How is ‘normal’ sports betting behaviour represented in gambling advertising?

What this research is about

Sports betting marketing and advertising are on the rise in many countries. Advertising may be normalising gambling behaviour as a common and socially acceptable activity. This could motivate more people to gamble. Norms are reflected in a person’s beliefs about how common a behaviour, like sports betting, is among others. Also, they are reflected in the extent to which a person feels pressured into engaging in that behaviour. Sports betting advertisements (ads) normalize betting by describing it repeatedly over time. Then, they influence bettors to follow specific behaviours while betting. The current study explored how sports betting ads represent bettors and betting behaviours in British and Spanish television.

What the researcher did

The researchers selected 135 sports betting television ads from British and Spanish television. All of the ads featured soccer, were shorter than 60 seconds, and were aired between June 2014 to September 2016.

The researchers used content analysis to evaluate each ad for 31 different features across seven broad categories. The seven categories included:

1. General information about the ad, such as brand name and length;
2. The characters and situations represented, such as gender, time of day, and location;
3. The identification of the characters with sports (i.e., sports fans);
4. The use of online betting, including in-play betting (i.e., betting while watching a game);
5. The presentation of gambling alongside other risky behaviours, such as eating junk food and drinking alcohol;
6. The amount of money bet, odds of winning and potential return; and
7. Other features such as the use of free bets, humour, and celebrities.

What the researcher found

The British and Spanish sports betting ads featured a number of patterns to communicate how betting is (or should be) normally carried out, and what a bettor is normally like.

1. Characters and situations: Most of the ads (77%) featured male bettors. Almost half (41.4%) of the
ads featured characters who were betting alone, even when more people were in the same room. Betting happened in a variety of locations and more often during daytime.

(2) **Sports identification:** Only a few ads (10.4%) showed characters wearing sportswear to identify them as sports fans. But many ads had characters showing satisfaction with a game outcome or celebrating a goal.

(3) **Risky behaviour:** Only a few ads (8.1%) showed alcohol and junk food being consumed. Drinking alcohol was usually associated with emotionally charged situations, such as celebrating a goal.

(4) **Online betting:** Almost half of the ads (46%) showed people betting while watching a sport either in a stadium or on the screen (in-play betting). The majority of the ads (92.4%) showed bettors using their smartphone to place bets.

(5) **Wagers placed:** Stakes, odds, and potential winnings differed between ads. However, no ad showed a bettor losing a bet. Also, the ads showed bettors wagering small amounts of money with large potential wins, implying high risk bets.

(6) **Others:** Over one-third (36.3%) of the ads promoted a free bet or refund when signing up as their clients. Over half of the ads (59.3%) used humour. Just under one-quarter (23%) of the ads had at least one character played by a celebrity. A small number of ads (14.1%) featured luxurious settings. These ads more frequently included women and drinking alcohol.

How you can use this research

Policymakers and legislators should consider the potential effects of how ads normalize gambling behaviour when developing policies for gambling advertising. For instance, ads featuring bets with small stakes but large potential wins may create the impression that gambling is less risky than it actually is. Future research should study how the representation of bettors and betting behaviours in ads influences people’s gambling attitudes and behaviours.

About the Researcher

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Citation


Keywords

Gambling advertising, gambling marketing, online gambling, in-play betting, mobile phone gambling

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