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Biddable Youth. Twitter sports and esports gambling adverts: action required to protect children

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About the research

The complexity of social media data has made it difficult to regulate online gambling advertising at scale. This is acute when it comes to children and those vulnerable to problem gambling. A particular issue is betting on esports (video games played competitively by professional gamers for spectators) often using cryptocurrencies like bitcoin.

To address this gap, the University of Bristol and Demos investigated over 800,000 Tweets from bookmakers, their affiliates and independent tipsters. This generated new findings on the tone and aims of marketing, the extent of gambling content consumed and reacted to by children, and the stark difference between the traditional sports and emerging esports gambling ecosystems.

Given the scarcity of research on the appeal of gambling advertising to UK children and vulnerable populations and the recent growth of the esports industry, this report covers important new territory. It raises concerns about the protection of the nation's young and vulnerable, highlighting issues to be addressed by the gambling industry, the advertising industry and their respective regulators.

Policy recommendations

For Advertising Regulators

- **Ensure that existing regulation and codes of practice are applied to GB licensed esports betting market as it develops.**

- **Maintain a robust approach to deterring and combatting unlawful gambling activities.** This is important as children are currently interacting with Twitter accounts advertising unlicensed esports betting.

- **Act on poor compliance to existing regulations and investigate potential new ones.**

- **Review the usefulness of the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA)'s term 'of particular appeal to children' in deciding whether to restrict certain advertising features.** This is a subjective judgement and does not apply to features that appeal equally to children and adults.

- **Consider the potential role and value of education initiatives for parents and young people.** Risks of gambling and betting odds merit particular attention.

For Technology Companies

- **Make better use of age verification tools and adtech to screen children from gambling ads.** Platforms should ensure that technology developed to exclude young and vulnerable users is widely available and obligatory for gambling advertisers.

- **Work with advertisers to make embedding terms & conditions in messaging seamless.** Before advertising on platforms, advertisers should provide a link to terms for that promotion, which should be embedded in the message without affecting character limits.

- **Provide a free, searchable database of gambling advertising on platforms.** Platforms should make lists of gambling advertising available to regulators to ensure compliance.

For Advertisers

- **Integrate more visible, explicit and frequent references to risk, age restrictions and safe gambling within advertising content.**

Key Findings

- **Tens of thousands of UK children follow and engage with betting accounts on Twitter.** 41,000 UK followers of gambling related accounts are likely to be under 16. Children make up 6% of followers of 'traditional' gambling accounts and 17% of esports accounts. 13,000 replies to and retweets of gambling content were sent from UK children's accounts.

- **28% of those responding to esports Tweets in the UK are children.** Children and young people are highly engaged in betting on esports. This arena sees the worst advertising practice; poor labelling of warnings and apparent flouting of regulations.

- **Betting advertising is widely shared on Twitter.** Over nine months in 2018, 888,000 Tweets were sent from Twitter accounts known to be related to betting, reaching 4.8 million users (700,000 in UK).

- **Half of the bets advertised by gambling accounts on Twitter were 'free' or 'matched' bets.** Half of Tweets from gambling accounts related to 'free' or 'matched' bets, which minimise the perceived risks of gambling and often contain complex conditions. These messages were often highly visually appealing.

- **Very little Twitter gambling advertising mentions age restriction, responsible gambling, or terms and conditions within the initial text of the post.** Only 7% of Tweets sent from a gambling account on Twitter include a warning message within the text of the post.

- **Most of the Tweets raised some regulatory concern.** 68% of traditional sports and 74% of esports Tweets appeared to the researchers to contravene regulations in some way, for example by presenting gambling as an income source, or by encouraging gambling as a regular activity or at unsociable times.

- **Advertising Tweets are seldom labelled as advertising.** CAP Code 2.1 states that, "marketing communications must be obviously identifiable as such." However, no overt labelling was found. Children or vulnerable young people may not understand that the Tweets are designed to elicit a behaviour that profits a third party.

- **Much Twitter gambling advertising is "content marketing" designed to build awareness and emotional attachment to the gambling brand and to encourage sharing.** The most common tactics used to engage Twitter audiences with gambling brands are humour, surprise, admiration and the content that makes people feel like insiders or niche experts. These tactics are likely to appeal to children.

- **Parents and teachers are likely to be completely unaware of gambling advertising on social media.** They probably know little of the potential role of esports betting in initiating children into gambling, and the possibility that, through the use of cryptocurrencies, children may be able to place bets without owning a bank account. Parents and teachers may also not know about content marketing designed to create a positive feeling about gambling brands and promote sharing of content.

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