The Media Provides Free Gambling Advertising, and has an Obligation to Promote Responsible Gambling

June 6, 2024



If you've been following the news recently, you might have noticed an uptick in the coverage of big gambling wins, especially large lottery jackpots. It turns out that structural changes to lotteries' rules are making large jackpots more common. News stories, both online and television, regularly highlight these large jackpot sizes when they start ballooning, and then follow up with a barrage of stories detailing where and when someone gets the perfect ticket and lands the big prize. Many of these news stories include details about the winners themselves, including a picture of them smiling while holding a gigantic fake check. As media sources fight for news consumers' attention by promoting these types of stories, researchers and public health advocates should consider the potential effects of this sort of free gambling advertising.

In particular, consider what's called the "big win effect." The idea behind the big win effect is that gamblers who experience a large win, especially if it occurs early on in their gambling experience, are more likely to engage in problem gambling in order to try to repeat the experience. Clinicians have observed early big wins to be a common experience among people experiencing problems with gambling. Experimental studies have found that gamblers who experience a large win tend to gamble longer than those who do not. More recently, research conducted by my myself and colleagues, using both Daily Fantasy Sports (DFS) and sports gambling records, has found that online gamblers who experience a big win (prizes of $1000 or greater, and/or large stake size multipliers) are more likely to continue gambling, and to gamble more, compared to those who do not experience a big win.

Research on the big win effect has mainly been oriented around individuals' *personal* experience with big wins and its singular effects on their individual gambling behavior. However it is conceivable that big win effects could extend to simply observing, or even hearing about, the big win experiences of others or the potential for large gambling fortunes. We might call this a "vicarious big win effect." Consider, for example, that gamblers who are led to believe that other gamblers around them are winning are more likely to increase or intensify their own gambling. Similarly, a vicarious big win effect resulting from regular exposure to news stories about jackpot wins could help to reinforce many of the cognitive biases that underlie a personal big win effect, such as the idea that large wins, because they have just happened to you or someone someone you know, are more likely to happen again. This type of bias is similarly supported with evidence showing that "lucky stores" selling a winning lottery ticket often experience increased sales afterwards, presumably because enough people believe these stores will sell another winning ticket in the near future. In this way, media coverage of gambling big wins could be as effective, if not more effective, than traditional gambling advertising at prompting individuals to take up or increase their gambling, potentially to problematic levels.

All this comes as direct gambling advertising from operators has faced heavy criticism and regulation because of its potential to attract vulnerable individuals. Lottery gambling advertising in particular has been criticized for targeting vulnerable and marginalized communities — especially those financially strained individuals for whom a big win would be most attractive — and for whom problematic gambling would be most destructive. However, most of the current regulations aimed at curbing and regulating gambling advertising tend to be confined to operators' advertisements. Here it is important to remember that the media, like advertisers, powerfully influence human thought and behavior through their unique access to the masses (they don't call it the "mass media" for nothing), and likely encourage gambling by sending the message, "Look at all these people buying lottery tickets; You ought to be doing it as well!" While some media stories certainly focus on the potential harms of gambling, the extensive coverage of large jackpots and big winners sends an alternative message that is more in line with traditional gambling advertising: *gambling is a common activity, and a reasonable means to improve your lot in life*. Thus, much of the media coverage of gambling, and particularly gambling big wins, might represent a potential blind spot that would limit the effectiveness of any effort to mitigate the

negative influence of gambling advertisement.

Given this potential, researchers and other interested parties should consider furthering the limited research on the effects of media coverage of large wins within all forms of gambling (not just lottery), and the role it might play in prompting individuals to begin or escalate their gambling. In the meantime, the media companies that produce these stories should take it upon themselves to mention the likelihood of actually winning a jackpot prize, as well as helpful resources for those who might be experiencing problems with gambling (e.g., problem gambling helplines), at the end of these stories. Researchers might also attempt to estimate the number of people within a community who will begin gambling, or escalate their gambling, as a result of lottery coverage, and enumerate the resulting social costs (admittedly, a very complicated task). Sharing this information with decision makers at local media outlets might encourage outlets to make more socially responsible choices, balancing their financial needs against their imperative to provide coverage that is not just credible and fair, but also useful.

– Timothy Edson, Ph.D., Research & Evaluation Scientist, Division on Addiction and Instructor in Psychology in the Department of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School

---