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COMMUNICATION FRAMING IN THE GAMBLING AND BETTING INDUSTRY IN SERBIA

ABSTRACT

The research subject is gambling advertising in Serbia, focusing on betting and casinos. Content analysis included a combination of communication channels aiming to identify key frameworks in which the brands are presented to the audience.

Research results showed that gambling and betting brands achieve specific communication goals by using specific channels. Socially responsible framing is achieved mostly via public relations and non-commercial narratives. Sports framing, prevalent on social networks, builds up the idea of sports and betting being naturally connected and inseparable. Television holds the dominating role in framing gambling and betting as entertainment.

The industry in Serbia has also shown certain specificities in terms of regulatory treatment. It deviated significantly from the restrictions imposed on categories with similar (addiction) risks. Also, it has proven to be very liberal compared to several other countries.

Keywords: gambling; betting; framing; communication channels.

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INTRODUCTION

Gambling is a unique commercial industry, infused with contradictions. It is a very potent business area, employing thousands and creating billions via rather controversial products. As an activity it has gone through quite a journey, from being illegal to being widely accepted as harmless entertainment. In terms of communication, economic, societal and ethical perspectives are rather complex and intertwined.

Gambling advertising, like all advertising, highlights the positives of its products and ignores or minimizes negatives. In Serbia, as in other countries, its controversy lies on the crossroads between business and public health goals. This paper analyses gambling advertising in Serbia, focusing on betting and casinos, excluding commercially less visible variants (lotteries, bingo).

The research problem focuses on communication framing of gambling and betting brands in Serbia. Not only do they inform and persuade, but ads also carry societal and cultural relevance. Advertising participates in shaping culture promoting specific values and behaviour models. We investigate how gambling and betting brands in Serbia are framed in terms of communicating their business, values, and lifestyles they highlight or obscure.

The first segment, theoretical framework, looks into key perspectives on gambling and framing theory which are used as a base in the development of a methodological framework.

The second part of the paper is focused on practical research advertising practices in Serbia. The method applied is quantitative content analysis. The sample includes examples of television, social media advertising and public relations content. A mix of communication channels is implemented to identify potential similarities and differences in the goals that brands achieve through them.

Key frameworks in the analysis are entertainment, sports, and social responsibility.

Entertainment is central to the industry and most prominent in communication, so it is addressed first. Next, the growing and complex link between gambling, especially betting, and sports is examined. The social responsibility frame, although not prominent in the literature, proved very relevant in the content analysis showing locally specific practices enabled by flawed legislation and advertising supervision.

KEY PERSPECTIVES

Societal perspective

Gambling has evolved from being immoral and illegal to becoming widely socially accepted. It is mostly viewed as entertainment, both globally, and as per Article 5 of the Law on Games of Chance of the Republic of Serbia (Official Gazette RS, No. 18/2020). On the opposite side, its addiction risks are gaining relevance with the industry's rapid expansion and increased accessibility online.

Problematic gambling behavior is influenced by many factors. Individually, there is gender (more common in men), age (youth and adults), family history, mental health issues, and personality (Mayo Clinic, 2022). Societal factors like economic conditions and cultural vulnerability are important as well (Livingstone et al., 2017, 1). A very special role in promotion of gambling as harmless entertainment belongs to mass media, popular culture and advertising (Binde, 2014, 17).

Around 3.9% of Serbia's population is at low, moderate, or high risk for gambling, with problematic and pathological gambling affecting 1.6% of individuals aged 18-64 (Kilibarda, Nikolić, 2020). This translates into 44 000 to 97 000 people potentially affected by pathological gambling. Students between ages 10 and 14 are very exposed to it, mostly betting (Leković, 2018). Around 34.6% have gambled, with a significantly higher prevalence among boys (Gudelj et al., 2018).

Media and communication perspectives

The visibility of gambling brands is overwhelming, especially in some countries. For example, a viewer of a Premier League football match in 2022 saw a betting logo 3 500 times on average, appearing almost every 16 seconds (Torrance et al., 2023). A staggering 90% of male gamblers aged 25 to 34 have seen gambling advertising, 91% of those 45+ (UK Gambling Commission, 2020). Most of them report to have seen it on television (76%).

There is no publicly available data on the visibility of gambling brands in Serbia. However, insights into marketing budgets suggest that ad spending is growing rapidly. According to their official annual reports, taken from The Business Registers Agency of the Republic of Serbia, in the period of 2021-2022 Mozzart Bet raised its investments by about 42%, while Balkan Bet increased its budget fivefold.

The high visibility of gambling brands largely stems from their strong prominence in sports media. In August 2021, around 60.5% of advertisements on Arena Sport 1 and 2 and Sport Klub channels were for betting (Kliping, 2021). Top TV advertisers were Mozzart Bet (35.18%), Soccer Bet (20.08%), and Balkan Bet (14.49%). Their extensive involvement with clubs, leagues, and events highlights the importance of sports for the growth of this already economically powerful industry.

Business perspective

The gambling industry is rapidly expanding, with projected growth of around \$260 billion by 2027 (Custom Market Insights, 2022). In the United States, gambling advertisers spent over \$738 million by October 2022, a 22% increase from the previous year (Media Radar, 2022). In the UK, the sector contributes about £3.2 billion in taxes and employs over 100 000 people (Betting and Gaming Council, 2020).

In Serbia, in 2022 there were around 70 legal entities are licensed for gambling, including 20 for sports betting, 61 for slot machines, and 22

for online games (Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Serbia, 2022). Over 12 000 people were employed in the industry in 2019 (UPIS, 2019). It generated approximately 140 million EUR in gambling specific budget revenues (not including regular taxes applied to all businesses and employers) in 2022. The amount has tripled in the period of one decade.

Balancing public health protection with the rights of players and companies on the market poses a significant challenge (Lycka, 2011, 179). The nature of the gambling product makes it eligible to be in the same category as alcohol and tobacco (Griffiths, 2005, p. 21). Regulation stands at the crossroads of economic and societal interests.

Regulatory perspective

Gambling advertising regulations worldwide range from complete freedom to partial restrictions and total bans. In Sweden, ads for licensed companies are allowed but cannot exaggerate odds, suggest skill influences outcomes, or portray gambling as socially appealing or a solution to personal problems (Lingerman, 2022). The U.S. legalized sports betting in 2018, ending a decades-long ban (Kaplan, 2023). UK also allows ads across all media since 2007. In 2019, most brands gathered in the Betting and Gaming Council with the aim of self-regulating. Initiatives like a “whistle to whistle ban” prohibiting ads from five minutes before to five minutes after live sports events before 9 PM, resulted in a significant reduction in ads seen by children during sports broadcasts (UK Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2023).

Germany prohibits gambling ads targeting minors and at-risk groups, between 6 AM and 9 PM, and those featuring active athletes (Rossi et al., 2023). Spain tried banning casino advertising, with a very restrictive Royal Decree in 2020 (Lingerman, 2022). Recently, it has been partially overturned by the Spanish Supreme Court, as limiting the freedom to participate on the market. It is still prohibited to advertise towards minors,

sponsor sporting events, broadcasts and facilities. Italy has a total ban on gambling ads across all media, including sponsorships (Rossi et al., 2023).

In Serbia, gambling is regulated by the Law on Games of Chance and the Law on Advertising. Ads must not target individuals under 18 or be placed within 100 meters of child-focused facilities, and they must include warnings about minors' participation and health risks. Deceptive advertising is prohibited, as are unfounded claims about winning odds or presenting gambling as socially desirable or a solution to personal problems. Whether or not these regulations are enforced is our topic in the next segment.

Regulatory frameworks are closely tied to economic and health concerns, with societal framing playing a significant role in shaping regulations (Orazi et al., 2015, 6).

FRAMING THEORY AND GAMBLING COMMUNICATIONS

Robert Entman defines framing as a process of promoting specific viewpoints by emphasizing certain aspects of perceived reality in communication (Entman, 1993, 52). Frames are variations in presenting information in public discourse (Scheufele, Iyengar, 2012, 7). They influence how audiences interpret topics across political, informational, educational, and commercial contexts (Iyengar, 1991; Shoemaker, Reese, 1996).

Commercially, framing is used to shape consumer perceptions by strategically highlighting chosen aspects of a brand while downplaying others, creating a specific brand image (Kotler, Keller, 2016, 297). Research shows that participation in gambling is influenced by how it is framed and promoted (Gainsbury et al., 2016; Parke et al., 2014).

Gambling framed as entertainment

Entertainment is a primary frame in gambling and betting communication. It is structured

around fun, glamour, and luxury as its key pillars (Gainsbury et al., 2016; McMullan, Miller, 2010). Gambling is portrayed as simple, accessible, and rewarding. Ads depict an idealized world, exaggerating ease of use (Gainsbury et al., 2016, 7) and downplaying risks (Binde, 2009, 8). Key mechanisms used to build this frame are:

- Depict gambling as simple, low effort, accessible focusing on ease of use with options like quick payouts etc. (Gainsbury et al, 2016, 7).
- Replace probabilities with possibilities – it is a subtle and very manipulative practice (Binde, 2014, 178). Ads focus on the possibility that you will win, which is not untrue, but the probability of it is extremely low. They will “celebrate” the skill of the player and minimize luck as a factor which is more important (Fortunato, 2020).
- Maximizing wins, minimizing loss – appealing to the idea of being victorious, achieving grandeur without informing about the risks of losing. The dominant message is about winning and success, driven by excitement and action (Gainsbury et al., 2016, 12).
- Suggest no real loss - stressing the ease of recuperating from your losses with options like cashbacks and welcome bonuses which aim to make players feel like they cannot lose, even if they lose. This relativizes the perception of money, especially in younger players (Thomas et al., 2016, 4).

Risk frame

Warning and restriction messaging is obligatory in gambling advertising in most markets, including Serbian. According to Article 6 of the national Law on Games of Chance, advertising must include “a notice about the prohibition of minors participating in games of chance and an appropriate warning text about addiction prevention.”

Although responsible gambling messages appear in two-thirds of ads, they are often sporadic, poorly phrased, and not visible at all (McMullan, Miller, 2010, 45). In Serbia, the prohibition warning for minors is mandatory in traditional

media like television, print, and outdoor advertising, while responsible gambling appeals are required at gambling and betting venues.

An interesting comparison can be drawn with advertising of medicines and dietary supplements. TV ads for these products in Serbia must include both audio and visual warnings to consult a doctor or pharmacist before use, warning against the smallest possible risk. Conversely, gambling activities, which are inherently risky, are advertised with almost no warning. TV ads for betting often only discreetly display an 18+ sign.

Sports frame

A key aspect of gambling communication is its strategic connection with sports. Brands use sponsorships of clubs, leagues, and competitions to tap into the passion and loyalty of fans, presenting betting as a natural part any sporting experience (Thomas et al., 2016, 12). For example, the European Basketball League partners with Bwin, MaxBet, Betano, Winline, Nesine. NBA is sponsored by FanDuel, Bet MGM, Caesars Sportsbook, DraftKings.

Exploring the perceptions of parents and adolescents, Thomas et al. (2016, 9) confirm that marketing fosters the perception of gambling as a natural part of sports. Adolescents described gambling and sports as inseparable. Nearly three-quarters of children aged 8 to 16 were able to identify at least one betting brand, while around 40% recognized four or more. More than 60% of children could associate a betting company with a specific team it sponsors. Parents shared very similar views.

Efforts to create a "symbiotic" relationship between gambling and sports in Serbia are extensive. During the 2022-2023 season the sponsorship landscape best illustrates the omnipresence of gambling and betting. Among the 14 clubs participating in the Admiral Bet ABA League were: Partizan Mozzart Bet, Crvena Zvezda Meridianbet, KK Borac Mozzart, and KK FMP Soccerbet (ABA League, n.d.). Clubs playing in the

Admiral Bet Basketball League of Serbia and the Admiral Bet Super League include: KK Dynamic Balkan Bet, KK Mladost MaxBet, Partizan Mozzart Bet, Crvena Zvezda Meridianbet, KK Borac Mozzart, and KK FMP Soccerbet (KLS, n.d.). The First Football League of Serbia is officially named Mozzart Bet First League of Serbia. An equally important football competition at the national level is the Mozzart Bet Super League of Serbia (Superliga, n.d.).

Another method of associating gambling with sports lies in integrating betting brands into the overall sports viewing experience. In 2022 alone, Mozzart Bet enabled viewers to watch qualifying matches for the European Football Championship, EuroLeague games, UEFA Conference League fixtures, Serbian Super League matches, FIBA World Cup qualifiers, the IHF World Men's Handball Championship, and the FIVB Volleyball World Championship. Furthermore, as a media partner, Mozzart Bet supported dedicated sports television programmes such as *Serbia Calling* (focused on the FIFA World Cup) and *Be a Winner* (covering the UEFA European Championship).

Balkan Bet served as a media partner for EuroBasket coverage and sponsored various programmes and broadcasts, including those for the FIFA World Cup in Qatar, the UEFA Conference League, the Premier League, as well as Wimbledon. It also acted as a partner for Serbian Super League broadcasts and the sports programme *Friend of Sports*.

MaxBet contributed in a similar capacity by sponsoring the coverage of the FIFA World Cup in Qatar, partnering with the Serbian Super League broadcasts, and supporting Wimbledon, the UEFA Conference League, and the Premier League. It also sponsored various thematic shows.

SoccerBet facilitated the viewing of ABA League matches and partnered with programmes such as *Novak – Untold Stories*, in addition to acting as a media partner for sports summary shows.

Corporate social responsibility frame

A different aspect of brand communication happens at the corporate level. Companies are not only profit-making entities, but active parts of societies (Dawkins, Lewis, 2003, 187). As such they have power and responsibility (Lindgreen, Swaen, 2009, 312). And for gambling and betting companies, within that lies the challenge. They are expected to be profitable growing businesses but not harm the general wellbeing in society. These two are “in a constant tension with one another” (Carroll, 1999, 292).

Hong and Kacperczyk (2009, 21) reported that the value of shares in the so-called sin industries (gambling, tobacco, alcohol) is riskier from an investment point. Although there are challenges in most studies, there seems to be an overall “mild positive relation between CSR and financial performance” (Cai et al., 2011, 468). Therefore, companies engage in various forms of socially responsible behaviour not (only) for purely altruistic reasons, but very rational, economic ones. It is about creating an appropriate image which is cleared of controversial aspects, “legitimizing a corporation’s activities and increasing corporate acceptance” (Palazzo, Richter 2005, 390).

The main course of CSR action is corporate philanthropy – gambling and betting brands donate to different charities. The biggest amongst them have separate entities and foundations dealing just with this type of CSR. For example, Flutter, the world’s leading online sports betting and gaming company, with brands like FanDuel, Sky Betting & Gaming, Paddy Power, MaxBet, etc. created a Do More initiative. Their goal is to “improve the lives of 10 million people by the end of 2030” (Do More, n.d.).

In general, donation causes range from sport, responsible gambling, to support of education, gender equality, fighting poverty, environment etc. Prevention or dealing with the potential damage gambling products might

cause is not in focus very often, except when it is obligatory. When the UK Gambling Commission’s investigation revealed that insufficient anti-money laundering and social responsibility procedures led to a suicide of a client of Playtech, a casino operator and games provider, on top of the settlement £619 000, they increased their donations to responsible gambling charities to £3.5 million (O’Boyle, 2020). All operators in the UK have to make donations in order to get a license (Gambling Commission, n.d.). One of the most prominent organizations in this area, GambleAware, working on public health campaigns, harm prevention tools, treatment and research, collected £49.5 million in the period 2023-24, exceeding the previous year by £3.1million. The biggest donors were the biggest companies: Flutter (£18m), Entain (£16.8m), Hillside (£5.8m), William Hill (£6m) (Fletcher, 2024).

Within the EU, European Gaming and Amusement Industry’s (Euromat) recommends four strategic CSR principles: research, education and communication, regulation, and treatment of pathological gambling (Yani-De-Soriano et al., 2012, 487). It is debatable how much value these generic guidelines hold in practice. For example, although the EU recommends it is up to each member country’s health system to deal with treatment of those with gambling problems, within their own local capabilities and priorities.

In Serbia, betting brands lead the way in donations. Data from Catalyst Balkans, which tracks humanitarian work in the region, shows that in 2021 and 2022, the second-largest corporate donor in Serbia was Mozart bet. They donated approximately €1.5 million in 2021 and around €1 million in 2022. Meridianbet was ranked 12th (Catalyst Balkans, n.d.). These activities are implemented via separate entities organized as foundations which enables them to enter certain areas they are banned from as gambling operators. Advertising to children and minors is one of them.



Picture 1
Examples of sponsorship of activities for minors

Source: <https://rs.mozzart.org/drustvena-odgovornost/besplatne-skole-sporta> i <https://odsrcasaljubavlju.rs/fondacija-vesti/fondacija-meridian-za-ligu-buducih-sampiona/>

According to Article 68 of the Advertising Law, “Organizers of classical and special games of chance cannot sponsor children or minors, their activities, or individuals or activities whose audience primarily consists of children or minors.” In real life, this is exactly what is happening. Betting brands, through affiliated entities (foundations), sponsor children’s sports schools, clubs, etc. (e.g., Mozart Sports School, donations of football kits to children’s sports schools by Meridian, etc.). This indicates that the regulatory framework is insufficiently defined, allowing for practices deemed undesirable to still be implemented and under the veil of corporate social responsibility.

An interesting aspect of CSR provided by gambling and betting brands is its acceptability. Eth-

ical criteria across the society in Serbia seem to be flexible. On January 13th, 2023, Trag Foundation, which organizes the prestigious Virtus Award for societal contributions in Serbia, issued a decision that restricts applications and awards for “industries whose primary activities involve the production and distribution of tobacco, alcohol products, weapons, and the gambling industry” (Trag Foundation, 2023). On the other hand, gambling advertising is quite liberal, even minors are affected via satellite entities like foundations. This raises a question: what is more concerning for a society - children growing up in an environment where gambling outlets and ads are everywhere, sports and gambling are almost inseparable, or potentially awarding the “unsuitable” for donating? The criteria for societal approval and encouragement appear unclear.

METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

The process of sampling and analysis consisted of two parts: defining the list of brands to be included in the sample and content analysis of the communication promoted by those selected brands.

In the first step a selection of gambling and betting companies was made based on one criteria – visibility in prime-time television advertising in Serbia during 2022. All brands that appeared at least 10 times on specified television stations and timings were included in the sample. Stations covered were all with national frequencies: RTS, TV Pink, Prva TV, Happy and B92 (due to the fact that they have the widest general audience), cable channel Nova S (due to its coverage of the national football team) as well as main sports channel in Serbia SportKlub and Arena Sport (due to their relevance in the area of sports). Airing time relevant for sampling was prime time defined as a time slot from 7 PM to 11 PM.

The second step was quantitative content analysis of communication from sampled brands. It included all branded content identified on 3 types of media: television, Instagram and in PR. So the final sample for content analysis consist-

ed of 3 subsamples: television, Instagram and PR subsample. In line with that, there were 3 units of analysis, one per each subsample: television commercial, Instagram post and PR article. The analytical unit was the same for all - the presentation of a gambling and betting brand.

Television was chosen due to its continued relevance for the Serbian audience. According to Nielsen Audience Measurement Serbia (2023) in 2022 citizens spent an average of 5 hours and 21 minutes daily watching TV. As in the previous step, choice of stations included all with national frequencies: RTS, TV Pink, Prva TV, Happy, B92, cable channel Nova S as well as main sports channels in Serbia SportKlub and Arena Sport. Airing time relevant for sampling was prime time defined as before. *Television subsample* included all branded communication from selected gambling and betting brands aired on the specified channels in prime-time.

Out of the social media realm Instagram was selected, due to its stable user base and growth on the local market. About 56% of Serbians use this network daily (Raković, Komatina, Klačar, 2020). Instagram is particularly relevant for analyzing gambling and betting communications due to its relatively young audience, with 82% of users aged 19 to 23 engaging daily. The *Instagram subsample* included content located on official pages of selected brands. It covered 20 published posts for each brand ending with May 25, 2023.

Given the broader societal dimension of the research topic, public relations (PR) content was also included in the analysis. The *PR subsample* consisted of texts published on Serbia's most popular portal, www.blic.rs (Kliping, 2021). Texts were located using the site's search function, with brand names as keywords. A maximum of 20 texts per brand was considered. Some brands had fewer entries. Other media outlets outside of www.blic.rs may have additional related content, so this must be noted as a methodological limitation.

The analysis of the sampled content was centred around 3 key communication frames introduced

in the theoretical section of the paper: entertainment, sports and social responsibility.

The entertainment frame covered content presenting gambling and betting as a game. This was identified in images and messages communicating ease, simplicity, winning, significant chances for profit, luxury, happiness, excitement, and the act of betting itself. *The sports frame* included narratives related to sports activities, from specific betting offers or broadcasting services tied to sports events, promotions of sports clubs, leagues, and events sponsorships. *The social responsibility frame* encompassed communications that highlight activities of gambling and betting companies aimed at societal improvement, regardless of the area (sports, culture, support for those in need).

In the process of sample reduction following elements were excluded:

- Versions of television ads differing only in length. Only the longest version of each commercial was taken into consideration as it is considered to be the most informative.
- Versions of Instagram posts with minimal differences (dimensions, ad layout, technical or logistical information about the same event etc.).
- Versions of PR texts with minimal differences (dimensions, layout, technical or logistical information about the same event etc.).

Content analysis was implemented via a codebook defining in detail each of the frames as well as how to identify it. The main question to be answered in the process of coding was: Which frame best describes this content: entertainment, sports or social responsibility?

Sample included a total of 80 PR texts, 200 Instagram posts, and 106 television ads. The content was coded by two coders. Inter-coder reliability test showed a satisfactory agreement of 0.86.

Entertainment framing

In the final sample which included Mozart Bet, Meridian Bet, Admiral Bet, Soccer Bet, Merkur X Tip, Max Bet, and Balkan Bet, along with as-

sociated entities (Mozzart Foundation, Meridian Foundation) results across selected channels show that each is strategically used to position brands in a certain way.

Looking across communication frames, entertainment is dominant in television ads, present on Instagram and hardly relevant in public relations, on daily news portals.

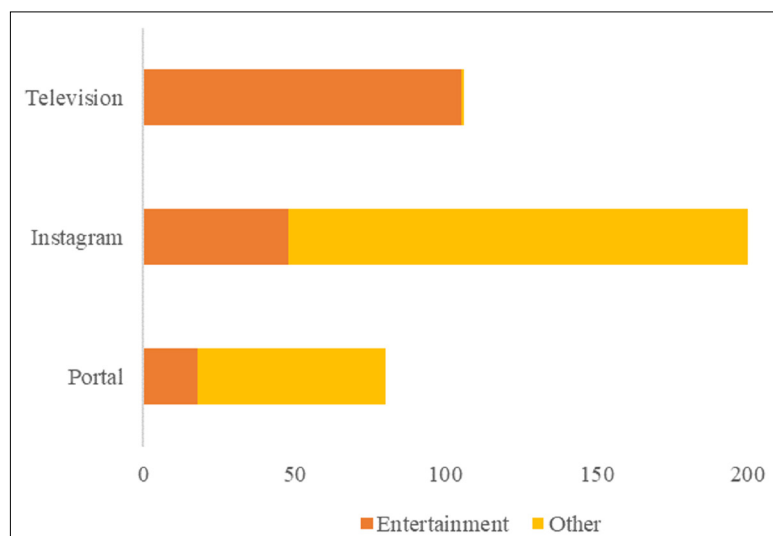


Chart 1
 Entertainment share in communication channels
Source: Research results

As predicted in the theoretical introduction, we can clearly identify several distinct content types:

- Promotion of gambling process and calls to action: content focused on emphasizing ease and simplicity of use and encouraging participation.
- Lifestyle promotion: Focus on grandeur and luxurious lifestyle.
- Focus on winning and competition: Highlights winning, profit, competitive spirit, and achievement.

Methodologically, these aspects were not treated as mutually exclusive due to the difficulty of separating them in the context of the overall gambling experience.

Approximately 74% of television ads emphasize winning and achievement. Typical messages include: Become our next multimillionaire; Place for great fun and big winnings; Be a winner; Make a decision; Be a live champion - we've prepared a million; Are you ready for a wild ride?; The craziest summer ever, every day 100,000 and a trip. These ads promote gambling as an exciting, glamorous activity with the potential for significant rewards.

Around 91% of TV ads include direct appeals to motivate potential players, aggressively promoting financial incentives like welcome bonuses. Examples of these messages are: Weekend bonus ease; Welcome bonus - get your money back, play risk-free on your first ticket; Welcome bonus - win up to 100,000 dinars on your first deposit; Welcome bonus - deposit 2,000, get 10,000 dinars; Welcome bonus - 1,000 dinars daily for the top 500 players; Welcome bonus from 100% to 900%,

300 spins, and 100% bonus on your first deposit; Royal bonus; Register, get 150% bonus and 150 spins; Loyalty pays off - 15% free bet on deposits, 100% free bet on every deposit, Soccer Bet treats you. Such practices would not be possible in Sweden for example where claims encouraging immediate play or highlighting the speed of games and payouts are not allowed.

In the analysed ads, celebrities are featured in about 38% of the cases. Specifically:

- Balkan Bet uses a well-known actor in 7 out of 9 ads.
- Soccer Bet features a famous international footballer in 8 out of 11 ads.
- Mozzart Bet includes various famous athletes in just over half of their ads (16 out of 29).

According to Article 22 of the Advertising Law, "An advertising message directed at minors, within the meaning of this law, is an advertising

message that is, directly or indirectly, addressed to minors.” Many of the celebrities featured in gambling promotions likely have substantial influence over minors. This raises the question of whether using such well-known figures—who clearly impact younger audiences—can be considered (in)direct communication with minors. The entertainment framework thus presents a range of complex issues for further consideration, including regulatory, communication, and broader societal dimensions.

Sports framing

Around 88% of Instagram content is sports-related, compared to around 44% on television. Notably, Instagram content is predominantly informational and entertaining, including sports news, event previews, and interesting facts. Only 16% of sports-related content is commercial and promotes specific offers. Thus, Instagram is a platform where a natural synergy between betting and sports is highlighted.

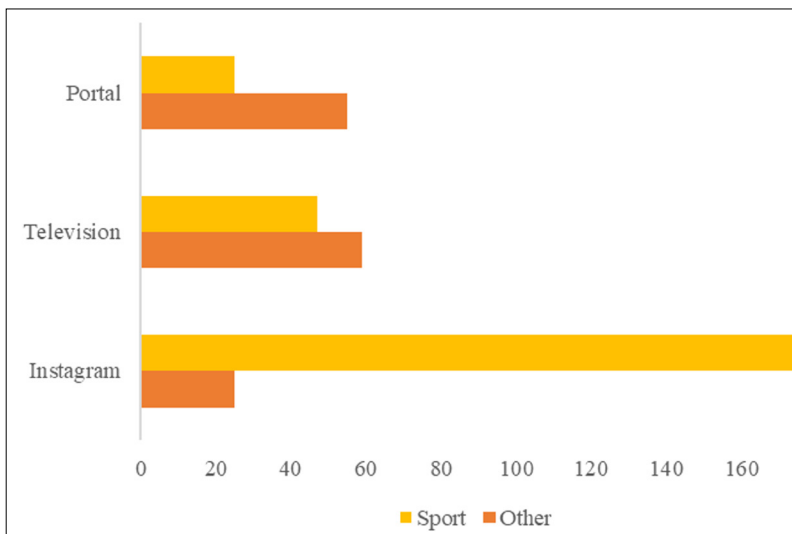


Chart 2
Share of sports across channels (number of post/broadcasts)
Source: Research results

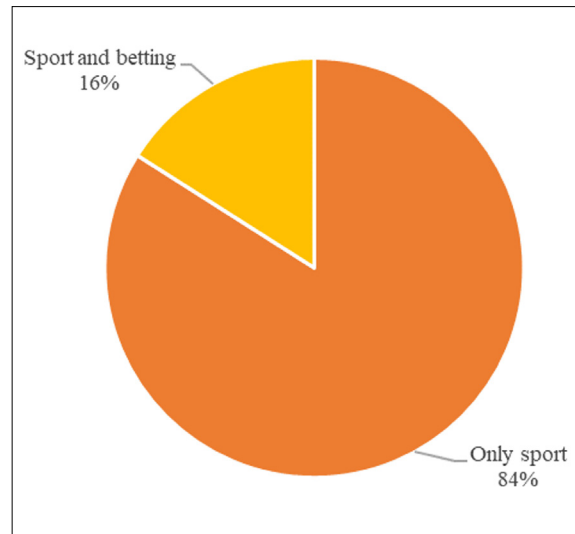


Chart 3
Sport versus sport and betting content on Instagram
Source: Research results

Comparing television and Instagram reveals a clear difference in approach. Television ads directly promote services and encourage user participation, while Instagram posts are more general and subtly framed around a passion for sports, without a strong push for commercial activation.

We can conclude that social networks, as exemplified by Instagram, are primarily used to position gambling brands as partners and a natural part of sports in the broadest sense.

Social responsibility framing

Comparing three selected channels in terms of coverage of socially responsible activities public relations takes the lead. Approximately 44% of all content on portal Blic was related to a wide range of socially responsible initiatives (children, sports, culture,

ecology, education, etc). Around 60% of content from Mozart (12 out of 20 posts) highlighted the brand's humanitarian work and donations. Meridian Bet and Balkan Bet also show significant proportions of socially responsible content compared to other areas such as sports, entertainment, and sponsorships.

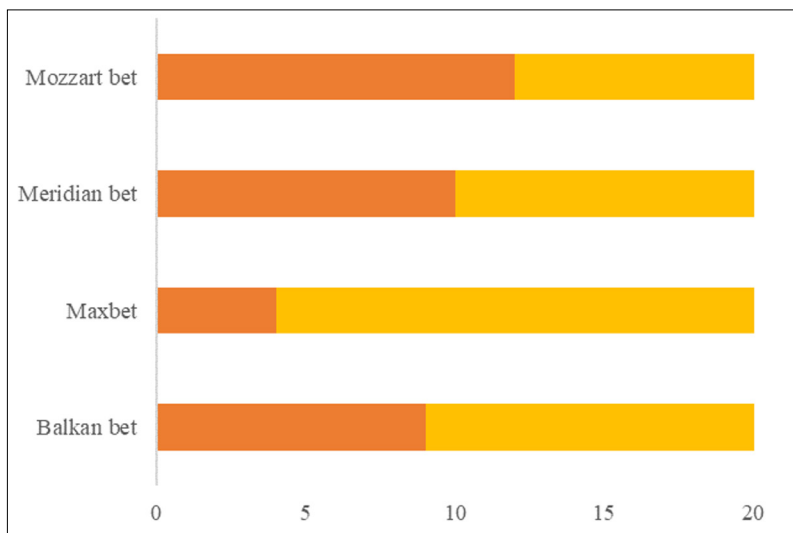


Chart 4
 Share of social responsibility on the portal

Source: Research results

The results highlight how gambling brands manage their public image. By focusing on social responsibility through PR efforts, they can mitigate negative perceptions and enhance their reputations. This approach seems to be a strategic move to counterbalance the more direct and aggressive commercial promotions and problematic associations with gambling activities.

CONCLUSION

The research was implemented in order to gain insight into the communication practices of gambling and betting brands in the Republic of Serbia. The aim was a comprehensive and deep understanding of key values and behavioural models they promote across selected media channels: television, Instagram and PR. Results

showed that dominant communication frames in the gambling industry in the Republic of Serbia are in line with those on other markets. Entertainment permeates all communication channels, particularly dominating television. Sports, as a “natural” partner for these brands is especially relevant on social media. The social responsibility framework is particularly prevalent in public relations.

Ads promoting entertainment focus on easy winnings, wealth, playing, and aggressive calls to action. Viewers are presented with images and messages which not only normalize gambling but glamorize it. The risks and dangers are almost invisible, with everything framed as so easy and harmless. Additionally, the audience is exposed to highly intrusive, even aggressive prompts

that push decisions to engage in gambling, increase frequency, stakes, etc. Prompt which are in some countries banned by law.

Sports play a crucial role in gambling and betting brand communication, serving both as a major visibility tool and as a means of improving brand image. The dual role of sports helps to shift focus to positive, aspirational aspects, thus maintaining a favourable public image. Betting and sports are represented as almost inseparable and naturally synergetic. Brands do not warn consumers about risks properly, so the individual awareness of players, of the fact that betting on sports is still gambling, that each incentive they are given is strategically calculated to lead to the next one, especially with the expansion of online gambling options, is crucial.

Social responsibility efforts proved to be very important in shaping the positive image of gambling and betting brands in Serbia. By investing in social causes and charity, they try to distance

themselves from the controversial aspects of the industry. Being present in various sectors like childcare, education, sports, culture, ecology, art, strengthens their societal acceptability and integration. If there is any effort to support gambling related issues they are not promoted in public. This topic is covered by the general news media sporadically, but brands keep strikingly silent on it.

There are no limitations in terms of where they can invest or donate, just like there are no clear restrictions when choosing sponsorships or advertising channels. And that, connecting all three presented frames (entertainment, sport and social responsibility) brings us to the key dilemma: what is allowed, or better said, approved or disapproved of in Serbia? Is there a societal, or at least regulatory, consensus?

In regulatory terms, Serbia is liberal since it stipulates very few restrictions to gambling and betting brands in communication. And even when there are bans, like the one restricting advertising towards minors, there are ways to get around it. Commercial messages create an image of ease, harmlessness, and impossibility of loss in betting. That is in direct contrast with legal provisions that prohibit deception, false representations, downplaying risks, and portraying gambling as socially attractive. Laws also state that pressure to participate is not allowed, yet most ads aggressively push the audience to engage in the game. The practice and the official rules do not seem to agree.

One of the most illustrative examples of, if not flawed legislation, then definitely deeply flawed implementation of it, is the presented partnership of several brands with children's sports clubs and events. Operating via different legal entities in the form of foundations, but under the same brand, legally they are foolproof. In real life, seven-year-olds play in jerseys marked with big gambling brands. It is important for all stakeholders to take this into account. For legislators as well as specialized regulatory bodies monitoring advertising, it is obvious that control over the implementation of the rules should

be improved. There are practices in similar, risk-infused industries from which relevant experience can be drawn. Cigarette brands cannot advertise anywhere, ever. They have striking warnings on packs. Alcoholic beverages are also restricted. They cannot sponsor the media, athletes, sports clubs, competitions or participants. Pharmaceuticals (dietary supplements and OTC medication) must have audio and visual warning in each TV ad so that the viewer can see and hear about the potential risks and the need to consult with his or her doctor before using the product. In gambling, it all starts and finishes with a discrete stamp 18+ in the corner of the screen. They can say almost anything to almost anyone, sponsor team, leagues, events etc. With the rising availability of gambling on online channels the significance of stronger scrutiny in setting and monitoring the implementation of the rules is crucial.

The economic relevance of the gambling sector cannot be ignored. It is powerful and growing. It employs thousands, mostly highly educated people. It is technologically advanced, creates profits and budget revenue, both in regular and taxes outlined specifically for this industry. It donates hundreds of millions. As their budgets and their donations rise, what does not seem to be improving are the safeguards protecting more and more players, offline and especially online. With freedom of advertising should come even greater responsibility in crafting messages, visuals and sales prompts. This is the area in which Serbia is lagging significantly compared to most Western markets and where a lot of progress can be made. All relevant stakeholders should work together to achieve it, from companies, legislators, supervisory institutions, media regulators, researchers, the public etc.

Just like any other business, gambling and betting companies should have fair conditions to compete in the market. Defining fair should not be made as a one-dimensional decision, but on the intersection of society, health, safety and economy.

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UOKVIRIVANJE KOMUNIKACIJE U INDUSTRIJI KOCKANJA I KLAĐENJA U SRBIJI

SAŽETAK

Predmet istraživanja je oglašavanje kockanja u Srbiji, s posebnim naglaskom na klađenje i kasina. Analiza sadržaja obuhvatila je kombinaciju komunikacijskih kanala s ciljem identifikiranja ključnih okvira unutar kojih se brendovi predstavljaju publici.

Rezultati istraživanja pokazali su da brendovi iz sektora kockanja i klađenja ostvaruju specifične komunikacijske ciljeve korištenjem različitih kanala. Okvir društvene odgovornosti najčešće se ostvaruje putem odnosa s javnošću i nekomercijalnih narativa. Sportski okvir, dominantan na društvenim mrežama, gradi percepciju prirodne i neraskidive povezanosti sporta i klađenja. Televizija zadržava dominantnu ulogu u uokvirivanju kockanja i klađenja kao oblika zabave.

Industrija u Srbiji pokazuje i određene specifičnosti u pogledu regulatornog tretmana. Značajno odstupa od ograničenja koja se primjenjuju na kategorije sličnog (ovisničkog) rizika. Također, pokazala se vrlo liberalnom u usporedbi s nizom drugih zemalja.

Ključne riječi: kockanje; klađenje; uokvirivanje; komunikacijski kanali.