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Sportswashing and attitudes towards gambling

What this research is about

Sportswashing is when individuals, groups, companies, or countries become involved in sports to improve their own reputation. Sometimes, support for sports is used to distract from or normalize wrongdoing. A person's decision to engage in betting on sports teams or events connected to sportswashing may be influenced by various factors. For example, people with problem gambling may prioritize their own gambling. Thus, they may be less critical towards gambling when sportswashing is involved. The aim of this study was to examine how familiar people are with sportswashing and how they feel about gambling when sportswashing is involved.

What the researchers did

A survey was administered through the recruitment service Prolific in 2022. The researchers aimed to recruit a sample that was nationally representative in terms of age, gender, and ethnicity. A total of 1,021 residents of the United Kingdom completed the survey. But responses were only included in the analysis if the participant reported gambling at least once in the past 12 months and correctly answered two attention checks. The final sample consisted of 786 participants. About 50% were women. On average, participants were 46 years old. The survey included questions about the following:

- Demographics (age, education, etc.).
- Gambling participation within the last 12 months.
- Severity of gambling problems in the last 12 months based on the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI). Scores of 0 were categorized as "no problem", scores of 1–2 as "low risk", scores of 3–7 as "moderate risk", and scores of 8+ as "problem gambling."

What you need to know

The purpose of this study was to examine how familiar people are with sportswashing and how they feel about gambling when sportswashing is involved. Responses from 786 residents of the United Kingdom were analyzed in this study. Only 32% of participants had heard about sportswashing before the survey. About 43% said that they would avoid betting when sportswashing is involved. The proportion was lower among those with moderate gambling risk/problem gambling (35%) compared to those with no/low gambling risk (45%). Participants' attitudes towards gambling and sportswashing could be categorized as self-oriented or as oriented towards external factors, such as gambling companies and regulators. Overall, participants were more critical about gambling operators and regulators compared to themselves. This study also highlights how personality traits (honesty-humility) and moral foundations are related to attitudes towards gambling when sportswashing is present.

- Familiarity with sportswashing.
- Attitudes towards gambling and sportswashing, measured using a scale developed by the researchers. An example is "I dislike betting on sporting events where sportswashing is involved."
- Whether participants avoided betting when sportswashing is involved and the reasons.
- Personality traits based on the HEXACO-60 scale.
- Moral foundations based on the Moral Foundations Questionnaire.
- Trust in political institutions based on four questions from the European Social Survey.

- External political efficacy based on two questions from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems: whether it makes any difference who is in power, and if it makes any difference who people vote for.

What the researchers found

Only 32% of participants had heard about sportswashing before the survey. About 43% said that they would avoid betting when sportswashing is involved. The proportion was lower among those with moderate gambling risk/problem gambling (35%) compared to those with no/low gambling risk (45%).

The main reason for avoiding betting when sportswashing is involved was to avoid “signaling approval of sportswashing”, followed by concerns that sportswashers would benefit financially. When asked for examples of sportswashing, participants most often mentioned the World Cup, Qatar, football, and human rights.

Participants’ attitudes towards gambling and sportswashing could be categorized as self-oriented (i.e., how they relate to gambling when sportswashing is involved) or as oriented towards external factors, such as gambling companies and regulators. Overall, participants were more critical about gambling operators and regulators compared to themselves.

Participants with higher honesty-humility personality trait were more critical towards gambling when sportswashing is involved. This personality trait refers to a tendency to value equality, fairness, and the wellbeing of others. Three moral foundations (i.e., care/harm, fairness/cheating, and purity/degradation) also influenced attitudes towards gambling when sportswashing is involved. Care/harm refers to concerns for the welfare of others. Fairness/cheating refers to concerns for justice and equality. Purity/degradation is related to spirituality and sacredness. Political trust and political efficacy were not linked to attitudes towards gambling when sportswashing is involved.

How you can use this research

Researchers can use this study as a starting point for scale development around attitudes towards sportswashing.

About the researchers

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Citation

Syversten, A., Erevik, E. K., Fodstad, E. C., Girard, L. C., Kaur, P., Kristensen, J. H., Kolberg, E., Mentzoni, R. A., Morken, A. M., Sagoe, D., & Pallesen, S. (2023). An empirical study on attitudes toward gambling when sportswashing is involved. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1147332.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1147332>

Study funding

This study was funded by the Norwegian Competence Center for Gambling and Gaming Research.

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