

# SPORTS BETTING MARKETING AND ADVERTISING: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

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**M**arketing strategies are essential in a market environment such as online sports betting wherein product differentiation is minimal and price inelasticity robust (Hing, 2014). Business insiders widely accept that product innovation is instantly replicated across competitors, which are permanently seeking to generate, so far unfruitfully, a disruptive competitive edge. In a context where the number of licensed bookmakers is constantly growing, advertising plays a big part in luring customers who cannot tell the difference between companies. Advertising and marketing spend on sports betting has greatly increased over the last five years in Europe (Lopez-Gonzalez, Estévez & Griffiths, 2017).

In a recent paper, we outlined two of the most utilized master narratives in online betting promotions, namely skill-enhancing narratives – in which there is an over-emphasis on the capacities and knowledge of the bettor, and, at the other end of the spectrum, risk-lowering narratives which under-emphasise the risks involved in betting and typically overestimate the probability of winning (Lopez-Gonzalez, Estévez & Griffiths, 2017).

Skill-enhancing advertising: Vahe Baloulian, CEO of the betting software company BetConstruct, declared that new features were there to give customers ‘a chance to feel more in control by engaging more often and making decisions’ (Lopez-Gonzalez, Estévez & Griffiths, 2017), with ‘feel’ and ‘control’ being the keywords here. The ‘feel’ component refers to a perceived non-factual sensation that lies at the heart of the advertising endeavour. The perception of control over the betting activity has been found to be a common attribute of gambling narratives in Sweden, in which elements of skill have been exaggerated (Binde, 2009), as well as in televised commercials from Canada, wherein betting has been associated with the imagery of media sport

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communication, skills, and long-meditated strategies, while luck was downplayed (McMullan & Miller, 2008).

Many betting features newly added to online platforms are said by commercials to enhance the control of the user over the outcome of the event bet upon, including more gamified experiences (where passive bettors supposedly become players), immersive betting experiences, and fantasy sports (where the player actively recruits a team). In these examples, the betting experience demands a higher involvement from the bettor, arguably resulting in a psychological transference between the active role of a bettor executing actions and the actual influence a bettor's actions may have on the outcome of an external event. In essence, betting advertising contributes to the myth of gambling as a sport (McMullan & Miller, 2008), an activity that is healthy, harmless, and that can be mastered with practice and talent.

Among the most used selling points that enhance the self-efficacy and control of the sports bettor are the narratives of masculinity. Attributes such as loyalty to the team, being a real man, and being brave enough to prove sporting knowledge have been implicit in some sports betting messages, including stereotyped gender depictions and sexualized imagery (Thomas et al., 2015). According to Hing et al. (2016), the prototype sports bettor is male, young, tech-savvy, and professional, which aligns with the target audience of betting advertising. This reinforces the idea of male providers that sublimates in gambling their manly instincts for aggression, competition, and combat.

Risk-lowering advertising: In parallel to the skill-enhancing strategies, advertising diminishes the harmful consequences of excessive betting by representing it as a risk-free activity. The combined narrative would be that of a safe environment where intelligent people possess the tools to succeed. In an attempt to lower the perceived risk inherently embedded in any betting activity, three major messages have been emphasized by advertisers: (i) betting is a perfectly normal activity; (ii) errors in betting predictions are not fatal; and (iii) betting is a social activity (Lopez-Gonzalez, Estévez & Griffiths, 2017).

Advertising has been frequently proposed as a significant mechanism of gambling normalisation including new social media channels. The portrayal of gambling attitudes and behaviours in media representations as well as in real life environments promotes the idea of gambling as an intrinsic form of entertainment. This is true for all forms of gambling but sports betting presents some singular intensifiers. Unlike any other gambling form, sport instils in betting its health and sanitization attributes (McMullan & Miller, 2008). Attributes such as fair

competition, success through talent and perseverance, equal opportunities and big rewards, respect for nature, green and healthy habits are transmitted to betting behaviour. Celebrities deepen that connection as they have been proven to reduce the perceived risk by the public of the products they endorse (Lamont et al., 2016). Sportspeople tell the story of young, talented risk-takers who challenged the odds but emerged successful in the end, arguably a perfect incarnation of the bettor's own aspirational narrative.

Another marketing technique broadly employed by betting operators concerns the provision of risk-free bets. Advertisements typically offer welcome bonuses for new customers, free bonuses for loyal clientele, and money-back exceptions in multiple complex accumulated bets (Lopez-Gonzalez, Estévez & Griffiths, 2017). All of these free offers pose a dual threat. On the one hand, the so-called free money requires bettors to engage in further betting in order to reclaim their benefits (leading to money losses in the process). On the other hand, even if it is a bona fide free bonus, problem gamblers might conceptualise betting as a riskless activity that entails no responsibilities even when done excessively.

A third main risk-lowering technique used in commercials is the representation of betting as a social form of entertainment to be conducted alongside other people. Solitary gambling, like solitary drinking, has been thought to be a determinant and/or consequence of problem gambling (Griffiths, 1995). However, some studies have raised the alarm about the misconception that gambling, when done in group, cannot be problematic (Deans, Thomas, Daube and Derevensky, 2016). In fact, peer facilitation has been identified as a fundamental contributing factor to impulse betting, with excessive betting being more plausible when sport matches are viewed in the company of others (Lamont et al., 2016). Sport is a cultural product, socially consumed (watched, practiced, discussed, and bet upon). The social stigma attached to gambling habits might be shifting towards its naturalisation, a long-term process that advertising cannot carry out on its own but can certainly facilitate.

### The growth of the online sports betting industry

The online sports betting industry is a solid and rapidly growing sector of the global economy. Drawing on the wide influence of sport content in society and backed by nascent Internet regulatory frameworks, bookmakers appear to have succeeded in normalizing the action of wagering money on the outcome of a sporting competition (Parke et al., 2014). Sports betting, especially in the context of football, has traditionally been an



asynchronous experience wherein game watching served, among other things, as a verification of the outcome of a bet placed hours or days before the game. However, online betting via mobile phones incorporating in-play betting options, has synchronized the betting and watching activities, making them both happen simultaneously and hence allowing a larger degree of synergies between adjacent industries.

As we have argued, fans have become more familiarised with sport competitions, their involvement with sport (and sports betting) has grown accordingly (Lopez-Gonzalez & Griffiths, 2018a). The development of the telecommunication technologies and the reduced cost of transmitting sports events worldwide have brought competitions and fans together in unprecedented ways. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that sport is frequently among the most viewed television programmes in every country and among every age group. Betting operators have been wise enough to capitalize on the massive amount of televised sport available to the consumers. Television has made spectators integrate sports into their everyday life experiences, and enhance their knowledge, awareness, loyalty, team identification, and belonging. Over the last couple of decades, the progressive transformation of sport into a commodity would not have been possible without the fundamental contribution of mass-mediated sport. Given this context, online sports betting is arguably a predictable ramification of the complex commodification process traversing sport today (Lopez-Gonzalez & Griffiths, 2018a).

The media reassure the relationship built on trust between betting bookmakers and bettors. Since their inception, sports media and gambling have had parallel trajectories. The honour of being the first sports-based media outlet in history is commonly attributed to the Boston Gazette of 1733. The magazine included

racing fixture tables so readers could bet money on horses (Boyle, 2006). In an era when information did not travel as quickly and as reliably as today, gamblers needed assurances about the facts they were betting on. The true outcome of a game or a race happening miles away required an uninterested third party to objectively deliver the information needed. The trust between bookmakers and consumers evolved toward more sophisticated ways as the transmission platforms became more capable of presenting the spectators with vivid and often live proof of the contests (Lopez-Gonzalez & Griffiths, 2018a).

A number of examples illustrate the extent of the normalisation of betting in everyday sports media. First, media sports websites are big affiliate partners of betting operators. Affiliation in online marketing means that if a reader is redirected by a banner from a sports site to a betting site, and later this fan places a bet there, the sports site gets a proportion of the net gaming revenue generated in the betting activity. Although no concrete figures are available as to the extent of this affiliation market between sports and betting, two proxy figures may shed some light. More specifically, the proliferation of betting banners placed in online sports outlets (and in illegal live streaming feeds), make a compelling argument concerning the existence and volume of affiliate traffic (Lopez-Gonzalez & Griffiths, 2018a). Furthermore, back in 2012, gambling websites (sport and non-sport) were believed to attract 50% of its clients through affiliate marketing. If this was the case for online sports betting, then it would be safe to assume that a large proportion of that 50% must come from sites producing sports content and targeting sports fans (i.e., sports journalism).

Second, on a subtler narrative level, betting odds increasingly feature in news themselves. For instance, in 2016, British football club Leicester City were the unexpected Premier League football

champions. The story of a team overcoming the budget obstacles and winning the Premiership title was consistently emphasised using a betting narrative. The angle selected by many outlets was not the underdog defeating the Goliaths of English football but focused on the 5000-1 odds that Leicester City were given at the start of the 2015-16 season to win the league. Bettors who wagered money before the season began (and under such disadvantageous circumstances), were portrayed as true fans. Bookmakers, with estimated losses in the area of £25 million (Rayner & Brown, 2016), did not wait to capitalise on the event and promoted themselves as a business that delivered big money to fans.

Third, and still on a narrative level, the fact that data companies deliver information to both media outlets and betting companies makes it more probable that the kind of news that is published is at the same time conveniently shaped for betting purposes. Statistics and ephemerides (also superstitious numerical coincidences) identify patterns in past confrontations between two teams and project them for the build-up of the next game, manufacturing the narrative of a probable outcome without explicitly encouraging a bet on it (Lopez-Gonzalez & Griffiths, 2018a).

Fourth, sport media has been very successful in helping journalists in the transition from sport experts to betting experts. In a study conducted in Spain, researchers cross-checked a list of the top ten sport so-called journalists in the country with the most Twitter followers to see if they had any sort of relationship with the betting industry. The results showed that all of ten sports journalists had current or past endorsement deals with betting companies, with some even launching their own online betting platform (Lopez-Gonzalez & Tulloch, 2015). These journalists are regarded as knowledgeable experts that can provide followers with inside information (i.e., 'good' tips) about the status of the teams and sportspeople. Some of these journalists, managing accounts with over one million followers, function as influencers, promoting and normalising the use of betting sites to adults and minors alike.

#### Empirical research on sports betting advertising

Over the last 18 months, we have published a number of papers examining various aspects of sports betting advertising (i.e., Guerrero-Solé, Lopez-Gonzalez, Griffiths, 2017; Lopez-Gonzalez, Estévez & Griffiths, 2017, 2018; Lopez-Gonzalez, Estévez, Jimenez-Murcia & Griffiths, 2018; Lopez-Gonzalez & Griffiths, 2016, 2018a, 2018b; Lopez-Gonzalez, Guerrero-Solé, Estévez & Griffiths, 2018; Lopez-Gonzalez, Guerrero-Solé & Griffiths, 2018). A number of these papers have come from an in-depth analysis of British and Spanish sports betting television adverts (N=135) from 2014 to 2016. Our aim has been to understand how bettors and betting are being represented. In one of the studies using content analysis (i.e., Lopez-Gonzalez, Guerrero-Solé & Griffiths, 2018), 31 different variables grouped into seven broad categories were assessed, including general information about the advert, the characters and situations represented, the identification of the characters with sports, the use of online betting, the co-representation of gambling along other risky behaviours such as eating junk food and drinking alcohol, the amount of money wagered, and other variables such as the representation of free bets, humour, and celebrities. The results showed a male-

dominant betting representation with no interaction between women. We found that bettors were typically depicted surrounded by people but isolated in their betting, emphasising the individual consumption practice that mobile betting promotes. In-play betting was observed in almost half of the adverts. We also found some evidence of betting while watching sport in betting adverts being associated with emotionally charged situations such as celebrations and/or alcohol drinking. Bettors were typically depicted staking small amounts of money with large potential returns, implying high risk bets.

In another study (i.e., Lopez-Gonzalez, Guerrero-Solé, Estévez & Griffiths, 2018), we used the same dataset to carry out a metaphorical conceptualisation of online sports betting advertising. We found four main structural metaphors that shaped how online sports betting advertising can be understood: betting as (i) an act of love, (ii) a market, (iii) a sport, and (iv) a natural environment. In general, these metaphors, which were found widely across 29 different betting brands, facilitated the perception of bettors as active players, with an executive role in the sport events bet upon, and greater control over bet outcomes. Again using the same dataset, we carried out a 'grounded theory' analysis (Lopez-Gonzalez, Estévez & Griffiths, 2018) and found that individual themes found in online sports betting adverts aligned in a single core narrative, constructing a dual persuasive strategy of sports betting advertising. The core narrative was (i) to reduce the perceived risk involved in betting (with themes such as betting with friends, free money offers, humour, or the use of celebrities) while (ii) enhancing the perceived control of bettors (including themes of masculinity and sport knowledge). We also found that new technological features of sports betting platforms (e.g., live in-play betting) were being used by advertisers to build narratives in which the ability to predict a sports outcome was overlapped by the ability of bettors to use such platforms, equalizing the ease of betting with the ease of winning. We concluded that the construction of a magnified idea of control in sports betting advertising is a cause for concern that requires close regulatory scrutiny.

#### Conclusions

Although many influences for betting behaviour exist, this short article has outlined some of the contemporary areas in the marketing and advertising of sports betting. The product innovations prompted by the internet have essentially transformed the essence of sports betting activity. Our article raises awareness about the issues and challenges that might lie ahead as our societies continue collecting more data concerning the long-term consequences of the commercialisation strategies of betting brands. Until now, the social concern about perceived excessive marketing and advertising of betting products has conflicted with the paucity of definitive research demonstrating their unequivocal contribution to problem gambling behaviours. Further research is needed in order to scientifically inform the most appropriate interaction between bookmakers, media, regulators, and consumers. **CGI**

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