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## CONNECTING WITH SPORTS FANS: GAMBLING MARKETING STRATEGIES ON INSTAGRAM

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### Introduction

Social media platforms have become a prominent space for the proliferation of commercial messaging that includes themes related to harmful activities, including gambling. These platforms enable gambling operators not only to promote their services via platform-based advertising but also to build and position their brands. Accordingly, there is a growing multidisciplinary literature on the use of social media in gambling marketing (James and Bradley, 2021). Previous research has explored gambling operators' use of multiple platforms (Gainsbury et al., 2016; Lindeman et al., 2023) and of Twitter particularly, exploring their content strategies (Houghton et al., 2019) and engaging in sentiment analysis of the content (Bradley and James, 2019). Instagram however has been less explored. Marketing through Instagram provides important impression management content that when combined with relationship marketing tactics can build brands and position celebrities, high-profile athletes or social media influencers in the minds of consumers (Doyle, et al., 2022; Pitt et al., 2024). Our research examines how major gambling operators utilise sports media consumption as a vehicle for marketing and brand building on Instagram.

This study provides important insights into how gambling brands use social media, in particular Instagram, and potentially bypass existing regulations to prevent gambling

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communications being viewed by children and young people under 18 years. It furthers a growing body of evidence that evidences the extent of gambling marketing that young people are exposed to and how gambling companies exploit fandom to target both gamblers and non-gamblers alike.

## **Method**

This paper presents findings from a larger mixed-methods research project that examines the exposure, awareness and perceptions of young people to gambling marketing through and around live sports in two European countries on the island of Ireland.

The focus group findings provided insights into the participants' sports media consumption and their exposure, awareness and perceptions of gambling marketing and its relationship with sport. Informed by these findings, we identified live sporting events of interest to our young people (i.e., football, rugby, darts, athletics, and horseracing) and social media platforms that they used to access this content (i.e., Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube). As Instagram had the highest percentage (n=18, 94.7%) of usage among 18-24 years olds in our focus groups and the platform allows targeting those over 18 years old for branded content on gambling, we decided to select Instagram as our social media case study platform to examine gambling marketing strategies.

We collected a purposeful sample of posts, including image (N: 114) and video (N: 79), shared between October 2023 and early January 2024 from 7 major gambling brands' Instagram accounts (Paddy Power, Boyle Sports, Sky Bet, Ladbrokes, Betfair, Betway, Bet365). The posts, including their captions, were collected by taking screenshots and screen recordings.

To analyse the collected data, we developed a codebook building on previous work (Gainsbury et al., 2016; Lindeman et al., 2023; Rossi et al., 2023) and the data was coded and analysed in qualitative data analysis software, namely MAXQDA. The coding scheme was comprehensive, including post features (format, genre, hashtags, emojis, mentions, likes, colour, and engagement drive), gambling brand (visibility of brand logo/tagline), sports references (references to a specific sport, team, and/or fixture), youth appeal (music, humour, cultural symbols, celebrity endorsement), gender (visibility of female/male characters, and reference to women's/men's sports), gambling references (type of gambling, method of gambling, specific gamble/bet references, odds, encourage to gamble, and T&Cs), and responsible gambling (RG) messages (age limit, RG message location, RG discourse, RG tools, and RG organisations).

## **Findings**

The findings suggest that gambling operators utilise sports media consumption as a vehicle for marketing and brand building by connecting with sports fans through the distribution of native social media content related to sports. However, the extent of this marketing varied depending on the sport, with men's football, horse racing and darts most saturated by gambling marketing, while other sports received little attention from

the gambling operators. The fact that there is little to no reference to women's sports in the collected Instagram posts reinforces the gendered nature of gambling marketing.

The findings reveal significant disparities in exposure to gambling marketing based on particular sports, with football-related content dominating gambling marketing on Instagram. Closer examination reveals references to teams, especially those English premier league clubs with the most supporters such as Manchester City, Manchester United, Liverpool, and Arsenal and references to specific fixtures such as Manchester City vs. Liverpool and Arsenal vs. Manchester City in the posts which increases the exposure of specific fan groups to gambling marketing. These teams are widely supported by young and old alike across the island of Ireland.

One prominent brand-building strategy of operators is to share content in a variety of different genres, especially sports content that is not directly related to gambling, to increase engagement. Such content includes informative content related to upcoming sports events and statistics, entertainment content like sport-related humorous sketches and interviews with sportspeople, promotional content such as information about their products and special weeks, and content related to responsible gambling. Informative and entertainment content drives more audience engagement compared to responsible gambling messages and general content promoting operators' services. One particular gambling operator, which has the most followers compared to other operators included in this research, stands out in the platform's algorithmic cultures by producing creative and relatable Instagram reels that appeal to a wide audience, increasing brand visibility and recognition.

While all operators share generic responsible gambling (RG) messages, especially during Safer Gambling Week in the UK and Ireland, these are mostly messages which display RG taglines such as *Take Time To Think* and *Be Gamble Aware* or messages which display RG organisation names and/or RG helplines. Indeed, our analysis has shown that such messages are often obscured when viewed on social media accounts on smartphones. Less prevalent are messages about gambling harms or those which give detailed information about RG tools where users can place limits on session length, losses, spending or deposits (Lopez-Gonzalez, et al., 2018).

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the distribution of native social media content on Instagram increases the exposure of some young adults who enjoy consuming sports media to gambling marketing. Unlike televised live sporting events that provide an avenue for distributing direct gambling messages, social media platforms such as Instagram facilitate the distribution of a wide variety of content types that not only seek to capture the attention of adult and youth sports fans, but also users who would not typically engage with gambling content. Overall, our analysis of gambling marketing content on Instagram has found that it attempts to reinforce the dominant industry narrative that gambling is a normal part of sports fandom and more broadly to (re) brand gambling as a normal 'leisure industry'. As with many industries however, they carefully conceal and obfuscate the individual and social harms that they generate.

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