

“Aussies love a bet”: Gamblers discuss the social acceptance and cultural accommodation of gambling in Australia

Sarah Marko,¹ Samantha Thomas,¹ Hannah Pitt,¹ Mike Daube²

It is now widely recognised that gambling poses a threat to public health through a range of serious health and social harms.¹ Approximately \$25 billion is lost on gambling in Australia each year, with almost two-thirds of these losses occurring in the states of New South Wales and Victoria.² Health and social harms associated with gambling include anxiety and other mental health disorders,^{3,4} family conflict,⁵ and energy poverty (for example, not being able to pay for essentials such as heating),⁶ with the annual social cost of gambling in Victoria estimated at \$7 billion.⁷ Despite this, gambling has become increasingly normalised in Australia, with a range of socio-cultural, environmental, commercial and political processes contributing to the availability and accessibility of gambling, the cultural endorsement of gambling, and the embedding of gambling in everyday life.⁸ Prevalence studies indicate that the majority of Australians do not gamble regularly with just over one-third (38.9%) of the adult population gambling in a typical month.⁹ Those who do gamble regularly typically use lotteries (76.2%) rather than higher risk products such as electronic gambling machines (EGMs, poker machines or pokies; 20.8%), race betting (14.3%) or

Abstract

Objective: This study aimed to explore regular gamblers' perceptions of the social acceptance and cultural accommodation of gambling in Australia, which are two dimensions of the normalisation of gambling.

Methods: Qualitatively focused online survey with 363 adults in New South Wales and Victoria who gambled in a typical month. Open-text responses about the link between gambling and Australian culture were interpreted using reflexive thematic analysis to construct themes from the data.

Results: Gambling was perceived to be a culturally significant part of Australian life due to existing traditions, the perception that gambling was central to the Australian identity, and perceived economic benefits. Participants considered that gambling was a common and socially accepted activity that was embedded in the activities of social networks. Participants also stated that gambling products, venues and marketing were embedded in everyday environments, although some believed that the embedding of gambling in society was harmful.

Conclusion and public health implications: This study demonstrated that regular gamblers largely viewed gambling as being a socially accepted and culturally accommodated activity in Australia. There is scope for governments to develop comprehensive programs to denormalise gambling, including learning from research, evidence and experience in other areas of public health.

Key words: gambling; culture; normalisation; denormalisation, public health

sports betting (8.4%).⁹ However, researchers have demonstrated that both adults,⁸ and children and young people,^{10,11} perceive that gambling is a normal and regular activity that most people engage in. This exaggerated perception of engagement in gambling is a concern as research from other areas of public

health, such as tobacco and alcohol, shows that people are more likely to engage in the consumption of harmful products when they perceive that this is a normal, socially accepted and culturally endorsed activity.^{12,13} Thomas and Lewis [2011] argue that there has been a “cultural construction of gambling” in

1. Institute for Health Transformation, Deakin University, Victoria

2. Faculty of Health Sciences, Curtin University, Western Australia

Correspondence to: Sarah Marko, Institute for Health Transformation, School of Health and Social Development, Faculty of Health, Deakin University,

1 Gheringhap St, Geelong VIC 3220; e-mail: s.marko@deakin.edu.au

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Australia, in which gamblers view gambling as a fundamental part of Australian culture and traditions.^{14(p.30)} Egerer and Marionneau [2019] argue that the cultural images that are created and endorsed about gambling provide a collective 'blueprint' of accepted engagement with different gambling products.¹⁵ Governments play a role in creating this blueprint by framing and promoting gambling as a legitimate leisure activity that many Australians engage in and that may have social and economic benefits for communities.¹⁶ For example, state government websites have described gambling as being "a normal activity to most people" and "seems so much part of the Australian way of life".¹⁷ Local government policies have described gambling as a "legal social activity enjoyed by many" and stated that gambling venues "provide valuable opportunities for entertainment, recreation, employment and socialising"^{18(p.7)} and the easing of Victoria's COVID-19 restrictions in November 2021 was aligned to coincide with the Melbourne Cup horse racing carnival.¹⁹ Marketing from the gambling industry has further aligned gambling with Australian cultural values, including mateship,²⁰ and "true blue Aussie themes" and "quintessential Aussie humour".²¹ This also includes embedding the pervasive promotion of gambling in community and culturally valued settings.^{11,22} Gambling venues in some parts of Australia have become spaces for social rituals such as birthday celebrations and sporting presentation nights.²³ The positioning of gambling products alongside non-gambling leisure facilities has contributed to gambling venues becoming accessible recreational spaces for population subgroups that may be vulnerable to gambling harm, such as older adults²⁴ and people with disability.²⁵ These, along with other factors, such as the accessibility and availability of new forms of gambling and the ability to conveniently promote, sell and consume gambling in a range of physical and online environments have all contributed to the normalisation of gambling in Australia.²⁶ Recognising the impact of normalisation processes on the initiation and continuation of harmful products, a range of policy and regulatory mechanisms have been used by governments to denormalise the use of harmful products such as tobacco and alcohol.^{13,27} These approaches involve eroding the social acceptability of these products through a range of strategies including

reducing their availability and accessibility, and placing curbs on marketing.¹³ They have also included hard-hitting, research-based and carefully evaluated public education messages about the harms associated with tobacco and alcohol products.²⁸⁻³⁰

There have been very few attempts in Australia to denormalise the gambling industry or gambling products and behaviours. Public education campaigns about gambling have generally focused on minimising gambling harm by promoting a range of 'responsible' gambling behaviours.³¹ Recent government campaigns have encouraged gamblers to "take charge" of their gambling,³² "become the type of man who controls the bet";³³ "play your way"³⁴ and advised that "a healthy approach means having balance – we can help you find it".³⁵ These campaigns often start from the point that gambling is a normal and accepted but potentially risky activity for some people, and that there are a range of responsible behaviours that individuals need to be aware of to control their gambling. These approaches continue to dominate. Studies show that stakeholders endorse a range of evidence-based strategies that seek to denormalise the gambling industry, and focus on the problematic nature of products, rather than 'personal responsibility' messages.^{8,36,37}

How then can we utilise information about gamblers' attitudes about the link between gambling and Australian culture, along with evidence about strategies from other areas of public health, to develop more effective denormalisation strategies in gambling? Focusing on regular sports and EGM gamblers (those who gambled at least monthly), this study aimed to explore two markers of gambling normalisation – social acceptance and cultural accommodation.⁸ The study was guided by two research questions:

1. Do gamblers perceive that gambling is an embedded part of Australian culture?
2. Are gamblers critical or accepting of this?

The study then considered the implications of these responses for the development of public health strategies to address the normalisation and denormalisation of gambling.

Methods

Approach

This paper was part of a larger online qualitatively focused survey that explored

how regular gamblers conceptualise gambling risk and harm. One other paper has been published from this data, exploring gamblers' perceptions of responsibility for gambling harm.³⁸ Online surveys are useful when exploring sensitive subjects because they afford participants anonymity, thus reaching people who otherwise may be reluctant to participate in such studies.³⁹ They also gather small 'chunks' of textual data⁴⁰ from a broader and more diverse sample when compared to in-depth interview approaches which focus on small sub-groups of the population.⁴¹ Braun et al. [2021] state that the aim of surveys for qualitative researchers is to gain "rich(er) insights into the topic of interest, not generating a sample that achieves statistical representativeness and allows simple claims of generalizability".^{41(p.3)} The disadvantage of this data collection method is that certain elements of qualitative research are lost, such as the ability to prompt and co-create data with participants, and the ability to explore new areas of thought while the data are collected. The study received ethical approval from the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee (HEAG-H 227_2020).

Sample and recruitment

The study recruited regular gamblers, defined as gambling at least once in a typical month (a definition which has previously been used⁴²). Participants needed to be 18 years or older, have gambled on EGMs or sports betting in a typical month and lived in New South Wales or Victoria. Regular gamblers were chosen because this group has been shown to be most at risk of gambling related harm.⁹ The focus was on EGMs and sports betting given that these two forms of gambling have been the focus of significant policy discussion and government public education campaigns. The survey was hosted via Qualtrics, which has access to several panel-based databases of individuals who have previously signed up to participate in online surveys. Those who met the demographic criteria were emailed an invitation to participate along with information about the study. They were provided a link to the Plain Language Statement and were asked to complete three eligibility questions. The participants' voluntary decision to complete and submit the survey was interpreted as providing consent. To ensure a diverse sample, soft quotas were used for gender (even split

between females and males) and age (18-29, 30-45, 46-60 and 60+ years).

Data collection

Participants were asked about their socio-demographic (age, education and place of birth) and gambling characteristics (the type and number of gambling products used in a typical month). This study is based on interpretations of data from two open-text questions about whether participants perceived that gambling was part of Australian culture and the reasons for this, and their descriptions about any perceived benefits associated with gambling. The survey was piloted to assess the clarity in the responses and participants' comprehension of the questions.⁴³ All responses were checked for quality. Thirty-one participants were removed due to unreliable data such as providing nonsensical responses to qualitative questions. An additional sixty-four participants were removed during the data analysis due to inconsistencies with their responses, for example, those who initially stated they met the inclusion criteria but later selected that they never or rarely gambled using EGMs or sports betting.

Data interpretation

A reflexive thematic analysis was used to interpret the data.⁴⁴ This is a theoretically flexible interpretive approach which can be used to address most research questions that involve qualitative data.⁴⁵ Author One led the analysis process which involved becoming familiar with and coding the data, refining, and grouping the codes according to shared meaning, and developing themes based on common patterns. The findings are illustrated by quotes which have primarily been left as written by participants; however, some grammatical errors and misspellings have been corrected. To enhance reflexivity, the authors had regular discussions about the interpretation of the data, the development of the themes, and how these interpretations could be explained by existing literature.

Results

Demographic and gambling behaviour characteristics

In total, 363 participants were included in the data analysis. The participants were aged 18-87 years (*M*=45.22 years), and the majority of participants stated that they were born in Australia (*n*=290, 79.9%). The

sample was evenly distributed according to age and gender due to the soft quotas. The most common gambling products used by participants in a typical month were EGMs (*n*=268; 73.8%), lotteries (*n*=231; 63.6%) and sports betting (*n*=185; 51.0%). The high proportion of participants who used EGMs and sports betting reflected the inclusion criteria of the study. Participants also reported gambling on multiple products, with 60.1% (*n*=218) using three or more products in a typical month.

Figure One illustrates the key themes that were constructed from the data.

The cultural significance of gambling as part of Australian life

Participants commented that gambling was a culturally significant part of Australian life. They referred to historical traditions that were associated with gambling, stating that gambling had a long history in Australia, with two participants describing it as a "national pastime". Some participants identified horse racing as being the main culturally relevant gambling activity, with descriptions of the annual Melbourne Cup race as "always [being]

part of our culture" and that the "whole nation stops" for the race. One participant suggested that while gambling appeared to be a "national pastime", the Melbourne Cup was an "an excuse to gamble":

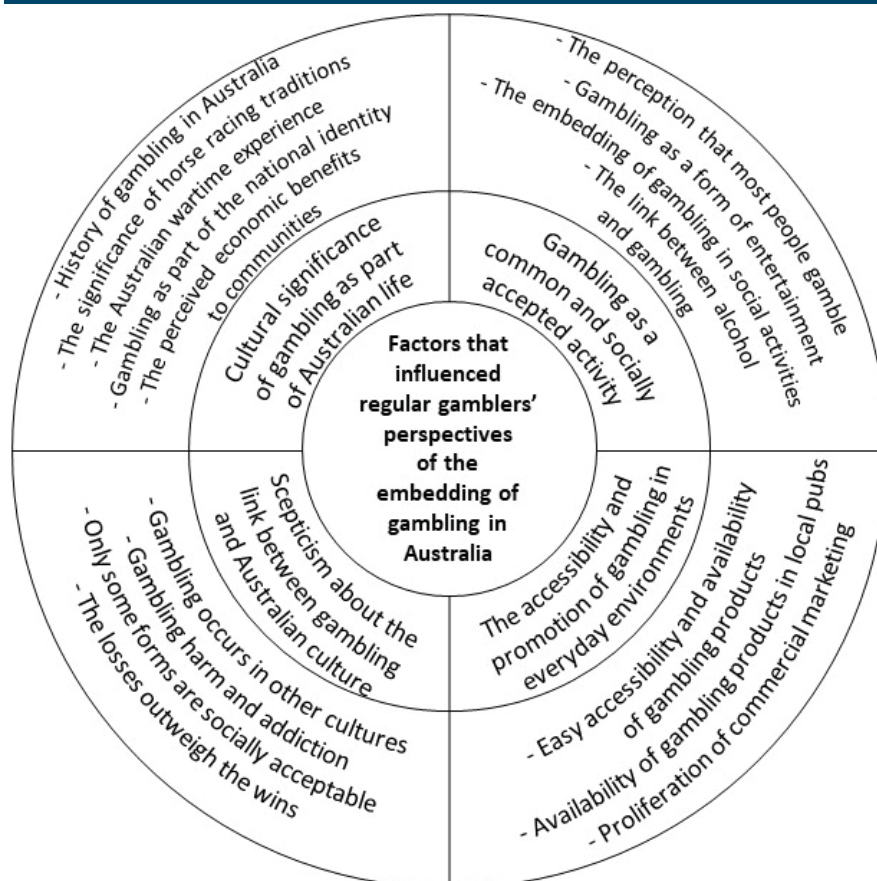
Yes, it seems to be a national pastime to spend money on the pokies or bet on the races, even the Melbourne Cup is treated like some sort of major event rather than being an excuse to gamble. – 38-year-old male

A few older male participants reflected upon the alignment of gambling with wartime, including Australian soldiers' experience of playing two-up during World War II and the ongoing tradition of playing two-up on ANZAC Day:

It is part of our culture generated by war experience. – 80-year-old male

Some participants commented that gambling was an activity that exemplified Australian culture and contributed to a range of shared cultural experiences. Participants often generalised that gambling was something that all Australians loved or was central to the Australian identity. For example, participants stated that "Aussies love a bet", that gambling "brings us together", is "part and parcel of

Figure 1: Factors that influenced regular gamblers' perspectives of the embedding of gambling in Australia.



who we are”, is a “normal way of life for many Australians” and is “ingrained in the social identity”. The following participant suggested that gambling was an activity Australians participated in as a way to celebrate:

Yes, gambling (done responsibly) is part of the Australian culture. Horse, dog and trotters have been part of Australia's celebratory events for generations. – 22-year-old male

There was also a perception that gambling had economic benefits for Australians. For example, two participants suggested that working class Australians gambled as a way to make money in the context of low wages, with one describing how this contributed to gambling becoming part of the Australian culture:

Gambling is a normal way of life for many Australians as it has been since convict days. It was a way of passing the time and making extra money for the working classes and now is something working class people do to the same degree. – 67-year-old male

Others stated that gambling benefited local economies through taxation revenue and job creation:

Yes, there is benefits to the economy and it puts money back into businesses which can help financially with wages, food produce and potential renovations for further investments. – 21-year-old female

There was also a perception that gambling provided financial benefits to local charities and local community groups via fundraising events such as horse races, lotteries and raffles, or donations to community organisations from gambling operators:

You can sometimes win money, it's fun, it passes the time, poker machine revenue helps the community. – 42-year-old female

Money used from my gambling can help local sporting clubs. – 37-year-old female

Gambling as a common and socially accepted activity for Australians

Many participants perceived that gambling was a common social activity in Australia. Some participants stated that gambling was a fun entertainment activity that “everyone” or “most” people participated in. One participant reflected on their own social network and stated that “most of my friends gamble regularly” while another stated that “90% of people I know have a gamble”. There was a perception that most people “have a flutter” whether it be betting on the Melbourne Cup, purchasing the occasional lottery ticket, or gambling on EGMs on a social night out.

The following participant suggested that gambling was something that everyone tries, and many continue:

I think most Australians would have gambled at some point in their adult life and I think many continue to do so, whether it's regularly or on occasion with family or friends. – 30-year-old female

Gambling was perceived by some to be a socially acceptable form of “entertainment” that was a “bit of fun”. For example, one participant described gambling as their “hobby” that they did in their “spare time”, while another compared gambling to boating in that they are both “great social activities” that people chose to spend their money on. Gambling was perceived to be an acceptable activity that people could enjoy while “hanging out” or “catching up”. As venues were seen as providing an avenue for social interaction, a few considered them as places to meet people and find social connection or “companionship”. However, most focused on gambling with their existing social network. The following participant highlighted that gambling events such as Melbourne Cup accommodated people regardless of whether or not they gambled, due to the broader social elements of the event:

Gambling is part of social activities such as attending race meetings, Cup Day parties where people feel part of the event without needing to gamble or can do so within their means. – 48-year-old female

Other participants commented on the linkages between gambling and alcohol in Australia. The co-location of gambling and alcohol in venues meant that consumption of these products often occurred together and contributed to the formation of social norms. Participants described attending venues to consume alcohol and gamble with friends or as part of a “night out”. One younger participant perceived that gambling in pubs was culturally significant, particularly for middle-aged men:

Spending each afternoon down at the local pub and betting money or playing the pokies is definitely a part of Australia's culture, especially for middle aged men. – 23-year-old female

The accessibility and promotion of gambling in everyday Australian communities

There was a perception among some participants that gambling was embedded in everyday environments because of the

extent to which it was accessible within the community. Gambling products and venues were described as being “everywhere”, with one participant suggesting there was “always some opportunity to bet”. Participants mentioned a range of products that were available in Australia including EGMs, sports betting, horse and dog race betting, lotteries, scratchies, and casino table games. One participant described how it was “hard to avoid” gambling venues due to their prominence in the community:

Possibly true, with a casino in most major cities and pokies in a lot of venues, gambling is hard to avoid in Australia. – 42-year-old male

Participants observed that “many” or “most” pubs in Australia had gambling products. According to one participant, the number of EGMs in pubs was “just plain silly”, while another suggested that this could lead to incidental gambling when people attended pubs for social drinking:

[Saying] “just going down to the pub for a few drinks” always ends in a cheeky bet here or there – 32-year-old female

The dominance of commercial marketing also contributed to the perception that gambling was embedded in everyday environments. Some participants commented that it was common to see gambling marketing at sporting events and during television broadcasts. However, the following participant suggested it went beyond the proliferation of the media coverage, and that gambling was marketed as being “normal”:

Yes because of advertising of gambling showing how normal it is and its advertised everywhere you go not, just on media outlets. – 59-year-old male

Scepticism about the link between gambling and Australian culture

Some participants were sceptical about the extent to which gambling was or should be considered a part of Australian life. This included participants who rejected the idea that gambling was part of the Australian culture. One reason for this was the perception that there was nothing uniquely ‘Australian’ about gambling, and gambling occurred around the world:

Everyone gambles regardless of country. – 22-year-old male

Two participants described the way in which gambling marketing contributed to the normalisation of gambling in Australian culture, including one who suggested it was

a “marketing ploy” and criticised the idea that not engaging in gambling was “unAustralian”:

No, I think this is a marketing ploy used by gambling companies, just as much as saying statements like it is unAustralian, total garbage. – 47-year-old male

Other participants commented that the normalisation of gambling within Australian culture was not something “to be proud of” and it “shouldn’t be encouraged to be part of our culture” because of the associated addiction and harm. Gambling was described as being dangerous and having the potential to cause “so much pain”. Consequently, some participants emphasised that gambling was only valued when engaged in what participants perceived to be a controlled and socially acceptable manner. This included gambling in “small doses”, “responsibly” or “in moderation”. For example, when describing gambling with friends at a local club, the following participant emphasised the need not only to “gamble responsibly” but also to limit the frequency of these events, the amount of money being gambled, and alcohol being consumed:

Providing you can gamble responsibly, it’s always good to have the occasional night out at the local club with a few drinks, good conversation and a few bucks in the pokies. – 73-year-old male

Discussion

This study aimed to explore gamblers’ perceptions of the social acceptance and cultural accommodation of gambling. In particular, the study aimed to investigate whether regular gamblers were critical or accepting of gambling being part of Australia’s culture and how these perceptions could guide the development of public health responses to the normalisation and denormalisation of gambling.

This study demonstrated that regular gamblers generally perceive that gambling is a socially accepted and culturally embedded part of Australian life. There were three main reasons for this identified in the study.

First was the perceived cultural accommodation of gambling, including the ongoing traditions relating to ANZAC Day and the Melbourne Cup, and the perception that gambling was central to the Australian identity. Evidence shows that people are more likely to consume harmful products when they are seen as being normal, socially accepted, and culturally endorsed.^{12,13} Despite

the risks posed by gambling, it could be argued that the gambling industry and some governments have made considerable efforts to align gambling with culturally relevant values. Researchers have also described the symbolic processes of consumption that occur with gambling marketing, in which appeal strategies such as mateship and patriotism are used to “influence the social acceptance of products, and rework the cultural meanings that individuals assign to these products”.^{46(p.2)} These dominant narratives may also have contributed to the perception that gambling is a fundamental part of Australian culture and traditions.¹⁴

Second, participants perceived that gambling was a common entertainment activity that provided social connections. Researchers have noted the way in which the accessibility and availability of gambling products and promotions in community settings contribute to the normalisation of gambling.²⁶ This also includes industry approaches to marketing which offer a range of non-gambling related activities that draw people into gambling venues, and create a perception that these venues are at the heart of local communities.^{23-25,47} Participants in this study also commented that the excessive promotion of gambling contributed to the perception that gambling was embedded in everyday life. While there have been some efforts to curb marketing within particular settings, researchers have argued that further restrictions are needed to comprehensively address the omnipresent nature of gambling marketing, including the appeal strategies that are used in marketing.^{46,48} Further consideration should also be given to the role of some government messaging which continues to portray gambling as a socially accepted and safe leisure activity for most adults.

Finally, there was the perception that gambling had many positive social and economic benefits for communities, although there is limited evidence that supports this perception with public health researchers arguing that any benefits are inequitably distributed across the community.¹ For example, taxes collected from EGM losses in Victoria are taken from the communities from which they are lost (disproportionately in low socioeconomic areas) and redistributed to other areas,⁴⁹ while the ‘community contributions’ made by venues are typically reinvestments into venues through means such as utility costs and capital works, with only a small amount being used for

philanthropic purposes.⁵⁰ It is important to note that some participants were sceptical about benefits for the community due to the harms and addiction associated with gambling. However, given that research demonstrates that gambling has considerable economic and social costs,⁷ there is a clear role for governments in challenging the common perception that gambling is a positive and normal activity for communities, including reconsidering how governments talk about gambling products and events. Learning the lessons from responses in other areas of public health could be helpful in reframing government responses to gambling. For example, in tobacco, hard-hitting, research-based and carefully evaluated public education campaigns alerted people to the harms associated with tobacco products, highlighted the behaviours of the tobacco industry, and influenced how tobacco was reported on in the media.^{28,51} A comprehensive public health approach to gambling should also involve restricting the availability of gambling products and marketing within everyday environments which this study shows may contribute to the perception that gambling is socially accepted and culturally accommodated.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, some participants did not elaborate on their response beyond indicating whether they agreed and disagreed with the questions. Online surveys provide no opportunity to ask follow-up or clarifying questions. Therefore, the perspectives of some participants could not be prompted or explored in detail. Second, this study may not have been accessible to people who were not fluent in written English. The perspectives of people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is an important area for further investigation, particularly in relation to immigrating to a country in which gambling is presented as aligning with the culture.

Conclusion

This study showed that regular gamblers largely view gambling as being socially accepted and culturally accommodated and have an exaggerated perception of how normal gambling is in Australia. Despite the harms associated with gambling and the influence of normalisation on people’s gambling behaviours, modern forms of gambling and marketing by gambling

companies, and existing government approaches to gambling may reinforce this normalisation. Changing the attitudes identified in this research will take time. However, an important starting point in developing a comprehensive public health approach to preventing the normalisation of gambling and gambling-related harm will involve governments taking a lead in changing public perceptions, including through strong, research-based public education programs that focus on the range and extent of direct and indirect harms caused by gambling.

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