



The symbolic construction of sports betting products

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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies have explored the specific risk factors of sports betting attending to the singularities of sports bettors. However, many of these are also present in other gambling profiles (e.g. younger age, males, higher education, skill-based gambling) and fail to tackle the essentially distinguishing trait of sports betting, namely, its symbolic association with sport. This conceptual paper argues that sports betting draws from a rich pool of meanings from professional sport that influences how sports betting products are understood. It argues that, unlike other gambling products whose symbolic covering has to be built *after*, sports betting relies on a preexisting symbolic pool that structures its social significance. Sport confers to sports betting attributes of agency, control, and skill that make betting products more skill-oriented and less chance-based, but also other attributes of health, game, fun, and nature that decrease the perceived risks associated with sports betting. The paper contends that the symbolic association of sport and sports betting poses particular barriers for treatment of gambling disorder in the form of resistant cognitions about winning because professional sport embodies narratives of success deeply engraved in modern society, to an extent other gambling forms cannot compete in creating via their marketing strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

Sports betting is a socially constructed product that draws much of its market value from the symbolic association of gambling and the world of sport (Deans et al., 2016). As in any other gambling form, the sports betting industry magnifies the commercial attractiveness of its products by attaching symbolic attributes to them, in an attempt to

transcend their mere utilitarian value and drive a more emotional product consumption (Lee & Heere, 2018). However, unlike any other gambling form, sports betting relies on a highly rich pool of meanings and cultural significance (i.e., sports) to construct its symbolic dimension. This pool of meanings pre-exists sports betting and is theoretically independent from it, in the sense that it would continue to exist in a scenario that sports betting ceased to, whereas the events and places that make roulette, poker, or bingo possible (e.g., casinos, poker tournaments and bingo halls) would render them meaningless. In this regard, the ‘symbolic covering’ for the latter gambling types appear to be constructed *after*, once the gambling form was created, whereas a large proportion of such symbolic covering for sports betting was arguably there *before*, contained in sport.

Sports betting is a fast-growing commodity in many jurisdictions. In the UK, online and land-based sports betting combined (including horse and dog racing) represent 33.4% of the gambling industry’s gross gambling yield, that is, the money they get from bettors minus the money they return in prizes (Gambling Commission, 2021). A similar proportion (31.5%) has been reported in the Spanish gambling market (Dirección General de Ordenación del Juego [Directorate General for the Regulation of Gambling], 2020). In Australia in 2018, sports and racing betting comprised 19.2% of the total gambling expenditure in the country, but sports betting was the highest-growing gambling form, increasing at least twice as much as any other form (Queensland Government Statistician’s Office, 2019).

As a fast-growing gambling product, sports betting has become the target of multiple public health strategies (Hing et al., 2017). Consequently, a number of efforts have been made to single out the specific risk factors that differentiate sports betting from other

types of gambling (e.g., Estévez et al., 2017; Russell et al., 2019). However, such efforts systematically ignore the symbolic component of sports betting as a determining characteristic, and focus on co-occurring variables that are typically present in sports betting contexts but are not exclusive to it.

For example, studies reporting higher problem gambling severity in sports betting have argued that this might happen because among sports bettors there are more men than women (Baggio et al., 2018), something that is also apparent in other gambling forms. Similarly, sports betting engages younger gamblers (Stevens & Young, 2010), a subgroup that usually exhibits more gambling problems (Calado et al., 2017). Sports betting-related harm can also be attributable to the mode of access and the number of electronic devices used, which again interacts with the fact that online gamblers are a younger demographic than land-based gamblers (Estévez et al., 2017; Gainsbury, Liu, et al., 2016). Additionally, online sports bettors tend to differ from other land-based gamblers due to their higher average income (Russell et al., 2019). Furthermore, as a game of skill, the singularities found among sports bettors have also been generalised to other skill-based games such as poker and blackjack (Myrseth et al., 2010; Odlaug et al., 2011), as well as speculation-type activities such spread betting on sports and trading on stock market shares. Finally, sports bettors are subject to more frequent impacts from gambling advertising and more aggressive promotions (Hing et al., 2018; Rockloff et al., 2019). Even the most idiosyncratic features of sports betting such as micro-events (Russell et al., 2018) and the instantaneity of in-play betting (Killick & Griffiths, 2019; LaPlante et al., 2008) can theoretically be replicated in other gambling forms (e.g., live television bingo).

The aforementioned approaches share a common trait: individually considered, none of these characteristics are exclusive to sports betting and can be observed in other contemporary gambling forms. In summary, they do not seem to consider sports betting *per se* to be a distinctive form of gambling because they do not regard sport as its key differentiating component. This paper argues in the opposite direction. It explores the defining characteristics of sports betting regarding its symbolic association with sport, contending that by drawing narrative elements, meanings, metaphors, and symbols embedded in sport, the notion of sports betting attaches itself to a positive set of connotations. It further contends that expounding on the symbolic aspects that underpin the relationship between sport and sports betting, more nuanced, comprehensive models on how to understand sports betting-related harm can emerge. This is not to say that ‘individual-factor approaches’ such as those aforementioned are to be dismissed, but rather complemented by sociological-level understandings that recentre sport as a core component of sports betting.

The paper also deals with the sports betting industry, which is arguably the main producer of the symbolic connection between sport and their products. Moreover, the gambling industry’s strategies to make their products look less harmful than they actually are by means of pairing their business with sports is not a new argument (e.g., Hing et al., 2017; McMullan & Miller, 2008; Roth-Cohen & Tamir, 2017), and it is a process widely considered essential for the normalisation of contemporary sports betting (Deans et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the present study departs from previous conceptualisations in that it further develops the entire symbolical meaning transfer, systematically identifying all the elements that pass from sports to gambling. More specifically, it details how such transfer can affect sports bettors with gambling problems concerning access to treatment and

barriers for recovering during treatment, stigma, low self-awareness of their gambling disorder, distorted cognitions, and relapse. In more detail, it focuses on the harm-related repercussions of the skill versus chance balance in the cognitions of sports bettors, generalising the findings to the interaction between gaming and gambling.

The present paper is entirely conceptual and argumentative, and is divided into three major sections. The first section introduces a theoretical framework to better understand how symbolic associations are transferred from the pre-existing world into products and consumers. The second section details the symbolic association between sports and sports betting, listing all the attributes that sports betting borrows from sport to construct its own meaning. Most importantly, the third and final section explores the implications for public health of the meaning transfer from sport into sports betting.

HOW SYMBOLIC ASSOCIATIONS HAPPEN

Given the inefficiency of commercial gambling to produce long-term monetary gains for the vast majority of consumers, some sociologists have tried to explicate its attractiveness for the public in terms of something that exceeds its “strictly utilitarian and pecuniary orientations” (Cosgrave, 2006). One method to exceed the narrow remit of monetary appeals is to forge a symbolic association with other remits connoted with positive characteristics (Downes et al., 2006). For instance, according to Reith, all gambling games act “as a kind of theatre in which human relations with uncertainty are symbolically played out” (Reith, 1999, p. 183). Such perspectives provide great insight into the symbolic construction of sports betting.

The specific intersection of gambling and sport that constitutes sports betting entails a similar symbolic association that originates in sports and ends in gambling, transferring in the process some of its sporting attributes. An equivalent transfer in the opposite direction (i.e., from gambling to sport) could be argued but that would violate one of the main tenets of symbolic transference in capitalist societies, which is the flow from the real world onto products. This theory is precisely what McCracken (1986, 1988) defends in his *Meaning Transfer Model* (MTM). According to the MTM, “cultural meaning is drawn from a culturally constituted world and transferred to a consumer good. Then the meaning is drawn from the object and transferred to an individual consumer”(McCracken, 1986, p. 71). This theory implies a two-phase symbolic movement of meaning involving three actors: from constituted world to goods, and from goods to consumer. Being an anthropologist himself, McCracken thinks that constituted worlds are in fact “culturally constituted worlds”, in the sense that worlds are shaped by cultural categories, which are mental entities that a specific culture uses to divide up the phenomenal world (McCracken, 1986, p. 72).

The MTM tries to provide a mechanism to explain how societies confer meanings to objects, transforming them into cultural objects. When such objects get associated with other objects, they transfer their perceived attributes (i.e., meanings) from Object 1 to Object 2. For McCracken (1988), some of the main mechanisms for the transfer of meaning are advertising, fashion, and the arts. These cultural forms produce situations in which rituals of exchange and possession of objects are publicly represented. By the aggregate repetition of such rituals, the public gets to perceive Object 2 as having some of the attributes of Object 1. If successful, the newly acquired attributes of Object 2 are persistent even when the association with Object 1 ceases.

In this mechanism, objects can take the form of any cultural entity. Examples of objects examined by the MTM have been celebrity endorsements and co-branding strategies. In endorsements, celebrities transfer some of their attributes to the products they endorse in order to enhance the appeal of such products (Walker et al., 1992). In co-branding, the pairing of two brands make the meanings and attributes popularly associated with each brand to get attached to the paired brand (Hwang, 2017). An implicit assumption of MTM is that attributes or meanings are mobile qualities of cultural objects, which can be transferred when getting in contact with other objects. Consumer good producers typically assume MTM to work, and allocate resources to ensure their potential consumers perceive their products as possessing some of the positive attributes that other objects from the culturally constituted world possess (Jain & Roy, 2016).

The MTM can be also applied to sports betting products. Sport is a culturally constituted world, sports betting a consumer good, and sports bettors the consumers. How humans in contemporary societies attach meaning to sport and constitute it as a cultural category distinguishable from other phenomena impacts how sports betting is understood when pairing with sport. As a chain mechanism, the symbolic value that the cultural category of sport bestows on sports betting gets in turn transferred down to consumers of betting products. Marketing and advertising strategies reflect rituals in which sports betting products and sports bettors become associated with positive attributes of sport, the result being the improvement of the general perception of sports betting.

Conversely, the symbolic association posited by the MTM can also malfunction in two possible ways. First, an undesired reverse meaning transfer from Object 2 to Object 1 can

occur (Campbell & Warren, 2012). This could explain recent episodes of backlash against sports organisations, leagues, and athletes for partnering up with sports betting operators (Conn & Davies, 2020; Forrest, 2012). In these cases, sports betting is transferring its negative connotations to sport, instead of the other way around. Second, the transfer of meaning from Object 1 to Object 2 might include negative attributes of the former than the latter is not interested in acquiring. Scandals involving bribery and corruption in supranational sports organisations as well as doping and sexual assault controversies of prominent athletes might exemplify this point. The following section draws on the MTM to detail how meaning gets transferred from sport to sports betting products.

THE SYMBOLIC ASSOCIATION OF SPORT AND GAMBLING

The relationship between sport and gambling

Sport is arguably one of the most central cultural categories of contemporary societies. The arrival and popularisation of television by mid-20th century transformed sport into a high value commodity capable of grabbing the attention of spectators more than any other television show (Rowe, 1999). Professional sport, as an industry with great and seamless media exposition, has the ability to transmit a specific set of the values it symbolically represents (Wenner, 1998). Although sport has largely been seen as a positive addition to the social fabric (e.g., Hargreaves, 1986; Wann, 2006), its hegemony has also prompted studies questioning the dark side of the values it promotes (e.g., Coakley, 2009; Giulianotti, 2005). To illustrate this, Hoch (1972) cites how the societies we live in are mirrored in the sports we play, and, for example, the possession of the ball in multiple sports is a symbolic representation of the importance of private property in modern societies.

The penetration of gambling products in sport has largely been seen through the lens of the corruption of a positive good (sport) by the influence of a negative one (gambling), with many of the concerns converging around the growth of sports betting advertising (Browne et al., 2019). As various studies have demonstrated, the proliferation and diversity of sports betting marketing strategies has signalled for the public the rapid growth of the sports betting market (Lindsay et al., 2013; Sproston et al., 2015), a growth so apparent as to refer to it as a “gamblification of sport” (McMullan & Miller, 2008).

However, modern sport was arguably *gamblified* long ago. The first newspapers entirely dedicated to sports in the UK – *Sporting Life* (1863), *Sporting Chronicle* (1871) – largely focused on disseminating tips and forecasts for a readership mainly comprising horseracing bettors. Statistics were reported, and semi-live odds concerning horses were communicated by telegraph (Reith, 1999). Tipsters, now in prominence thanks to social media, offered their tips in the newspaper columns. Interestingly, betting not only occurred on already existing sports events, but in some cases such events were created for the sole purpose of betting. Common examples included personal bets over walking a specific distance, which gave rise to pedestrianism (i.e., competitive walking; Reith, 1999). More recent examples include the creation of UEFA Intertoto Cup in 1961, a summer football (soccer) tournament conceived to allow national football pools to continue their business activity during football off-season (Florin-Elbech, 2006).

Meaning transfer of sport to sports betting

Some of the effects of the gamblification of sport are observable. In abstract terms, an implicit association between sport and gambling has been found among adolescents (Li et al., 2018) as well as 5-12 year old children (Bestman et al., 2015). However, such

associations only demonstrate a latent linkage between the two notions but tell nothing about its content. The question remains ‘which specific meanings are being transferred?’

Taking sports betting advertising as a proxy for such association, multiple analyses of the content of bookmakers’ advertisements have identified recurring themes that structure their narratives. These include sophistication, excitement, glamour, power, wealth, personal success (Lamont et al., 2016; Sproston et al., 2015), thrill and risk, adventure, peer bonding, patriotism, social status, winning, happiness, power and control, sports fans rituals (Deans et al., 2016), alcohol and junk food consumption, control, humour, and team identification (Lopez-Gonzalez, Guerrero-Solé, et al., 2018). However, it could be conveniently argued that such themes are not exclusive of sports betting narratives because they are similarly utilised by non-sport forms of gambling. Content analyses of poker adverts have also demonstrated the use of humour, relaxation, wealth, confidence, excitement, togetherness (Kim et al., 2013), and themes of social status, glamour, excitement, humour, and the promise of wealth have been identically found in other gambling products’ advertising (Gainsbury, Delfabbro, et al., 2016; Sklar & Derevensky, 2011). Consequently, the association of sports betting with these themes does not appear to encapsulate the key symbolic domain that makes it stand out.

Drawing from all these findings, the present paper ventures further by proposing a new and comprehensive taxonomy of the symbolic association of sport and sports betting. Table 1 details specific attributes of sport and the form they adopt when they get transferred to the sports betting domain. The sport attributes outlined in Table 1 are divided into five main categories: educational, societal, modernity-related, aspirational, and emotional.

Insert Table 1 about here

The educational category encompasses positive values typically associated with sport that societies generally considers to be worth promoting. It includes considering sport as a health-promoting activity, sometimes connected to natural, open-air settings that reconnect humans to nature. These attributes imply psychological as well as psychical wellbeing, with strong symbolic implications as to the innocuity of sports betting products. Similarly, sport transfers other educational values particularly relevant for childhood such as cooperation, teamwork, and being just a game. These help to convey the idea that sports betting is suitable for young people, is something fun that is done with friends, further reinforcing the notion that it causes no harm. Elite sport is also widely perceived as a merit-based profession in which hard workers succeed, something that when extrapolated to bettors would imply that hard work would eventually pay off. Moreover, it is a closely scrutinised environment, with strict regulations that penalise cheats (e.g., performance-enhancing drugs), similar to how sports betting penalises match-fixing.

Sport is also considered to have a beneficial impact on the societies in which it is practiced. It is a legal business that pays taxes and creates jobs, very accessible for working-class people, and that perpetuates social rituals and traditions. According to this symbolic transfer, the same could be argued about bookmakers. The precise way the sport game itself is codified reinforces its fairness and the neutrality of its rules. Everything is monitored and recorded on camera, which symbolically translates into a sports betting context wherein bettors must trust the fairness of the results they obtain.

On a technological level, elite sport relies heavily on the latest available advances, creating an aura of modernity, innovation, high speed, and global interconnectivity. This is a symbolic construction that sports betting advertising reproduces, focusing on sports bettors *being there* (as if they were on the field) and being able to use responsive digital platforms to engage in betting. Additionally, sport is a cultural content that unlike films or books, requires no language knowledge to fully enjoy. This characteristic gets transferred to sports betting in the way that it relies on numerical systems for which sport contexts and country-specific characteristics are largely irrelevant.

Sport also conveys aspirational values, epitomised in the representation of wealth, media exposure and notoriety, and being a frequent backdrop for heroic narratives of achievement. Professional sportspeople, as discussed in the next section, achieve all such positive values and serve as aspirational figures for the next generations. The symbolic association with this parcel of sport arguably makes sports bettors more vulnerable to the idea that they can make it, that they can beat the bookies against all odds and become rich.

Fundamentally, sport also transfers emotional meanings to sports betting. Sport procures loyalty towards a team and/or sportsperson that embodies specific traits (e.g., belonging to the same community). It bonds people through sentiments of identity, and penalizes those who dare to break such bonds. Consequently, sports betting draws upon this pool of emotional connections to build brand loyalty, and becomes an emotion channel between bettors and the game. Sometimes, bookmakers make use of team identification to offer fans team-specific promotions (e.g., better odds if they bet on their preferred

team), which becomes a way of transforming team loyalty into sports betting brand loyalty, and therefore, a commercial exploitation of team–fan emotional link. We mentioned this in one of our content analysis of football ads papers. It would be worth referencing Lopez-Gonzalez, H., Guerrero-Sole, F. & Griffiths, M.D. (2018). A content analysis of how ‘normal’ sports betting behaviour is represented in gambling advertising. *Addiction Research and Theory*, 26, 238-247.

Furthermore, sport is a socially-permitted vehicle for behaving in ways otherwise disallowed. Sportspeople are allowed, within the rules, to be violent, to follow their animal instincts and to try to exert their dominance over other sportspeople. This momentary and fictional break from social constraints can be construed in the sports betting context as an individual following their intuitions, behaving like a man, and trying to beat the bookies.

Meaning transfer of sportspeople to sports betting

Not only sports, but sportspeople also embody a persuasive narrative about the path to success that resonates with sports betting and its meaning transfer. This narrative is better exemplified by famous athletes who serve as brand ambassadors for various gambling firms (e.g., Neymar, Usain Bolt, and Cristiano Ronaldo). However, the metaphorical influence of sportspeople’s careers goes beyond the most celebrated athletes and expands to the generic professional athlete story.

In its simplest terms, a professional athlete of a popular sport represents the narrative of somebody who has emerged over hundreds of thousands of other athletes who shared their goal but did not make it to the top of their profession. Professional athletes can be

interpreted as the ultimate illustration of meritocratic economic systems. They have jobs that millions of people have applied for (or aspired to have) but failed to obtain. For instance, in the case of football (soccer), recruitment networks reach potentially every corner of the world irrespective of geographical location, religion, language and domestic gross product (Darby, 2002). Rags to riches tales of now famous footballers are plentiful (e.g., Rivaldo or Luka Modrić). Once footballers start to compete, they receive constant public and private scrutiny from very early ages until they retire. Their job security and salary are permanently re-assessed and greatly depend on their most recent achievements. Those who underperform are quickly discarded or demoted. It is difficult to imagine any other high-paying job career “conceding interviews” to kids from underprivileged backgrounds, either due to discrimination or incapacity to obtain proper education and opportunity, which arguably makes world football one of the least biased career paths.

The aforementioned narrative is deeply engraved in the social imagery of elite sport and has an impact on the way sportspeople’s symbolic value is transferred to sports betting. In its transit towards sports betting, the sportsperson narrative confers to sports bettors the following meanings: (i) betting outcomes are the result of internal factors that the bettor is responsible to manage, (ii) talent, knowledge, and ability (i.e., skills) are the determining factors, (iii) external factors that escape the sportsperson’s control lose prominence in success narratives, and allusions to injuries, weather conditions, or referee’s mistakes are perceived as a weakness in the modern sports zeitgeist. Therefore, blaming bookmakers would be considered an external factor and should be avoided, (iv) skill can be improved via training, preparation and perseverance, (v) failure to succeed in the beginning is a completely normal phase, due to insufficient skills and inexperience, and can be corrected by further training, preparation, and perseverance, and (vi) the

individuals who did not make it are not visible, and narratives contain an inherent survival bias.

IMPLICATIONS FOR GAMBLING DISORDER

The meanings that sport transfers to sports betting would not be a question of particular interest if it were not for the impact they might have on public health. On the most abstract level, the symbolic transfer detailed in Table 1 identifies several categories that function as normalisers of sports betting, reinforcing its acceptance as an ordinary consumer good that poses no significant risks for the population. The normalisation of sports betting behaviour hampers the identification of betting-related harms and, paradoxically, by lowering the social stigma associated with being a sports bettor—something, in principle, positive – undermines problem gambling self-awareness among those experiencing it (Lopez-Gonzalez, Estévez, et al., 2018). Attributes that symbolically approach gambling to health, nature, suitability for young people, or being a working-class game contribute to the perception of sports betting as a riskless activity. Although this more abstract level cannot directly link greater normalisation with gambling-related harm, it does so indirectly by supporting the total consumption model that posits that problem gambling raises as a stable percentage of total gambling participation (Hansen & Rossow, 2008; Lund, 2008; Orford et al., 2013). If true, greater normalisation would equate to greater participation and, subsequently, to a larger number of people experiencing gambling-related harm.

At the core of the risks for public health associated with sports betting is its skill versus chance balance, which is critical for commercialising a product that is both attractive for gamblers and profitable for bookmakers. Evidently, truly enhancing skill in a commercial

gambling product is a paradox: if real skill was possible, profitability would be jeopardised for bookmakers. However, bookmakers resist to give up on the perceived skills components of sports betting, and their marketing strategies largely concentrate on promoting chance-minimising skill-maximising scenarios wherein sports knowledge can supposedly beat the bookies (Lopez-Gonzalez, Estévez, et al., 2018). Arguably, all gambling forms, irrespective of their actual skill weight, endow consumers with attributes of control and agency, even when these are mostly pseudo-agency tools – an example being many ‘pseudo-skills’ and ‘idiot skills’ reported by Griffiths (1994) in British ‘fruit machines’. For sports betting, although some studies have found that it is possible to design systematic strategies to make more accurate predictions than bookmakers, such strategies do not result in a net profit for bettors that can compensate for the commissions hidden in bookmakers’ odds (Cantinotti et al., 2004; Huberfeld et al., 2013; Khazaal et al., 2012). Other authors prefer to view sports betting not as embodying a chance versus skill dichotomy, but as a product located about the middle of a spectrum that ranges from pure chance to skill mixed with chance (Hurt, 2006). According to this view, sports betting sits very close to stock market trading within the speculation segment of the spectrum. Not surprisingly, the use of popular athletes such as Usain Bolt and Cristiano Ronaldo to endorse trading brands reinforces the consideration of sports betting and trading as analogous consumer goods for which similar skills are needed to succeed.

The attribute “game” aptly illustrates the issues with skill. This attribute, when passing from sport to sports betting conveys some of the inherent notions of games – namely, they are fun, safe, and with no real-life harmful consequences. But games also imply agency, control, and an active role of participants’ skills, whereas gambling implies lack of control and passivity. This is, in fact, one of the bases for the widely reported

convergence of gambling and gaming industries (Delfabbro et al., 2020), although in the present paper we do not refer to gaming (i.e., playing videogames) but to the act of playing any game in general. In the case of some videogames, game developers insert gambling-like elements (e.g., loot boxes as well as gambling products incorporating gaming elements that enhance the *playability* of the gambles and therefore, increase the perceived internal locus of control. This second feature (i.e., *gamification*) is the key in the symbolic transfer of the “game” attribute from sports to sports betting, serving the purpose of activating the cognitive scripts assigned to gaming when thinking about gambling. Table 2 outlines the main meanings being transferred by this symbolic association.

Insert Table 2 about here

Thinking of gambling in terms of playing games means focusing on internal rewards (e.g., fun, excitement) instead of money. It also means considering bets as experience-based consumption practices instead of objects with material value, and that the agency component is no longer alleged, or artificially pushed by marketing tactics, but inherently associated to the act of playing games. Also, gambling and playing games propose different ways of constructing immersive scenarios. Gambling immerses gamblers in “the zone”, a combination of “perceptual shelters”, an “inward focus into their own private domain that makes them oblivious to everything around them” (Dow Schüll, 2012, p. 40). The ‘zone’ gaming proposes shares attributes with gambling but includes narrative, linear components that makes it more digestible for the public scrutiny, endowing a sense of purpose in the immersion as opposed to the purposeless repetitiveness gambling

incentivises. It also includes socialisation components that gambling generally lacks, with exceptions.

Yet this strategy is not new. The Las Vegas gambling industry has been favouring the term ‘gaming’ in its public communications since at least the 1970s in an attempt to sanitise the negative connotations of the word gambling (Luntz, 2007). But where the sports betting and general gambling strategies significantly differ is in how genuine their ties to gaming are. Gambling arguably needs an artificial public relations and marketing plan to symbolically link the two, a strategy easily spotted by scholars and vulnerable to backlash (Cassidy, 2013; Griffiths et al., 2014; King & Delfabbro, 2019). Instead, sports betting effortlessly draws from the pool of game meanings sport naturally provides.

The impact of these seemingly abstract considerations about the symbolic meanings of sports betting becomes more apparent in therapy. Sports bettors undergoing treatment for gambling disorder struggle to eliminate their cognitions about the skill involved in sports betting, and even when they are abstinent and in recovery, they continue to verbalise thoughts that imply cognitions about the feasibility of winning in sports betting (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2020). In turn, professionals providing treatment to sports bettors might feel that long-held ideas about randomness and illusion of control no longer apply in a black-and-white manner as previously thought, and feel confused about how to tackle therapy with bettors that exhibit a combination of irrational and rational cognitions about betting (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2019). The situation gets worse with some products such as sports betting exchanges, which might not even include a house edge in their design, rendering partially obsolete the catchphrase “the house always wins”. In addition, the existence of visible examples of success such as professional tipsters apparently

contradict the inefficacy of gambling as a viable source for money, and makes it more difficult to debunk its skilful nature. The aggregate effect of all these circumstances can arguably worsen the treatment of cognitive distortions among sports bettors.

The professional athlete's narrative further consolidates the intended skill-based perception of sports betting by bookmakers. This is problematic in so many ways, but not least, in that it reinforces (and distorts) the responsible gambling framework adopted in gambling scholarship since the Reno model (Blaszczynski et al., 2004). The centrality of gambler's responsibility, in contrast to the responsible provision of gambling, has been an issue of heated debate in academia in recent years (Hancock & Smith, 2017; Miller & Thomas, 2018). The teachings that emanate from the association between sportspeople's successful careers and gamblers' gambling problems in terms of individual responsibility are troublesome. The aforementioned loss of prestige of discourses that focus on the external determinants of sport performance (e.g., injuries, weather, opponents) get symbolically transferred to the sports betting realm, and consequently, externally-based explanations of betting behaviour lose emphasis to the detriment of internal factors. The professional athlete's discourse might arguably empower sports bettors in their recovery but, as the responsible gambling framework does according to its critics, it might stigmatise and blame those who fail to stop gambling or relapse (Miller et al., 2018).

CONCLUSION

The present paper has argued that sports confers to sports betting unique symbolic attributes that explain why this gambling form presents essentially different risks for sports bettors as compared to other gambling types. The argument has been that the

symbolic association between sport and gambling reinforces specific cognitions about sports betting, normalising it, and lowering the awareness about its risks. It has also been argued that the cognitions about skills that sport transfers to sports betting play a significant role in imposing barriers for treatment, the extinction of distorted cognitions about winning, and relapse.

The main contribution of this paper is to produce a systematic and comprehensive taxonomy of meanings that sport conveys to gambling that works as a practical guide. It outlines the precise mechanisms that explain how bookmakers can be using sport-origin notions to build the symbolic covering of sports betting products as a means to distort the way these products are perceived and understood. The Meaning Transfer Model provided with a general framework to conduct this approach, and identified five main categories in which sports betting is drawing from pre-existing sport meanings to shape its products.

The paper partially evokes the methods and findings of previous research on sports betting advertising but clearly differentiates from it in making the case for a broader, more abstract scope to contemplate how the inner mechanisms of this type of advertising actually work. If other gambling forms can be as creative, manipulative, and persuasive as they want in putting forward new (and positive) interpretations of their products, sports betting does not necessarily have to rely on such tactics, and finds in sport a stable, rich pool of meanings that does not seem artificially imposed on the audience and has immense societal pervasiveness and acceptance. These factors, among other structural or situational ones that other gambling products might also incorporate, have been argued to be a key component of sports betting and one of the major causes for concern in treatment settings. In this regard, the paper implies that the specific enticements that

specific sports betting marketing strategies use to attract customers might be considered minutiae in the grand scheme of things, especially when compared to the magnitude of the underlying sport meanings fermenting for centuries that support an essentially biased understanding of sports betting.

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