helpful for the client ADAPT to understand participants' experience and how effective the program is in the new market.

Thus, seven concepts were developed for the framework using areas identified as important to exploring the context and impact of the Ontario gambling market changes: gambling history, gambling media, availability and ease of access, gambling impact, impact of stigma, societal impact, and education and support.

Methodology and Methods

The objective of the study was to develop a richer understanding of how specific changes within the gambling market expansion affected the problem gambling community. The chosen methodology is qualitative and exploratory. In the following section, we describe the qualitative study and how people were selected for the study. It also describes the use of semi-structured interviews which focused on several areas: personal experience with gambling, changes in media, increased availability and accessibility of online casinos, stigma, societal impact and supports. This project went through the ethics process and was approved by the UVic Human Research Ethics Board on March 15, 2024.

Researcher Positionality Statement

I, as the researcher, am a white cis-gendered male living in Southern Ontario. I recognize that I come from a privileged background, and I am fortunate to have had the opportunities available to me that others may not have as I am financially stable and able bodied.

My interest in this issue is partially connected to some of the addiction issues I experienced in my youth which led me to my career. I currently work in the addictions field for a non-profit named ADAPT as a problem gambling counsellor. As a result of these experiences, I am sensitive to the needs of the vulnerable in my community and through my work as a counsellor I am often reflecting on my biases; however, I am aware that I may have hidden biases that can affect my research, and I lack understanding of how participants experience their life. There is also a potential conflict of interest as I work for the organization that is a part of this project. The potential conflict of interest was addressed through the ethics approval process. To reduce the conflict of interest this researcher was to use other ADAPT staff to send the invite e-mails on my behalf to potential participants to reduce the influence of any potential relationship they may have had with myself. In the e-mail, participants were also given the contact information of the Director of Programming at ADAPT if participants had any concerns about their use of ADAPT services.

Research Design

The research involves exploratory interviews of people who are affected by changes in the Ontario gambling market and might describe themselves as people more prone to gambling addictions. The interviews sought to understand the lived experience of those in the problem gambling community after the gambling market expansion. The interview allowed people to tell their story using their own words.

The semi-structured interview was chosen because it offered a flexible approach in which there is a defined questioning plan but allows the researcher to follow interesting tangents (O'Leary, 2021, p. 251). At the beginning of the interview, the researcher reviewed the confidentiality and anonymity norms of the research and began the interview. The consent form

that detailed confidentiality and anonymity was approved by the ethics board and can be found in [Appendix A](#).

Once the interviews were completed, the data was analyzed to understand the impacts of gambling market changes on those seeking support for problem gambling and common themes relating to lived experiences of the participants. Further analysis was completed to compare the literature review and interview findings to complete a thematic analysis.

Sample

Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted, and all interviews were completed one-on-one via the University of Victoria Zoom account the researcher had access to. Recordings were stored on the researcher's laptop in an encrypted file. The participants were selected using a registration list for a day treatment program facilitated by ADAPT. Potential participants from the registration list were at least above the age of 18 but varied in age and gender. All participants needed to have a problem with gambling to enter the day treatment program. ADAPT gave written permission to use the registration list and assisted in reducing the potential conflict of interest by providing administrative support for the project. One staff was chosen to send the invitation e-mail on the researcher's behalf to reduce any undue influence from potential professional relationships. ADAPT administrative staff sent out the invitation e-mails to participants with a consent form attached to the e-mail.

ADAPT sent participants a recruitment e-mail ([Appendix A](#)) with a consent form attached ([Appendix B](#)) to the registration list for an intensive problem gambling treatment program that accepts referrals from across Southern Ontario. This information was accessible through the researcher who is employed by ADAPT.

The criteria to enter the study was all potential participants had to be above the age of 18 and had previously identified a problem with gambling and accessed services within the last year. ADAPT specifically has a Day Treatment program that took referrals from across Ontario thus giving access to participants who had voluntarily entered a treatment program for problem gambling and were spread across Ontario. This list of potential participants was also seen as valuable because the participants would have completed an intensive treatment program and would have a greater chance of developing richer insight into their gambling problem. This would also allow ADAPT to draw insights into the people that they serve within the community.

An e-mail invitation template was produced which outlined the study and how to get in contact with the principle researcher with an attached consent form. The e-mail included the contact information of the supervising professor and the director of operations at ADAPT if participants had any potential issues or concerns. The consent form had several crisis support lines listed for participants to access as the nature of the questions in the interview could be potentially triggering for the participants. The e-mail was sent to participants through administration staff to people who had completed the Day Treatment program within the last

year instead of the principal researcher sending out the invite. The list included 30 people, all 30 potential participants were e-mailed, and a total of 13 participants had reached out to the principal researcher.

The first section of the interview collected information on how participants gambled. In Table 2, it breaks down the methods of gambling each participant had engaged with. Most participants had a mix of both online and land-based gambling, and a few had only gambled online or only gambled at land-based options.

Table 2 - Participants and Method of Gambling

METHOD OF GAMBLING	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
Land Based Gambling Only	3
Online Gambling Only	3
Mixed (Use of Land Based and Online)	8

Design of Instruments

The interview guide for this project focused on different areas: Context, Impact of Gambling, Media, Availability and Ease of Access, Societal Impact and Stigma, and Help and Support. (See seven sections in [Appendix C](#)).

In each area, the interview guide included open ended questions where participants were asked multiple questions on the changes in the gambling market and how it impacted them. For example, in the area of Availability and Ease of Access, interviewee were introduced to the questions and the area and asked the following questions.

1. How has the increased number of online betting options affected you?
 - a. Do you use specific options, or do you use several of the options available?
 - b. If you have specific sites you use, what is it that draws you to them specifically?
2. How has the ease of access of these online options affected you?
 - a. Are there any specific examples of this ease of access affecting your gambling?
 - b. Did the ease of access have a positive or negative affect on your gambling?
3. What do you think about the changes to the increased availability and ease of access to online options?

If you could change anything to accessibility and/or ease of access, what changes would you make? Each section of the interview guide followed a similar structure. The logic behind these questions is for the participant to answer the open-ended question allowing them to explain their perspective and what they see as most important without the researcher influencing their

answers. The follow up questions were to clarify the impact if not initially captured in the answer to the open-ended question.

While the interview consisted of approximately 18-20 questions, the goal of many of the questions was to gain more in depth insight of one of the seven concepts. The interviews lasted 40 minutes to an hour in length, with some interviews being shorter and some longer. Interviews were conducted between March 2024-August 2024.

Method of Analysis

The interview data was analyzed through a thematic analysis transcripts were coded to find themes which described common responses.

The research builds on grounded theory methodology that seeks to generate theory through the analysis of the data rather than starting with a hypothesis and uses inductive reasoning (O’Leary, 2022, p. 151; Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 4). Further analysis was used to find similarities and differences between the findings and the literature review. The analysis was used to inform recommendations for further study, potential regulatory changes and areas of concern for front line agencies as it pertains to the problem gambling community and how they are impacted by the current gambling market.

Interviews were transcribed via Microsoft word transcription software into written transcripts. Notes were taken during the interviews to help keep track of interviews and to supplement the transcripts. Interview transcripts were reviewed and the researcher made corrections to the transcripts when necessary.

The researcher then reviewed the transcripts and coded key themes. Several rounds of coding were undertaken in developing the themes were identified within each concept defining the framework. Each area had themes coded and identified for the similarities within their experiences and differences of experience participants had discussed. This helped find common themes within each area and helped to differentiate between themes.

This researcher manually coded interview responses. Each interview transcript was reviewed and coded into an area and then coded into a theme. For example, *“I think they (advertisements) are excessive. I think that they are everywhere you go, and you don’t really have a chance to get away from them. I was, for instance, my office is downtown Toronto, so whenever I take public transit, you know, Go train and the TTC, there’s ads all over the place. If I drive down, the billboards along the Gardiner, have ads for different companies. You can’t get away from it. You can’t turn the television on. You know, to watch the newscast, the newscasts are sponsored by them. You just can’t get away. You go to a movie and some of the ads are on the screens before the movie or for gaming. It’s everywhere”* would be coded into the area of “media” and the theme of “Inescapable”.

Strengths and Limitations

Limitations

There are several limitations to this project. First, the generalizability of this study is limited as the sample size is too small to generalize the data in any meaningful way. The selected group of participants was selected specifically and were not selected randomly from a large sample pool therefore may not be generalized to the larger population. All participants were people who had an identified gambling problem and had received treatment which limits generalizing these findings to other people in Ontario without a problem gambling issue. With the criteria for the selection of participants being minimal there is limited insight on differences between genders and age groups. Time and capacity restraints limited the resources available to study the topic as the number of participants and the data that can be analyzed. The researcher's personal biases could also affect the analysis of data in the project.

Strengths

This project helps to fill the gap of research on how the gambling market changes in Ontario affected the problem gambling community. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed participants to use their voices and lived experiences to provide rich data for the project. The data collected from the interviews provide valuable information for addiction agencies to help tailor their services to these experiences. Although the findings may be limited in its generalizability, these findings can help to illuminate areas for further research and suggestions for regulatory changes to help protect those in the gambling community.

Findings

This section lays out the findings based on the concepts used in the interview guide. Through the findings section, five areas were highlighted that coincided with specific sections of the framework with those areas being: media, increased access & availability online, stigma, support systems, and societal impact. When reporting the findings, this project reported the number of participants using specific words. Please use Table 3 below as a reference point.

Table 3 - Key for disseminating results

WORD USED	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
ONE	1
A COUPLE	2
SOME	3-4
A FEW	5-6
MANY	7-9
MAJORITY	10+

I - Context

Due to the large-scale changes within the gambling market, it is important to understand the context in which the participants found themselves. Participants were asked about what they had observed from the gambling market expansion in 2022 in regard to media and the increase in the number of regulated gambling apps. This section provides context as to how the gambling market changed within the eyes of the interviewee. The central themes relating to the changes in the gambling market can be found in Table 4. The three themes to emerge relate to excessive advertising, easy access to gambling, and multiple gambling options.

Table 4 - Context of New Gambling Market

Context of New Gambling Market

Excessive Advertising (13)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“I think they are excessive. I think that they are everywhere you go, and you don’t really have a chance to get away from them. You can’t get away from it.”</i> • <i>“I don’t think I can go on a day in my life, in today’s current state of like the promotion of gambling, where I don’t see something for it. . . It’s just it, it’s so saturated.”</i>
Easy Access to Gambling (9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>. . .because you can use it on a mobile device. You can take it with you. It’s constantly there. If you’ve got a browser, you can access it.</i> • <i>At least (Casino) Rama, you have to drive. You have to drive an hour and a half and then it’s a commitment . . . Well, now you’re alone all the time with your phone.</i>
Multiple Gambling Options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>At one point I had 15 gambling apps on my phone, all on my second home page and I didn’t use all of them.</i>

- (7)
- *I started opening more accounts, trying more services, more sites and because all there was always new ones that popped up*

The first theme describing context points to a gambling market where participants were overwhelmed by advertising which encouraged more gambling. A majority of participants highlighted how the ads were “*way too much*”, “*Aggressive*”, “*Excessive*”, and felt like they were “*getting bombarded*”. Many of the participants noted that everywhere they went they would see advertisements for gambling in many different media formats. This included billboards, radio, podcasts, TV, social media, internet, and many other venues.

Some of the participants also mentioned how their e-mails were a place for personalized advertisements and bonuses to bring them back to the casino. A participant made note of how their browsing data was being used to send them personalized ads. “*Well e-mails, the e-mail that I use for that kind of thing. That doesn't go away. They bombard you with ads for the casinos all the time. You get advertisements based on your browsing history and even though you do it incognito. . .*”. Targeted advertising through other avenues such as banner ads on the internet and social media were also mentioned.

A few participants specifically pointed out that sports had become laden with advertisements for gambling. “*Absolutely. As a longtime sports fan I definitely do not remember advertisements being as frequent as they have been.*”. Some of the participants mentioned that the sports channels and podcasts they listen too have partnered with sports betting apps and openly discuss betting odds in their programming. For a couple of participants, they had stopped watching live sports altogether or will record the game using a recording software to be able to skip the advertisements.

The second theme was how easily accessible the new regulated sites were from the perspective of participants. Many participants noted how easy it was to access the gambling sites as long as there was internet access and an internet capable device. Some of the participants mentioned how quickly they could create a new account or deposit money onto a betting app. A couple of participants who had experience with land-based gambling noted the difference between that experience and the new online gambling options. One participant quoted in the previous table explained how going to a land-based gambling option required commitment and travel time where gambling online only required the possession of a phone with internet service contrasting the two experiences.

The third theme was the variety of gambling options now available to the public that the participants observed. Many participants discussed how they themselves had several gambling apps on their phone at a time and that they felt that there was always a new app available for them to download. Due to the excessive advertising of gambling participants continued to feel like there were new apps releasing often and if they were not enjoying their current app, they had

an option to move to a different app. Some of the participants noted that if they had enough of one gambling app they would move onto another app and then would switch between the apps.

II - Impacts

This next section of the findings highlights how the changes in the gambling market has impacted participants. The following sections will discuss how the market changes impacted participants, gambling impacts, impact of stigma, and resulting societal impacts.

Impact of Market Changes

Participants were asked several questions about how the new gambling market had impacted them. From the participants responses six themes of instant gambling, reminder of harm, prolonged gambling, increased frequency of gambling, increased rate of play, and a smaller theme of no effect.

Table 5 - Impact of Market Changes

Impact of Market Changes	
Instant Gambling (9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “... for the record you can deposit money without blinking an eye. . . . Withdrawing it (money), you have to give your first born. If they made you put the same amount of effort into a deposit, then they do a withdrawal, I probably wouldn't gamble.” “It's time consuming. I would play wherever, whenever. There was no stopping it as long as I had a little bit of privacy and a signal, internet access you can play. So, it was a black hole of my time.”
Reminder of Harm (8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “It reminds you constantly about the negative stuff too and you feel like you can't heal because it's always there. Just when I think I'm starting to feel a bit better I see a commercial.” “...these gambling advertisements, if anything, . . . They definitely triggered my emotions of loss, both financially, emotionally, and all the damage that I had caused to my family.”
Prolonged Gambling (7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I just couldn't delete them for the longest time. Just kept the hope alive instead of facing reality. . . .” “It has benefitted me as a gambler. It has hurt me as a gambling addict.”
Increased Frequency of Gambling (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “. . . prior to seeking treatment this last time I was gambling more than I ever have. Spending more time gambling and more money than I've ever done in the past, and it seems to be the time when the advertisements became more apparent.” “The first thing that draws me toward them (gambling apps) is advertisements.”
Increased rate of play (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “You know we used to bet at the beginning before the game started and you would bet now you can bet the beginning, 5 minutes into it, 10 minutes into it.” “Everybody's got to put their chips down, got to spin the ball. Maybe 5 minutes per game. So that's 12 an hour. On a digital game,

whether it's online or at the casino, you're playing every 40-50 seconds."

- No Effect
(3)
- *"I'm not triggered by ads"*
 - *"I wouldn't say that those advertisements have affected me much"*

Instant gambling was the first theme that participants reported in regard to the impact of gambling market changes. Many participants highlighted how quickly they could gamble and how that led to a loss of time and money with one participant describing the apps like a "blackhole". Some participants mentioned losing hours of time to gambling apps and significant amounts of money ranging from a few hundred dollars in ten minutes to thousands lost in an hour. *"You can have \$500 and 10 minutes later you have \$2 and that's how quickly it can happen."*

Many participants discussed how they would gamble anytime they had access which was often. *"At those times that it got out of hand it was unlimited. It was, you know, it was just at your fingertips."* Participants reported how they generally had their phone and had access to data so access to gambling could not have been easier. Several participants discussed how the ease of access fed into their urges and cravings to gamble. Some participants reported how easy it was to deposit money into gambling accounts but how much harder it was to withdraw money. Depending on the gambling app being used deposits were reported to take less than a few minutes to a few seconds and withdrawals could be a minimum of 24 hours to a few days. Participants gave examples of how this system would eventually lead to them losing most of their winnings as the gambling apps allowed participants to bet with their money even though it was slated to be withdrawn.

When asked about the impact that advertising had on the participants one common impact was being reminded of the harm gambling has wrought in their lives. Participants described several difficult feelings when seeing or hearing ads with some of the participants noting that they feel like this keeps them stuck emotionally as they try to recover from problem gambling. Participants reported feelings of loss, regret, guilt, and shame. Some of the participants mentioned that they feel like they relive their past mistakes when they see a gambling advertisement *"That's how I feel every time I see it because I associated it with this negative thing that seems to have taken over my life. It's a reminder of everything, all the bad decisions."* One participant mentioned that seeing the advertisements feels like they relive trauma from the consequences of their actions and makes them question how things could have been different. *"The trauma is still there where it's. Like. You know, if I hadn't heard that (ad) that day you know, maybe things would be different..."*

For some participants the gambling advertisements triggered a feeling of intense dislike or anger. For some participants these emotions were triggered thinking about how they had been personally affected by gambling or how this may affect someone else like them. *"They make me*

a little angry. So, it makes me angry because I know it's going to hurt people. It's going to hurt someone."

The third theme was prolonged gambling. The expansion of the Ontario gambling market has increased the amount of online gambling options available to participants. The participants highlighted that the variety of options available led to them having multiple accounts on multiple sites which would delay them from stopping a gambling cycle. *"It affected me in a way where even on the times where I tried to stop or wanted to stop I couldn't because of the availability of it and the promotional sign-up bonuses. Just imagine, you're an addict, how easy is it to say no to a free bet?"* Promotional bonuses led to some participants signing up for several gambling apps to take advantage of promotions and increase the odds that they could get a big win.

Participants noted that responsible gambling options that were made to help protect them became obsolete because of the variety of options and lack of collective protective strategy. *"Again, some days I would say it was great from the view that I had self-excluded from many of them (sites). So, when a new one popped up, it was that ability to play again."* Ontario currently does not have a centralized self-exclusion system for iGaming Ontario certified gambling sites. For many participants this was a source of frustration as it was difficult to cut off the avenues to new gambling apps without being put in a risky situation.

A few participants noted that the increase in advertisements in Ontario's media landscape led to an increase in frequency of the gambling behaviour. Some participants noted that they had been gambling before the increase in advertisements but that they were potentially gambling more as a result of the advertising environment. Some participants noted that the first thing that drew them towards gambling was the advertisements that they had seen. For participants that had already been gambling through land-based casinos found that advertisements increased their gambling frequency when their gambling was most problematic. A couple of participants discussed how they were trying to stay away from gambling, but the advertisements triggered a desire to go and check on their gambling accounts or go and explore a new casino app. One participant noted that they had nine years of sobriety and the increase in advertisements led to his most recent relapse. *"The reason why I did go into my most recent relapse was because of a radio commercial, and I wasn't even aware of it at the time. It was very subliminal. Like I heard the same radio commercial three times in the very same day and you know, because of that I ended up making a bad decision of placing that bet again after nine years of sobriety at that period of time."*

The fifth theme in the area is increased rate of play. The fifth theme is minor in comparison to the previous theme but some of the participants pointed out how online gambling has increased rate of play which leads to quicker gambling outcomes comparatively to their land-based counterparts. The participant expanded upon this explaining how online versions of games can be skipped through to the result instead of waiting for other players to make bets or for cards

to be dealt. One participant noted that with the advent of single game sports betting and prop betting within the game even sports betting has increased rates of play.

Three participants who were land-based gambling only reported that the gambling market changes had no effect on them.

Gambling Impacts

Participants discussed how they were impacted by their gambling problem. The only notable positive impact identified by some of the participants was that gambling early in their gambling history the behaviour felt exciting. The more robust impacts identified in the interviews were negative overall. Six themes were identified as a result of gambling impacts being financial damage, damaged relationships, low self-esteem, suicidality, loss of employment, and legal issues.

Table 6 - Gambling Impacts

Gambling Impacts	
Financial Damage (13)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“When I started to accumulate payday loans and I started getting caught in the payday loan cycle where I had multiple loans out and I was constantly having to pay those loans and reborrow and I was just stuck.”</i> • <i>“Well, I have figured that over 20 years of gambling I have thrown away at least \$1 million away.”</i>
Damaged Relationships (12)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“It was the fact that I lost connections with very close friends and family, but I also lost interest in general, with the world at large. My world became very small.”</i> • <i>“Ended relationships over it just to keep the secret. Strained my trust with my folks (parents).”</i>
Low Self-Esteem (10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“I feel very, very badly. I never really felt bad about myself in that way. . . But now it's like, every day I feel. Unworthy. Bad. I can't even find the right words. I just. I feel like I've ruined everything.”</i> • <i>“. It has made me lose respect for myself. To the extent that for a few years during my relapses, I was thinking extremely negatively about myself, even when I saw my own image in the mirror abusing myself by, you know, like cussing myself and blaming myself and feeling guilty for all the harm that I've caused, both my own life but also my family's.”</i>
Suicidality (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“I was starting to cycle really, really bad and start to feel very suicidal.”</i> • <i>“I thought about committing suicide like I would say a handful of times. I can remember each one.”</i>
Loss of Employment (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“I got fired and my life turned upside down. I've moved four times. I'm on Ontario works.”</i> • <i>“There is a high likelihood I could lose my job over this.”</i>

Legal Issues
(2)

- *“I ended up doing some illegal actions at my company. It’s still under investigation and so I’m waiting for the outcome.”*

All the participants reported significant financial damages. Many of the participants reported thousands of dollars being lost and eventually accumulated debt to maintain their gambling. Participants had mentioned losing their savings, pension, or inheritance they had received. For some of the participants they had reported that the financial damages affected them emotionally as they were reminded of their losses each day *“...I’m forced to deprive myself of luxuries, you know that I would typically be able to or normally be able to afford and that takes its toll emotionally.”* The financial losses tended to affect the other areas of health such as emotional and mental health. Participants did not mention any potential wins they may have had when gambling.

Damaged relationships were reported by all but one participant. Most participants mentioned the loss of trust in relationships and the difficulty navigating relationships as they try to recover from problem gambling. Some participants had noted that they have had relationships end either do to the loss of trust or the participant ended the relationship to keep gambling.

Low self esteem was reported by ten out of thirteen participants. Many participants mentioned they saw themselves as a *“bad person”*. Similar to the damage done to personal relationships, many participants spoke about how they lost trust and respect for themselves. Some of the participants felt like they did not deserve good things due to how they had impacted their family. Even though many of the participants reported low self esteem only some of the participants had mentioned a past history of suicidality. When suicidality was mentioned by participants it was generally isolated occurrences and consisted of just thoughts of suicide and no action.

Some participants discussed how they had either lost their jobs as a result of their gambling or were potentially close to losing their job. A couple of the participants that had lost their job were also experiencing legal consequences as they had taken money from the businesses they were working for to continue to fuel their gambling problem.

Impact of Stigma

Participants discussed the stigma that they may or may not have experienced in the new gambling market. The three themes in this area are hidden problem, lack of understanding and no stigma found in Table 7. The first theme participants noted how easy it was to hide their gambling problem which has led to a lack of stigma experienced overall. The second theme concerned how most participants reported that there is a lack of understanding about gambling and gambling problems. The third theme was about how there was no stigma in society comparatively to substances because people lack an understanding of the risks associated with gambling.

Table 7 - Impact of Stigma

Impact of Stigma	
Hidden Problem (9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Just my two hands how many people in my group know what’s going on because I don’t want to tell anyone else because I know that I’m going to be judged.” • “I suspect there’s a lot of people out there suffering silently. I started shutting down and keeping my mouth shut about it. It’s a very, very silent disease. Most people don’t share until the damage is done.
Lack of Understanding (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It’s a lot to see. It’s a lot to hear, but basically, you know, they’re equating it with greed.” • “Yeah, a little bit like the doubt from my family and not understanding. There is little understanding for it. So, you feel stupid. They just have no understanding.”
No Stigma (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I think there is a lack of stigma with gambling. You know if I go to work, say I bet on the Leafs and I lost, they’re going to laugh because I’m a Leafs fan. That’s the worst thing that’s going to happen. You know, there’s no real stigma. • The Leafs are going to win the next two games. I bet on that. All your buddies are doing it. You’re not stigmatized. You’re part of the in-crowd.

The first theme in the area of stigma is problem gambling being a hidden problem. When participants were asked about their experience of stigma a few of the participants discussed how few people knew about the problem if any. Participants were scared to open up and because gambling is an addiction that is easier to hide, they decided to keep it hidden for fear of judgement. Participants noted how few people knew the extent of their gambling behaviour and were unlikely to share their experience outside of the people that already knew. Many of the participants discussed how they had self-stigma, and their own internal stigma made them fear potential stigma from loved ones. *“I stigmatized myself apart from my immediate family, no one else knows. My friends don’t know that I am a gambler or hopefully used to be a gambler because of the deep shame that I feel about my gambling activities. I judge myself quite harshly for having gambled, and I feel that if I judge myself that way other people will judge me even more harshly.”*

A couple of participants noted that a gambling addiction is easier to hide than a substance use issue. *“Yeah, generally, I mean you don’t see a lot of physical symptoms of gambling. I mean they’re there but they’re not easily recognizable and they’re disguised as mental health issues or, you know whatever else. I mean, you don’t lose your teeth. You’re not like other addictions. There is no obvious signs, right?”* As gambling was easier to hide than other addictions a couple of participants observed that *“Most people don’t share until the damage is done.”*

The second smaller theme in the area of stigma is the lack of understanding. For some of the participants they found that society and the people around them had very little understanding of problem gambling and the challenges that are associated. Many of the people in the participant's lives equate problem gambling with greed. Other participants had heard people in their lives discuss people who gamble of having "*lost their minds*" or would make light of a serious problem by suggesting they were only "*one jackpot away*".

The final theme in the area of stigma was some participants who reported no stigma. Participants who noted a lack of stigma reported that problem gambling is not well known enough to have stigma. One participant proposed a scenario they had experienced in which having an alcoholic drink at a work lunch would be looked poorly upon but mentioning you had placed a bet in that same lunch would not be seen as a negative behaviour. Another participant discussed how they see their friends engaging with gambling and that being a part of gambling just means you are a part of the "*in crowd*".

Societal Impact

In regard to larger societal impacts, there were four themes being exposure to youth, normalization, increased addiction rates, and increased financial hardship. The first theme concerned how youth were being exposed to gambling advertising and the potential risk. The second theme highlighted how the increased gambling media presence is having a normalizing effect in the province. The third theme came up amongst participants who predicted increased rates of problem gambling in the near future. The last theme concerned the potential financial hardship across the gambling populace and its impact on mental health, homelessness, relationships and other problems.

Table 8 - Societal Impact

Societal Impact	
Exposure to youth (8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I have two children, and they are constantly inundated with gambling advertisement when we watch sports, I think that's extremely inappropriate." • "Teenagers. . . They watch sports . . . and they're seeing these ads, and they are associating it with a life of joy."
Normalization (8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "It's very normalized right? That's the first thing that comes in my head is like, it's almost part of the industry." • "And like because it's becoming more normal, you're just accepting gambling as becoming normal now."
Increased Addiction Rates (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I just have the greatest fear of the thousands of people that will do online gambling because it is so easy and because they're really promoting it." • "I think it's going to accelerate gambling addictions, which could lead to other addictions as well. I think it will strain our addiction services, unless they're expanded greatly, I do not see anything positive other than whatever tax dollars they collect from gambling."

Increased
Financial
Hardship
(5)

- “The money’s got to come from somewhere. People are borrowing it. They’re stealing it. They’re cashing out investments. They are doing whatever they can in an economy like ours right now.”
- “Gambling for a majority of people has a negative impact because it’s a loss of finances and with finances comes depression, anxiety.”

Due to the excessive nature of the gambling media landscape, many participants observed how youth were now being exposed to gambling advertisements. Many participants were concerned about the potential implications of youth being exposed to so much gambling advertising. Some of the participants had children themselves and were worried about the implications of the current gambling media landscape. One participant noted that modern youth are into gaming and have been raised on technology which may make online gambling more enticing for youth. *“Because, let’s face it, youth today are on computers at the age of three and four, and are involved online and involved in gaming and from gaming could lead to online gambling. That is not good.”*

A couple of participants mentioned that the gambling and sports connection could be potentially risky for youth as well. *“I have sons, and I think about them loving sports so much and always wanting to place these little bets here and there with friends and so on.”* Participants felt that there was a positive association between sports and gambling and that can make youth feel that gambling is a part of sports. A couple of participants gave examples of them already seeing youth starting to gamble in high school settings or observing more young people attending support groups. Participants noted how this positive association with gambling through the new media landscape has normalized gambling in the current market.

Normalization is referring to an activity becoming more “normal” in society and therefore becoming more common place. The participants noted how the excessive advertising has normalized gambling as a hobby, and they have noticed people in their lives talking about gambling who were not discussing it previously. One participant noted that when it comes to professional sports and the sports betting industry the two entities have become so intertwined it is hard to separate them *“it’s kind of like a part of sports”*. There was also overlap with the first theme of risk to youth as many participants made note how normalization of gambling can increase the risk for youth to develop gambling problems.

The third theme of community impact is increased rate of gambling addiction. Some participants noted that with the increase in advertising and greater accessibility of gambling options they believe more people will develop a gambling problem. One participant noted that although the Ontario government may be collecting revenue they questioned how much of that revenue will have to be set aside for services to help those who are struggling. *“Like everything else, it will affect me indirectly. It will affect me through social services. It will affect me via taxes. It will affect me via food banks. I mean directly, no it won’t affect me at all. Indirectly it will affect everyone, absolutely.”*

The fourth theme centered on the potential financial hardship that will affect the families of those who are struggling with a gambling addiction. The participants noted how the financial impact can affect several other life areas. Some of the life areas that participants listed as being impacted as a result of financial hardship were: mental health, loss of relationships, physical abuse, increased suicide, increased debt, and homelessness.

III - Support Analysis

In order to be eligible for the project, participants had to have been seeking support for their gambling problem. Participants were asked about their experience with the support systems they had encountered. Through analysis of participants' responses three themes emerged. One major theme of Positive, a moderate theme of not enough and a small theme of unprepared. The first theme noted how effective the programming was for a majority of participants. The second theme of not enough highlighted how difficult it was for participants to find and access services. The third but smaller theme of inept encapsulated one participant's experience with private rehabilitation services.

Table 9 - Support Analysis

Support Analysis	
Positive (12)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“Just knowing that someone was there that got it, that was willing to listen, that was willing to help and direct and you know, give advice. I felt I didn't feel alone. You know, more than anything. That was huge.”</i> • <i>“I was impacted positively, I've been through some programs, some counseling, different psychologists and stuff like that.”</i>
Not Enough (8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“Resources aren't readily available and not nearly enough to the extent that gambling advertising is increasing. The increase is nowhere near proportional to the gambling options that exist in the Ontario gambling market.”</i> • <i>“When somebody is willing to talk or somebody is willing to be vulnerable for a moment, that can change in a flash and if somebody has to wait two weeks to get in to see somebody then they may not continue to seek help.”</i>
Unprepared (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“The counsellors were not great. They were not trained. I found the government funded programs much more informative and better at working through problems.”</i>

The first theme that came from the support analysis was how positive the supports were for all but one participant. Participants mentioned how the counsellors and groups they were apart of had a positive impact. Intensive programs such as day treatment or the residential programs they had attended were praised for their content and facilitating connection amongst participants. Most participants mentioned that connecting with people in their groups was helpful in their recovery as it made them feel less alone. Some participants made note that their

individual counsellors and psychotherapists were effective in helping them navigate personal issues and finding the right path forward for them.

Although participants praised the programs they had accessed, navigating the support systems was considered difficult amongst many of the participants. The second theme of not enough was brought up by many participants as they detailed how difficult it was to find supports when they were trying to find support. Some participants noted how difficult it can be to find help comparatively to finding more gambling options. One participant highlighted that there does not seem to be proportionality to the availability of gambling options and the availability of support. Some participants explained that even though a person may find a support that support could take up to two weeks to access as many services have waitlists. One participant explained that within that two-week period that person could change their mind about accessing the support potentially causing more damage.

The third theme of unprepared was highlighted by one participant. The theme was not mentioned by any other participant but that could also be due to the uniqueness of this participant. The participant was the only person interviewed who had experienced both public gambling rehabilitation and private rehabilitation. The third theme had come from this participant's observation that the public programs they had accessed were superior to the private programs. The participant mentioned that the private rehabilitation was unprepared to support their gambling problem specifically noting how unprepared the counsellors and facilitators were.

Summary

The new context of the Ontario gambling market provided three key insights. Participants reported how excessive gambling media had become. All thirteen participants agreed that there were very few safe places without gambling advertisements and many participants felt that they were being bombarded. Many participants observed how easily accessible gambling had become requiring only an internet connection and a desire to place a bet. The amount of gambling options available was a notable change in the market with participants remarking that they had multiple apps on their devices and if they closed one down a new one would be opening.

The new Ontario gambling market created an environment that was overall negative to participants. Participants highlighted how the instant access to gambling made it difficult to cut down on their gambling which led to many participants sinking an inordinate amount of time into their gambling with one participant noting that it felt like a black hole of time. Participants mentioned how gambling advertising triggered a reminder of gambling harm and elicited a number of strong negative emotions. The number of strong emotions elicited by advertisements made participants feel stuck and they could not move on. The multiple gambling options and their corresponding incentives kept most participants gambling longer than they would have liked as they would continue to look for new gambling apps to find bonuses or free bets. The gambling incentives and the variety of gambling apps created a difficult feedback loop that kept participants gambling longer than they felt they should have. A few participants noted that the

new gambling advertisements increased the frequency of their gambling and was a dangerous trigger. Some participants made note that moving casino games to online formats increased the rate of play which fed into their impulsive gambling behaviour. Only some participants noted that the increase in online casinos and gambling advertising had no effect on them, but that theme was only common amongst land-based only gamblers.

The participants' gambling led to numerous negative consequences. A majority of participants reported significant financial damage, damaged relationships and low-self esteem as a result of their gambling behaviour. This meant that many participants had significant debt, felt disconnected from loved ones, and had a number of strong negative emotions. Some participants noted suicidality and a loss of employment. Only a couple of participants reported that they were dealing with legal issues as a result of their gambling behaviours.

A majority of participants reported that very few people knew about their gambling keeping it a hidden problem. Participants had a very harsh view of their actions and were fearful of those same judgements coming from others. Therefore, many participants only told a select few people about their gambling problem. Some participants reported that there is a lack of understanding amongst the population about problem gambling which has led to experiences of judgement directly or indirectly. A few participants challenged that there is no stigma as society has little understanding of the risk of gambling and is not comparable to the stigma experienced by substance users.

In regard to societal impact, participants were most concerned with how youth were being exposed to the new gambling market. Participants observed youth using gambling language and discussing the bets they would place and were mostly concerned about where that might lead. Normalization was seen as another societal impact. Participants noted how their friends and family were discussing gambling more often and how they tend to see gambling everywhere. Participants mentioned that they felt there would be an increase in gambling addiction rates and financial hardship as a result of the new gambling market.

A majority of participants reported that the support they had received through the programs they interacted with had a positive impact on them and was effective in addressing their gambling concerns. Unfortunately for many participants they found that finding support or getting connected with help was difficult and was not enough. One participant noted a negative experience with support they received and made mention that the private rehabilitation facility they attended was inept at providing the required support compared to the public options they had accessed.

Discussion and Analysis

This next section discusses and analyzes the key findings from this project. This section also highlights the connection between the findings and current literature. Due to the exploratory nature of this project, suggestions to help reduce negative impacts on the problem gambling community are discussed and future areas of research are highlighted.

The Ontario gambling market expansion was marked by two large changes, the increase in gambling media and the expansion of online gambling options. According to participants these two changes had overall negative consequences leading to a litany of negative impacts including financial damage, relationship breakdowns, and low self-esteem amongst others. Overall, these findings are not surprising when referencing the literature available. The literature had shown evidence that expanding both gambling media and online gambling options would have numerous negative impacts if not mitigated. The literature also highlighted the outsized impacts these market changes would have on those who are experiencing problem gambling. Although most of the literature was not based in Canada many of the same themes emerge from the literature review and the findings of this project.

As observed by participants in this project, the excessive advertising environment and the proliferation of gambling apps has started a normalizing trend that has not been seen since the expansion of land-based casinos. Gambling has become more available than at any point in the province's history and gambling has now become entangled with the sports media. This presents a potential risk to other vulnerable populations that would otherwise not be as exposed to gambling. Participants observed how youth are being exposed to gambling media and some participants observed youth discussing their bets. A systemic review conducted by McGrane et al., (2023), noted: "*Children and young people were most aware of advertising linked with sports, which is seen to normalise gambling. Some children reported wanting to bet on sports due to the widespread advertising of sports gambling.*" (p. 128)". These observations propose a potential emerging trend in youth problem gambling and should be an area of observation for youth-oriented non-profits as the combination of risk and normalization could potentially increase youth problem gambling rates. The potential impact of the gambling market expansion on youth problem gambling is an area in dire need of further research from an Ontario gambling perspective.

In terms of impact for the participants of this project, many participants noted that gambling advertisements did not specifically trigger a want to gamble most of the time but rather it was a reminder of the harm associated with their gambling behaviours. A similar finding was noted in a qualitative study by Samuelsson et al., (2018), in which participants stated that advertisements did not trigger gambling but rather had a deterring effect (p. 519). Many of the participants connected the reminder of harm to their continuing feelings of low self esteem and potentially worsening their self esteem as a result. The reminder of harm combined with an inescapable advertising environment meant that participants had no discernable methods of

avoiding the triggers posed by advertising. One participant in the findings stated how this made them feel like they were stuck and could not heal fully.

The combination of an excessive advertising environment and participants being reminded of gambling harms creates a situation in which people may feel stuck in their recovery from problem gambling. Due to the excessive advertising environment, there now exists a risk in which participants may relapse for a prolonged period of gambling due to poor psychological well being. This new environment presents new challenges for front line gambling addiction agencies. In the previous gambling market, there were only limited options to gamble and very little gambling advertising which made avoiding and cutting down on gambling triggers simpler. In the current gambling market, addiction agencies will have to modify their treatment to help participants find new ways to cope with the constant reminder of harm they have experienced. There is also room for more regulation from government to make advertisements not as excessive to protect vulnerable populations, such as those with problem gambling issues and youth.

The expansion of online gambling options impacted participants in predictable ways. The instant access to online gambling allowed participants to access gambling whenever they had urges and cravings and many participants had several gambling apps on their phones. The instant access to gambling led to some participants to report the significant amount of time and money that were lost. One of the impacts that was noted by many participants was that the gambling apps they were using provided a number of incentives such as bonus bets, free spins, and bonus money to keep them on that specific gambling app. Participants observed how they would keep several gambling apps on their phone and cycle through the apps taking advantage of the incentives when they had no more money to gamble. For some participants this helped to prolong the gambling cycle and delayed them coming to terms with the reality of their gambling problem.

The advertising of new online casino apps would entice participants to engage with a new gambling app in order to take advantage of new incentives. Incentives are not new to the casino industry as land-based casinos have rewarded their customers for their loyalty through free meals, items, rooms, amongst other incentives. Participants could only take advantage of a small number of incentives in land-based casino options whereas in the current gambling market participants can switch between apps instantly. The prolonging of gambling cycles through the use of several gambling apps potentially collecting several gambling incentives presents a difficult problem. A problem in which people may get stuck in a behavioural loop by not engaging with supports to utilize a free bet with the hope that a big win could happen and if it doesn't happen move to another app. There is room for prevention education to help highlight this potential feedback loop and help people recognize they may need to make changes to their behaviour.

Although gambling has become ubiquitous, many of the participants discussed how their gambling problem was a hidden problem. Participants felt that their own internal judgements would be how their loved ones would judge them. Hing et al. (2016) discussed how self-stigma was common amongst problem gamblers and that their own self-stigma led to them keeping their problem gambling hidden from other people and decreasing treatment seeking behaviour (p.256). Gambling continues to be a hidden problem, and participants highlight that even though gambling has become more visible and more people are exposed to gambling the stigma attached to problem gambling remains the same. Participants have noted that there is little discussion about the risks associated with problem gambling and they do not feel represented in the media. Participants noted that there were some responsible gambling commercials but were unimpressed by what they saw and observed how little responsible gambling ads aired comparatively to ads promoting gambling. This aligns with previous findings in the United Kingdom in which participants noted a lack of responsible gambling advertisements highlighting the risk of problem gambling (Killick and Griffiths, 2022, p. 810). This creates an environment in which stigma is not being meaningfully addressed, people struggling with problem gambling are self stigmatizing and as a result participants felt they were suffering in silence dissuading them from seeking treatment.

When participants did seek out treatment for their gambling problem, they were overall positive in recalling the impact of those supports. Participants felt that the supports they came in contact with were competent and effective in helping them on their journey to healing from problem gambling. Unfortunately, participants felt that supports were difficult to find, and it was hard to navigate the support systems that were in place in Ontario. Participants were quick to point out that people with similar problems to their own may be discouraged by navigating the system and as a result may abandon their goal of treatment and fall back into problem gambling.

Overall, the findings were not unprecedented and were unsurprising. The Ontario government expanded the online gambling market through iGaming but did not have suitable regulations in place to help those who developed a problem gambling issue. The potential profits from expanding the online gambling market in Ontario far outweighed the potential harms to people who found themselves with a gambling problem. The literature highlighted that negative impacts were associated with expanded media and online availability, but it seemed as though there was little done to mitigate the negative impact on those most vulnerable. Unfortunately for many participants in this project they will have to live with some of the negative impacts moving forward.

Recommendations

This section of the project contains recommendations for potential changes to the gambling market and suggestions for further research on what non-profits can do to respond to the problems. The first section highlights the participants suggestions for change to the gambling market to help reduce negative impacts amongst problem gambling individuals. The second section highlights the recommendations by the researcher.

Suggestions for change

As part of the interview guide, participants were asked what they would do if they had the power to change certain aspects of the gambling market. Four recommendations emerged being restrict advertising, highlight risk, more controls, and reduce ease of access.

Table 10 - Participants Suggestions for Change

Participants Suggestions for change	
Restrict Advertising (11)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“There’s got to be some legislation surrounding how many times you can. . . promote. I think promoting it on TV during prime-time hours, I think that’s absolutely got to be the first to go because it is targeting children, it’s targeting young players.”</i> • <i>“I would have it be like smoking, where they are not allowed to advertise it.”</i>
Highlight Risk (8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“I want to get the message out there that this is a real issue and it’s only getting worse.”</i> • <i>“Every gambling commercial says how great they are and then says super quickly in eight minutes how it could be a problem.”</i>
More Controls (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“I’d say for persons in my position. Theoretically, offer a solution that allows the self-exclusion across the board.”</i> • <i>“So just more controls, I guess? There has to be patterns of like my deposits and stuff that would set up red flags. . . Almost like smart serve.”</i>
Reduce Ease of Access (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“Make it a little harder somehow. . .make it a little harder to get onto the account.”</i> • <i>Make it a little bit more difficult to create an account. It’s like if you want to create an account, we’ll need to see your ID.”</i>

The first recommendation from the participants is the restriction of advertising. Many of the participants noted that the advertisements were excessive and suggested that there should be stricter policies and regulations on how many or when advertisements could be shown. Some participants noted that youth are seeing these advertisements constantly and should be protected. *“Kids don’t need to see gambling advertisements. There’s no need. There’s no need at all. Adults*

know they can gamble.” Several of the participants made direct comparisons to how cigarette advertising is treated and suggested similar legislation and regulation. *“Even what they do with cigarettes, it’s clearly deterring people from smoking because it’s not as obvious.”*

The second recommendation from participants relates to reducing risk. Participants noted that the media landscape is not highlighting the risk of gambling and how that could impact potential gamblers. *“You know, not enough people know what these sites can do to you and the dangers of gambling need to be highlighted. . .”*. Participants brought up the idea of proportionality and how it would be helpful to have an increased proportion of gambling advertisements that highlighted the risk and harm of gambling as there are advertisements that promote gambling. Participants noted in the findings that they feel they are not represented in the media and that stigma still plays a role in the current gambling market. Representing gambling harms to the public could help to elevate public consciousness of problem gambling and hopefully start to reduce stigma. Two participants discussed how cigarette packages highlight risks to consumers and shared how that method could be helpful. *“I don’t know if it is even going to work, you know how cigarette packages you have those disturbing images of what smoking can do to you? Something equivalent to that. . .”*.

The third recommendation is not as significant as the previous two, but a few participants noted that there should be more controls for those experiencing problem gambling issues. Self-exclusion is a service offered by Ontario casinos and online casinos in which a person can ban themselves from attending a casino and give up their ability to win future jackpots for a specified time. Before the online gambling expansion if a person excluded at one land-based casino they excluded from all the casinos as there was a shared data base. This helped people with problem gambling issues to put a physical barrier in place and severely reduce their access to gambling. Unfortunately, with the online gambling expansion there is no universal self-exclusion process at the time of writing and the participants involved in this study had to self-exclude from each individual casino app they had which is unfortunate because there are approximately eighty casino apps available. Participants were upset that a universal self-exclusion system was not in place before expansion and some participants mentioned how helpful that tool would have been and could have prevented more harm. A couple of participants mentioned how banks could do more to help block transferring money into casinos while they currently do not offer much protection at all.

The last recommendation from participants was to reduce the ease of access for some of the apps. Participants noted that some of the gambling apps were easy to sign up for and only took a few seconds to a few minutes. Participants recommended a more rigorous process to signing up for gambling apps.

Researcher Recommendations

Through the findings there are several recommendations to help to create a healthier environment for those with a problem gambling issue or who are at risk of developing a problem

gambling issue. The participants had some excellent suggestions to help create a safer environment for those experiencing gambling problems and as a result some of those recommendations will be repeated in this section.

The first recommendation is the restriction of advertising. As the participants mentioned in the findings, gambling advertising is widespread and is difficult to escape. Advertising could have adverse effects on people who have a gambling problem and may be potentially detrimental to vulnerable populations such as youth. Regulation of gambling advertising could focus on the amount of advertising that can be shown or when advertising could be shown especially around popular media such as sports. This has also been suggested in other legalized gambling markets such as the United Kingdom where advocacy groups are looking to reduce the frequency of advertising especially in live sports (Davies, 2024). In Australia, there is also a push to continue to reduce the frequency of advertising and have already taken a step to stop gambling advertising during prime-time sporting events in which children may be watching (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2025). Restricting advertising can help both emerging vulnerable populations and those who are currently struggling with a problem gambling issue by reducing potential triggers.

The second recommendation would be to highlight the potential risk of gambling to consumers. There are currently some responsible gambling messages but there is no specific messaging at time of writing that demonstrates the real risk of a gambling problem. Participants had suggested that gambling should have warning labels similar to cigarette packages. Highlighting the potential risk similarly to cigarette packaging could allow for more vulnerable populations to make a more informed choice about the risk they are taking on when engaging with gambling.

Another recommendation would be to install a centralized self-exclusion system. Land based casinos in Ontario have a centralized self-exclusion system and are powerful tools in protecting people with problem gambling issues. Unfortunately, iGaming does not provide a centralized self-exclusion for its many gambling applications. Through the findings it has been reported by participants that if they self-excluded from one casino they would just move to another casino app which delayed their recovery. Harm could be reduced with the implementation of a centralized self-exclusion for iGaming gambling apps.

There is a large opportunity for further research on other populations in the current gambling market. The impact on youth specifically is an area of unknown in the Ontario gambling space. Very little research has accounted for the impact on youth and would be necessary to help create new prevention initiatives. There is also ample opportunity for research into potential differences between gender, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Socio-economic background could also be an area in which further research could be completed. Overall, there is a lot of room for further research in the area of problem gambling and the impact of the current gambling market in Ontario.

It is recommended that non-profits continue to advocate for further reforms and provide more education on gambling harms to their respective communities. Most non-profits are already doing this work, but it would be important to ensure that prevention material is updated to address current needs. Although non-profits can help to raise public consciousness there is a severe lack of gambling awareness on a large scale and help to reduce stigma. Unless larger media outlets come on board it will be difficult to raise significant awareness of gambling harms.

Conclusion

This project was seeking to develop a better understanding of the how the changes resulting from the expansion the Ontario gambling market and access to online gambling have affected those experiencing gambling addictions and those who provide support to these clients. The need for this research was to gather information on how a large change in the gambling market impacted those who have been harmed. The changes to the Ontario gambling market had two changes, the expansion of online gambling and the proliferation of gambling media. Insight into how the problem gambling community has been impacted and what they have observed can be useful in helping to inform next steps for front line workers, potential research opportunities, and policy changes that would help protect vulnerable populations. This research project intended to contribute to the literature through exploration of the new Ontario gambling market as there currently exists a gap in research in the current market.

The research comprised of a literature review, conceptual framework, semi-structured interviews and review of the findings. According to the literature online gambling posed great risk of negative impacts comparatively to land based options. The instant accessibility, breadth of options and the ability for continuous play were considered risk factors for those vulnerable to a gambling problem. Gambling advertising was found to potentially increase rates of gambling amongst problem gambling and vulnerable populations. Some of the research from other jurisdictions that allow gambling advertising found evidence of a normalizing effect making gambling more socially acceptable. The interviews with participants provided insight on how the changes in the market impacted them in a negative way.

One of the key findings from this project is how excessive the current gambling media landscape is in Ontario. Participants made mention how they are inundated with gambling media and that can trigger feelings of shame and/or the want to gamble more. The increase in gambling media and the instant accessibility of the new online casinos led to many of the participants gambling whenever they felt an urge. As online casinos continued to compete for market share incentives were numerous and participants felt that their problem gambling behaviour was prolonged as a result. Overall, participants felt that this new gambling environment was difficult to avoid and made their recovery journey even more difficult resulting in a slower recovery process.

Another key finding was the larger impacts the participants observed in their communities, social circles and family. Normalization of gambling was a key theme that participants noticed especially amongst youth. Youth were also observed to be discussing gambling more often and were seen to be accessing support groups more often. Even though gambling was more normalized participants noticed that stigma for problem gambling had not changed. Participants described how fear of judgement and self-stigma led to them keeping quiet about their gambling problem and assumed there were many other people struggling with gambling and not coming forward. The problem of stigma and lack of awareness by the general population were seen as areas of improvement to create larger societal changes.

This project was an exploratory project to understand the impacts on the problem gambling community. There is little generalizability due to sample size and the nature of the study. The sample size would need to be much larger and diverse in order to start to provide more generalizable results. Subsequent research may want to understand the differences in impact between men and women in the new gambling market. There is also room to understand how different cultures have been impacted. There is ample opportunity for further research as highlighted in this project. Youth are an emerging vulnerable population that requires further study on the impact of the current gambling market. Overall, this project highlighted several areas in which non-profits, researchers, and governmental agencies to expand research of the current gambling market.

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Appendix A: Recruitment E-mail

Email Invitation Template

Hello,

This e-mail is being distributed on behalf of Scott Swiniarski who is conducting interviews for the research component of his Master's of Community Development degree to understand the impact of changes within the Ontario gambling market on those accessing gambling supports. The research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Barton Cunningham, who is a professor in the department of Public Administration at the University of Victoria. I am reaching out to you because you have previously attended a gambling support program through ADAPT and would fit the population he is looking to connect with. Please be advised that although ADAPT is helping to support the research project the project is not being conducted by ADAPT. The research project being conducted by Scott Swiniarski is for his personal pursuit of a graduate degree not as an employee of ADAPT.

The interview will be no longer than an hour in time. The interview is looking to capture your perspective on the current gambling market in Ontario which may help to inform potential education material, treatment options, and raise awareness of potential harms in the new gambling market. The invitation to participate in this research project is completely voluntary and whether or not you decide to participate will not impact any relationships with ADAPT. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw from the project at any time without consequence.

Participation in this research project will be confidential and your name will not be attached to any information collected. If you are interested in being a part of this research project, please send an e-mail to scottswiniarski@proton.me and he will reach out to set up a time to connect via Zoom. The consent form is attached to this e-mail for you to look over and if you do connect with Scott, he can answer any questions you may have. Please reach out to Scott if you have interest in participating in this research project. Your name and contact information has not been shared with Scott Swiniarski and Scott will only learn this information if you contact him directly. You are under no obligation to participate.

Thank you,

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form



Public Administration

Participant Consent Form

Gambling Expansion: Understanding the impacts of the Ontario gambling expansion on people engaged with gambling supports

You are invited to participate in a study entitled Gambling Expansion: Understanding the impacts of the Ontario gambling expansion on people engaged with gambling supports that is being conducted by Scott Swiniarski and Dr. Barton Cunningham.

Scott Swiniarski is a graduate student in the department of public administration at the University of Victoria and you may contact him if you have further questions by sending an e-mail to scottswiniarski@proton.me.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in community development. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Barton J. Cunningham. You may contact my supervisor at bcunning@uvic.ca, 250-721-8059. Please be advised that although ADAPT is helping to support the research project the project is not being conducted by ADAPT. The research project is being conducted by Scott Swiniarski for his personal pursuit of a graduate degree not as an employee of ADAPT.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this research project is to understand how the gambling market changes in Ontario has affected people seeking gambling support. The objective of this research is to interview participants and record how the changes in the gambling market are impacting those who have identified a gambling problem.

Importance of this Research

Research of this type is important because the gambling market has changed significantly within the last year and there are a number of important changes that create new complexities in the Ontario market. This research will bring a greater understanding of how people seeking support interact with the new changes in the gambling market which can inform new education material, prevention material, and inform treatment.

Participants Selection

You are being asked to participate in this study because you have identified that gambling was something you needed support for and are looking or have made changes to your gambling behaviour.

What is involved

If you consent to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include an interview answering a series of questions about how gambling has impacted you and how the changes in the gambling market have impacted your gambling experience. An audio recording, written notes, and observations will be taken during the interview process. A transcription of the interview will be made. The interview will be conducted virtually using the University of Victoria Zoom platform. The session will be recorded using the University of Victoria Zoom platform whose servers are in Canada and the recordings will be stored on an encrypted laptop.

Inconvenience

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, as the interview process will take potentially 60 minutes total.

Risks

Participation will include answering questions about your gambling experiences surrounding relationships, finances, mental health, emotional health, and stigma. Answering some of these questions may create emotional distress. To mitigate these risks, you may ask to pause the interview or ask for time after the interview to debrief. The interviewer, Scott Swiniarski, is a trained counsellor and can help to support you with any emotional distress. An Appendix has been attached to this consent form that details resources that can help to address any lingering emotional distress or if you disconnect during the interview and cannot get in contact with the interviewer. If you need to connect with support for gambling or other addiction issues you can connect with the director of programming at ADAPT Monty Montgomery at mmontgomery@haltonadapt.org.

Benefits

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include sharing your story and how the changes in the gambling market have impacted you. Inform the development of future prevention education and treatment approaches at ADAPT. Raise awareness about the potential harms of the new gambling market.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will be deleted immediately.

Researcher's Relationship with Participants

The researcher, Scott Swiniarski, is a counsellor at ADAPT and may have provided counselling to you in the past. To help prevent this relationship from influencing your decision to participate all participation is voluntary and will not affect services received at ADAPT. You are under no obligation to participate. Your name and contact information has not been shared with Scott Swiniarski and Scott will only learn this information if you contact him directly

Anonymity

In terms of protecting your anonymity, a nickname or an alternative name of your choosing will be used during the recorded Zoom interview. The recorded interview, accompanying transcript, and notes will be labeled using a number such as interview 1. The nickname or alternative name will only be known by the interviewer.

Confidentiality

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected on an encrypted computer.

Dissemination of Results

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in a thesis class presentation as required for obtaining a degree. Data will be kept for two years as the principal applicant may want to publish results after completion of the research project and Master's degree has been obtained.

Disposal of Data

Data from this study including recorded interviews, field notes, and transcripts will be disposed of two years after completion of the research and all electronic files will be deleted.

Contacts

Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include the researcher Scott Swiniarski at scottswiniarski@proton.me, and Dr. Barton Cunningham at bcunning@uvic.ca, 250-721-8059.

In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study, that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers, and that you consent to participate in this research project.

Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Appendix

Distress Lines

Toronto Distress Centres: 416 408-4357 or 408-HELP

Distress Centre Halton: *For Residents of the Halton Region (Burlington, Halton Hills, Milton, and Oakville). Oakville: 905-849-4541; Burlington: 905-681-1488; Milton/Halton Hills: 905-877-1211*

Distress and Crisis Ontario: <http://www.dcontario.org/> a website that has a collection of all local distress lines.

Kids Help Phone: 1 800 668-6868; Languages: English and French

Crisis Line:

9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline: Call or text 9-8-8

Appendix C: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Introduction

The purpose of this research project is to understand how the expansion of the gambling market in Ontario has affected those seeking gambling support. This project will seek to address certain aspects of the gambling industry that have changed as a result of the expansion such as media and availability of online gambling options.

The interview questions will ask about your experiences and perceptions of the current gambling landscape in Ontario. Your experiences might relate to how some of these changes may have affected your gambling including potentially positive or negative examples. The goal is to understand the impact of the changes seen since the expansion of online gambling markets. The questions contained in this interview may be potentially emotionally distressing. You can pause at any time during the interview and time will be made available after the interview to debrief. There are also resources attached to the consent form provided in the initial e-mail. Keep in mind you can end the interview or pull your information from the research project at any time.

Context

The following questions will seek to describe your experience with gambling and how you perceive your gambling behaviour.

1. When did you start gambling?
 - a. How were you introduced to gambling?
 - b. What forms of gambling did/do you engage with? (Forms: black jack, online, sports betting etc.)
 - c. What did gambling do for you? Was it entertainment? What purpose did it serve?
2. When did gambling become a problem?
 - a. How did you know that it became a problem?
 - b. Were certain forms of gambling more problematic than others?
 - c. Do you frequent certain casinos or online casinos more than others?
3. What led you to seeking a support program?

Impacts of Gambling

Gambling when used in an unhealthy way can result in several negative consequences. These negative consequences could be mentally, emotionally, or financially unhealthy. This section is to understand how gambling has impacted your life.

1. How has gambling impacted your life overall?
 - a. What does this look like?

2. How has gambling affected your mental health?
 - a. Can you provide examples?
3. How has gambling affected your emotions?
 - a. Can you provide examples?
4. How has gambling affected your finances?

Media

Gambling media has changed significantly since the expansion of the gambling market. By gambling media I mean: sportscasts, advertisements, podcasts, social media posts, and other media promoting gambling. These questions will try to understand how this expansion of gambling media has affected you.

1. What do you think about the gambling advertisements in Ontario?
 - a. Where do you find these advertisements?
 - b. Are there other forms of gambling media that you engage with outside of advertisements? (Ex. Betting shows, gambling streamers)
2. How do these advertisements/media affect you?
 - a. What kind of effect does this media have on your gambling?
 - b. Can you provide an example of this effect?
3. Have there been any changes you have made in response to the increase in gambling media?
4. If you could make any changes to the current media landscape, what kind of changes would you make?

Availability and Ease of Access

Online gambling availability has increased significantly since the Ontario gambling expansion. There has been an expansion in available online platforms allowing for a wide range of regulated gambling options. The following questions will try to understand how the increase in availability, referring to the number of options available, and the ease of access to these options have impacted your experience.

4. How has the increased number of online betting options affected you?
 - a. Do you use specific options, or do you use several of the options available?
 - b. If you have specific sites you use, what is it that draws you to them specifically?
5. How has the ease of access of these online options affected you?
 - a. Are there any specific examples of this ease of access affecting your gambling?
 - b. Did the ease of access have a positive or negative affect on your gambling?
6. What do you think about the changes to the increased availability and ease of access to online options?
 - a. If you could change anything to accessibility and/or ease of access, what changes would you make?

Societal Impact and Stigma

The next set of questions are looking to understand your perspective on how these changes in the Ontario gambling market may have on the province as a whole. There will also be questions on stigma. Stigma is defined as a set of negative beliefs or judgements held by individuals or populations about a specific behaviour or those who engage with the behaviour. These questions will explore your perceptions and experiences in regard to societal impact and stigma.

1. With the increased presence of gambling in Ontario, what do you think the effects are on society?
 - a. Are there any positives about the increased presence?
 - i. Can you provide any examples?
 - b. Are there any negatives about the increased presence?
 - i. What would that look like?
2. Stigma has long been a reported problem for many people with addiction, have you experienced stigma?
 - a. Are there any examples of you experiencing stigma?
 - b. Do you feel the increased presence of gambling could be helpful in reducing stigma?
 - i. If yes, how so? Any examples?
 - ii. If no, how so? Any examples?

Open Ended Question: Is there anything that you feel has not been covered in these questions that you would like to say about the changes in the Ontario gambling market?

Education and Support

There are variety of problem gambling supports and education available in Ontario. This could include peer groups such as gambler's anonymous, nonprofit counselling, or online education. Part of the criteria of being apart of this project is that you have had contact with some form of support or education. This next section seeks to understand the impact of these supports & education have had on you and what could be improved upon in the new gambling market.

1. How has the support and education you have received impacted you?
 - a. Are there positive examples?
 - b. Any negatives that you experienced?
2. In regard to the current gambling market, are there topics that you think supports or education should focus on?
3. Do you think that support and education programs you have interacted with are addressing the changes in the gambling market?
 - a. If not, what do you think they are not addressing?
 - b. If so, how are they addressing it
 - i. Any feedback on improvements?

4. What has been the most important takeaway for you from the support and education you have received?

Open Ended Question: What are you most hopeful for in the future?

This is the end of the interview. Thank you for your participation in this research project. As a reminder you have the option to debrief if you feel that would be helpful. Also, a reminder that there is a list of resources available attached to the consent form if you feel you need more support later. If you change your mind in participating as part of this project please connect with me via email and I will delete any and all data collected the moment you rescind your participation.