Addiction & the Humanities, Vol. 6(9): Selling the Dream: Trends in the Commercial Advertising of Lottery Gambling

October 20, 2010

In a previous *Addiction & the Humanities*, we explored the design features of a major alcohol media campaign and the potential connection between these design features and risky alcohol use. The scientific literature focusing on gambling advertising is less well developed; comparatively few studies have examined how governments and advertising agencies use message design and content to promote gambling behavior. This week's *Addiction & the Humanities* represents an early step towards a psychology of lottery advertising.

McMullan and Miller (2009) analyzed a sample of 920 radio, print, television, and point-of-purchase lottery ads available in Atlantic Canada from January 2005 to January 2006. The authors used content analysis to identify the persuasion techniques of these ads. In this content analysis, the authors attempted to describe the design and content features of the ads by independently coding the ads along a number of dimensions, such as intended audience, color scheme, and theme. The authors report that they agreed 100% of the time on several of the variables and resolved discrepancies for the remaining variables by viewing and discussing the ads several times until they reached a consensus.

Here, we review the study's findings with regard to a selected number of the coded dimensions.

Intended Audience. Most people depicted in the television and print ads were men, but the reverse was true for print ads. The overwhelming majority of people in all types of ads were Caucasian. In radio and television ads that included dialog, the speakers often used an informal and conversational language style (e.g., "People are gonna be winnin' everyday."). Patterns in the ads' intended audience are consistent with two trends in epidemiological data. First, similar proportions of Canadian men and women participate in the lottery (Marshall & Wynne, 2004). Second, adults of lower income and education levels are more

likely to participate in lottery activities (as reviewed by LaPlante, Gray, Bosworth, & Shaffer, 2010). Advertisers were likely attempting to reach out to typical lottery consumers—Caucasian men and women of relatively low income and education levels—and reinforce the notion that that the lottery, and its prizes, are geared to them. Advertisers commonly bolstered this strategy by highlighting "real winners"—ordinary people whose lives were transformed by the simple act of buying lottery tickets.
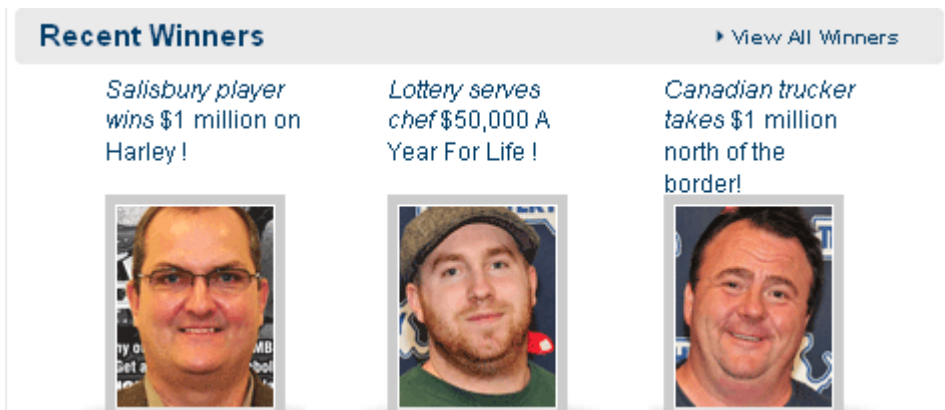
The "real winners" persuasive technique is illustrated here, part of the Massachusetts State Lottery's website that highlights recent winners and their prizes. Reprinted with permission from the Massachusetts State Lottery.

Color Scheme. All of the television ads, and most of the print ads, used vibrant shades of red, yellow, green and blue. By contrast, the ads were nearly devoid of dark or muted hues. This tendency likely was not coincidental; advertisers have long used color to shape consumer behavior by changing consumers' moods and shaping their mental associations. For instance, compared with dark or muted hues, highly intense colors make people feel excited and happy (Cimbalo, Beck, & Sendziak, 1978; Gorn, Chattopadhyay, Tracey, & Dahl, 1997). Whereas people associate darker colors like grey with richness and value, they link brighter colors, particularly red, with cheaper prices (Aslam, 2006). Interestingly, the colors often used in lottery ads—red, yellow, green, and blue— often are associated with toys (Aslam, 2006). In sum, it seems the lottery advertisers used color to communicate the prospect of excitement, happiness, and recreation, all at a cheap price.

Theme. Perhaps not surprisingly, the most common theme was the possibility of winning. The medium often was participatory fantasy; ads encouraged consumers to imagine what they would do with their lottery winnings. Typical slogans were

"What if?" and "What would you do?" Some ads encouraged the fantasy of winning by offering concrete examples of elaborate spending scenarios. Another common theme was familial acts of generosity; rather than squander their winnings, fictional lottery winners demonstrated their love and kindness by providing for the well being of their friends and family members . One ad effectively combined the two themes of fantasy and familial generosity. Here, a middle-aged married couple buys a new cottage overlooking a scenic lake. Their adult children, in admiration, promise that they will visit every weekend. Suddenly the children are handed keys to their own beautiful cottages. The parents, children, and grandchildren all embrace in celebration of their family's dream fulfillment.

Discussion

To summarize, lottery advertisers crafted their messages to appeal to consumers who fit the demographic profile of lottery players, and they manipulated the ads' color scheme in order to make lottery purchases seem exciting and fun. The central theme of many lottery ads was that a small bet can turn into a life-transforming prize, allowing winners to provide a carefree, luxurious existence for their loved ones and themselves. Paradoxically, the ads' theme of familial generosity contrasts with popular notions of how actual lottery winners have spent their winnings, notions that often involve frivolous spending sprees, squandered fortunes, family discord, and eventual bankruptcy (Binde, 2007). Potential lottery players appear to resolve the inconsistency between their fantasies of being rich and generous and their beliefs about actual winners being greedy and lonely by making self-serving judgments (Nelson & Beggan, 2004). In other words, potential consumers think "other people who win the lottery will squander their winnings and alienate their families, but I'll be loving and philanthropic." The lottery ads are perfectly crafted to appeal to this impulse.

-Heather Gray

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