

# Marketing and Advertising Online Sports Betting: A Problem Gambling Perspective

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## Abstract

In this article, online sports betting is explored with the objective of critically examining the potential impact on problem gambling of the emerging product features and advertising techniques used to market it. First, the extent of the issue is assessed by reviewing the sports betting prevalence rates and its association with gambling disorders, acknowledging the methodological difficulties of an unambiguous identification of what exactly constitutes sports-related gambling today. Second, the main changes in the marketization of online betting products are outlined, with specific focus on the new situational and structural characteristics that such products present along with the convergence of online betting with other adjacent products. Third, some of the most prevalent advertising master narratives employed by the betting industry are introduced, and the implications for problem gamblers and minors are discussed.

## Keywords

sport, gambling, online betting, gambling advertising, media

## Introduction

In 2012, it was estimated that 6.84 million Europeans gambled online in the continent (European Commission, 2014a). Among online forms of gambling, sports betting is the most prevalent, accounting for 48.3% of the overall online gambling industry

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(Global Betting and Gaming Consultancy, 2013). Sports betting companies in Europe are forecast to reach approximately €60 billion of gross gambling yield by 2016 (Foley-Train, 2014), excluding the unknown market generated by the unregulated online betting sites. The large and unprecedented demand for online gambling has prompted EU legislators to develop new up-to-date guidelines to inform public policy in member states (European Commission, 2014a). This has led to national legal frameworks to boost their industries which, at the same time, protect their citizens from the undesirable effects associated with online gambling. Such effects fall into two major groups: from an economic and sports integrity perspective, match-fixing issues; and from a public health perspective, problem gambling issues.

To date, the problem gambling perspective has gained much less interest from both sporting bodies and public institutions. Unlike more traditional forms of addictive gambling such as playing slot machines (Griffiths, 1999), historically, sports betting has not been a source of significant concern. In the pre-Internet sporting era, gambling on the football pools was engaged in weekly, and the results were not known until the weekend after all the football matches had been played. State-sponsored or informal pools were broadly regarded as social gambling activities and, as such, the in-group kept an eye over each other or if playing alone caused few problems (if any). Many of the risk factors for excessive gambling were simply not there. However, such risk factors are substantially embedded in contemporary sports betting. Features of the game such as event frequency, intensity, and duration—known factors influencing the onset of gambling disorder (Gray, LaPlante, & Shaffer, 2012; Griffiths & Auer, 2013; LaBrie, LaPlante, Nelson, Schumann, & Shaffer, 2007)—were typically absent from the sports betting structure. However, betting products are now marketed with new functionalities such as cash out, exchange, or accumulators that promise greater and instant fun.

The transformation of betting from a discontinuous (periodical and subject to availability) to a continuous (ubiquitous, globally accessible, and permanently available) form of gambling (Griffiths & Auer, 2013) has arguably changed the nature of the practice while raising timely questions about its potentially detrimental consequences. In response, betting operators (i.e., bookmakers) have attempted to turn the tide of the social concerns surrounding gambling by associating it with positive attitudes. As a social acceptance accelerator (Binde, 2014b; Deans, Thomas, Daube, & Derevensky, 2017), advertising depicts likable characters engaging in gambling activities, sometimes played by sport celebrities with wide public support in the community (Amos, Holmes, & Strutton, 2008). The morality of “hedonism, materialism, covetousness, individualism and fatalism” traditionally linked with gambling (Binde, 2014a, p. 10) is being reversed by bookmakers’ in an attempt to give the perception of betting as a leisure and entertainment activity (Korn, Hurson, & Reynolds, 2005; Monaghan, Derevensky, & Sklar, 2008).

The proliferation and pervasiveness of sports betting marketing and advertising when consuming mediated sport is probably self-evident for most sport fans in Western countries. According to EU estimations, over €150M are spent every year in sponsorship of the five biggest football markets alone (European Commission, 2014a). Examples involve jersey sponsorships (in the 2015-2016 season, seven English Premier

League teams out of 20 had bookmakers as main shirt sponsors), stadium renaming (e.g., Bet365 Stadium for English team Stoke City FC), adverts on television, social media buzz, in-stadium electronic banners, and a long list of other juxtapositions between the sport and betting industries (Lopez-Gonzalez & Griffiths, 2016b).

In this article, online sports betting is explored with the objective of critically examining the potential impact on problem gambling of the emerging product features and advertising techniques used to market it. First, the extent of the issue is assessed by reviewing the sports betting prevalence rates and its association with gambling disorders. Second, the main changes in the marketization of online betting products are outlined, with specific focus on the new situational and structural characteristics that such products present along with the convergence of online betting with other adjacent products. Third, some of the most prevalent advertising master narratives employed by the betting industry are introduced, and the implications for problem gamblers and minors are discussed. Broadly, this article seeks to build on the paucity of research available to raise awareness and delimit the conversation regarding the consequences for public health of online sports betting as it is currently being marketed and advertised.

Acknowledging the methodological difficulties of an unambiguous identification of what exactly constitutes sports-related gambling today, the present study excludes horse and dog racing from the operational definition of sports betting. Despite their large economic impact on the sports gambling industry in some territories, they raise two major issues. First, in many jurisdictions, horse races are categorized separately from the rest of sports regarding revenue accounting. Similarly, in countries where national gambling prevalence surveys have been carried out (e.g., British Gambling Prevalence Surveys [BGPSs]), horse and dog race betting are always excluded from sports betting and examined separately. Second, although massively popular in some countries (e.g., the United Kingdom, Japan, or Australia), horse and dog racing are arguably context-specific, with many countries showing no apparent interest in them.

## **Prevalence of Sports Betting and Problem Gambling**

There is no such concept as sport-related problem gambling in prevalence surveys because problem gambling is assessed on the totality of gambling experiences rather than a single activity. For instance, in the three BGPSs conducted since 1999, sport-related gambling is subsumed within a number of different gambling forms: “football pools and fixed odds coupons,” “private betting,” and “other events with a bookmaker.” The 2010 BGPS included “sports betting” as a category, along with “football pools” (no coupons), “fixed odds betting terminals,” “private betting,” and “spread betting” (which can include both sports or financial trading). In addition, the 2010 BGPS added a new category under online gambling activities to include “any online betting” (Wardle et al., 2011). More recently, the Health Survey for England 2013 also introduced a new category: “gambling on sports events (not online).”

Despite these limitations, some evidence can be inferred from gambling activity by gambling type. In England and Scotland, among adult males aged 16 years and above

during a 12-month period, 5% participated in offline football pools, 8% engaged in online betting (although no indication was made about whether this only involved sport), and 8% engaged in sports events (not online). Categories are not mutually exclusive so an overlapping of respondents across categories is very likely (Wardle et al., 2014). A similar rate was found in South Australia in 2012, with those betting on sports over the past year accounting for 6.1% of the adult population, an increase from the 4.2% reported in 2005 (The Social Research Centre, 2013).

In Spain, 1.5% of the adult (male and female) population had gambled online on sports in 2015 (Dirección General de Ordenación del Juego [DGOJ], 2016b), which is a significantly lower proportion compared with the British data, although methodological variations cannot be underestimated. Spanish data also show that, among those who have gambled online on a single gambling type only, betting on sports is the more prevalent form with up to 66% of those adults (DGOJ, 2016a).

The gambling type data disaggregation from France focuses only on those who gamble instead of examining the general population of gamblers and nongamblers. Among online gamblers, 35.1% reported having bet on sports during the last 12 months in 2009 (Costes et al., 2010). In another study with data from 2012, sports betting represented 16.4% of the gambling cohort (Costes, Kairouz, Eroukmanoff, & Monson, 2016) although again, the representativeness of sports betting behavior among the general gambling and nongambling population cannot be determined.

Due to the aforementioned shortcomings in the definition of sport-related gambling, there is only fragmented empirical evidence concerning the impact of sports-related problem gambling behavior. For instance, clinical reports indicate that treatment seeking has grown in Australia (Hing, 2014). In British Columbia (Canada), surveys have found that 23.6% of at-risk or problem gamblers had gambled on sports either offline or online (Malatests & Associates, 2014). A smaller proportion (16.2%) was found in the Spanish population screened in the national gambling survey, except this subgroup was entirely composed of online bettors (DGOJ, 2016b). In a study with patients from a pathological gambling unit within a community hospital in Barcelona, the researchers found that among those who had developed the disorder gambling online only (as opposed to those who gamble both online/offline or offline only), just over half (50.8%) were sport bettors (Jiménez-Murcia et al., 2011). Those who gamble online only (on any activity) and those who only gamble online on sports events represent a small minority of the total number of problem gamblers. However, the numbers make it advisable to monitor the evolution of this trend as the online gambling population grows.

## **The Marketing of Online Sports Betting**

In this article, it is argued that the growing conversion of sports betting into an online activity has prompted two types of transformations in the way companies market their betting products. First, the Internet has not only extended the opportunities to bet but also changed the characteristics of the betting practice itself. Such product characteristics can be divided into two categories, namely situational and structural

characteristics, that appear to be associated with factors influencing the onset and maintaining of betting as well as the difficulty of discontinuing it (Griffiths & Auer, 2013). Second, the online dimension has also enabled the proliferation of cross-marketing strategies leading to a convergence between previously independent markets or the tightening of the relationship between those with already established synergies.

### *New Situational and Structural Factors*

The Internet has substantially transformed the situational and structural characteristics of sports betting. Situational factors comprise all environmental features that might make gamblers feel comfortable (both psychologically and physically) while gambling (Griffiths, 1999), including sensory factors like color, music, and smell in the environment; novelty of the activity; accessibility or proximity to a gambling venue; social facilitation; and intrinsic association, which is defined as “the degree to which gambling is associated with other interests and attractions” (Griffiths, 1995, p. 197).

New situational factors in online sports betting include (a) easier and faster accessibility to betting opportunities, (b) ubiquity of bettable competitions around the globe and seamless availability of those competitions around the clock, (c) anonymity (in terms of social stigma traditionally attached to gambling) and comfortable betting from home or elsewhere via mobile devices, (d) greater social facilitation via online communities of bettors or betting leagues organized between groups of friends, and (e) an enhanced intrinsic association of sports betting with sporting values such as health, competition, team identification, and loyalty, further facilitated by the proliferation of live sport content on television and social media.

Structural factors refer to the specific characteristics or design of the gambling activity—for example, win probability, sound and lighting effects of the game, event frequency (how many bets a person can place in a given period of time), loss chasing facilitation (gambling to recover lost money), jackpot size, price structure, and near-miss opportunities (the psychological bias of interpreting losses as nearly wins or anticipatory of a winning streak; Griffiths, 2005).

New structural factors in online betting include (a) a greater frequency of bets, with shorter intervals between bets, and shorter event durations (e.g., virtual sports), meaning faster reward mechanisms; (b) in-play betting, which encompasses a closer connection between watching sport and betting; (c) contextual betting, with live markets that open after specific actions—for example, betting on the outcome of a penalty kick seconds after being awarded by the referee; (d) greater illusion of control over the bets with new functionalities that emphasize the skills involved and diminish the role of luck—for example, cash out (the person can withdraw the bet before the end of the event at the price stipulated by the betting site), accumulators (a person can aggregate multiple events in a single bet, increasing the potential return), exchange (betting against other people instead of the bookmaker); and (e) a greater integration in the betting process of the knowledge about the sport (e.g., daily fantasy sports), resulting in the gamification of the betting experience.

New situational and structural factors associated with Internet gambling have been considered to influence the onset of problem gambling in other nonsporting gambling contexts (McCormack & Griffiths, 2013). The relative novelty of these situational and structural characteristics affecting the wagering on sports is reflected in the scarcity of research devoted to understanding them. However, there are a few studies. An analysis of 47,603 *Bwin* betting website subscribers showed some interesting results in the direction of the importance of structural factors determining excessive gambling (LaPlante, Schumann, LaBrie, & Shaffer, 2008). The Most Involved Bettors (those comprising the most active 1% of the user sample) who gambled on final outcomes did not escalate their gambling behavior over time whereas those who gambled in-play did so. In a follow-up study a number of years later (LaPlante, Nelson, & Gray, 2014), the effect of in-play betting in the development of problem gambling became clearer. The researchers expanded the sample to other forms of gambling and compared the role of breadth (i.e., many different gambling forms) and depth involvement (i.e., more frequent betting) in problem gambling onset. They hypothesized that more involved users would be more likely to become problem gamblers (which was shown to be the case). For every form and gambling, when controlling for depth and breadth involvement, the model was not able to predict gambling-related problems, with one exception: in-play betting. The study suggested that a structural characteristic of a game, the live betting action, could be a precipitant, in conjunction with other determinants, of gambling disorders.

Another study found that self-limiting features—in which the bettor determines a maximum amount of money to be bet—made problem gamblers bet less frequently but, in turn, increased the stakes of the bets placed (LaBrie & Shaffer, 2011). Bettors who scored high on problem gambling scales chased their losses by implementing a risk aversion strategy, placing high bets conservatively on short odds events—that is, events with unbalanced contenders in which the outcome can more likely be determined beforehand but with a lower monetary return. The impact of the remainder of the situational and structural characteristics of online sports betting remains largely unknown.

### **Marketing Convergence**

The marketing cycle of a typical online betting firm aptly illustrates the converging nature of sports and its neighboring industries. For instance, consider this soccer narrative. A betting site buys advertisement space in a national newspaper. The online edition of that newspaper accompanies the advertisement with an active link. If a user clicks on it and access the betting site, the newspaper as an affiliate marketer will get 30% of the money that user has lost betting (Affiliates United, 2014). To boost the number of users clicking on it, the paper publishes next to it a news article featuring Real Madrid on the eve of a match against Manchester United with the following headline: “Cristiano Ronaldo scored in 4 of his last 5 visits to Old Trafford.” Now, the journalist shares the link to that piece of news on *Twitter*, predicting a goal from Ronaldo, with a nonnegligible likelihood that he or she is in business with a betting

company, according to what was found in a 2014 sample of the 10 most followed sports journalists in Spain (Lopez-Gonzalez & Tulloch, 2015). The tweet might be read by someone at home, or even in the stands of a stadium as the game is being played, in which case a betting company might have sponsored the installation of high-speed wi-fi connection to facilitate bets (Hills, 2014). The bet will be preferably made in the proprietary app of the team, who partnered with the betting firm for an amount of money in exchange for adorning the stadium with the brand's logo, although exclusivity in the electronic banners surrounding the pitch is not possible as the home team must comply with the different betting partners of the league.

Chances are that those at home watching the game on television will hear a litany of statistics and ephemerides about the game delivered by the commentators, provided by a data company like *Perform* or *Dimension Data*, who in turn also provide those same data to betting companies, and which are also in a partnership with the league. It is these same data that will inform a fantasy league competition, which also sponsors the league. It might be the case that among the members of the family watching the game at home, there are minors who cannot legally gamble for money, for whom a social gaming alternative is also available that can smooth the transition toward real money gambling in the future (Cassidy, 2013). Also, for some demographic groups, sports betting might not be as appealing as eSports, but sport teams have already started sponsoring players in those competitions (Wakefield, 2016). When the match has finished, fans can watch further gambling commercials such as the ones related to poker, conveniently introduced by sportsmen such as Neymar, Rafael Nadal, or Cristiano Ronaldo, or indulge themselves in a little trading in the forex market company *Xtrade* endorsed by Cristiano Ronaldo himself (Golovtchenko, 2016).

A potential downside of such convergence might be the errors derived by a faulty identification of each product's category and characteristics. The border between not-for-real-money social gaming on sports and real money gambling might not be obvious, especially when gambling gradually approaches gaming with more gamification attributes being added to the betting experience (Betradar, 2014), and simultaneously, gaming approaches gambling by implementing real or virtual money in-app micro purchases or simulating gambling environments (Gainsbury, Hing, Delfabbro, & King, 2014). Blurred lines might impact the understanding of what is information and what is promotion, as has been observed with children having problems distinguishing gambling advertising from nonadvertising content (Sandberg, Gidlof, & Holmberg, 2011). Another downside could be the transference of positive attributes from sport to other markets (most notably financial trading or poker in the example above), that buy their way into the mental association by, for instance, becoming a named sponsor of a sporting competition.

However, neither the situational and structural characteristics nor the cross-marketing convergence act as singular factors determining online betting behavior. More likely, they work by aggregation, populating a marketing and advertising ecosystem that far from curtailing other gambling motivating factors—individual factors such as the biological, psychological, or social characteristics of the gambler—facilitates them.

## Advertising Online Sports Betting

Marketing 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 (iGaming Business, 2016a). 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 increased exponentially over the last 5 years in Europe (Van Rompuy & Asser Institute, 2015), and that is mirrored on the exposure to betting commercial messages of sports fans. Researchers have estimated that viewers of the Australian Football League and the National Rugby League—the two most followed sport codes in Australia—are exposed to 10 to 15 min of gambling advertisements per game (Gordon & Chapman, 2014). Similarly, Lindsay et al. (2013) looked further into the environmental impact of gambling advertising in sport events. They calculated that in three rugby league matches, the public had been exposed to “322 episodes” of betting marketing—for example, considering an episode every time an electronic banner advertised a gambling site—which is somewhat paradoxical given in-play betting is illegal in Australia (as of mid-2016).

Bookmakers might have been diluting the importance of the prediction of the final outcomes of an event and shifting their attention to new functionalities that promise bigger entertainment. Research into them found that, from a utilitarian and turnout maximization perspective, those functionalities are a bad business for bettors as they typically carry a higher expected loss (Newall, 2015). The same researchers realized that betting operators emphasize the participation in complex bet types, whose probability cannot be easily estimated.

One of the marketing tricks is the use of the psychological bias known as the “representativeness heuristic” (Tversky & Kahneman, 1983). Imagine the following two betting propositions concerning a soccer game: (a) FC Barcelona will lose the next match against the bottom team in the league (an extremely unlikely event, say .01 probability); (b) FC Barcelona will lose the next match against the bottom team in the league but (i.e., AND) Leo Messi will score at least one goal (this one an extremely likely event, for the sake of the argument, .99 probability). Mathematically speaking, Proposition B can never be a better choice than Proposition A, as  $P(A) = .01$  as opposed to  $P(B) = .01 \times .99 = .0099$ . However, bookmakers understand that Messi scoring a goal is a highly representative event that can effortlessly be retrieved from memory, transferring the representativeness to the whole betting proposition. In addition, it is plausible that representative heuristics work in conjunction with wishful thinking, overestimating the likelihood of an event based on one’s own preferences, as anecdotal evidence from betting advertisements concerning national teams participating in international competitions appear to suggest.

Below, two of most utilized master narratives in online betting promotions are discussed, namely skill-enhancing narratives—in which there is an overemphasis on the

capacities and knowledge of the bettor—and, at the other end of the spectrum, risk-lowering narratives—which underemphasize the risks involved in betting and typically overestimate the probability of winning.

### *Skill-Enhancing Advertising*

Vahe Balouljian, 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” (iGaming Business, 2016b, p. 36), with “feel” and “control” being the keywords here. The “feel” component refers to a perceived nonfactual sensation that lies at the heart of the advertising endeavor. 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 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 (Milner, Hing, Vitartas, & Lamont, 2013).

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; Thomas, Lewis, McLeod, & Haycock, 2012). According to Hing, Russell, Vitartas, and Lamont (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, as was observed in the behavior of horse race bettors as identified in early studies (e.g., Hess & Diller, 1969).

### *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: (a) betting is a perfectly normal activity; (b) errors in betting predictions are not fatal; and (c) betting is a social activity.

Advertising has been frequently proposed as a significant mechanism of gambling normalization (Binde, 2014b; Deans, Thomas, Daube, Derevensky, & Gordon, 2016; Hing, Vitartas, & Lamont, 2013; Sproston, Hanley, Brook, Hing, & Gainsbury, 2015; Thomas et al., 2015), including new social media channels (Gainsbury, Delfabbro, King, & Hing, 2016). The portrayal of gambling attitudes and behaviors 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 instills 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, and green and healthy habits are transmitted to betting behavior. Celebrities deepen that connection as they have been proven to reduce the perceived risk by the public of the products they endorse (Lamont, Hing, & Vitartas, 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. All these free offers pose a dual threat. On one hand, the so-called free money requires bettors to engage in further betting 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 conceptualize betting as a riskless activity that entails no responsibilities even when done excessively. Hing, Vitartas, and Lamont (2014) advocated careful review of such bonuses, which in some jurisdictions have been deemed illegal.

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 et al., 2017). 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 toward its naturalization, a long-term process that advertising cannot carry out on its own but can certainly facilitate.

### *Impact on Problem Gambling*

The causal association between betting advertising exposure and betting behavior is far from being established. Some correlational studies have demonstrated that bettors

who scored high on a problem gambling screening instrument also watched more sport on television and were more exposed to gambling advertising (Hing et al., 2013), but authors argue that those who have a gambling disorder might be more likely to expose themselves to advertisements as a result of their fixation, regarding advertising as the consequence rather than the cause of the problem. Yet, more recent studies have noted that problem gamblers who report stronger advertising impacts on their gambling behavior were equally exposed to advertising than nonproblem gamblers (Hanss, Mentzoni, Griffiths, & Pallesen, 2015).

Individuals who suffer an addiction to sports betting report that watching betting commercials worsens their behavior, or at least curtails their capacity to discontinue betting (Hing, Lamont, Vitartas, & Fink, 2015). Considering the limited evidence there is to support the influence of advertising in converting new gamblers, some have argued that promotions only effect the market share between the companies but not the overall volume of bettors (Hing et al., 2015). When asked about the betting promotions with highest impact on them, problem gamblers highlighted the on-screen displays (i.e., integrated into the narration of the game), with a message that emphasized how easy placing a bet was, preferably accompanied by a risk-free kind of bonus, and communicated to them by an attractive (but nonsurprisingly) nonexpert presenter host (Hing et al., 2014).

### **Minors**

A major source of preoccupation concerns the impact of betting advertising upon children. Parents usually express their own immunity to gambling promotions while show concern about the influence those advertisements can have on their children (Thomas et al., 2012), which could also be understood as a form of third-person effect wherein people overestimate the negative impact that advertising has on others while underestimating it on themselves. Researchers asked Australian children aged 5 to 12 to play with magnets on a board featuring their favorite sports teams and commercial brands to test how many were able to connect the team with the brand sponsoring that team's jersey. Arguably, one of the most alarming findings was that one fifth of the children associated their team with the betting company *Bet365*, even when that company was not the actual jersey sponsor (Bestman, Thomas, Randle, & Thomas, 2015).

The causes for concern regarding the influence of sports betting advertising upon children are twofold: sports bettors are younger than ever (Gassmann, Emrich, & Pierdzioch, 2015) and they tend to consider betting with friends a lesser form of gambling, a game in which they can self-express, be rebellious, and (as the saying goes) "put their money where their mouth is" (Korn et al., 2005). Some children have acknowledged that betting advertisements teach them that with sufficient knowledge and preparation, they can influence the odds of an event, and that skill is fundamentally involved in the game (McMullan & Kervin, 2012). While most gambling advertising forms are restricted to adult spaces, including watershed prohibitions for television in various countries, sport events (both in situ and on television) enjoy a privileged regime with much fewer restrictions. In many jurisdictions (such as the

United Kingdom), advertising sports betting in sport events is allowed at any hour and in any format, provided the event is not specifically targeting minors or that the athletes competing in it are not minors (European Commission, 2014b).

The sentimental bond with elite sport leagues and popular sportspeople appears to be entrenched in the imagination of children and adolescents. In contrast to alcohol or other forms of gambling advertising that recreate adult worlds with adult pleasures, sports betting cannot stop evoking a world familiar to children. In other words, if poker, casino, or slot machine advertising is rendered problematic is because the activities advertised are attached with negative connotations. However, sports betting and sport betting advertising are permanently associated with sport activities, which are largely considered harmless merit goods that can be actively performed or passively consumed (watching, reading, discussing) by children. Betting operators and advertisers alike may try to capitalize on that sentimental bond, exploring how traits such as team identification, territorial affiliation, loyalty, and peer pressure can lead to a more engaged betting conduct. Although no empirical evidence is available concerning the real influence of sporting sentimental bonding on minors' betting attitudes and behaviors, one recent interview-based study found preliminary indications of such influence in young adults (Deans et al., 2017). In this regard, the social responsibility of leading sport organizations and popular athletes among children when partnering with betting companies and delivering messages that exploit and normalize the sentimental threads associating betting with sport cannot be overemphasized.

## Concluding Remarks

Although several other paths for influencing betting behaviors exist, this article has outlined the main areas of the marketing and advertising influence concerning online sports betting. It has been argued that, from a problem gambling perspective, the product innovations prompted by the Internet have essentially transformed the essence of the sports betting activity. Causes for concern such as the convergence of betting and adjacent industries, the new structural and situational characteristics of online betting, the risk-lowering and skill-enhancing attributes embedded in betting promotions, or the emotional connection between sport and minors have been critically discussed.

Until an operational definition of sport-related gambling is available, it is difficult to estimate the extent of the problem, and to begin to consider sport itself and its dissemination and penetration techniques as a discernible risk factor affecting betting. The present authors have raised awareness about the issues and challenges that might lie ahead as our societies continue collecting more data concerning the long-term consequences of the commercialization 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 behaviors. In response to such concern, governments have acted conservatively and passed legislation limiting some gambling promotions' attributes and strategies. Some of these laws have been found

to offer protection beyond what researchers have actually been able to identify as harmful (Lopez-Gonzalez & Griffiths, 2016a). This does not deny by any means the existence of the problem but rather highlights its latent and elusive nature, reinforcing the thought that more research is urgently needed to scientifically inform the most appropriate interaction between bookmakers, media, regulators, and consumers.

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