

**A Content Analysis of Advertising by Popular Online Sports Betting Companies**

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## **Abstract**

This study applies McCracken's (1986) Meaning Transfer Model (MTM) to analyze popular metaphors used in sports betting advertisements. It examines four dominant metaphors and how some attributes from sport can be transferred to sports betting advertisements. The four metaphors that will inform this study are Betting is Loving, Betting as a Sport, Betting as a Natural Environment, and Betting as a Market which come from Lopez-Gonzalez et al. (2017). By examining the way these metaphors frame sports betting as a source of income, competitive, emotional, and instinctual activity, this study highlights how sports betting advertisements use popular narratives to shape consumer perceptions and behaviors. The MTM provides a lens to understand how these metaphors not only influence attitudes towards sports betting, but also strengthen the association between sports and gambling. This is further complicated by the rise in sports betting advertisements, persuasive roles of the media, and celebrity endorsements. The findings suggest that while these metaphors enhance engagement, they also raise concerns about the normalization and potential risks associated with gambling behavior.

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## **Content Analysis of Advertising by Popular Online Sports Betting Companies**

Anytime you watch TV, scroll through social media, or listen to the radio there's a good chance that you'll run across an advertisement from an online sports betting company. Online sports betting is starting to become an integral part of the general media, sports media and professional sporting events. But people have been betting on sports long before the Internet ever existed. The earliest accounts of people betting on sports traces all the way back to 4000-3000 BC when ancient Egyptians would bet on sports like fencing or chariot racing (Harris et al., 2024).

Moving forward to one of the earlier incidents involving sports betting on American soil, the Black Sox scandal took place during the 1919 World Series. This incident involved thirteen people being indicted with eight from the White Sox and five gamblers. This indictment came down after the White Sox players were accused of throwing games in the 1919 World Series. Three of the players who were indicted appeared before a grand jury, and one of the gamblers appeared as well. Eventually, the indictments were lifted against all the players and they were exonerated after the identity of one of the gamblers couldn't be confirmed. The players would later receive a lifetime ban from baseball (Baseball Hall of Fame, 2013).

Another gambling scandal in Major League Baseball (MLB) that took place in the 1980's was the Pete Rose scandal. Rose, who was a great baseball player turned manager, led MLB in hits with over 4,000 during his career. Early in 1989, Rose faced allegations of betting on baseball, after bet slips belonging to him were found in an Ohio restaurant. Evidence concluded that Rose placed multiple wagers on his team, the Cincinnati Reds, to win while he was managing the team. Further evidence showed that Rose also bet on himself while he was playing for the Reds as well, which would lead to a lifetime ban from MLB (Sutelan, 2024).

Now, in 2024, there are still scandals floating around MLB involving inappropriate sports betting activity linked to Shohei Ohtani from the Los Angeles Dodgers. Ohtani being from Japan requires an interpreter with him at all times, and the Dodgers hired his friend Ippi Mizuhara for this role. It soon came to light that Mizuhara stole \$4.5 million from Ohtani's bank account to pay an illegal bookmaker in Southern California for his gambling debts. Even though there have been numerous scandals around sports betting at the professional level, it's starting to sneak into the collegiate level as well (O'Brien, 2024).

Former Alabama head baseball coach Brad Bohannon was sanctioned by the NCAA for providing insider information to an individual known to be engaged in sports betting activities. Bohannon texted the bettor before a game in Spring of 2023, notified him of a player being out of the lineup, and told him to bet against them. The bettor proceeded to attempt to place a \$100,000 bet, but was limited to \$15,000 due to suspicious activity. This sparked a full investigation by the NCAA to look into the context of this wager (Wright, 2024). It doesn't just stop with baseball though; illegal sports wagering has had scandalous activity in other major professional sports like the NBA and NFL.

In 2024, Toronto Raptors forward Jontay Porter was issued a lifetime ban from the NBA for betting on NBA games and providing insider information to an individual engaged in sports betting. Before a game in March 2024 Porter provided information about his own health to a bettor telling him to take his under on stats, and then proceed to sit most of the game saying he was ill. The bettor placed an \$80,000 parlay bet on the under of Porter resulting in \$1 million worth of winnings. Also, from January to March 2024 Porter placed 13 NBA bets while traveling with his organization, using an alias account resulting in a net winning of \$20,000 from these bets (NBA, 2024).

On the NFL side of things, star wideout Calvin Ridley from the Atlanta Falcons was reported to have gambled \$3,900 on six wagers including one on the Falcons in the 2021 season. Five of his bets were multi-team parlays with the Falcons involved and one live bet on the team total of points the Falcons would score in that game. Ridley was caught because he tried to place the bets on a Florida sportsbook while being outside of Florida, which triggered a geolocation violation. These bets were placed while Ridley was away from the team on the non-football illness list as he was dealing with mental health issues. The consequences of Ridley's actions included a one-year suspension from the league without pay, resulting in a forfeit of \$11 million (Purdum, 2022).

With online sports betting continuing to grow it raises the risk for more scandals, addiction, and integrity issues to occur at the collegiate or professional level from either coaches or players. One of the biggest driving factors in the growth of online sports betting is the heavy advertising that is involved. During 2023, from January to November, there was \$471.8 million spent in the U.S. on gambling and casino TV advertisements while \$126.8 million was spent on paid social media posts (Lebow, 2024). This study will explore the common themes and content used in sports betting advertisements from popular sports books BetMGM & FanDuel's Youtube channels.

Concepts that will be used frequently throughout this writing include sports betting, sports media, problem gambling, and social media/ online. Sports betting involves any form of wagering on the outcome of anything involving sports. Online sports betting involves the wagering of sports on any mobile device or tablet with location services and wifi. Geolocation services are used to determine the gambler's location to see if it's legal in their state/location. Sports media involves anything covering sports from ESPN and its broadcasts, to social media

websites, radio, podcasts, and billboards etc. Problem gambling/gambling addiction has been defined as all gambling behavior patterns that compromise, disrupt, or damage personal, family or vocational pursuits (National Council on Problem Gambling, 2021).

## **Literature Review**

### **Meaning Transfer Model**

The theoretical framework that will be used for this study is the Meaning Transfer Model (MTM) symbolic construction of sports betting (McCraken, 1986). The MTM can be defined as follows: “Cultural meanings drawn from a culturally constituted world and transferred to a consumer good. Then the meaning is drawn from the object and transferred to an individual consumer” (McCraken, 1986, p. 71). McCraken (1986) explains, “This theory implies a two-phase symbolic movement of meaning involving three actors: from constituted world to goods, and from goods to consumer” ( p.71).

McCraken (1989) summarizes the overall objective of a celebrity-endorsed advertisement to be aimed at the successful transfer of meaning from celebrity to product or brand endorsed. Thus, McCraken (1989) also suggests that associations at the cultural and societal levels with the endorsed products should help with the guiding of the selection of a celebrity endorser. McCraken (1989) explains that the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements depends largely on the variety of associations the celebrity brings through the process of the endorsement. Celebrities first bring symbolic properties from their public roles, whether that be professional athletes or professional musicians, that provide a certain aura that has attracted the endorsers to grow the company. These properties are then transferred to a given product through marketing communications that correlate the celebrity with the product, and then are acknowledged and consumed by consumers.

Roy (2016) used the MTM to study celebrity endorsements in advertisements and the transference of the celebrities' associations to the endorsed brand. This study followed the MTM by breaking it down into Stage 1 as celebrity-generated meanings from their prior status/accomplishments in their career/life; Stage 2 involving the meanings associated with the celebrity that are transferred to the product brand through the endorsement; and Stage 3 involving the same meanings being transferred from the product to the consumers via the purchase activity and consumption. This article is key to this study due to the use of celebrity endorsers by online sports betting companies and the significance of this selection to the meaning of the ads.

More research that has been done on the MTM and celebrity endorsements comes from a study by Tian et al. (2021), who looked at the transferring of the positive and negative traits of a celebrity endorsement and their use of their social media platforms to further endorsements. This study examined celebrities' Instagram posts for their endorsed versus co-created brands. Social media has become a primary platform for celebrities to find and build connections with their following by updating them with their newest endorsements, life update or business venture (Tian et al., 2021). Celebrities then create secondary associations consumers may infer or relate to. "For example, consumers may infer that wearing Chanel No.5 perfume is sexy because of the endorsement Marilyn Monroe had." (Tian et al., 2021, p. 1020).

With this process, celebrity endorsements can influence beliefs and attitudes toward the brand (Tian et al., 2021). Reflecting on the current tactic of celebrity endorsement and social media co-branding, the visuals and text information from the celebrities' posts continually emphasize the relationship between brands and celebrities. This persuades consumers to

consciously process and infer the meaning of the partnership with the celebrity and the brand and draw an attitudinal conclusion.

Outside of celebrity endorsements and advertising, the MTM correlates with sports betting products, as sports is a culturally constituted world, sports betting is a consumer good, and sports bettors are the consumers. “One of the most eloquent indicators of the meaning transfer of sports to sports betting is arguably sports betting advertising” (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2021, p. 503). Research has shown sports betting marketing and advertising stimuli are central elements of modern consumption of elite sport, including evidence from multiple sports and countries (Hing et al., 2015, 2017; Milner et al., 2013; Sharman et al., 2020). Public and media representations of sports betting are so common now that even small associations between sport and gambling have been found among kids five-to-12 years old (Bestman et al., 2015). Multiple analyses of the content of bookmakers’ advertisements have identified recurring themes that structure their narratives. These include narratives of sophistication, excitement, glamor, power, wealth, personal success, power, and wealth (Lamont et al., 2016; Sproston et al., 2015), thrill and risk, peer bonding, winning, happiness, power and control, humor and team identification (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017). However, it can also be argued that these themes are not exclusive to sports betting narratives because they are similarly utilized by non-sport forms of gambling. Content analyses of poker advertisements showing the use of humor, wealth, excitement, peer bonding or togetherness have all been identically found in other gambling advertising (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2021, p. 503).

Lopez-Gonzalez et al. (2021) explain, “As a chain mechanism, the symbolic value that the cultural category of sport bestows on sports betting gets in turn transferred down to consumers of betting products” (p. 501). A chain mechanism can be referred to as a process

where something is passed along from one entity to another, influencing or affecting subsequent stages or outcomes (Ou et al., 2022). “Marketing and advertising strategies reflect rituals in which sports betting products and bettors can be associated with a positive feeling of sport, then resulting in the overall improvement of the general perception of sports betting” (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2021, p. 501). On the other hand, the symbolic association provided by the MTM can also come with defects. First, it would bring a reverse meaning transfer from object two to object one, resulting in backlash against sports organizations, leagues, and athletes for partnering with sports betting operators. “The penetration of gambling products in sport has largely been seen through the lens of corruption of a positive good (sport) with the influence of a negative one (gambling) with concerns arising around the growth of sports betting advertising” (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2021).

Sports can be a motivator for kids and the next generation of athletes by the aspirational values, wealth, and heroic or villainous narratives portrayed by the media. Lopez-Gonzalez et al. (2021) states, “Sports betting also draws upon a pool of emotional connections to build brand loyalty and establish a pool of emotional connections between bettor’s and the sports they are interested in.” Lopez-Gonzalez et al. (2021) continues with, “Bookmakers have also been known to make use of a bettors location and team identification to offer team-specific promotions (better odds for betting on a certain team).” By doing this bookmakers are turning fans’ team loyalty into sports betting loyalty and manipulating the fans’ emotional connection to the team with team-specific promotions (Lopez-Gonzalez Guerrero-Solé et al., 2018).

Sports can also give people the chance to be violent, loud, and rude, as if they are wild animals trying to be dominant over other fans. This happens whether they're an active participant in the sport or a passive watcher feeling as if they are playing (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2021).

Lopez-Gonzalez et al. (2021) explain, “These momentary and fictional breaks from social constraints can be construed in sports betting context as an individual following their intuition, behaving like a man or predator and beating the bookies.”

### **Sports Media**

For meaning to be transferred, it must be seen by audiences. ESPN is one of the biggest platforms of sports media from their internet/social media presence to their dominant TV presence. ESPN specializes in showing highlights of sports, various talk shows about sports, and live sport broadcasts throughout the day. With the recent rise of sports gambling in the past few years, ESPN has begun to dedicate different segments of their various programs to sports betting. ESPN shows final scores of games and upcoming times of games on the lower-third of the channel. Over the past few years, as sports gambling has been making its ascension, they have begun to integrate lines/spreads (handicaps) for upcoming games in the lower-third section of the channel with the scores. A spread/line is defined as the oddsmaker's expectations of what will happen in the game. A betting line is what the chances are of a team winning its game, and the spread is how many points a team will win or lose by in the contest (Feery, 2023).

ESPN has been making its transition into the gambling industry with advertisements and paid sponsorships that permeate its broadcast. ESPN recently delved into a 10-year partnership worth around \$2 billion with Penn Entertainment, a casino company, to launch a sportsbook called ESPN Bet (Browning, 2023). The chairman of ESPN, Jimmy Pitaro, said in a press release after the deal was official how “ESPN’s strong brand, combined with Penn’s Technology and experience running a sports books, provided a tremendous opportunity to serve the ever-growing number of consumers interested in betting” (Browning, 2023).

With all this exposure to online sports betting in the media, TV is the primary source of socialization, nurturing observational learning through images, values and ideologies portrayed, which may bring about attitudinal and behavioral change (Hing et al. 2014). Therefore, large viewing audiences for TV sporting events are routinely exposed to these promotions whether it be pay-per-view TV or broadcast TV. The abundance of sports betting promotions in mainstream media and televised sports may be contributing to problem sports betting.

Some online sports betting companies offer live bets and the cash-out option on bets that would require the same attention as stock market prices fluctuating. Live bets are referred to as bets that are placed while a game is being played, and the cash-out option is taking whatever money the gambling company is offering at the time. It could be more than what you initially bet or less than what you bet, depending on the flow of the game (Hing et al. 2014). These new, innovative features of live bets and the cash-out option can be contributing to the problem gambling disorder amongst gamblers.

### **Online/Social Media**

Most people now use social media as part of their daily lives, with 72% of American adults reporting use of at least some form of social media (Maryville, 2020). Social media deliver user-generated content such as text, images, videos, and sound. This encompasses a range of communities from blogs to online games and social networking websites. The most widely used social media platforms being used by Americans are Facebook and YouTube (Sidoti et al., 2024). Gambling companies have realized this and started to embrace social media as a means of communicating with potential customers. The proliferation of social media has allowed many communities of like-minded people to propagate. In the case of gambling, these groups discuss topics like different wagers for the group to place (James & Bradley, 2021).

With the rise of the Internet and related technology, online sports betting is easier and more convenient than it's ever been. The accessibility of online sports betting could spike the cases of addictive gambling among problem gamblers. Globally, sports betting accounts for 53% of the online gambling market, with migration increasing from betting through retail outlets and telephone to betting through the Internet using computers, tablets, and smartphone apps (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017).

Although sports betting through online and mobile platforms provides convenience and better odds, it also has features conducive to problem gambling. Past research identified by Griffiths (1999) and Lopez- Gonzalez et al. (2017) discussed situational and structural factors around gambling but the growth of new technology has introduced new factors. Lopez-Gonzalez et al. (2017) explains, “New situational factors surrounding online betting include easier and faster accessibility to betting opportunities, and bettable competitions around the globe.” A vast availability of sport competitions going on around the globe, gives gamblers a chance to bet whenever. Gamblers can wager from the comfort of their home or elsewhere via mobile devices with the Internet. New online communities dedicated to just gambling have also begun to rise with friends making group chats and other social media to discuss shared wagers.

New structural factors surrounding online betting involve more bets being placed with less time in between bets, and shorter matches being bet on like betting on a first half outcome of a game resulting in a faster reward mechanism. Lopez-Gonzalez et al. (2017) states “In-play betting, which encompasses a closer connection between watching sport and betting; 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.” With new control and functionality over bets that diminish the role of luck, some bookmakers offer a cash-out feature that allows

bettors to withdraw from a bet before the event ends and take more or less of their original wager. Another new feature offered by some bookmakers is parlays where a bettor can combine multiple bets from a single game or multiple events into one single bet increasing the potential return from the bet. These new situational and structural factors associated with online gambling could influence the onset of problem gambling (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017). With new situational and structural factors associated with online gambling, it is also increasing the advertisements and promotions of these factors into part of our daily lives as well.

### **Sports betting Advertisements/ Promotions**

Hing et al. (2014) examined how gambling brands have been able to merge with sport telecasts. They surveyed Australian gamblers about their response to gambling promotions. Results from that survey found that 29% of online gamblers were more likely to increase their gambling in response to promotions compared to 23% where non-online gamblers were not affected. This survey also pointed out that gambling advertisements can still be processed unconsciously, and repeated exposure can have positive effects even if viewers cannot consciously recall the exposure.

Methods mentioned in this article of this merging involve paid advertising in commercial breaks, visual displays of sports betting logos and websites, stadium signage, sponsored segments, logos on player uniforms, and celebrity endorsements of different sportsbooks. Other promotional techniques that have been implemented into live sportscasts include betting odds discussion flowed into game commentary, on-screen displays of changing odds from prediction of the game to live odds, and game-specific novelty and exotic bets (Hing et al., 2014). Major messages that are conveyed in marketing to online sports betting were ease of access to betting anywhere, anytime, and value for money from online betting offers such as bonus bets, money-back guarantees, and best odds and payouts. With embedding of promotions for sports

betting into televised sports, this can result in increased sponsorship of professional sport and the purchasing of advertising rights by gambling brands.

Two characteristic factors that have changed online sports betting marketing are situational and structural factors (Griffiths, 1999; Lopez-Gonzalez, et al., 2017). Situational factors comprise all environmental features that might make gamblers feel comfortable (both psychologically and physically) while gambling 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 interest and attractions” (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017, p.260). 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) (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017).

A singularity of sports betting in contrast to other forms of gambling is that it builds on an existing social variable of sport to downplay gambling among sport fans. This symbolism gets its strength from the public perception of the harmful effects of sports betting marketing which has provoked multiple calls to regulate sports betting advertising in other countries. Some gambling narratives have been quickly blocked – at least in Europe (European Commission, 2014). These include messages that depicted gambling as a legitimate source of wealth, an investment product, and an alternative to employment (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2020). The most prominent risk factor that these regulatory proposals emphasize is the vulnerability to gambling advertising of those already experiencing problem gambling or gambling disorder.

Lopez-Gonzalez et al. (2017) analyzes how certain advertisements and messages that are being delivered all share similar advertising metaphors in their delivery.

### **Advertising Metaphors**

Online sports betting advertisements have been found to have underlying metaphors in their advertisements; gamblers usually don't think advertising turns non-gamblers into gamblers, but rather that advertising is a mechanism to increase expenditure for those already gambling (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2020). Lopez-Gonzalez et al. (2017) detail four dominant metaphors that have been found widely across multiple betting brands. The four metaphors that are used for this study are Betting is Loving, Betting is a Market, Betting is a Natural Environment, and Betting is a Sport.

Betting is loving can be described simply as placing a bet on your favorite team as a way of showing love for what that team represents, from a city, nation or simply the sport as a whole. Similarly, betting against an enemy team (hate betting) can also be described as an act of loyalty or love betting. An example of this could be that your favorite team got put out in the playoffs against the Bengals, now the Bengals play the Rams in the Super Bowl and you bet on the Rams to win. When watching sports games, and not betting on them, they were described to be dry and dull by online sports betting companies, therefore companies use slogans like, *Bring the game to life* or *turn an ordinary game into an extraordinary one* (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017). Betting is loving was also broken down into a sexual metaphor as well, with physiological manifestations being the emotions of betting and the feeling of a winning bet can stimulate as an orgasm. Beyond romance, betting could also be understood as love in terms of a friendship. By betting with friends, they experience new memories and bonds. Some advertisements also depict friends encouraging each other to bet on the most probable outcomes of games.

Betting as a Market is a widely-used metaphor across various gambling companies. In this metaphor, online sports betting is represented as a stock market wherein bets are products that bettors buy. Sport competitions are the real world where events happen and cause stocks to change value. Bettors try to interact with them, watching events in sports and predicting how team performance will impact the bet. An underlying meaning perceived from the market metaphor is that betting is a financial domain defined by making money or limiting the loss of it. Bettors can be described as buyers or investors, and bookmakers are intermediaries between the games and the betting market offering best possible conditions to navigate the market and make the biggest possible profit from it. A slogan that was shown in one online sports betting company is that, *In life you ought to think fast and act faster* (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017).

Betting as a Natural Environment refers to bettors as animals and doing simple actions trying to survive. Following this metaphor, the smartest bettors are the ones who win a lot of bets and follow the same principle as *survival of the fittest*. Bettors can be classified in this metaphor as predators and the oddsmakers are the prey. Bettors as predators use their mobile phones or computers as tools to kill their prey. Animal-like characteristics these bettors hold are natural instinct which is intuition to make bets; fear of how a bet is being played out; and escaping or running by cashing out on a bet you don't feel good about. This metaphor makes sense because some gambling advertisements say things like track your live bets or cash out if you don't like your bets anymore.

The last metaphor, betting as a sport, turns bettors into more active players rather than passive observers of external events. The main implication of this metaphor for bettors is to see their role fundamentally in two distinct forms as a player and a manager. One betting company ran an advertisement with the motto saying, "Don't celebrate sport stars, beat them." Elements of

betting as a sport depict the game as training for a game, or scouting can be studying stats for your bet or looking through odds to find for mispriced bets. This would lead up to your game strategy, which is the bet selection you chose for the game. Playing/ attending a game would be considered in-play betting, and winning the game would be considered winning your bet.

Given the ease and growth of sports gambling following its legalization in many states, this study explores the use of popular gambling metaphors in current advertising by big name gambling companies to answer the following research questions:

**RQ 1:** Which common themes frequently appear in the gambling advertisements by two popular sports gambling companies' YouTube channels?

**RQ2:** How do these themes compare to prior research on sports gambling advertisements?

## **Methodology**

The methodology for this study involved examining a census of content that included all the ads from BetMGM's and FanDuel's sports betting advertisements playlist. BetMGM and FanDuel's sports betting advertising playlist were chosen for this study due to their heavy spending on advertising. Sramek (2024) reports that BetMGM and FanDuel's estimated annual marketing spend per year is over a billion dollars per year with both companies spending at least \$500 million. The main focus of where the advertising is placed for both companies has been heavily online ads. With the next focal point of advertising for both companies being TV ads (Sramek, 2024).

This study uses a directed qualitative content analysis. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) explain, "The goal of a directed approach to content analysis is to validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory" (p. 1281). This study builds on the work of Lopez-Gonzalez

et al. (2017) that was detailed in the literature review under advertising metaphors. The four online sports betting metaphors are Betting is Loving, Betting as a Market, Betting as a Natural Environment, and Betting as a Sport. The current study applies these metaphors in a modernized sports betting environment by following Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) approach to "begin coding immediately with the predetermined codes" and "data that cannot be coded are identified and analyzed later to determine if they represent a new category or a subcategory of an existing code" (p. 1282).

The study involved two rounds of coding with the first round of coding consisting of placing the advertisements that easily matched up with one of the four codes. The second round of coding took place with going back and rewatching the advertisements that did not easily fall into one of the four metaphoric categories used to guide the codes for this study. Then, the ads that were not coded from the first round were examined more deeply for other characteristics that might not jump out to you after one or two views. Then, after reexamining the ads from another perspective, they were carefully coded into one of the four groups.

Scholars have used Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) methodology of directed qualitative content analysis to study various types of media content including advertisements featuring celebrities (Belch & Belch, 2013), magazines (Hall et al., 2009), online postpartum depression discussion groups (Evans et al., 2012), health websites (Heath et al., 2013), social media (Kostick et al., 2015), public service announcements (Inci et al., 2017), social media influencer blog sites (Jurgell et al., 2019), and Reddit posts (Ouverson et al., 2021).

## **Sample**

This study's sample consisted of 62 sports betting advertisements from BetMGM & FanDuel YouTube accounts. FanDuel's YouTube account had 43 advertising commercials in a

playlist that have been shown on live TV or on the Internet/social media. BetMGM's YouTube account had 19 commercials in their playlist that were shown on live TV or on the Internet/social media. BetMGM's commercials ranged from 2021 to July 2024. FanDuel's commercials ranged from 2019 to July 2024. It is important to note that both of these channels contained multiple duplicate ads in both of their playlists. Three videos from the FanDuel playlist contained three duplicate videos, and six videos from the BetMGM playlist were duplicates.

## **Results**

In the analysis of advertisements from two major sports betting companies, a systematic coding process was used to categorize the advertisements into four separate codes. The study began by watching all advertisements across both channels, then proceeding with coding each ad. This approach helped determine a clear understanding of the marketing strategies used by the two companies while also highlighting the constant themes within their advertising narratives. The following analysis shows the frequency of specific codes and how each company positions its betting offerings in a competitive landscape.

To start the first round of coding, 56 of the 62 advertisements were easily identified into one of the four codes. The second round of coding consisted of going back and rewatching the six advertisements and finding a suitable code for them after careful re-examination. After two rounds of viewing, all advertisements from the sample were identified and coded. FanDuel's channels had 43 advertisements listed while BetMGM's had 19 advertisements.

The first research question asked which common themes frequently appear in the gambling advertisements by the two sports betting companies, and the results indicated that the code that frequently appeared the most was Betting as a Market. It had 21 combined entries from both channels. The FanDuel YouTube account had 10 advertisements that matched the Betting as

a Market code, and the BetMGM account had 11 entries that matched the code. The second most frequently coded advertisements were betting as sport with 17 entries. Fourteen of these entries came from the FanDuel channel while BetMGM's account only had three advertisements that matched the code of Betting as a Sport. Lastly, Betting as Loving and Betting as a Natural Environment both finished with 12 codes a piece and 24 total. For Betting as Loving and Betting as a Natural Environment, FanDuel's YouTube account boasted 18 advertisements that matched these codes. Ten of these codes were Betting as Loving from the FanDuel playlist, and eight were Betting as a Natural Environment. BetMGM's channel had only six advertisements that matched these codes, three for Betting as Loving and three for Betting as a Market.

After watching all the Betting as Loving coded advertisements, the recurring theme that was similar from both channels for this code was togetherness with friends, excitement, and pure joy. FanDuel's Betting is Loving coded advertisements featured people betting with friends or at social gatherings encouraging people to all make the same bets. The FanDuel advertisement "NBA Groupchat" depicts a group text chain asking, "What are we all betting on tonight together?" The advertisement ends with them discussing their picks for the night. This is consistent with the observation by Lopez-Gonzalez et al. (2017) that, "By betting with friends, they experience new memories and bonds" (p. 15). One of BetMGM's most-viewed ads, titled "StandOff", that was coded as Betting as Loving featured two celebrities, Jamie Foxx and Kevin Garnett, arguing on whom to bet on for the night, which concluded with Garnett exclaiming how the Boston Celtics are the only right pick for the night. The casual viewer or sports bettor may not know the history of Garnett's stance, but he was a former longtime player for the Boston Celtics, so he is showing love to his former squad and betting on them. Lopez-Gonzalez et al. (2017) explain, "Betting is Loving can be described as simply placing a bet on your favorite

team as a way of showing love” (p.15). These examples all serve to answer the second research question of how these themes compare to the prior research on sports gambling ads.

The Betting as Market coded advertisements try to convince sports bettors that they work for the stock market with strong emphasis on live betting, the variety of wagers they can place, and alluring promotions to get people to start betting. Live betting fits well with the code Betting as a Market due to the similarities of working the stock market. If you work for the stock market, you can have a bad start to the day with stocks and trades, but you can ultimately still finish the day better than you started if you stay patient. An advertisement that portrays this well is FanDuel’s “Cherish Every Moment & Cherish Football.” These ads express how even if a game is going bad, there is still a chance for an over or under to still hit, and the ability to place a live bet on the game whenever you start watching the game before it's over. Answering the second research question Lopez-Gonzalez et al. (2017) state, “Sport competitions are the real world where events happen and cause stock to change its value, bettors try to interact with it, watching events in sports, and predicting how team performance will impact the bet” (p.16).

Betting as a Natural Environment's most prevalent theme from the sample of coded advertisements emphasized persuading bettors to draw upon their natural survival instincts and trust their intuitions. This is referenced by bettors being portrayed as predators and the bets they place as prey. One series of ads that displayed this well from the sample was FanDuels “Winner Winner” that contained the same slogan of “Winner winner chicken dinner.” In each of these ads, it has talking chickens discussing what happened to all of their friends and one or more chickens disappearing. The ad closes with the slogan mentioned and how FanDuel has everybody feeling like winners and feasting on their friends. BetMGM’s “King of Sportsbooks” advertisement also illustrates this natural environment code well. In this ad, BetMGM

spokesperson Jamie Foxx mentions all the possible wagers and functionality of the app to new customers. It ends with an emphasis on the slogan of “You know what to do.” This slogan implies the natural intuition of gamblers to go gamble and trust themselves. Lopez-Gonzalez et al. (2017) justify the second research question by stating how bettors have animal-like characteristics being predators and their bets being prey and possessing natural instinct/intuition to make their bets (p.16).

Wrapping up with Betting as a Sport, the literature states how sports betting advertising turns bettors into more active players rather than just passive observers (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017). Some of the constant themes that were shown in the advertisements that were coded as Betting as a Sport showed preparation and strategy methods, along with responsible gambling tools. An ad from FanDuel that mixed both of these themes well was “FanDuel Responsible Gaming - Magic Cat.” In this advertisement, a group of actors discuss their betting strategies, and one actor explains all the responsible gaming tools FanDuel has to offer like setting time limits on the app and deposit limits to stay responsible. The other actor talks about how his cat is magic and makes all the picks for him by giving the cat options to pick from and he goes with whatever the cat chooses. This relates to how someone can scout and prepare for upcoming games in sports. Some teams have people who scout the other team and make the decisions of what plays they should run or who they should or shouldn't play, and the actor from this ad uses his cat to scout for his upcoming bets (game). Lopez-Gonzalez et al. (2017) help answer research question two by explaining that “Betting as a Sport depicts the game as training for a game or scouting can be studying stats for the game you plan on betting on” (p.16).

Table 1 on the next page, presents the findings from the directed qualitative analysis of the sports betting companies FanDuel and BetMGM. The table compares BetMGM and

FanDuel's advertisements that were coded during the analysis: "Betting is Loving," "Betting as a Market," "Betting as a Natural Environment," and "Betting as a Sport." With a total of 62 findings from both companies' YouTube channels, this data provides quick insights into how each brand approaches its betting advertisements through the four coded metaphors.

**Table 1*****Findings***


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<b>Brand</b>	<b>BetMGM</b>	<b>FanDuel</b>	<b>Totals</b>
Betting is Loving	33.33%	66.67%	100%
Betting as a Market	47.62%	52.38%	100%
Betting as a Natural Environment	16.67%	83.33%	100%
Betting as a Sport	11.76%	88.24%	100%
<b>Total</b>	29.03%	70.97%	100%

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## Discussion

Overall the findings support the categories established by Lopez-Gonzalez et al. (2017) by illustrating how sports betting advertisements use these themes to engage and attract bettors in a friendly, competitive, natural marketplace. Betting as Loving was displayed by both companies with strong social themes and emphasis that betting with friends can build connections and bonds. Betting as a Market was supported by showing a strong analysis of live betting and promotions, that sports betting can operate like the stock market. Betting as a Natural Environment supported the data from, Lopez-Gonzalez et al. (2017) with similarities to nature being natural instinct and in a betting viewpoint trusting your intuition/ instinct and placing bets. Lastly, Betting as a Sport was supported by the advertisements encouraging active participation and strategization of placing bets.

This analysis also aligns strongly with the themes previously describing the framework used for this study of the MTM. Themes from the MTM include peer bonding, happiness, and team identification. These themes directly relate to the metaphor of betting as loving, as team identification betting on your favorite team or peer bonding relating back to betting with friends. Other themes of the MTM that correlate with this analysis are sophistication, personal success, power, and wealth that are attributed to betting as a market. Whereas more themes from the MTM like thrill and risk, control, or humor can all be attributed to depict betting as a sport or as a natural environment. Providing more connection to the MTM, all the themes from the MTM are transferable to all three actors present in this study. Sports being a culturally constituted world it can contain thrill, happiness, and humor all while watching it. Sports betting being the consumer good it can contain risk and team identification while placing bets. Sports bettors

being the consumers will possess all the themes from the two other worlds of the MTM like happiness, wealth, and control.

Lopez-Gonzalez et al. (2021) study establishes a positive association between betting and sport by relating common categories to sports betting. Categories mentioned in the study include aspirational, educational, emotional, and societal categories, thus all these categories tie back to the metaphoric codes used for this current study. The educational codes relate back to the codes of this study with the educational categories attributes from sport being work ethic, training, preparation, and teamwork transferring to the sports betting code of betting as a sport. This code transfers back with bettors improving over time through practice, with early losses indicating more training is necessary. The emotional codes' attributes from sport include sentiment, identity, loyalty, and team identification which then transfer back to the sports betting advertisement metaphor of betting is loving by placing bets on your favorite team. The societal code from Lopez-Gonzalez et al. (2021) states that its attributes from sport are legal business that pays taxes, employs people, and a working class activity. This code transfers to the advertising metaphor of betting as a market with its transference to sports betting by creating jobs, being accessible to ordinary people to partake in, and being performed in a technological secure environment. The aspirational code from the study relates back to the advertising metaphor of betting as a natural environment with aspirational attributes from sport being wealth, TV exposure, huge events, and large numbers of people participating. These attributes transfer back to sports betting with the large-scale activities being broadcast on many media platforms, by having diverse actors in the advertising of sports betting to show a sense of normality, and by selling the dream that you can get rich by doing this.

This chain mechanism of attributes from sport to betting suggests that the symbolic value of sport and its associations of excitement, bonding, skill, and competition transfers to sports betting. This process creates a loop where more sports betting is being framed as a part of the broadening of sport culture which can be embedded into future consumer behavior and not seen as a financial transaction but a vital part of watching sport. Over time this chain mechanism strengthens the relationship between sports and sport betting making it a normalized and expected activity for sport fans.

### **Limitations & Implications for Future Research**

As with the majority of studies, the research provided in the current study is subject to certain limitations. This study used a directed qualitative content analysis with the framework of a Meaning Transfer Model to study common metaphoric advertising techniques used by popular sports betting companies. Limitations with this study can involve other gambling companies advertisements not being studied for the same metaphorical advertising techniques. With online sports betting growing vastly, new companies are trying to grow and reach mainstream audiences. Also, new advertisements from the studied gambling companies could have been released that weren't available at the time of this analysis. Researchers reviewing this study could also disagree with how some of the advertisements might have been coded resulting in another limitation.

Further research could look at different gambling companies' advertisements to see if the four codes used in this study are also presented elsewhere or in newer ads by the same gambling companies posted after this analysis. More research could also look at the production of new advertisements promoting responsible gambling awareness as well to prevent problem gamblers. An alternate approach to this study and for future studies would be to use a thematic content

analysis. Instead of going into the analysis with predetermined codes, a thematic analysis could allow for codes and themes to emerge as the viewing of the analysis takes place. A quantitative content analysis can also be conducted to test the categories. However, examining ad content does not tell you about the effects of these ads on the audiences, so it would be essential to pair this analysis with experimental research to understand their impact deeper.

### **Conclusion**

Sports betting and marketing practices are becoming integrated into the lives of sports people and non-sports people. By looking through the lens of the Meaning Transfer Model, it shows multiple implications of consumer behavior and societal perceptions of gambling. Celebrity endorsements and advertising metaphors can create powerful associations that may influence consumers' attitudes about sports betting. As the landscape of sports media rapidly evolves, household platforms like ESPN are trying to integrate sportscasts with betting information by normalizing and promoting this information to extensive audiences. With more integration of betting information into everyday sports casts it can raise the interest and viewership of many sports.

Furthermore, the use of metaphors in advertising, such as portraying betting as loving, betting as a sport, as a market, or as a natural environment serves to frame gambling as an engaging, competitive, career-like pursuit, potentially downplaying its risks. Reflecting on the findings present in the literature, it shows that while sports betting can boost fan engagement, it could also require an examination of the advertisers to show the risks associated with problem gambling. As betting advertising continues to grow, ongoing research about the advertisements are crucial for educating the public about advertising used by sports media platforms and sports gambling companies.

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