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## **Lifestyle Gambling, Indebtedness and Anxiety: A Deviant Leisure Perspective**

### **Introduction**

Over the past three decades, the gambling industry has undergone a significant process of deregulation (Orford, 2010). While this has largely been a global phenomenon, few governments have embraced these changes as enthusiastically as the UK. In 2007, the introduction of the Gambling Act (2005) effectively liberalised the industry by withdrawing prohibitions on the television advertising of sports betting, casinos and poker. Since then, Ofcom (2013) have reported that there has been a 600% increase in gambling advertising, with the industry spending £456 million on TV advertising between 2012 and 2015 (Chapman, 2016). Major sports broadcasters of Association Football have even squeezed in a new advertising segment immediately prior to kick-off, enticing viewers to place last-minute bets with up-to-the-minute odds on the first team or player to score. This aggressive liberalisation has significantly enhanced revenues for the gambling industry that are contingent upon a multitude of financial, social and personal costs to the gambler. The most recent statistics from the Gambling Commission (2017) indicate that British gamblers incurred a record £13.8 billion in losses last year, a number that has been consistently rising since 2011. Online gambling accounts through poker, casino and sports betting account for a third of these losses; a figure that dwarfs even the £1.7 billion lost by UK punters on Fixed Odds Betting Terminals (Mitchell, 2017a; 2017b; Wood, 2017).

Engaging with a 'deviant leisure' perspective (Smith and Raymen, 2016; Hayward and Smith 2017), this article examines the harms associated with gambling's intensified attachment to existing leisure markets, consumer identities, and access to friendship. We will address the gendered contexts of what we term 'lifestyle gambling' in future publications, but for the purposes of this article, we draw upon our ongoing ethnographic work among male<sup>1</sup> travelling football fans who are committed lifestyle gamblers. After discussing what we mean by lifestyle gambling and resituating it as a proto-form of problem gambling in the context of consumer culture, we explore just what it is about gambling as opposed to other leisure forms that has the capacity to

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<sup>1</sup> Although this article addresses only male cultures of 'lifestyle' gambling, elsewhere in the literature there has been an increased interest around female football fandom (see Pope, 2016). If claims around a growing female fandom are correct, then we would venture that there will be a commensurate interest in online gambling apps. If we are right, this will be undoubtedly be reflected in a gender-balancing of advertising materials from within the sports-gambling industry, as already witnessed in relation to bingo and online poker. Such a development would indicate not a hegemonic culture of masculinity, but (as we already suspect from the growth of female gambling around bingo and online casino games) that women experience the generative structures and processes that drive contemporary gambling behaviours in similar ways to men.

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result in the range of harms we identify. We examine how new gambling cultures are shaped by and perpetuate processes of infantilisation, which in turn necessitates engaging with how the technological facilitation of frictionless gambling and debt-acquisition fundamentally alters our culturally-problematic relationship with money and consumption.

### **Rethinking 'problem' gambling**

Existing research tends to position gambling—particularly 'problem' gambling—as distinct from everyday life. For the most part, gambling spaces are understood as separate 'magic circles' of play which have different rules, norms and values (Bartheleme and Bartheleme, 1999; Huizinga, 1949). Gamblers are perceived as taking on temporary gambling identities and personas which are separate to everyday life (Caillouis, 1958; Goffman, 1967), while the phenomenology of gambling constitutes a 'temporal break' or escape from the emotional rhythms of everyday life (Cosgrave, 2006; Reith, 1999a; 1999b). As such, the focus of much gambling research is restricted to gambling places, spaces and socio-economic populations and demographics traditionally seen as problematic and characterised by issues of marginalisation and social exclusion.

This article argues that this notion of gambling's separateness is largely obsolete and actively conceals the *ubiquity* of gambling-related harms. Aided by technological developments that have spatially flexibilised gambling's practice (Griffiths and Parke, 2002; Torres and Goggin, 2014), the 21<sup>st</sup> century gambler is not limited to the bookmaker's, the casino, or the confines of the dingy amusements arcade. They are found down the pub with their friends, pint in one hand and smart phone in the other, placing bets on the day's football. They might be gambling on the daily commute, in front of their work computer, or even sitting at home on the sofa playing online poker or bingo and socialising through chat forums saturated with gendered tropes and symbolism. Recent industry statistics from the gambling commission show that casinos, bookmakers and amusement arcades are all in decline, whilst 'remote gambling' via phones, tablets and computers now makes up the largest sector of the gambling industry (Gambling Commission, 2017). Between October 2015 and September 2016, UK gamblers lost £4.5billion in remote gambling alone, with £628million of that specifically on football (Gambling Commission, 2017). Alongside easy access to consumer credit, contemporary gambling occurs in what Paul Virilio described as the 'city of the instant'; a collapse of time and distance in a consumer culture of unreflexive immediacy. Consequently, gambling, a traditionally isolated and individualised practice, has become both normalised and socialised. It has become embedded within—and tailored to—individual lifestyle, modes of consumption and existing leisure markets. Sports-betting in particular has slipped its

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traditional moorings of the betting shop and embraced a new 'identity-based' culture of 'lifestyle gambling' in symbiosis with other leisure activities such as casual sports fandom and the night-time economy. Following the advertising playbook of the alcohol industry, gambling is re-presented as integral to the wider 'lads weekend' experience, imbuing sports-betting with an infantilised masculine leisure identity that is peculiar to late-capitalism (Hayward, 2012).

This socialisation of gambling is fiercely defended as a positive development by the gambling industry. Research sponsored by the Gambling Commission (Parke et al, 2012) goes so far as to assert that 'social gambling' can promote *responsible* gambling. As the data that follows suggests, these claims fundamentally misunderstand the real and concrete changes in individual subjectivities surrounding leisure, identity, and a recalibration of the relationship between hedonism and restraint that are symptomatic of deeper shifts in political economy and consumer capitalism (Žižek, 2002). Far from the harmless youthful hijinks of 'grown-up boys', these are men in their twenties and thirties who are experiencing growing social and financial precarity. Despite the proclamations of the gambling industry that these forms of 'social gambling' are typically unproblematic (Parke et al, 2012), these men display many of the hallmarks of problem gamblers. Deepening overdrafts, spiralling credit card bills, and the relentless pressure of high-interest pay-day loans have become all-too-familiar in their daily lives, part of a culture of indebtedness which is both normalised and necessary for the current model of late-capitalism (Horsley, 2015). In an accelerated timeframe, this has contributed to strained personal relationships, family breakdown and prompted growing mental health issues among these men including alcohol abuse, depression and anxiety that have in many cases resulted in the prescription of anti-depressants and anti-anxiety medications. In the absence of a stable symbolic order, these men feel that their incomprehensible anxiety—intensified by the looming threat of cultural irrelevance (see Smith, 2014)—can only be assuaged by returning to those consumer markets that are the very locus of their problems. It appears, therefore, that the normalised 'socialisation' of gambling requires a more critical criminological eye that extends beyond the limited notions of 'crime' and 'deviance' and instead contextualises these issues through the more ontologically robust notion of *harm* (Hillyard and Tombs, 2004; Pemberton, 2015; Smith and Raymen, 2016; Yar, 2012).

### **Methodological Note**

The data presented here is drawn largely from participant observation and unstructured interviews among approximately twenty-eight young men from a large city in the South of England. With the exception of four, all of these men are white, in their late twenties or early-to-mid thirties and are passionate and committed football

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fans. Perhaps most importantly they are young men with whom one of the researchers grew up and consequently has knowledge relating to their biographical life histories, class backgrounds, their partners, their relationship issues and the various other nuances that it might take other researchers months and years to obtain (see Liebow, 1967 on issues of access). Moreover, our shared support for a particular football club provided the larger social backdrop and impetus for conducting this research. For the vast majority of the men in this study, their gambling began through the combination of football fandom and the emergence of smart phone sports-betting apps that not only provided a wider array of betting opportunities, but also made it more socially convenient, interactive and dynamic. The participants discussed here, while an undeniably small sample, are arguably the prototypical research subjects for this project. These are not the destitute and marginalised individuals stereotypically associated with gambling. These are socially-*included* men with families, jobs and mortgages.

Ethnographic data has been collected over the past 18 months by travelling to both home and away football matches, going to the pub, entering their homes, attending family events, holidays, stag weekends and, of course, occasionally betting with them in all of these contexts. As we shall see in the following pages, this methodological approach does not preclude a critical analysis of their actions. On the contrary, our analysis fully acknowledges their commitment and entanglement with consumer culture and the ego-ideal of 'the betting men', often to the detriment of family, relationships and finances. It is this context of consumer culture and the individualism of late-capitalism at which we take aim in the following section.

### **Lifestyle Gambling, Friendship and Infantilisation**

It is midday on a rainy Sunday in February. Jordy, Tom and Dean lean on the bar of their local pub. All of them are in their mid-30s and are in serious relationships. Each has one hand wrapped around a pint of cheap import lager, while engrossed in their phones with the other. Jordy has three different betting accounts open on his phone, backing bets for the day's football on each one as they offer different odds and in-play deals. I ask him how much he's laid today. Without looking up, he chuckles, stretching out his words for emphasis saying: *"Not a fucking clue, maaaate. Shut uuup. Don't wanna knooowww"*.

The others laugh and call him a 'mug', reminding him of his near-miss on a big win after laying £200 on an improbable accumulator the weekend before. Jordy laughs along, shrugging his shoulders with a cheeky smile. With a pained expression, Tom tells him to 'leave it out' and to stop tempting him. He has already placed his bets for the day, promising to limit himself to only betting £40. The night before, he and 'Nosey' had an unexpectedly expensive night that

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ended in a casino. He can't bring himself to check his bank balance, but suspects that he probably spent over £200, at least £120 of that being lost to the casino. He laments his lack of funds as he scrolls through the seemingly infinite odds available on today's games; moaning about his hangover as he sips his pint, telling his phone to 'fuck off' as his girlfriend reminds him he has to pick up their 6-year-old daughter from a dance class later.

Our phone's 'ding' collectively, meaning that there's a message on the *WhatsApp* group chat. Dean checks it first, and bursts into laughter, shaking his head muttering "what a fucking nuisance". Nosey has sent a text. He was expected to be absent from today's proceedings, having been out the night before and expecting 'the in-laws' coming for a Sunday Roast. It appears things have changed, as his text reads: "*Little tip lads: If you annoy the Mrs enough, you don't need to get permission to come to the pub. She'll just kick you out the house for the day and job done. Pint of the black stuff [Guinness] please. Anyone else putting money on the scum [a rival club] today?*"

(Fieldnotes excerpt February 2016)

This brief excerpt encapsulates some of the themes around consumerism, indebtedness and identity-based lifestyle gambling with which this paper is concerned. It is clear that the role of identity here is something more fundamental than the illusory, temporary gambling identities identified by Goffman (1967) or Caillois (1958). These are not the carnivalesque gambling spaces of a day at the races or Las Vegas which, "isolated from the reality of the everyday world", allow the gambler to "'step out' of real life and adopt new roles and identities" (Reith, 1999a: 117). Rather, the new geographies of gambling include many spaces notable only for their mundanity – the local pub, work-place, or living room. We are in no doubt that for our respondents, gambling identities are inseparable from their broader leisure or consumer identities, entangled with issues of sports fandom, masculinity and drinking. More specifically, as the above excerpt illustrates, masculine identities have been increasingly subjected to processes of cultural infantilisation, a process inextricable from consumer culture and its promotion of 'cool individualism'.

The role of infantilisation in consumer culture has been gaining traction across the social sciences in recent years as it becomes increasingly apparent that the notion of a distinct and linear 'youth transition' into adulthood is becoming the exception rather than the norm (Barber, 2007; Calcutt, 2000; Heath and Potter, 2006; Smith, 2014). Today, contemporary transitions into adulthood are characterised by interruptions, reversals, and a general theme of 'extended adolescence' (Currie, 2005) as the flexibilisation of labour, the decline of industrial employment, and the individualism of consumer culture have exerted their socio-economic and cultural influence (Lloyd,



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2012; Winlow and Hall, 2009). The shift from an economy based on production to one based on consumption requires committed consumers willing to take on debt in order to avoid missing out on new experiences or purchases. Dominant cultural norms of deferred gratification had to be overturned in favour of the impulse purchase and the fetishisation of the consumer object. This process is deftly described by Žižek (2002) as constituting a 'reorientation of the cultural superego' toward a 'cultural injunction to enjoy' (Žižek, 2002). Here, the guilt that would traditionally be invoked on giving-in to desire is redirected, experienced sharply upon failure to take up an opportunity to engage within circuits of consumption.

Most of the participants detailed here have attained at least some of the traditional markers of 'adulthood' (Blatterer, 2007). All of our respondents are employed—albeit precariously—and most are in self-described 'serious' relationships. Some have mortgages and several have children. Despite this, all of our participants cannot shake a sense of uncertainty and reluctance about adulthood. This is typified by a profound incongruence between their identification with the *ego-ideal* of a 'cool', unencumbered and youthful hedonistic consumer, and their concrete reality as husbands, parents, and professionals who are undeniably adults with responsibilities that require deferred gratification. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the ego-ideal is a specular, idealised self-image represented in the external world with which the subject misidentifies. The subject looks at oneself from this point of 'ideal perfection', finding their 'normal' life, their whole reality, as repulsive and undesirable.

Nick, a sports coach in his mid-thirties captures these anxieties, and the conflicts that arise with domesticity and the process of 'growing up':

"It's exactly like what that Ed Norton guy's character in *Fight Club* says. Something like, 'I can't get married. I'm a 30-year old boy'. Except I'm fucking 36 mate! [Laughs] It just feels like you're letting a lot go, you know what I mean? Basically feels like you're letting go of everything you enjoy...I know I'll have to knock it on the head one-day mate. Course I will. But it's like until then, why am I saving? I got that money and I wanna enjoy it while I can. As soon as we get married, kids will be next. Then I trade in my GTI for a people carrier. Swap me nice jeans for shit ones cos the kids will piss and puke all over 'em. I don't mind being in a relationship, I love [girlfriend's name] to bits, and I'll do all that one day. Just feels like I'm not done with it yet. *Like I haven't got it out my system.*"

It is our argument that this infantilisation and the allure of youthful markets of consumption reflects the requirement of capital to continuously open up new markets or extend the target demographic of existing ones. Therefore, the aforementioned barriers to adulthood imposed by neoliberalism's restructuring of labour markets and social institutions must also be read in conjunction with an individualistic, identity-

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oriented and youth-obsessed consumer culture that, as Hayward (2012: 214) has accurately identified, has systematically “eroded established stages of the life cycle in search of corporate profit”.

Returning to Nick's comments above, all of his concerns revolve not around a particular aversion to more adult responsibilities, but an aversion to the inevitability of having to temper his attachment to the consumer goods, commodities and lifestyle that provide him with the culturally relevant symbolism of youth. The demands and responsibilities of adulthood were seen among participants as inescapable and even desirable—*one day*. However, the reorientation of the cultural superego (Žižek, 2002) has resulted in these pressures exerting far less influence in comparison to the looming threat of cultural irrelevance that is associated with a decreased attachment to such consumer markets (see Raymen and Smith, 2016; Smith 2014). Indeed, Nick's primary fear is that he is ‘not done with it’ and that his lifestyle and identity that is so closely attached to gambling is not ‘out of his system’. This is indicative of his anxiety that he has yet to attain the unattainable *ego ideal* of the unburdened, liberated ‘jack the lad’ with which he has so closely identified. This is precisely because it is a *specular* and false image in the external world. The lifestyle depicted within contemporary gambling adverts can be conceived as a corporately engineered *synecdoche*: a part, which is alleged to represent—but misrepresents—the whole. Nevertheless, in a consumer culture that privileges immediacy, individualistic hedonism and youthful identity above all else, Nick feels compelled to delay his inevitable reality of ‘growing up’ and return to these arenas of youthful consumption in the hope that he will finally achieve this ego ideal and, describing it almost like a disease or an exorcism, ‘get it out of his system’.

Traditionally, the human life-span has been thought of as a series of stages in which one life-stage builds out of and progresses upon the previous (Erikson, 1982). In modernity, this notion of ‘growing up’ into adulthood was fundamental to the successful functioning of an industrial capitalism that required a continuously replenished mass labour force and its associated social institutions. Today, settling down and deferring gratification is thoroughly incompatible with the *neophilia* of consumer culture (Campbell, 1987). Specifically, the repressive identity structures of modernity are perceived as negating opportunities for self-expression independent of capitalist structures (Riley et al, 2013). However, this has not liberated the individual from the need for identity but *intensified* it. As ultra-realist criminological thinkers have observed, the need to identify with a symbolic order is an unavoidable and fundamentally necessary aspect of identity-formation and socialisation driven by a powerful and unconscious sense of lack that exists at the heart of the subject (Hall and Winlow, 2015). However, our current symbolic order is relentlessly shaped and characterised by neoliberal individualism and consumer capitalism obsessed with the



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primacy and constancy of youth, hijacking the socialisation process and leaving individuals pursuing the unattainable specular images of aforementioned *ego-ideals* presented in the external world.

The infantile hedonist is a character instantly recognisable within advertising campaigns from sports-betting companies which visually attach gambling to the accumulation of cultural capital and drinking down the pub. As Barber (2007: 7) has observed, "these avatars of consumer capitalism are aiming both to sell to a younger demographic and to imbue older consumers with the tastes of the young". Within the alcohol industry, we see WKD and Carling drawing upon this trope of infantilisation through the depiction of silly schoolboy pranks in adult settings such as bars and offices. The gambling industry has largely followed suit, as seen through the 'Ladbrokes Life' advertising campaign (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MgCzKQJyWdk>). Barring the description of gambling as an entire lifestyle to be lived, the most intriguing aspect of these adverts is the conspicuous *absence* of betting in the visual depiction of lifestyle gambling. What we see is gambling as an undercurrent to a wider lifestyle of laddish infantilisation and more general youthful consumption among a group of men of ambiguous ages that range from their late twenties to early forties. Gambling, therefore, becomes a vital attachment to these wider circuits of consumption that is part of the valorised and glamorised 'Ladbrokes Life' of youthful exuberance, silliness and adventure with friends.

Moreover, access to friendships become increasingly contingent upon a willingness to bet and join in the fun. Reith (1999a) has argued, quite correctly, that the aim of the gambler is not to win or lose but to simply prolong the indefinite continuation of play. We would agree with this statement, and revise it only to expand the notion of 'play' to the wider circuits of consumption and access to the tenuous and fragile friendships with which lifestyle gambling is now entangled. The lifestyle gambler is not driven by a desire to accumulate profit and protect their winnings. Spending money rather than making money was an accepted feature of lifestyle gamblers' narratives<sup>2</sup>. Winning bets merely facilitated the ability to place further bets, cover debts, or spend money on alcohol, recreational drugs, and consumer capitalism's fetishized commodities. As Dave explains:

"It's the best feeling ever beating the bookies. Although most of the time when I do, I make like the big'un and all like 'yeah lads drinks on me' [laughs]. Before I know it I've spunked away my winnings and then some. I would transfer the

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<sup>2</sup> This is consistent with existing reflections on the relationship between the gambler and money (Benjamin, 1992; Pascal, 1987).

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money back into my [bank] account. But I always end up sticking £30 or £40 back into my SkyBet account and the next thing I know I'm back in the red [in debt]"

Quite clearly then, this new age of betting constitutes more than the sum of its parts of winning and losing. Rather, it is a wider identity-based culture of betting in which the way one bets and, more importantly, responds to the peaks and troughs of winning and losing, provides a reflective mirror of *who they are*. As Binde (2010) has observed, identity-based cultures of gambling encourage impulsive betting, the chasing of losses and as we have observed from Dave's words above, the spiralling costs and creeping indebtedness that stems from gambling's embedded position within wider circuits of consumption. Dave's response to winning a bet was far from unique. Being bought a pint or taking care of the cab fare was the *expected* response to a winning bet, irrespective of the sum won. This is evidence that the practice of gambling and its profits have become socialised or, to quote the Ladbrokes Life advert, a 'team sport'. However, this does not apply in the same way to losing. Upon losses, the gambler is expected to deal with the loss and its consequences individually. They are told to suppress it and 'forget about it', internalising its potentially negative financial and domestic costs rather than drawing upon the solidarity of friendship as a means of support. The gambling loss is to be combatted by spending further money (usually on alcohol) and often at an intensifying rate in order to avoid being a 'downer' for others.

Missing out and letting a 'bad bet get you down' elicits the shame, guilt and anxiety that we would expect to associate predominantly with losing money. This is clearly vocalised in the following comments by Darren, who was reflecting on his decision to stay out, continue drinking and betting in the casino after losing £90 earlier on various bets on the football:

"What a nightmare of a day. [Manchester] City let me down on one bet, and the spuds [Tottenham Hotspur] let me down on another. I won two bets but I may as well have wiped my arse with those. But you're just a bit of a tit if you sulk and you're like 'nah I'm going home lads' because you're worrying about money. We're *all* worrying about money. So if you go then it just deflates everyone else, know what I mean? Plus, I'd feel like a dick if I went home and then the lads have a cracking night and are just ripping me about why I'm not out. I'd just be home sulking. May as well just stay out long enough that you forget about it and all you really remember is a good night and a laugh."

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Darren's resilience in the face of gambling losses illuminates the subject's role in the unconscious repression of what they already know: that their attachment to consumer capitalism and its myriad 'sublime' consumer objects and commodified experiences is both the source of and temporary salve for their underlying anxiety. In this sense, the resilience of consumer capitalism is centred upon what Steve Hall (2012b) refers to as 'the solicitation of the trap'. As we have discussed above, the need to identify with a symbolic order is fundamental to identity-formation and socialisation. However, consumerism is perhaps the foremost architect of our present symbolic order as it shapes our fantasies and expectations of what it means to live 'the good life' (Žižek, 2002). For this study, our participants did not reluctantly partake in the specular dreams of a consumer culture. Rather, they *actively solicited them* in the absence of an *alternative* symbolic order (Hall, 2012b), only to then systematically repress into the unconscious the harms associated with lifestyle gambling and consumer culture more broadly. Participants *really knew* about these issues, but fetishistically denied them. This is encapsulated perfectly by Darren's admittance that "We're all worrying about money", whilst attempting to resolve these problems and assuage these anxieties by "staying out long enough that you forget about it". In the eyes of the committed lifestyle gambler, the only way to temporarily alleviate the underlying *objectless anxiety* (Hall, 2012a) of their precarious existence is by compulsively re-entering those wider circuits of consumption that are the original and continuing source of their problems. The only conscious choice that could be seen was continued participation or the complete cultural irrelevance and merciless teasing, ostracism and isolation from friendship groups; which did not amount to much of a 'choice' at all. This has significant implications for a research field of leisure and consumption which has consistently depicted a free, autonomous subject capable of reflexively reinventing themselves and their identities unburdened by the pressures of late-capitalism and consumer culture (Riley et al, 2013; see Rojek, 2010 for critique).

Developments in online gambling platforms that allow the individual to place bets against friends, alongside discernible 'mate' narratives within advertising indicate that friendship and sociability has become pivotal to the market success of lifestyle gambling. However, the extent to which gambling is a truly pro-social activity is of course questionable. Friendships cultivated and maintained within the circuits of consumer capitalism are far from the parallel biographies and community bonds that characterised the modern era, and instead have more in common with the 'pure relationships' identified by Giddens (1991). Failure to maintain a presence in gambling, the NTE, and associated circuits of consumption can spell the end (or at least a hiatus) for 'liquid' friendships (Bauman, 2000):

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“When you're not there every week, doing the away days, boozing and that, having a cheeky punt [bet], you just kinda lose contact with all the boys at football 'cos that's really the only place you see 'em. Can't join in with the group chats on WhatsApp, banter and that. So once things settled down [financially] and I started going again then it [debt] just all started again.... I can live with losing a bit of money, it's a good laugh. The downer is when you've gotta go home and your missus gives you stick about losing a ton [£100] on top of the couple hundred you spent on tickets, travel, booze.” (Marc, 29-years-old)

Marc's anxiety around losing 'contact with the boys' is palpable, but his access to the friend group depends on his ability to pay his way and engage in the consumer markets of football, drinking and gambling. In this sense, these are instrumental friendships, distilled down to their use-value. This desire to consume results in spiralling harmful consumption and financial implications that quite quickly impinge upon these lifestyle gamblers' mental health, personal relationships and domestic lives. Just a year after being in a position to buy a house and take out a mortgage with his partner, Tom, a 35-year-old tradesman, is in significant financial trouble having taken out three different payday loans:

I'm not some down and outer or nothing. I've still got my job and that. I'm alright. But every month you go 'yeah I'll be good and put a bit away and make a dent in it' [debt]. But things get a bit tight so you extend your overdraft. That's just a license to spend money though innit? You've kind of got that weight off your back. It's like a bit of breathing room. So I went out to just have a couple pints with Jordy and Mick down [regular pub name] just to unwind a bit. Course it turns into a proper massive one and we end up down Grosvenor [a large chain casino] and I drop £300 quid on roulette of all things. It just goes and goes from there. Imagine trying to explain that to [girlfriend's name]?

Tom's relationship has deteriorated since this time. His partner has moved out of their shared home citing his need to 'grow up' and his reckless financial and alcohol consumption habits; habits which he claims stem from her not understanding his need to 'spend time with the lads'. Now, unable to afford paying his mortgage alone, he is in the process of selling the house, constantly having to turn down requests to come out, attend the football, and resisting the temptation to bet, resulting in significant anxiety and more problematic drinking habits:

“Mate it's bad. Being alone makes that harder than ever. She's [girlfriend] gone. I'm just sitting on my arse. Think the lads are a bit fed up that I'm constantly saying I can't come out. Haven't really heard much from them in a while. Usually it's every day. I know, I sound like such a needy cunt. I just sit at home

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getting so worried about everything that I nip to the shop and just buy a crate [of beer] and smash it. Can't remember the last day I didn't have a drink actually".

The socialisation of gambling in consumer culture compounds and exacerbates existing anxieties and inequalities that permeate youth leisure cultures. However, the following section explores what it is about gambling *specifically* that provokes issues of spiralling indebtedness and its subsequent personal and social problems. What makes gambling distinct from, for example, buying clothes or a new phone? In the following section, we spend time critically theorising the contemporary gambler's problematic and increasingly casualised relationship with *money*, situated within a broader analysis of the psychoanalytical structure of consumer capitalism. Here, we look at how both money and 'the promise' of consumerism (McGowan, 2016) become *desublimated*, as the gambling win fails to offer lasting satisfaction whilst simultaneously eroding money's 'sublime' status (Bjerg, 2009). The desublimation of money is exacerbated within the contemporary context of 'accelerated culture', in which we are increasingly separated from the physical symbolism of notes and coins, whilst having unfettered access to various forms of debt such as overdrafts and payday loans through the casual swipe and tap of a phone screen.

### **'The Promise' of Capitalism and The Desublimation of Money**

Our ethnographic examination of lifestyle gambling consistently uncovered two related and recurring themes. The first theme is the palpable dissatisfaction associated with the gambling *win*. Participants continuously expressed a fleeting but rapidly-declining experience of elation after a win, followed swiftly by an experience of loss, dissatisfaction, and the desire to re-stake their winnings (and more) on new bets. The second was the sense that within gambling, money had little value beyond the flimsy symbolic capital of a situated knowledge around football, boxing or any other sport. One participant, Kenny, who has recently joined a gambler's anonymous support group after accumulating nearly £4,000 of debt stated this quite plainly:

"In gambling, money has no value. You tap in your stake and place your bet and it means nothing. You don't think of it as money for the rent, or the council tax, or to pay for petrol or any of that. It loses all of its value" (Kenny, 30 years old)

These were phenomenological and psychological sensations expressed by the vast majority of our participants in varying forms. The likes of Reith (1999a), Benjamin (1992), Dostoevsky (2015) and Pascal (1987) have all made similar observations that while money is a *necessary* element of gambling and winning is the alleged goal,

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neither are the primary object of the gambler. Rather, the primary aim of the gambler is the preservation of gambling's phenomenological sensation—its *promise*—through the “indefinite continuation of play” (Reith, 1999a: 145). Reith suggests that:

“This affective experience is generated by the creation and resolution of tension in the game...It begins the moment the bet is placed and ends when the outcome is known. In between, the gambler waits in anticipation, and in this state of suspended animation ‘the conflicting valences of fear or hope run in tingling arpeggios up and down his spine’ (Devereaux, 1949: 699)” (Reith, 1999a: 131).

However, we suggest that we can build upon Reith's rich phenomenological description to actively *explain* the dissatisfaction with the gambling win how money loses its value in gambling. Interestingly, we can do so through that which Reith (1999a:145) explicitly rejects—a psychoanalytic theory of money and consumerism in a capitalist system. Here, we suggest that the gambling win provokes a double trauma, which disintegrates both money's status as a sublime object of capitalist ideology (Žižek, 1989), and *the promise* of the gambling win.

Reith's (1999a) scepticism toward psychoanalytic theory appears to be based upon the assumption that psychoanalytic theory positions the subject as playing “out of a masochistic desire to lose” (1999a: 145). Of course, the gambler's desire is to win. Throughout this research we did not witness a single incident in which our participants placed a bet in the masochistic hope that they lose. Rather, the problem lies in the fact that the capitalist subject actually finds the *realisation* of satisfaction essentially dissatisfying. This is because, as McGowan (2016: 11) writes, “the fundamental gesture of capitalism is the promise, and the promise functions as the basis of capitalist ideology”. One partakes in the latest fad diet or workout with the *promise* of the ideal body-figure. One buys the latest fashion that promises to provide them with the right ‘look’; and one places a bet in the *promise* of excitement, elation and the accumulation of enough winnings to satiate their desire. While Reith (1999a) describes this as part of some timeless natural desire for excitement, we can explain this phenomenon of gambling, excitement, and the desire to prolong the continuation of play within the context of the underlying generative mechanisms of consumer capitalism. As McGowan (2016) illustrates, it is the *preservation of the promise* that provides the driving energy of desire upon which capitalism is dependent. This is the notion that the One true object that will satisfy us is just around the corner in the next consumer purchase, new kitchen renovation, or indeed gambling stake. Conversely, therefore, it is our *dissatisfaction*, our constant quest to find this Object, that we find deeply satisfying.



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Of course, this ultimate Object of satisfaction does not exist. Moreover, it *cannot* exist. The presence of genuine satisfaction would sound the death knell of capitalism. Nevertheless, consumer society is predicated on the idea that such an Object of ultimate satisfaction that will bring an end to our desire *does* exist. Consequently, the promise of the gambling win—the anticipated and unattainable intensity of satisfaction—rapidly disintegrates upon its realisation. The win, while nice, always fails to live up to expectation:

“When you win, you always have that ‘get in’ moment. You think, ‘brilliant, £130 in the bag’, and you get a pint, get a round in for everyone, no worries, sorted. But then you think ‘it’s only £130’. You’re trying to be happy with it and you’re kind of looking around and nobody is as impressed or whatever as you thought they’d be. And you know you shouldn’t bet anymore, you’re £130 up, know what I mean? Be happy with it. But you’re not. And you think you’ve got the rest of the match and the rest of the day’s football and it’s like...*well that’s that over*. And it’s just a bit of a downer. That’s when you start betting more”  
(Dave, 31 years old)

The outcome of the bet—whether a win or a loss—signals the disappearance of the promise. Therefore, as David notes, ‘the promise’ must be restored either through re-staking their money on another bet; spending their money on consumer commodities which carry an immanently sublime ‘promise’; or, as was often the case in this research, doing both. However, there is a second related psychosocial process occurring here which works in conjunction with ‘the promise’ to, as Kenny alluded to earlier, strip money of its sublime value and encourage the gambler to compulsively restake their money. This is what Ole Bjerg (2009) describes as the ‘desublimation of money’.

Bjerg (2009) has argued that the problem gambler holds a distorted relationship with money. Bjerg’s starting point is to analyse money as a sublime object of capitalist ideology. As psychoanalysts of consumerism and capitalism have acknowledged, the ‘sublimity’ of an object is preserved not only through its cultural reification, but through the subject’s maintenance of an element of *distance* from the object (Žižek, 1989). Traditionally, money is something that requires time to accumulate. Bjerg (2009) observes that the worker must sell their labour and time to be paid wages, while even the capitalist entrepreneur must engage in a range of management and logistical duties before claiming profits. Money, therefore, is attached to and expresses the value of particular material and symbolic commodities. In gambling, however, money *loses its symbolic function*. No longer tied to any symbolic entity, money is simply created out of itself, seemingly out of thin air. In gambling, Bjerg argues, the subject gets ‘too close to money’ and money becomes *desublimated* as

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one can win "\$1000 in a breath". The gambler has done nothing to acquire it, nor has anything of symbolic value been acquired.

Much like the 'promise' of the win described above, the promise of money and its subsequent satisfaction and happiness is quickly destabilised as it loses its status as a sublime object. Much in the same way that scholars of consumerism have observed that the 'sublime' commodities of consumer culture rapidly lose their symbolic appeal upon the moment of acquisition, it is traumatically revealed to the gambler that the symbolic meaning and value usually attached to money—the sublime qualities seemingly inherent to it—carries no material reality and is, in fact, is nothing but a symbolic projection. This desublimation of money is captured within the experience of 'the big win' which, as in many other studies, was reflected on by many participants as an almost traumatic and formative event which forever transformed their experience and attitude to money. To quote one participant:

"I can vividly remember when I first got these apps mate. Like *vividly remember*. I'll never forget. And my mate did this acca and I was new to it so I did one myself, a five-fold accumulator. And it actually fucking came in. I won about a grand. I mean, £1000 just there, like that, sitting in my lap. I was in me living room just gobsmacked. I couldn't believe it. And I just remember expecting the whole day, thinking like 'if this comes in everything will be different. I expected to *feel so different*. I expected it to like, I dunno, just change everything. And it doesn't really. After that, I dunno you just don't really think about it. *It's just money*". (Glenn, 38-years-old)

Here we can see how, simultaneously, money is *desublimated* and 'the promise' of the gambling win traumatically disintegrates in the same moment. Glenn's description of the big win depicts money phantasmagorically appearing out of thin air as he lounges in the living room. Nevertheless, Glenn's imagined transformation and ultimate satisfaction that would stem from the unfettered access to capitalism's sublime object of ideology were never forthcoming. Instead, we get a sense of deflation and indifference in which, with a verbal shrug of the shoulders, money is 'just money'. Therefore, we can conceptualise the compulsive restaking of money—particularly after wins—as an effort to *resublimates* money, to put distance between the subject and money and restore money to its sublime perch; whilst simultaneously also restoring the *promise* of money. This is the psychoanalytic reason—rooted in the psychological structure of capitalism—that we see in gambling what Reith (1999a) described as the desire to indefinitely prolong the experience of play.

Moreover, the removal of distance from money is exacerbated in a technologically accelerated culture which, paradoxically, attempts to distance the subject from physical currency and the symbolism of notes and coins to engender a frictionless

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access to money and debt. From debit cards, to contactless payment, to Apple Pay mechanisms which do not even require one to take out their wallet: all are part of an evolution in the desublimation of money<sup>3</sup>. Debt can be acquired by simply tapping in numbers to a phone; the stake of a bet decided by sliding one's thumb up and down a screen:

“Mate it's just too easy that's the thing. I was sitting at home after [friend's] stag do and mate...lost a fortune out there betting on football back here and then in the casino. Like a *bad* amount know what I mean? I'm sitting there trying to figure out how I'm gonna pay for the redecorating and explain to my old man how I spunked the money he loaned me to help me *pay* for the fucking redecorating. I knew the costs were gonna start hitting my account soon and the money wouldn't be there. So I literally just got out my phone, extended my overdraft by like 800 quid just like that, and got a couple of them QuickQuid/Wonga loan things for another 400 quid. It literally took 20 minutes mate and that was it. I've been in the hole [debt] ever since. Ever since I've just been this agitated fucking mess, knocking back *Kalms*<sup>4</sup> like they're fucking skittles and drinking booze just to chill out.” (Marc, 29 years old).

Consequently, we can see how capitalism's basis in *dissatisfaction*, the desublimation of money in gambling, and unfettered access to debt can contribute to a potent cocktail which exacerbates issues of anxiety and lack which are endemic to late-capitalism. These subsequent issues of indebtedness and anxiety only contribute to a fear of missing out on the celebrated youthful hedonism of consumer culture; prompting a vicious cycle which many of the individuals in this study are finding it difficult to exit.

## Conclusion

The last two decades have witnessed a dramatic shift in the gambling terrain, both globally and domestically. Deregulation around advertising has embedded the industry within the largest sporting organisations in the world, ensuring that industry logos are emblazoned across advertising hoardings at sports stadiums and on replica football kits, while the advertisements of gambling websites are synonymous with televised sports. Gambling has moved from being a pastime requiring

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<sup>3</sup> It should be made clear that we are not suggesting that society should materialistically worship money above all else. Money's status as a sublime object of ideology has resulted in various obscene and barbaric practices conducted in the name of wealth creation. Rather, we are suggesting that the leisure and consumer industries, in trying to reify their own objects, experiences and commodities, are continuously trying to *desublimat*e money in ways that encourage the subject to part ways with their money. In the context of gambling, however, this desublimation is incredibly destructive.

<sup>4</sup> Kalms are a popular brand of over-the-counter herbal medicinal tablets that aid stress, anxiety and sleeplessness.

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commitment and an intimate knowledge of the social habitus of the 'bookies', to a form of 'casual leisure' (Stebbins, 1997) that is accessible online through all handheld devices. The new mediascape of gambling detaches the gambler to some extent from the act of handing over money, robbing transactions of the symbolism associated with notes and coins. In combination with payday loans, overdrafts and other forms of credit that our participants utilise regularly, we can see the relationship between the gambler and money becoming distorted. In this way, money loses its 'sublime' status and merely becomes a means of accessing consumer society's reified gifts of consumer commodities and cultural capital (Bjerg, 2011). For the men at the centre of this research, the gambling transaction becomes more than a matter of winning or losing, but provides access to a temporary form of ontological security through the group dynamic reflected in advertising campaigns such as the 'Ladbrokes Life' series discussed above.

Utilising a deviant leisure perspective (Smith and Raymen, 2016), this article problematises the broadly positive depiction of 'social' or 'lifestyle' gambling (see Devereux 1949 on the social function of gambling; Parke et al, 2012) and its attachment to the symbolic and psychical structure of consumer culture. Far from being a harmless pastime or even one inhibitory to problematic gambling, the lifestyle gamblers discussed here could undoubtedly be described as problematic gamblers. These men display a reflective awareness that their gambling is against their own self-interest, and acknowledge the destructive potential in regard to their relationships, finances and personal well-being. But beyond tokenistic gestures from the industry, there is little indication that regulations are going to be tightened around advertising, online app-based gambling or the proliferation of online 'tipsters' (BBC News, 2016). Situated in the context of consumer culture, the pervasive fear of cultural obsolescence, and the extended adolescence of the 'lifestyle gambler', it does not seem unrealistic to suggest that the defence of socialised 'lifestyle gambling' as entirely unproblematic will become increasingly difficult to sustain.

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