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**Broadening an understanding of problem gambling: The lifestyle consumption  
community of sports betting**

**Abstract**

This paper presents a study exploring and offering further insight and understanding of the emerging concept of lifestyle consumption community in the context of sports betting in Australia. Recent research has identified the utility of socio-cultural approaches for understanding gambling, thereby broadening the scope of research in this area beyond an individual psychology of gambling perspective. Furthermore, the concept of ‘problem gambling’ has mostly focused on pathological gamblers. However, scholars in the field have argued for a repositioning of these ways of framing gambling. In this study, we utilize an interpretivist research approach, featuring friendship group interviews with young adult non-pathological gamblers engaging in sports betting aged 18-30 in Australia. The findings offer further insight and understanding of the locus, power structure, purpose, marketing potential, time span, structure, and social position of lifestyle consumption communities. Furthermore, we identify the utility of consumer culture theory research for offering a broader understanding of gambling. We also posit that a more expansive framing of problem gambling consumption may be required. Implications for marketing management and consumer culture theory are presented, in addition to ideas for future research.

Keywords: Gambling, sports betting, consumption communities, lifestyle consumption community, at-risk consumers, Australia, transformative consumer research.

## **Broadening an understanding of problem gambling: The lifestyle consumption community of sports betting**

### **Introduction**

Gambling is an activity that has a very long history (Bloch, 1951; Downs, 2010), and is a prominent feature of most cultures (McMillen, 1996). Gambling is a major feature of Australian society (McMillen and Eadington, 1986), and it has been estimated that over 80% of adults engage in gambling at some time (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000). Gambling expenditure in Australia was estimated at \$19 billion in 2008-2009, an average of \$1500 per adult who gambled (Productivity Commission, 2010). Much research in the field focuses on pathological gambling – gamblers “*unable to resist impulses to gamble which can lead to severe personal or social consequences*” (Vorvick and Merrill 2010). However, these figures suggest that the study of gambling from a broader social and consumer behavior perspective is warranted (Productivity Commission, 2010). Consumer research on gambling is in its relative infancy, and understanding of consumption communities relating to gambling is only recently emerging.

This paper presents the findings from a qualitative study on how consumers interpret, navigate and participate in sports betting lifestyle consumption communities in Australia. We explore how non-pathological gambling consumers negotiate their involvement in *lifestyle consumption communities* (LCCs) – a recently proposed concept from the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) literature. For our study, the LCC of interest relates to sports betting in Australia. Interpretivist research broadening understanding of gambling as a social consumption practice has begun to emerge in the past 20 years. Cotte (1997) presents an innovative and holistic study on casino

gamblers that identifies important emotional, hedonic, interpersonal, and communal drivers of gambling practices. In a later study of regular recreational online and casino gamblers, Cotte and Latour (2009) find that advances in technology, such as online gambling, and the gradual cultural acceptance of gambling presents challenges to mitigating gambling harms, and has created an environment in which consumers are more immersed in gambling as an everyday consumption practice.

However, in the gambling research field there have been few studies that consider how consumption communities may be formed in relation to gambling (Nagel, Hinton, Thompson, and Spencer, 2011). Furthermore, given the recent emergence of the concept of LCCs in the consumer culture literature (Närvänen, Kartastenpää, and Kuusela, 2013), there have been no studies framing forms of gambling, such as sports betting, as a lifestyle consumption phenomenon. In addition, much existing research on gambling consumption has focused on pathological gamblers (Prentice and Woodside, 2013), and has been framed from addiction, or psychology of gambling, rather than consumer behavior perspectives (Casey, 2003; Reith, 2007). Our study builds on the broader socio-cultural perspective of gambling emerging in the field (Cotte, 1997; Korn, Gibbins, and Azmier, 2003) as a potentially harmful consumption behavior, by exploring the consumption processes of non-pathological gamblers. Proponents of broader perspectives on gambling research identify that as gambling becomes more commonplace in many societies, its social, cultural and economic impacts are likely to increase (Reith, 2007). Therefore, research on topics such as the consumption of gambling among non-pathological gamblers and broader social and economic harms relating to gambling have been advocated (Korn et al. 2003; Gordon and Moodie, 2009).

Our study advances knowledge in the following ways. Firstly, it is one of the first studies to utilize a consumer culture theory perspective to examine how consumers interpret, navigate and participate in gambling and specifically sports betting consumption communities. Such insights may be of interest to consumer researchers, stakeholders in the gambling domain, and marketing managers. The study also makes a theoretical contribution to the CCT literature, by advancing understanding of and identifying the characteristics of LCCs. Furthermore, the study contributes towards a broader framing of gambling research, in this case from a consumer perspective; and also to a broader conceptualization of gambling as a harmful social consumption behavior.

The article begins by considering the literature on consumption communities and the LCC theoretical framework underpinning the present study. The research context relating to gambling consumption and specifically sports betting in Australia is then presented. The study methodology, located in the interpretivist qualitative research tradition, and featuring friendship group interviews with young adult consumers is then presented. The subsequent section presents the research findings, identifying key themes governing sports betting consumption communities. A discussion of the theoretical and practical implications for marketing management and consumer research is then offered. The article concludes by offering ideas for future inquiry.

## **Theoretical framework**

### *Typologies of consumption communities*

A community is a social unit of any size that commonly share conditions such as values, intent, beliefs, resources, preferences, needs, risks and consumption experiences that influence the identity and degree of cohesiveness of participants. The word community is derived from the Latin word *communitas* (things held in common). McMillan and Chavis (1986, p9) define a sense of community as a “*feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that member’s needs be met through their commitment to be together*”. Scholars have identified core elements of communities including locus (whether it be physical, virtual, emotional or consumption based co-location), sharing, joint action, social ties, and diversity (MacQueen, McLellan, Metzger, Kegeles, Strauss, Scotti, Blanchard, and Trotter, 2001; James, 2006).

Conceptualized by Boorstin (1973), *consumption communities* are identified as communities in which commonality of consumption is a present force. Over recent years there has been increasing attention in consumer research on understanding marketplace and consumption communities (Canniford, 2011). Research in this area has identified how commercial brands can create or assimilate consumption communities and engage consumer members (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Such studies have also examined the various ways that consumers socialize and relate in consumer cultures, identifying how consumption can enhance the sense of connection among community members (Mathwick, Wiertz, and De Ruyter, 2008). Research on consumption communities is relevant for marketing management as it can offer insights on consumer meanings and value; and can help inform marketing activities (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry, 2003). Research in this area is also important for gaining insight on consumer perspectives, experiences, expectancies, and

representations of meaning relating to consumption that adds to the knowledge base of consumption as a social process (Arnould and Thompson, 2005).

Despite significant research interest, there remains some lack of clarity over typologies, concepts, and descriptors of *consumption communities*. Recognizing this, Canniford (2011) presents a taxonomy of consumption communities identifying three main types: *subcultures of consumption*, *brand communities*, and *consumer tribes*. *Subcultures of consumption* concern communities that revolve around lifestyles and consumption experiences of various marginalized and deviant consumers (Goulding Shankar, and Elliott, 2002). *Brand communities* relates to how consumers socialize in relation to a given brand, form communities that reflect the role and meaning of the brand in everyday life, and interaction between consumers and the brand (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). *Consumer tribes* involve socialization processes through the shared use of goods and services rather than a particular brand that are often unmanaged, autonomous and driven by strange logic (Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar, 2007).

However, scholars acknowledge the complexity of consumption communities, identifying that consumers are often members of multiple forms of community (Beverland, Farrelly, and Quester, 2010), or that communities may not always be tied to one single consumption interest (Weijo, Hietanen, and Mattila, 2014). Furthermore, the possibility of hybridization, when consumption communities may display characteristics from more than one of the three community forms is acknowledged (Canniford, 2011). Recognizing the continuing development of understanding in this area, scholars have recently proposed a fourth form of consumption community: LCCs (Närvänen et al. 2013).

### *Lifestyle consumption communities*

*Lifestyle consumption communities* are where a community revolves around a lifestyle interest instead of a single brand (*brand community*), or deviant or marginalized subculture (*subcultures of consumption*) (Närvänen et al. 2013). Community members are often faced with decisions about which consumption norms to conform to and which practices to adopt (Närvänen et al. 2013). Lifestyle consumption communities often feature heterogeneity rather than unison and uniformity (de Valck, 2007). Members may also engage in conflict and debate (Heinonen, 2011). However, despite these characteristics, LCCs still hold together and function communally (deValck, 2007; Närvänen et al. 2013). *Lifestyle consumption communities* may also be managed, and contain rules, rituals and meanings (Närvänen et al. 2013); often absent from the autonomy and strange logic governing *consumer tribes*. As with Canniford (2011), we acknowledge the complexities and overlaps between these typologies of consumption communities that may result in coinciding or hybrid forms of communities. Whilst there is an increasingly established body of literature on *subcultures of consumption*, *brand communities*, and *consumer tribes*, less knowledge exists on the rules, structures and processes governing LCCs. Therefore, the present study aims to contribute insights in this area.

We propose that the concept of LCC offers utility in understanding sports gambling consumption. The socio-cultural understanding of consumption offered by taking a CCT lens to study gambling can help broaden the scope of gambling research beyond a predominant individual psychology focus. Furthermore, through offering insight on socio-cultural influences on gambling behavior, such knowledge can help inform strategies such as responsible business practices by the gambling industry, and



interventions that target the social dimensions of gambling rather than solely individuals, during a period when gambling appears to be transitioning to a common lifestyle pursuit. Indeed, scholars have theorized gambling as a lifestyle that is viewed by consumers as a means of socialization and enhancing self-worth, minimizing insecurity, and regulating fear (Walters, 1994). Research has recognized that gambling is becoming a more mainstream consumption activity, that in countries like Australia is common, widely accepted, and an established part of the social fabric (McMillen and Eadington, 1986; Mizerski, 2013). Using a CCT lens and LCC framework can therefore help understand gambling and sports betting as a lifestyle consumption pursuit.

### **The research context: Sports betting in Australia**

This study presents an interpretivist inquiry exploring consumption communities relating to sports betting among young adult non-pathological gamblers aged 18-30 in Australia. Research focusing on communities associated with consumer lifestyles is an increasingly established method of inquiry in consumer research (Weijo et al. 2014). Gambling is a major feature of Australian and many other Western economies. In recent years, the gambling industry has successfully used marketing strategies to grow exponentially (Humphreys, 2010). A myriad of new forms of gambling products, services and platforms are now available in the marketplace – for example smartphone sports betting apps and online betting accounts (King, Delfabbro, and Griffiths, 2010). Consumers are able to gamble on a diverse array of activities for an unlimited period of time, in almost any social or physical environment (Brindley, 1999; King et al. 2010).

Gamblers can develop chronic, uncontrollable and repetitive urges to spend and consume (Downs, 2010). Such compulsive consumption is normally carried out as a means of risk taking and creating excitement (Anderson and Brown, 1984), or as a form of escapism (Reid, Li, Lopez, Collard, Parhami, Karim, and Fong, 2011). Scholars have theorized this may be in part due to its often-glamorous portrayal in marketing and media (Moodie and Hastings, 2009), and given that gambling is an established social and cultural practice (Reith and Dobbie, 2011).

Given the high rates of gambling in Australia, there is increasing focus on gambling related harms. It is estimated that there are between 80,000 and 160,000 Australian adults suffering from severe gambling problems. In addition, there are between 250,000 and 350,000 at moderate risk (Productivity Commission, 2010). Furthermore, the consumption of gambling is popular among younger consumers – specifically those aged 18-30 (DelFabbro, 2008). Consumption of gambling can lead to severe negative consequences. Research has suggested that many forms of gambling, including sports betting, can be associated with harm on individuals, families, and communities such as financial hardship, family breakdown, headaches and nausea, stress, anxiety, and depression (Catford, 2012). The social cost of gambling related harm in Australia is estimated at \$4.7 billion per annum (Productivity Commission, 2010).

Heretofore, much gambling research has focused on pathological gamblers. However, there is less research, particularly from a consumer perspective, regarding other types of gamblers. Traditionally, non-pathological gambling has not necessarily been conceptualized as problematic. However, recent discourse has identified that even non-pathological gambling can create health, economic and social impacts - for example stress of hiding sizeable losses from family members even if they are

occasional, or loss of income that could be spent on other priority items such as food or clothing (Productivity Commission, 2010).

The present study focuses on sports betting as this is the most rapidly growing segment of the wagering market in Australia (JSC, 2011). Furthermore, scholars have argued that the ‘gamblification’ of sport has created an environment in which it is almost impossible to avoid the marketing of wagering products during professional sport (McMullan, 2011). Bearing this in mind, the study aimed to address the following research question: **How do consumers interpret, navigate and participate in sports betting consumption communities in Australia?**

### **Methodology**

A series of exploratory qualitative friendship group interviews were conducted with young adult consumers aged 18-30 years to explore this question. Young adults were selected as the participant group of interest as previous research has suggested they are particularly engaged with sports betting (Thomas, Lewis, and Duong, 2012). Despite this, there remains a paucity of consumer research on sports betting among young adults. Ten friendships group interviews (n=50) with young adults were conducted; at which point a point of data saturation was reached. Groups were conducted in main population centers in Victoria, Australia with a sample emphasis towards the main urban conurbation in the state to reflect population density. The aim was to explore consumption experiences and consumption community dynamics with a range of these consumers. Small friendship groups are an effective method for qualitative interviews as they create a naturalistic environment in which participants

feel more comfortable to discuss topics (Bryman, 2012). This is especially important considering the potentially sensitive topics under discussion.

Table 1 here

A purposive sampling approach was used (see Table 1 for sample composition). Participants were recruited according to the following selection criteria: age (18-30), location (Victoria, Australia), and gambling behavior (all participants had reported sports betting at least once in the past 12 months). All potential participants were then screened using the Brief Biosocial Gambling Screen (Gebauer, LaBrie, and Shaffer, 2010) to assess for people with gambling problems, with those providing answers that suggested problem or pathological gambling behaviors excluded from the study. The focus in this study was to add to the under researched knowledge base on recreational gamblers, including those potentially at risk of transition to problem gambling in the contemporary environment in which gambling has become established as a socio-cultural practice (Reith, 2007). Furthermore, LCCs are theorized as being mainstream collectives, rather than containing marginalized or deviant members, offering theoretical justification for a focus on recreational gamblers.

For each of the friendship groups one 'lead' participant was recruited and then asked to identify four other friends that met the recruitment criteria. These friends were then screened for suitability and inclusion. Six male leads were approached, and four female leads were approached. A sample emphasis towards young males as lead participants was utilized due to research suggesting young males are more likely to be engaged with sports (Armstrong and Gulianoti, 1999), and are more likely to be

gamblers (Productivity Commission, 2010). Information sheets and consent forms were then distributed, and written informed participant consent from all participants was obtained. Participants were presented with a \$30 gift voucher as recompense for their time, and groups were held in participant's homes, or a local amenity – depending on the preference of participants.

The researchers developed a semi structured discussion guide that covered broad themes concerning the consumption of sports and sports betting; cultural influences on the consumption of sports betting; and how consumers interpret, navigate, and respond to sports betting consumption communities. Among participants in this study, sports betting on Australian Rules Football and Rugby League was most prevalent, though horse racing, soccer, and basketball were also referred to. Participants reported that they often bet in social environments such as pubs, especially whilst watching live sports, or gathering at a friend's house, though betting at home or work individually was also mentioned. Sports betting mobile phone applications appeared to be the most popular way to bet, creating an easy way for members to bet whenever and wherever desired.

Groups were digitally recorded, transcribed, and then entered into the QSR NVivo 10 qualitative data software tool for analysis. A corpus of 10 hours, 58 minutes and 48 seconds of audio, and 347 pages of transcripts was produced. Once the data was loaded into QSR NVivo 10, the researchers reviewed the transcripts, met and discussed emergent themes from the data, and proposed a draft coding structure. The researchers further considered and revisited this thematic analysis during an iterative process involving numerous meetings over a period of several months to reach a negotiated interpretation and representation of meanings.

## **Findings**

Analysis of the friendship group transcripts identified two key themes relating to how consumers interpret, navigate and participate in sports betting LCCs: *shared cultural values* and *desired acumen and skill*. In identifying and exploring these themes, the present study both further develops and offers new insights into the emerging concept of LCCs and the social structures and interactions governing them. Specifically, our study found that a LCC is bonded communally by shared cultural values that collectively manifest sociality and passion, whilst desired acumen and skill may serve to create conflict and debate amongst the community through negotiations of status and power.

#### *Shared cultural values*

Common cultural values were expressed in the narratives, highlighting how LCCs hold together and function communally. Consciousness of kind has been explored in extant studies (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig, 2002) as a marker of consumption communities. This refers to a shared intrinsic connection felt among community members that differentiates them from others outside of the community and fosters a strong connection amongst one another. In our study, such consciousness was present and manifested as shared *cultural values*. These in turn created a sense of belonging amongst individuals in the community by fostering shared expressions of passion and shared experiences of sociality. Two cultural values bonded the sports betting community together, namely *competition* and *loyalty*.

#### Competition

For the participants in this study, *competition* was a core cultural value that tied the community members by functioning as a collective expression of their passions. The enthusiasm consumers felt for various sports was exhibited through expressions of rivalry with others within the sports betting community. The act of betting served to heighten both the passion felt and the rivalry exhibited. As participant observes, *“I like it, it makes it interesting. One of my friends will go the opposite to what I do so it’s more competitive”* (Group 10). Competition was most clearly exhibited through the goal of winning, wherein the desired victory for a sporting team or individual was heightened if a wager was placed on them:

*“We watch an AFL game because we’re interested in it and even if money wasn’t involved we’d probably have a meaningless bet: who might kick the first goal and we’ve obviously got our super coach team, just another way to increase our interest in the game. If it happens to have five or ten dollars on the line it’s not going to ruin your night. It’s just going to make you a bit more tuned into the match”* Group 4).

Numerous participants spoke about the competitive aspect of winning a bet as intensifying their interest and stake in the game. As a participant notes, betting makes *“the sport more enjoyable to watch, you’ve got something riding on it so you’ll be watching it harder ... barracking a bit more”* (Group 6). By conferring *“bragging rights”*, winning a bet not only reinforced the sporting success that had taken place on the field but also made the occasion more special for consumers - *“I think it’s more memorable to have a win”* (Group 9). Yet, being the winner of a bet entailed certain obligations to the community.

Many of the participants spoke of their weekend tradition of watching sport on large television screens at the local pub in social groups. If a person in the group has a

relatively sizeable gambling win, they are expected to give back to those around them by sharing the winnings through purchasing multiple ‘rounds’ of alcoholic drinks. This notion of sharing is an important practice that helps dissolve interpersonal boundaries and serves to bond the community (Belk, 2010). As one participant reflects on a recent win and their role within the community:

*“They just hit me up for a round, that’s all right; I don’t mind shouting a round, sure. That’s protocol when someone wins. Well it is, like you, come on, you’re buying all night”* (Group 10).

Hence, although winning was an important exhibitor of passion, it could not be a selfish pursuit when experienced amongst others in the community. Indeed, sharing a big win signifies a rite of passage to gain acceptance by adhering to community rules and fosters social cohesion. Nevertheless, this confluence of alcohol, group dynamics and gambling heightened the potential for risky and adverse behaviors. As various participants note, there is always a *“perceived pressure”* to gamble *“because everyone else is doing it, so you’ve got to do it too or you’re not in that ‘in crowd’”* (Group 10). Here, the quantity of money one gambles plays an important role, with participants sharing concerns of being perceived as ‘tight’ and not putting their money where their mouth is. As such, by fostering a spirit of competition and winning, norms within the sports betting community signal the potential for spillover into more harmful and problematic behaviors. As one participant relates, *“I had a pretty big win and then a few weeks after that I was betting more because I was thinking it was going to happen again”* (Group 8). Here, the problematic side of a spirit of competition in the sports gambling community is highlighted, whereby efforts by consumers to continue their ‘winning streak’ may result in financial losses and other on-going damaging behaviors.



## Loyalty

The second cultural value that tied the community together was *loyalty*. The loyalty individuals within the community exhibited for sports and their respective stars was an important means by which members within the community connected with one another. For Australian sports fans “*everyone has their footy team*” (Group 6), which creates an immediate point of connection and shared interest. As one participant notes about gambling and Australian Rules Football, “*if someone’s talking about putting bets on I might join in a conversation*” (Group 6). By providing a “*common ground*” and “*good conversation starter*”, loyalty towards certain sports bound actors together in the community in a natural and organic way. This was most clearly demonstrated through the collective gesture of the ‘high five’:

*“If we are in the pub and people are betting on the same thing, of course we will give each other a high five and get to know each other. That’s a connection”* (Group 1)

Conversely, a lack of interest in another sport functioned to socially organize the community. As one participant notes:

*“If I did hear someone talk about harness racing for example I’m ‘leave this loser alone’ where someone with a multi bet on NBA, into AFL I’ll actually be attracted more to those people to talk to than your harness racing weirdo in the corner”* (Group 4).

As such, the ways in which members socialized within the community was structured by the member’s interest in a given sport. For those who follow the same sport, gambling provided a way of taking that shared interest to the next level:

*“We talk about what bet you going to put on this match and why you’re going to do that bet and follow it week to week how the teams are going. Give each other feedback”* (Group 5).

By offering support to one another about how to bet on an ongoing basis, betting provides a way to bond and create memories together – *“it’s a story, and then next time ‘how good was that’”* (Group 7). Interestingly, those outside the community who may have a shared interest in a sport but do not gamble are ostracized and derided – *“don’t worry about that other guy who didn’t bet, he’s a bit of a wanker”* (Group 7). The greatest show of loyalty, as discussed by the participants, was demonstrated by betting on your own team – no matter the circumstances:

*“I’ll always bet on the Bombers, it’s the team I follow. Whether they win, I’ll bet on them in impossible situations but that’s because they’re the team I follow ... Even if it’s two dollars because they’re terrible and playing the top team I’m still going to show my support and put my five dollars on”* (Group 4).

Betting against one’s team was a divisive issue, with members of the sports betting community quick to judge or comment on this action. By and large, most took such an act to be a betrayal:

*“If you happen to have a bet against your team, purely because the odds are so great against them, what’s better after the game – your team’s won or that you’ve got your bet up? You feel pretty shit after I have to say that, because you’ve already ripped them off – you bet against them, you’ve ripped them off”* (Group 4).

The only acceptable ‘excuse’ for betting against one’s team was superstition – *“I’m more likely to tip against my team because I have the belief it will make them*

*win*” (Group 9). Fearful that their dogged loyalty in always supporting their team by tipping them has “*cursed them*”, other members devise alternative strategies to nevertheless demonstrate their loyalty – “*I’ll tell other people to bet on them and I’ll even give other people the money and they bet on it for me*” (Group 7). In these various ways, loyalty binds the community together as a common value. However, the potential for this to be exploited by gambling organizations is very real, with members of the sports gambling community exhibiting a vulnerability when it comes to the sports and teams they support, whereby an obligation is felt to demonstrate their loyalty through gambling.

#### *Desired acumen and skill*

*Desired acumen and skill* relating to both sports and gambling were used by individuals within the sports gambling community to negotiate their power and status, by acting as a means of communicating their level of engagement within the LCC. In turn, this led to expressions of conflict and antagonism within the community. Whilst the consumption community literature has acknowledged the role of conflict (Fournier and Lee 2009; Thomas, Price, and Schau, 2013), it has not been explored to the same extent that more cohesive characteristics of communities have. Two sources of desired skill and acumen manifested divergence in the sports betting community, namely *navigating the odds* and *knowledge of the game*.

#### 5.2.1 Navigating the odds

The ability to deftly *navigate the odds* and come out ‘on top’ was highly regarded within the community. For many consumers, the ability to understand and

interpret the odds was something that required commitment and dedication. As one participant notes:

*“I’m a sports fanatic ... I reckon I check daily odds around the world and different betting agencies as well. I don’t reckon I go through an AFL weekend without looking at what the odds are”* (Group 8).

This was a skill developed through a history of gambling, with each bet providing insights for consumers about what to do and not do the next time around – *“the longer you bet, the more you figure out how the different bet types work”* (Group 7). The ability to navigate the multi-bet, a risky bet with large potential payoff, was particularly well regarded within the sports betting community. As one participant observes, *“if you’re looking for the outcome, if you’re looking for the big dollars at the end, the multis are the way to go”* (Group 8). The consumers in this study explained how those ‘in the know’ realize that *“there’s no value in sports betting to bet one off. You can’t double your money unless it is a real outsider”* (Group 8). Sports gamblers thus distinguished themselves from others within the community through the types of bets that they chose to punt on. More experienced and skilled gamblers will *“never do the straight two horse race ... there’s not enough in it”* (Group 2). Also important was the ability to compare the odds being offered by different organizations to *“manipulate the markets ... so you can’t lose”* (Group 5). As one participant notes:

*“The other day there was a match, Washington and the Lakers. Wizard was paying a \$1.60 and the other agency had the Lakers at \$2.85 so if you can work out the market you can back both outcomes. If you have a thousand at \$1.60 you’re making \$600. If you put \$600 on the other outcome at \$2.85 you*

*get back more than the thousand. You free roll that on that team, all the money you have”* (Group 5).

In addition to betting across different agencies, consumers demonstrated their prowess by discriminating between the offerings of the agencies – *“ I look at all the promotions the companies are running and work out which is the one to bet on”* (Group 5). Often this entailed large commitments of resources to the practice of sports betting, such as finances and time:

*“If you’ve decided what you you’re going to bet on, if you’ve got 5 or 6 different accounts, you go through, better odds, money back, guarantee, double figures, double fixed odds”* (Group 3).

These efforts to ‘work the market’ in different ways were means by which consumers demonstrated their competence and expertise to others in the community. In turn this granted those consumers a kind of *“hero status”* amongst others. As one participant notes, *“it’s like you can’t become like Cristiano Ronaldo, but you can play the same game in the betting side”* (Group 1). Participants described a culture of *“trying to outdo your mates in betting”* for a *“bit of an ego trip”* (Group 3). The ability to navigate the odds demonstrated status and power in the community through the ability to *“one up”* those less proficient. This prestige *“makes it look like you know what you’re doing”* so that other sports betters are always *“asking you ... they ride with you as well”* (Group 8). However, the ability to navigate the odds also had a darker side with participants sharing stories of the consequences when *“you think you’re smart when you put bets on”* (Group 8). By providing a false sense of control over the risky practice of gambling, acumen and skill related to gambling odds made

consumers more likely to take on bigger and more daring bets. Whilst consumers are well aware that *“it’s a business and they’re trying to suck you in so they do more research than you could possibly do”* (Group 2), the ability to navigate the odds better than others in the community makes consumers think *“this is easy, so you keep going ... and you sort of get engrossed in it”* (Group 8). As such, consumers in our study who gained insights into the practice of gambling and became celebrated in their community for this were more likely to gamble more frequently and take greater risks, highlighting the darker side of mastering this lifestyle practice.

### 5.2.2 Knowledge of the game

The LCC of sports betting also experienced frictions of power and status through members’ expressions of their *knowledge of the game* (sport). This knowledge provided a means of demonstrating a competitive edge above others when gambling, as such insights enabled more nuanced decisions to be made – *“If it’s football you talk about who’s in, who’s out, who’s injured and then that might change your perspective on who to bet for”* (Group 3). Consumers considered strong sporting knowledge to provide greater confidence in their betting – *“I take the risk because I know that I’ve got enough knowledge to know that they will most likely win”* (Group 5). For the participants in our study, sport was often strongly embedded into their lifestyle which made it easier for them to accrue the needed knowledge to gain entry and power within the community – *“People who are involved in sporting clubs and teams and sporting environments probably find it a bit easier to get involved in than someone who’s not sporty”* (Group 8). People who did not play, watch or contribute to sport were excluded or marginalized, thus illustrating how sporting knowledge was used as a barrier within the community. As previously noted, the community was

structured according to different sports and this was reflected in the gambling practices of consumers. As one participant notes:

*“If I want to bet on one game but I don’t have knowledge I won’t bet on that. You should have knowledge on both sides ... for example I don’t have knowledge about soccer so I don’t bet on that. I know I have a good knowledge of AFL cricket and tennis so I normally only bet on these three”* (Group 1).

Consumers agreed that the more they gambled, the more knowledge they gained about the sport in question. Not only did this enhance their betting experience, but it also it provided kudos within the community:

*“If you look into it more, start to follow more teams, more players, start to read more around the world in different sports, all of a sudden you know more about that sport and you can talk to people more about it”* (Group 8).

This was also perceived to directly influence the winning ability of the gambler, who if well informed enough about a sport’s players and statistics could foresee the outcomes of the game – *“I know for a thing there’s certain stats, I know when a first team gets to a hundred points they’re 95% chance of winning the game”* (Group 4).

A gambling strategy that particularly highlighted the knowledge that a consumer had for a game was the ‘specials bet’. As one participant notes of this type of betting:

*“It could be like most possessions or goals or most points or tries or whatever, in cricket most wickets or runs. You get bigger odds and feel like you’re really winning something”* (Group 6).

Those participants in our study who considered themselves to be informed about sport admitted they tended to get “*sucked into*” these types of bets because they leveraged the knowledge they worked hard to accrue – “*you study everything, who’s in, who’s out, who they beat last round*” (Group 8). For those with less status in the community, there was a strong awareness that to excel at betting, they must learn more about sport from those more knowledgeable and esteemed within the community:

*“For example he has a good knowledge of footy so I ask him which team has won because he’s got a very good knowledge. He knows each player so before betting I ask which team to go for. If he says Hawthorn I go for Hawthorn”* (Group 1).

For these consumers, sports betting is not only an important source of information but also increases their involvement in the lifestyle – “*you give more concentration on the games, you keep more interest in the game*” (Group 1).

However, the reliance they felt upon those more knowledgeable – “*if I know I’m going to gamble I seek out those I think know more about it than I do*” (Group 4) - positioned such consumers as less powerful within the community. Moreover, less informed sports betters were often ridiculed by those more knowledgeable. As one participant reflects:

*“Often he doesn’t know who the bloody horse is ... he’ll just put ten bucks because I don’t know what it is, it might be a sheep. But he only bets what he knows what he can afford and walks away. The point is he doesn’t know anything about it. It is a ‘ground ball’ which is as much as shoot in the dark”* (Group 4).



In contrast, the same participant reflects that his sporting insights equip him to make more informed betting choices thus increasing his chance of success – “*I really believe because a couple of players are out ... and the way the form has gone beforehand I think I’m really going to win*” (Group 4). By believing that “*you’re smart when you put bets on*” (Group 8), this very present attitude by the more learned sports betters creates a status hierarchy and the potential for discord in the community. The clear concern here is that gambling and sport have become inextricably tied, with those perceived as possessing great sporting knowledge demonstrating the utility of this through the act of gambling. This highlights the strong potential for gambling organizations to tap into ego and status needs of consumers to encourage more frequent and risky gambling. In an age where televised sports often involves discussion of the odds in relation to the key statistics of the game in question, this linkage of sporting knowledge and gambling success is increasingly reinforced.

## **6. Discussion**

### *6.1 The concept of lifestyle consumption communities*

Our findings offer new insights into understanding LCCs whilst also consolidating knowledge on the concept. Table 2 extends Canniford’s (2011) taxonomy of consumption communities through the inclusion of the concept of LCCs. Here we develop this concept first proposed by Heinonen (2011) and Närvänen et al. (2013), identifying some of the characteristics of LCCs.

Table 2 Here

First, the locus of a LCC is that of the lifestyle in question, such as sports betting in our study. A lifestyle is a way of living that is often expressed through leisure or work patterns. Lifestyles are important socio-cultural resources drawn on by consumers in the construction of individual and group identities and have an important bearing on consumption decisions. This more comprehensive influence over the everyday lives of consumers that lifestyles play (Närvänen et al. 2013) highlights its importance as a concept for further interrogation in consumer culture literatures.

Second, the power structure of a LCC comprises a hierarchy of core members based on skill and acumen displayed in relation to the lifestyle in question. In our study, the skill and acumen displayed by consumers in navigating the odds and demonstrating their knowledge of the game provided a means by which power and status was negotiated within the community. Often this led to experiences of conflict, with some members of the community marginalized and others are heroicised. The presence of conflict, often driven by ego, has been considered in extant LCC literature (Heinonen, 2011). We contend that the skill and acumen that manifest this conflict plays an important role in differentiating a LCC from other types of consumption communities, where hierarchy does not necessarily entail such divergence.

Third, the purpose of a LCC is aligned through a common set of cultural values. In our study, this comprised competition and loyalty. Extant literature on LCCs has discussed the importance of adopting common norms (Närvänen et al. 2013). We contend that a LCC is bonded communally by shared cultural values that collectively manifest sociality and passion as related to the lifestyle in question.

Fourth, the marketing potential of LCCs is most evidently seen through the practice of lifestyle branding. By working to incorporate the interests, attitudes and opinions of a LCC, lifestyle brands provide the resources to direct and inspire the identity work of consumers who are committed to a certain way of life. Clearly, co-creative efforts in this space will yield the greatest impact to ensure the rules, rituals and meanings of the community in question are adhered to.

Fifth, the time span of a LCC is usually long-term given the investment made by consumers in ensconcing themselves into a certain lifestyle as a way of life.

Sixth, the structure of a LCC is diffuse and dynamic due to the debate and conflict that exists in terms of what is considered to be acceptable practice within the community. For example, the idea of betting against ones team was a hotly contested practice by members in the sports betting community. As extant literature has observed, LCCs often feature heterogeneity rather than unison and uniformity (de Valck, 2007). Hence, although a particular mindset and orientation is needed to enter the community, namely a dedication to the lifestyle in question, heterogeneity, diversity and fluidity pervade the community itself. In our study members displayed different levels of perceived knowledge, acumen and skill relating to sports betting, and discussed different levels of betting activity from fairly regularly to occasional.

Finally, the social position of the community itself may extend from mainstream to marginal, depending on the consumption context. Whilst the lifestyle of sports betting would be considered mainstream due to the general acceptance of its

practice within society and the visible marketing efforts that has been directed towards it, other lifestyles such as a Paleolithic diet or nudism are outside of the cultural norm and thus more marginal. Marginal LCCs may or may not identify with a sub-culture or alternatively mix elements of different sub-cultures. Marginal lifestyles may offer a different path to traditional consumption behaviors or a newer approach.

### *6.2 Broadening the scope of gambling as a socio-cultural process and conceptualizations of gambling harm*

Our findings suggest that among participant consumers, sports betting is an established lifestyle practice embedded in the everyday lives of community members. Study participants commented upon how sports betting is a regular feature of their social interactions and leisure practices. Furthermore, membership of sports betting LCCs offers cultural value and a vehicle for expressing consumer identities through displayed acumen and skill. This socio-cultural framing of gambling identifies some important insights for the gambling field. Participants referred to gambling as manifest in the fabric of everyday culture, and this presents insights into gambling behaviors as normative and acceptable when part of the lifestyles of consumers. Whilst extant research largely locates gambling as an individual and psychologically framed behavior, this study identifies that gambling is also a social and cultural process.

Indeed, Reith (2007) identifies gambling as being well established as a normalized and mainstream social activity that has engaged the middle classes who were traditionally hostile to gambling. Reith (2007) notes that significant socio-cultural changes, such as changing living and working patterns, secularization, the

spread of consumerism, and marketing by the gaming industry are influential factors in this shift of the framing of gambling. It can be theorized that born out of these significant socio-cultural changes, LCCs relating to gambling have emerged. Therefore, in taking a broader approach to gambling research by exploring consumption communities around sports betting among non-pathological gamblers, we lend some insight into how gambling and specifically sports betting is become more prominent as a social and a lifestyle phenomenon.

The present study also identifies that problem gambling may be reconceptualized from a broader social harm perspective. Whilst study participants were not pathological gamblers, some of the behaviors discussed hinted at problematic consumption, social harms and the potential and pathway for compulsion. One concern here would be that those in the community may bet more and perhaps more riskily to demonstrate their knowledge of the game. These insights present important implications for responsible gambling efforts. Stakeholders in the gambling field may need to reconsider current activities that promote knowledge of the game as a key practice in sports betting – for example by avoiding marketing tactics that may build false confidence in recreational gamblers about their expertise. This is a difficult challenge as arguably sport betters may receive some benefits from gathering knowledge in the sports on which they bet. Further exploration of how this challenge may be tackled would be helpful.

In social contexts, displaying prowess through gambling related to the sport in question may negate a lack of ability and skill in playing the game itself from less

knowledgeable members. A further concern is that by displacing notions of loyalty and competition tied to the game with the punt, problem gambling may be heightened. Examples from this study included members betting more after a big win, feeling peer and social pressures to assimilate with the community by betting on sports, or holding erroneous cognitions about the probability of winning (see Moodie, 2008) by being 'more knowledgeable' than other community members - creating a perception of increased odds of winning. The importance of competition and skill in gambling consumption practice is also identified by Cotte (1997), who identified gambling as competing as a way to show off to others, and a motivation for gambling as learning a skill, albeit with recreational casino gamblers.

These are examples of risky consumption practices that are influenced by social motivations, and which may impact not only gamblers, but also others such as friends or family members (Korn et al. 2003). Sztainert, Wohl, McManus, and Stead (2013) identify that as social motives for gambling increase, the likelihood of treatment seeking decreases. That competition and loyalty appear to act as strong social motives for sports betting, potentially presents a major barrier for harm reduction strategies. Holistic approaches to tackling gambling harm may need to acknowledge and seek to counteract these strong social motives, for example by highlighting the need for loyalty to oneself or to family members as a trigger for seeking treatment. Furthermore, mobile betting applications underpinned much of the social gambling behavior identified in this study, offering easy access whenever and wherever desired. The influence of sports betting apps on gambling behavior and harms warrants exploration.

## **7. Limitations**

There are a number of limitations to the present study that are important to acknowledge. Firstly, the study presents findings from a moderate sized qualitative sample, with non-problem and non-pathological gamblers aged 18-30 in Australia. Whilst some important insights on the socio-cultural perspectives of sports betting have been identified, these findings cannot be generalized. Furthermore, typologies of consumption communities are contested in the CCT literature, and our identification of LCCs as an appropriate lens for framing gambling consumption requires further investigation. The present study focuses on the characteristics of LCCs relating to sports betting. Further research may be able to explore whether constructs such as gender or the social environment influence the structures, and/or negotiations of status and power in sports betting consumption communities. Whilst the Brief Biosocial Gambling Screen offers a useful short screening tool for problem gambling behaviors, its use does not absolutely guarantee that pathological or problem gamblers were excluded from the sample. Finally, whilst this article calls for a broader socio-cultural understanding of gambling as a consumption practice, a holistic approach is required that does not discount the equally relevant individual, and policy level perspectives.

## **8. Conclusion**

The present study offers some interesting suggestions for future research in this area. Firstly, this study has offered additional insight into the emerging concept of LCCs. Further research examining the features of and exploring different contexts for LCCs would help establish further knowledge regarding the concept. In addition, more research taking a broader perspective on gambling as a social process and cultural practice would be beneficial as consumer research, and specifically CCT

inquiry, on gambling is only recently emerging. Therefore, work exploring these interactions can add to the knowledge base. Finally, this study considered whether problem gambling might be reconceptualized as a broader social issue. Research is needed with a focus on gambling as potentially instigating broader societal harms, thus adding to the primary extant focus on pathological gamblers. We argue here, that CCT offers a useful theoretical lens for broadening the study of gambling to include socio-cultural as well as the dominant individual psychology perspectives, and therefore contribute to holistic understanding of gambling practice, and responses to gambling related harm.

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**Table 1: Sample table for friendship group interviews.**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Neighborhoods</b>
1	5 Males	Area A - Urban Victoria
2	5 Males	Area B - Urban Victoria
3	3 Females & 2 males	Area C - Urban Victoria
4	5 Males	Area D - Urban Victoria
5	5 Females	Area E - Urban Victoria
6	4 Males & 1 female	Area F - Urban Victoria
7	5 Males 18-30	Area G Regional Victoria
8	5 Males 18-30	Area H - Regional Victoria
9	3 Females & 2 males	Area I - Regional Victoria
10	5 Females 18-30	Area J - Regional Victoria

**Table 2: Typology of consumption communities**

<b>Form Feature</b>	<i>Subculture of Consumption</i>	<i>Brand Community</i>	<i>Consumer Tribe</i>	<i>Lifestyle consumption community</i>
<b>Locus</b>	Activity	Brand	Emotion	Lifestyle(s)
<b>Power Structure</b>	Hierarchy of core members	Hierarchy of core members & brand managers	Diffuse, democratic, hybrid network	Hierarchy of core members based on skill & acumen, conflict
<b>Purpose</b>	Sociality, response to alienation	Brand use, sociality	Sociality, passion	Sociality, passion, purpose, cultural value alignment
<b>Marketing potential</b>	Unpredictable, unmanageable	Brand equity, co-creative dialogue	Linking value, entrepreneurialism	Lifestyle branding, co-creation
<b>Time span</b>	Long term	Long term	Transient	Long term
<b>Structure</b>	Slow to change, resistant	Slow to change, conservative	Fluid, fast moving	Diffuse, dynamic
<b>Social position</b>	Marginal	Mainstream	Ambivalent	From mainstream to marginal dependent on context

Source: Adapted from Canniford, 2011