

# Use of Social Media Platforms to Address Addiction and Psychosis in a New Age of Online College Gamblers

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## 1. Introduction

As gambling companies expand into the digital world, they have begun to approach the next generation in novel ways. Most recently, gambling companies have partnered with academic institutions to reach younger and more impressionable adults. Per a recent New York Times Articles titled, “How College and Sports Betting Companies “Ceasarized” Campus Life”, over eight universities have already partnered with online sports betting companies [1]. These academic institutions direct students, irrespective of age, to betting websites with promo codes which provide “free” funds to gamble [1]. While the full extent of the repercussions of such actions are not yet clear, to hand-wave these endorsements as “harmless” and “free” is sorely naïve.

### 1.1. Gambling Addictions

With DSM-V’s renaming of “Pathological Gambling” to “Gambling Disorder” and its reclassification under Substance-Related and Addictive Disorders, there has been formal acknowledgment of gambling tendencies to lead to psychologically addictive behavior [2]. College aged adults are at increased risk as most college students’ prefrontal cortexes are still in the process of maturing via synaptic pruning. During this period, individuals experience reduced executive function and higher impulsivity levels resulting in a greater susceptibility to gambling.

In other words, through these partnerships, academic institutions are supporting potentially pathologically addictive behavior to a substantially at-risk population. Prior to these deals, studies have shown the prevalence of college-aged students engaging in online betting to already be rising. Between 2005-2007, a study estimated 75% of the sampled college student cohort had gambled legally or illegally [3]. A 2007 meta-analysis found that the college-aged population had the highest rate in meeting the criteria for “disordered gambling” compared to adolescents and adults [4]. The obvious concern is then that there will not be just an overall rise in gambling but an increase to levels representative of a gambling disorder.

### 1.2. Prodromal Psychosis

Furthermore, the threat of pathological gambling is accom-

panied by an additional concern of prodromal psychosis. The Adult Psychiatry Morbidity Survey in 2007 found that problem gambling tended to co-exist with psychotic episodes [5]. Additional studies consistently show that psychosis is 3.5-5x more strongly associated with disordered gambling than with non-disordered gambling [6,7]. The relationship between psychosis and problematic gambling implies overlapping motivational and behavioral disturbances stemming from abnormal dopaminergic function and high impulsivity levels [8]. The peak incidence of prodromal psychosis tends to occur for males in their late teens and early 20’s [8]. This coincides with both average ages of college students and the period of prefrontal cortex development. Therefore, the college age demographic falls in line squarely with two peaks, one for pathological gambling and the other, prodromal psychosis.

### 1.3. Digital Health Intervention Methods

With these pressing concerns, identifying and addressing the issue with effective therapeutic modalities becomes of utmost importance. Various screening assessments for gambling and prodromal psychosis already exist in research and in practice. However, currently, these methods are limited by their reliance on physicality. Therefore, a successful method would both be independent of physical means of administration yet still focused on the at-risk demographic. One potential solution is the advent of social media, specifically the platform TikTok. TikTok has already gained immense attention for becoming the next frontier for public health [9]. Given that 41% of TikTok users were aged of 16-24 in 2019, this is an ideal platform to reach the target demographic [9]. The material on established screening modalities can be converted into short informative videos that detail warning signs and spread awareness.

Using digital media as an intervention, even for prodromal psychosis, has been efficacious. In 2017, Northwell’s Health’s Early Treatment Program and Strong 365, a non-profit organization, created a digital outreach campaign. Through landing page advertisements and monitoring selected Google AdWords, researchers identified those potentially displaying early signs of psychosis. Identified individuals in New York were then present-

ed with launch page advertisements promoting the availability of local early psychosis intervention clinics. During the program's runtime from April to July 2017, ads appeared 191,313 times and engaged with 4,350 times. Approximately 44% of users also took further steps to seek help, such as continuing to learn more about psychosis-specific information [10].

## 2. Conclusion

Monetizing students via digital sports gambling presents a very real risk to their wellbeing. Academic institutions endorsing such behavior not only spurs students to potentially develop gambling disorders but also prodromal psychosis. Considering this, understanding the vulnerabilities of this demographic, and identifying the most effective platforms to reach them becomes imperative as ensuing problems continue to rise. While the prospect of partnering with online gambling companies certainly seems lucrative, we must ask ourselves what the real cost is.

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