

Open Access Original Research

Sports News And Stories In The Service Of Gamblification: The Finnish State-Owned Gambling Monopoly's Sports-Related Social Media Posts

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Citation: Jääskeläinen, P., Hellman, M., Lindeman, M. (2023). Sports News And Stories In The Service Of Gamblification: The Finnish State-Owned Gambling Monopoly's Sports-Related Social Media Posts. Journal of Gambling Issues.

Editor-in-Chief: Nigel E. Turner, PhD

ISSN: 1910-7595

Received: 05/23/2023

Accepted: 09/18/2023

Published: 10/05/2023



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Abstract: Gamblification refers to the gambling industry's aspirations to normalize gambling through hybrids of gambling and non-gambling contexts, most commonly sports. While research has widely shown that betting, sponsorships, and marketing gimmicks contribute to the normalization of gambling, we lack knowledge on how sports news production and journalistic storytelling pursue the same objective. This study provides insight into the ways in which Veikkaus, the Finnish state-owned gambling monopoly, utilizes sports news and stories in its social media communication. We sampled Veikkaus's sports-related social media posts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube in 2018–2020 and analysed the ways in which the content is framed to serve the Finnish public through an alignment between Veikkaus and the world of sports. Our study shows that the company takes on three communicative roles in order to claim, acquire, and justify its relevance: a news agency, a producer of high-quality journalistic storytelling, and an engager of people. In these roles, Veikkaus is pursuing the function of sports media, while simultaneously being Finland's only legal gambling provider. This societal dual role needs to be problematized, not least because it relies on the revenues of citizens' gambling.

Keywords: Gamblification, Sports News, Sports Betting, Social Media, Sports Journalism.

Introduction

Many countries have longstanding financial entanglements between gambling and national sports organizations. Most commonly, sports teams and organizations receive funding through lotteries and sports-betting profits or through sponsorship deals with gambling companies (Egerer et al., 2018; Humphreys & Soebbing, 2012). Studies have shown that gambling companies actively align their brand and products with sports to associate gambling with the positive connotations that sports evoke (Lamont et al., 2011; Sartori et al., 2018). In gambling research, the term “gamblification” signifies some sort of economic, technical, and symbolic merging of gambling with different kinds of social actors and cultural phenomena. Most often it is used for the synergies between gambling and the realm of sports. The gambling–sports synergy facilitates a presentation of gambling as an activity that is socio-culturally widely accepted and normalized (for more on the concept, see Macey & Hamari, 2022).

This study investigates the Finnish state-owned gambling monopoly’s social-media-based alignment with sports and the role that the company, Veikkaus, takes in addressing the public as a producer and mediator of sports news and stories. Previous studies (Hellman et al., 2022; Lindeman et al., 2023) have found that Veikkaus takes advantage of and combines two evident roles and functions in its social media communication.

First, Veikkaus, like many of its global counterparts in the gambling business, utilizes linkages to the world of sports in its social media content to normalize gambling in the eyes of the public (Hellman et al., 2022; Lindeman et al., 2023). Betting and horse sports are traditional alignments, whereas online sports betting, e-sports, and fantasy sports gaming are more recent formats of sports–gambling mergers (Lopez-Gonzalez & Griffiths, 2018a). Typically, gambling companies synergize with sports in sponsorship deals, sport-themed games, and mobile applications and in a wide range of marketing contexts (Milner et al., 2013; Newall et al., 2019). Highly admired sports professionals are often used to promote sports betting (i.e., Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017). Gambling companies’ business cooperation with sports events and teams has shown to be a means for promoting sports betting as a harmless leisure activity (Lamont et al., 2011; Sartori et al., 2018). Veikkaus is no exception to this. It has sponsorship deals with major sports teams and national leagues such as the Finnish premier soccer league, which has even integrated the sponsorship in its official name: Veikkausliiga [in English: The Veikkaus league].

Second, Veikkaus uses social media for maintaining its unique social role in Finnish society and for upkeeping an image of itself as a reliable and stable social actor that promotes good causes and brings the nation together (Hellman et al., 2022; Lindeman et al., 2023). Hellman et al. (2022) compared Veikkaus’s communication on social media with that of Swedish license-based gambling operators and showed that Veikkaus

emphasizes its corporate social responsibility and its proceeds to the common good more than the Swedish license-based companies that focus more straightforwardly on commercial communication instead of the need for justifying a monopoly position (Hellman et al., 2022). This social role dates back to the 1940s, when the civil society organizations—from which the current monopoly originates—would collect revenues to support good causes through the provision of gambling opportunities (Matilainen, 2017). In this, sports have played a crucial role. In previous decades, sports betting was even advertised as a way for citizens to support sports organizations (Ahonen, 2019). Today, Finnish sport life and civil society are still heavily dependent on gambling revenues. In 2021, the revenues from gambling that were channeled to civil society organizations amounted to 680 million euros. Veikkaus's revenues are channeled through the ministries to the fields of sports and physical education, science, arts, youth work, health and social welfare, and horse breeding (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2023).

In this study, we are interested in a third social-media-assisted function that Veikkaus has taken upon itself—namely, the role of a mediator and producer of sports news and stories. This communicative role supports both the aims of gamblification and the company's societal role of supporting good causes. However, providing sports coverage is not unique to the Finnish gambling company. Almost all large global gambling companies provide livestreaming services with sports commentaries and regularly post sports news on their social media.

In 2023, Veikkaus has a media portfolio that includes two online magazines, 11 livestreaming channels, a multi-functional mobile app, and 10 active social media accounts on various social media platforms. Studies show that sports betting companies are especially active on social media in promoting and marketing gambling products (Guillou-Landreat et al., 2021; James & Bradley, 2021.) Posting sports content, such as sports news and match commentaries, is a common social media strategy for gambling operators' brand engagement (Houghton et al., 2019). However, the sports content is not always viewed as such by the public (Thomas et al., 2015; Gainsbury et al. 2016). Furthermore, gambling companies serving as sports news producers are especially problematic in cases where the companies also operate social media accounts under their other brand names, of which the public is not necessarily aware of the relation to gambling (see Houghton et al., 2019).

Media and communication research has pointed out ways in which digital platforms create opportunities for companies to function as news agencies and producers of journalistic content (for discussions on brand journalism and marketing, see, e.g., Di Domenico et al., 2021 and Waisbord, 2018). While research has shown that gambling companies commonly post sports news on social media, we have not been able to find any research into how sports news production and journalistic products serve the gambling industry in its gamblification aims. To unfold this

circumstance, we have conducted a content analysis of Veikkaus's social media postings in 2018–2020. For understanding the ways in which the company uses its social media to build a role of a mediator of sports news and stories, we refer to epistemologies of breaking news (Ekström et al., 2021) and to narrative journalism (Van Krieken & Sanders, 2021). Next, we present the study's ontology. We then proceed to account for the content analysis and our findings. At the end of the article, we draw some conclusions and discuss how our study relates to the changing media landscape of sports journalism—where gambling-industry-driven journalism has the potential to become audiences' primary sources of sports news.

Literature review

Our focus is directed toward how gambling operators address the public while mimicking the genres and functions of sports media. Even if this is a topic on which we have not been able to find any studies per se, the existing literature gives us some clues about how this phenomenon serves the sellers of gambling products.

The concept of gamblification, initially introduced by McMullan and Miller (2008) in their study on gambling advertisements on TV, refers to the merging of gambling elements into the sports context and integrating gambling as a natural part of the sporting culture. While gamblification has expanded to various domains, such as gaming and e-sports (Gainsbury et al., 2015; King et al., 2015; Macey et al., 2021), the intersection of gambling and sports remains an important focus. Recent literature on gamblification shows that the entanglement of sports, sports betting, and young people, especially men, has a strong connection to a socio-cultural normalization of gambling (i.e., Djohari et al., 2019; McGee, 2020; Killick & Griffiths, 2022).

With the advent of social media, gambling marketing found new platforms to complement traditional marketing channels. A systematic review on online gambling marketing by Guillou-Landreat et al. (2021) identifies three major themes presented in gambling marketing research published between the years 2000 and 2020: the alignment of gambling marketing with sports, the gendered nature of marketing strategies primarily targeting men, and the targeting of vulnerable groups such as young people and at-risk/problem gamblers (see also James & Bradley, 2021). A literature review conducted by Newall et al. (2019) emphasizes that these gambling marketing strategies are not limited to the internet and social media only, but marketing in traditional media, sponsorships, and promotions are targeting men and vulnerable populations.

Synergies brought about by gambling and non-gambling contexts offer the gambling industry ways to play down the harmfulness of its products. For example, an Australian study (Milner et al., 2013) on the ways in which gambling marketing is embedded in televised sports

broadcasts concludes that promotional content, such as sponsorship deals and logos, are seamlessly integrated into the entertainment experience, effectively blurring the boundaries between marketing and live events. It can be especially challenging for children to discern the promotional intent behind such marketing. Gainsbury et al. (2016) have shown that posting non-gambling content, such as sports news, is a common strategy that gambling companies use in their social media communication in order to reach wider audiences and normalize gambling. Posting sports content, specifically on Twitter, is an important cornerstone of sports betting companies' social media marketing (Houghton et al., 2019; Killick and Griffiths, 2020; Thomas et al., 2015).

An example illustrating the process of gamblification is provided by Lopez-Gonzalez and Griffiths (2018b), who noted that, by the 2016–2017 season, all teams in the English Premier League (soccer) had an official betting partner. This was a significant increase compared to the 2006–2007 season when only a handful of teams were sponsored by the gambling industry. The extensive presence of sponsorship deals further reinforces the association between sports and gambling. Studies by Deans et al. (2017) and Lamont and Hing (2019) support this notion, showing that young men perceive sports betting as an integral part of the sporting culture and even as a component of masculinity.

Sports betting advertisements are typically male-dominated and lack representation of women (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2018a). Additionally, the marketing narratives employed by betting companies on social media often rely on a dual persuasive strategy, as identified by Lopez-Gonzalez, Estévez, and Griffiths (2018b). This strategy involves reducing the perceived risk of sports betting and enhancing the perceived control of gambling. By incorporating themes related to masculinity and sports knowledge, betting companies aim to appeal to their target audience and foster a sense of mastery, expertise, and control over the gambling experience (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2018b).

Study Ontology

The aim of this study is to capture the modus—genres, contents, and ways of addressing the public—in which Veikkaus communicates about sports in its social media. What are the practices by which the company takes a role as a provider of sports information to the public?

Manifesting public credibility in news production entails a connection between temporality and authority. The mass media use continuous news updates to retain their role as authoritative truth-tellers in relation to audiences, the competition, and their own professional position (Usher, 2018). The same applies to sports news production. The ways by which the news media claim information about the world through epistemic practices have been described by Ekström and colleagues (2021, p. 176) as

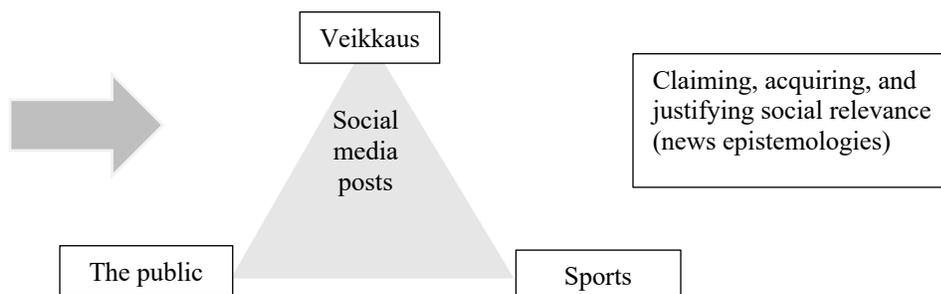
entailing “a promise of fast, continuously updated, and newsworthy information about events that concern the public”. News is characterized by a fact-based discourse. In news production, procedures are developed to guarantee “a constant influx and identifications of information that qualifies for breaking news. [...] The task is to acquire and communicate information under time pressure that adds something meaningful” (Ekström et al., 2021, p. 177). Therefore, news production must indicate an insider role in events as they happen—on the spot—and be able to communicate this unique position to the audiences.

The epistemic work that justifies knowledge claims occurs through “facticity, degrees of certainty and the authority of different voices” (Ekström et al., 2021, p. 177). These are used in reporting to provide the publicly acceptable reasons to believe the presented knowledge claims. In the same manner that media outlets use news epistemologies and journalistic narrative formats in their sports coverage to claim relevance and authority, the gambling company Veikkaus must communicate in a voice that is line with its main justification: Veikkaus’s status has been granted as an exception to European Union legislation on account of its ability to protect citizens from harmful gambling and reduce gambling-related harm (Selin et al., 2019). Its status is defined in the Lotteries Act (2023) as a company with exclusive rights to provide gambling services in mainland Finland. When it comes to the legal boundaries of Veikkaus’s commercial communication. The Lotteries Act (14b§ 22.12.2021/1284) states that gambling marketing must remain “moderate,” and gambling should not be portrayed as “desirable,” “in an overly positive light,” nor as an ordinary, everyday activity.

We have empirically investigated how Veikkaus functions as a mediator between sports and the public by engaging people and creating relevance, urgency, and news value related to the sports world. This mode of communication, or epistemology, can be examined by paying attention to the practices that create the kind of relevance and urgency that news carries. We demonstrate how the mediated sports information and references to sports are claimed, acquired, and justified through epistemologies of news, as discussed by Ekström, Ramsälv, and Westlund (2021).

In Figure 1, we have portrayed our ontological setup in which we see Veikkaus utilizing news epistemologies— that is, claiming, acquiring, and justifying social relevance—for connecting the interest triad of public–gambling–sports on its social media posts. Our research question is: In what types of communicative roles and formats does Veikkaus connect and uphold this triad of interests?

Figure 1. Social media posts serving the creation of claiming, acquiring, and justifying the relevance of Veikkaus in a triad of gambling, sports, and the public.



Data and methods

The data for this study consist of 450 sports-related social media posts published by Veikkaus on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube in the years 2018–2020. The data are sampled from a data set of 3,289 curated social media posts, initially collected for a broader research project that compares Finnish and Swedish gambling operators' social media activities (for more information, see Hellman et al., 2022; Lindeman et al., 2023).

At the time of data collection, Veikkaus had 10 social media accounts under its brands, targeted at slightly different audiences. Veikkaus operated accounts for sports betting, horse racing, poker, and lotteries as well as accounts focusing solely on heart-warming stories about lottery winners, beneficiaries such as junior sports, or other inspiring content. The accounts had a combined total of more than a half-million followers, but through the appearance on different social media flows, the reach may be much wider. The extent of visibility is reflected in Veikkaus's main Facebook account, which was liked or followed by 286,000 social media users. In comparison, the largest Finnish newspaper, Helsingin Sanomat, had at the time 234,000 followers and the Finnish Broadcasting Company's sports account (Yle Urheilu) had 120,000 followers. Considering the Finnish population of 5.5 million people, it is fair to say that Veikkaus's accounts reached a large audience base.

The manually collected data ($N = 3,289$) consist of screenshots of the posts that appeared on Veikkaus's social media accounts' timelines on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube during a sample month in 2018, 2019, and 2020. These included posts and visitors' posts, tweets and retweets, videos, links, pictures, events, polls, and other content accessible to anyone scrolling through the accounts. Paid advertising and influencer marketing are not included in the data. All curated posts ($N = 3,289$) were coded according to classic content analytical proceedings. A 50-item coding scheme included basic aspects such as date, platform,

format, type of game, and number of reactions as well as visual elements, such as gender and age of the people appearing in the posts. Posts were scanned for links and content with competitions, lotteries, or other engaging features (e.g., Share this!). March was chosen as the sample month because it presented a timeframe without any major national holidays or major international sports championships or events that would influence the number or content of the posts. However, the Covid-19 lock-down of Finland began on March 17th 2020, in the midst of the last sample month.

Of the total number of posts, 54 percent (1,783 of 3,289) were coded as containing references to sports (See Table 1 for the sports posts by each Veikkaus social media account). These would typically cover popular betting sports like soccer, ice hockey, and horse racing but also activities that are not as directly connected to gambling per se, such as skiing, junior sports, and floorball. The posts focused predominantly on men's sports leagues, teams, and male athletes. Only 19 of 1,783 posts were about women's sports leagues, teams, or female athletes, indicating a significant gender imbalance. However, women were represented in around 5 percent of the posts: these included Veikkaus's retweets of posts by female members of the horse racing teams and photos featuring women as sports spectators, and so forth. In order to follow our research task, we limit ourselves to unraveling the communicative roles and formats that Veikkaus takes in its sports-related social media communication, but we will briefly return to the topic of gender in the conclusions. Except for the gender imbalance, the posts varied in terms of topics and style, containing videos, results tables, livestreaming, and in-depth interviews of sports professionals.

Table 1. Veikkaus's sports-related posts (N=1,783) by the social media account and platform 2018-2020

Social media account	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	YouTube	Total	Sports posts/ posts by the account
Casino Helsinki Casino located in Helsinki	1	4	2	Not on YouTube	7	7/110 = 6%
Feel Vegas Gambling arcades with a bar, located in big cities	17	Not on Twitter	11	Not on YouTube	28	28/69 = 41%
Inhimillisiä uutisia Stories about beneficiaries	1	1	1	Not on YouTube	3	3/96=3%
Lotto Lotteries	4	Not on Twitter	Not on Instagram	Not on YouTube	4	4/72 =0,6%
Pokeri.fi Poker games	1	0	0	0	1	1/852=0%
Toto-pelit Horse racing news, results, and betting tips	96	724	7	1	828	828/829 = 100%
Veikkaus Main account	34	15	14	26	89	89/401=22%
Veikkaus TV Live streaming of sports events, occasionally sports commentaries	Not on Facebook	202	Not on Instagram	Not on YouTube	202	202/204=99%
Veikkaus vedot Sports betting news, results, and tips	253	297	30	17	597	597/603= 99%
X Award-winning online media for Veikkaus customers	18	Not on Twitter	6	Not on YouTube	24	24/53=45%
Total	425	1243	71	44	1783	1783/3289 = 54%

To get a more in-depth understanding of how Veikkaus incorporates a communicative role (“epistemological modus”) in its sports-related social media content, we randomly sampled 450 sports-related posts (150 posts for each of the sample years 2018, 2019, and 2020) for closer scrutinization. The sample size of 450 posts may seem rather small for a study covering three months in three years, but due to a great deal of repetition in the posts observed already at the coding phase - and also taking into account the thorough analysis method - we soon reached a point of saturation in which new elements or formats no longer occurred. Identical posts appeared simultaneously on more than one account and social media platform. Similar elements and themes were repeated in regular intervals.

We thoroughly explored each post, meaning that we watched each video and followed all links and tags. The content and formats of the posts were then broken down in more detail regarding their elements of connotations (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). This exercise entailed spelling out the main messages: describing their context and setting (who, what, where, and when) and auditing the more subtle cultural elements (e.g., feelings of national pride) and communicative means (e.g., excitement). We also interpreted functions of emojis, the content of jokes, and the style of language, such as whether the message was humorous in its choice of words or if the tone was more serious. The analysis was a joint effort between the authors with regular consensus-striving discussions about interpretations (Graneheim et al., 2017).

Drawing on Ekström and colleagues’ (2021) epistemologies of breaking news production, we identified and named four reoccurring elements: temporality, location, expertise, and backstage. Each of these elements could be argued to serve Veikkaus in its speaker position to align the public with a synergy between gambling and sports. “Temporality” entailed a reference to an immediacy that serves as a foundation for breaking news production (Karlsson, 2011). “Location” pertained to a specific place or event where this immediacy finds its justification. “Expertise” was an umbrella term that we construed for describing the posts containing sports information and knowledge, such as comments from sports-betting professionals and tipsters. Finally, the contextual dimension of “backstage” included the various ways in which Veikkaus positioned itself as an insider in the realm of sports, providing information on athletes, teams, and events that was not readily available to the general public.

While identifying the characteristics of the sports posts, we found that the most significant common denominator was that majority of the posts carried a message of urgency, of being up-to-date and topical (For more on immediacy on live sports reporting, see Barnfield, 2013; McEnnis, 2016). Next, we needed to transfer the reoccurring elements to an understanding of the social media practices that manifest Veikkaus in a communicative role addressing the public by merging the audience’s interests, the gambling company, and the realm of sports. We found that Veikkaus creates three main roles in its sports-related communication on

social media: news agency, journalist, and engager. Next, we present these roles and how they materialize in the content under study.

Findings

Publishing sports news is a way of communicating that the company has direct access to events as they happen (the role of a news agency). Inside stories from behind the scenes of sports would involve journalistic storytelling that draws a contextual backdrop to the sports news (the role of a journalist). Competition posts were mainly used for engaging followers and facilitating interaction with the company's social media (engager of people).

The news agency

Around 70 percent of all sports posts were ticked as following a news reporting style. The content posted during the sports events even imitated a breaking news production modus with constant updates of ongoing events (see Usher, 2018). The news-like posts varied from actual sports news to results tables posted as “news.” In the news posts, Veikkaus asserted relevance by creating a sense of immediacy and urgency and through references to expertise and accuracy of information. For example, posts featured reports of injuries that would keep athletes sitting out from important events: “[...] No recoveries in the Ilves-SaiPa [ice hockey] game tonight. Ilves’s Laaksonen, Leimu, Mieho will stay aside, as will SaiPa’s injured [players]” (Veikkaus Vedot, 2019a). This is relevant information for sports fans, as they are eager to know the latest news from the field, but also valuable knowledge for punters closing bets at the very last minute. With constant updating, Veikkaus addresses both the fans and bettors and seemingly ties the company to news production.

An essential part of Veikkaus’s sports news communication consisted of sharing sports professionals’ social media posts. This served as background information and contextualization to current events. Sharing sports professionals’ updates can be seen as following a general social media trend, where the role of a sports journalist has been increasingly taken by the teams and athletes themselves. The teams and sports professionals communicate directly with the audience, without the mediating and editing role of a journalist (Sheffer & Schultz, 2010). Veikkaus would typically share sports professionals’ personal comments before and after events. Through the following retweet of a horse racing team manager, Veikkaus provided an implicit betting tip but also a sports news piece about a horse’s physical condition as she was returning to the track after a break: “[...] Might not be at her best. Let’s just take this race as a trial run” (Toto-pelit, 2019a).

In sports reporting, the comments by sports professionals are valuable, newsworthy, first-hand sources, often containing inside

information that could not otherwise be obtained (Nölleke et al., 2017). By sharing sports professionals' posts, Veikkaus creates an impression that it has a close connection to and relationship with the athletes and that it is providing them a platform to reach the public. Another retweet stemmed from a horse racing driver: "Today [...], we'll try to take advantage of our starting position and put all in at the beginning. It's easier on the horse when you can take off the shoes. As an equipment change, we'll probably try Yankee carts, in case they warm up smoothly!" (Toto-pelit, 2019b). The tweet contains information about the team's racing strategy and possible equipment changes but also the driver's opinion about horseshoes. With athletes' original posts, Veikkaus strives to strengthen an image of itself as an impartial sports media outlet that refrains from editing athletes' words.

Posts about betting tips and betting wins also followed a news reporting style. To strengthen the importance of sports-betting content, the tipsters and live studio commentators were presented as seemingly reliable and relevant information sources. Regardless of the occasional banter, emojis, and vivid expressions, the betting tips were fact-based, always relying on statistics and trustworthy sources—the experts—much in line with commonly shared ideals of sports journalism (see Ramon-Vegas & Rojas-Torrijos, 2018). In the posts, the tipsters typically wore sportswear or suits to stress the role of an expert with sports knowledge. The trustworthiness of the information provided is also emphasized by the presence of multiple experts in the studio. For example, Veikkaus's Instagram post about a live studio commentary of tonight's horse races mentioned having four experts in the studio and two commercial TV channels broadcasting the show. Typically, Veikkaus would post videos in which the professional tipsters remained neutral in their assessments and refrained from giving betting advice for a particular team. Instead, their contributions were framed as sports information that followers could use as they wished.

Posting global sports news and streaming sports events is bound to attract the attention of sports fans, which further emphasizes the role of Veikkaus as sports media. Similarly, locating big wins on the map of Finland by mentioning the winners' hometowns translates international sports betting into tangible "local news," consequently reminding readers of the company's role as guarding national and local interests. An example is the following tweet that imitates news reporting: "[Betting on] European football [soccer] brought 40000 euros to the winner in the city of Espoo, and the NHL brought 20000 euros to the winner in Itäkeskus [a neighborhood in Helsinki]" (Veikkaus Vedot, 2018). In this tweet, Veikkaus informed the audience the next morning about how the betting wins from the international leagues landed in neighborhoods around Finland. The Covid-19 pandemic was hardly reflected in the content or style of the sports posts – on the contrary – international sports leagues and horse racing continued in other countries, changing only the geographical location

of sports events, and keeping Veikkaus as a reliable news mediator and a betting provider.

Another way of manifesting itself as a natural part of Finnish society and seeing things from the perspective of the Finnish people, Veikkaus shared links and hashtags to mainstream media, such as commercial TV channels, whenever sports events were available. By doing this, the company would group itself together with mainstream sports media as peers in serving the public about sports events and as sports news mediators.

A strategy for downplaying gambling-related content and for emphasizing the role of the “neutral” sports news provider was to refrain from linking posts to sports-betting tips and Veikkaus’s hashtags. News posts about Veikkaus’s livestreaming services and upcoming events would only include hashtags of sports leagues and championships—not to any of Veikkaus’s brands. In addition, Veikkaus published a great deal of content about professional sports that is not related to betting or other gambling elements. Retweeting the Finnish Paralympic Committee’s post reminded audiences of Veikkaus’s role as a benefactor of the Finnish sports scene. With versatile topics, linking, and sharing on social media, Veikkaus thus creates a role for itself as a sports news agency, which is much in line with its gamblification, and gambling normalization aims.

The journalist

The sports news posts discussed in the previous section were characterized by claims of immediacy, objectivity, and newsworthy information that were acquired in a sound and reliable manner. In comparison, journalistic storytelling, or narrative journalism, as defined by Van Krieken and Sanders (2021, p. 1404), inherently includes “narrative storytelling techniques of voice, point of view, character, setting, plot, and/or chronology to report on reality through a subjective filter”. This type of journalistic role enables Veikkaus to really root for the home team and live with the athletes in their ups and downs, with a hope of engaging sports-enthusiastic audiences with emotional content. In sports stories, the subject is, to the fullest, the person, team, or topic in the story.

Although this thorough storytelling covers only 10 percent of the sports-related content, it is an important genre for long-term audience engagement, as well as for brand sympathy and appreciation (e.g., Shim, 2014). Journalistic storytelling is crucial for contextualizing the sports news posts and tying them to a backdrop that enables emotional investment by a committed audience. Journalistic posts create credibility for the company’s role as a news agency by providing more in-depth stories. These posts cover the aspect of “acquiring relevance” in the news epistemology framework (Ekström et al., 2021) and thereby support the credibility of Veikkaus as a mediator of news to the public.

Veikkaus posts journalistic stories mainly under the social media account belonging to its online magazine X, which has won several Finnish awards for its quality journalism: When it comes to the sports coverage, the X magazine publishes lengthy, in-depth stories about people and phenomena in the world of sports. An illustrative example of Veikkaus's journalistic and financial involvement in sports is from 2018 (xlehti, 2018) when the X magazine's reporter Janne Flinkkilä and photographer Aapo Huhta travelled to Siberia to follow the promising 18-year-old ice hockey player Eeli Tolvanen who played in the Russian Premier League. During the week-long trip, the journalist and photographer witnessed the routines of a grueling four-game tour and provided the audience an in-depth interview with the young star and an access to the international hockey team's private jet and inside their locker room.

Another example of Veikkaus's journalistic efforts is a video filmed in Italy before the Finnish national soccer team's match against Italy. In the clip, Finnish soccer player Teemu Pukki answers tricky questions sent by followers about how finding the love of his life and having a smiling daughter have affected his football performance. The intimate post asks: "Why is he such a late bloomer on the soccer field?" (X, 2019). In this video, Veikkaus gave followers a chance to pose personal questions to the soccer star while engaging the public in its journalistic task of getting to know the athletes and their private lives.

Such inside stories from all around the world—written in a narrative style that immerses the audience as a part of the story—give the impression that Veikkaus has access not only to the backstage of the sports world but also that it has become a close friend and travel companion of the athletes. By posting stories about sports stars and their whereabouts, the company provides followers a chance to become insiders and meet the stars behind the scenes of elite sports.

Veikkaus also produced a sports series on its YouTube channels. A YouTube series about soccer serves as an example of the company's attempts to create an impression of close connections to the global world of sports. In the series, it is implied that the company has behind-the-curtains access to non-Finnish teams and their everyday practices. In the 22-minute video, former soccer player Sebastian Sorsa gives the viewers a tour—seasoned with his soccer expertise—in an empty Ajax training center, followed by a discussion with former Ajax soccer star Jari Litmanen and other Finnish soccer players who are playing abroad (Veikkaus Vedot, 2019b). Through the Finnish sports stars, the company portrays itself as a close friend and ally of the European soccer leagues.

Overall, the sports stories, ranging from typical betting sports to junior sports, were built around the notion of all sports being equally important. By incorporating the image of promoting "good values" in its cultural alignment with sports, Veikkaus continues the gambification tradition that began in the 1940s when sports betting was first launched in Finland and advertised through sports organizations (Ahonen, 2019). The

genre of journalistic sports stories provides Veikkaus with a possibility to be seen in the light of promoting good values: uniting people behind good causes and shedding light on personal struggles and triumphs in the world of sports.

Engager of people

The third main way in which Veikkaus addresses followers in its social-media-based sports communication is through arranging competitions and other gimmicks that seek to engage followers. Customer engagement is known to be one of the most common brand strategies at the heart of social media marketing (Tsimonis & Dimitriadis, 2014). Competitions are a means of engaging customers and targeting a wider audience, for example, by encouraging them to tag a friend or to share a post in order to participate. The Lotteries Act (2023) prohibits the use of gambling products, such as free rounds or game bonuses, as prizes for competitions. For this reason, the prizes in Veikkaus games and gimmicks were never directly related to gambling.

Nevertheless, the competitions that Veikkaus arranged on social media shared similarities with sports betting. In many of the posts, the followers were asked to guess the winner of tonight's game, while the prizes were drawn among those who *had known the correct answer*. Research shows that betting companies typically emphasize sports betting as a game of skills (see Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017), as in the case of Veikkaus's social media competitions, which highlighted sports knowledge.

Sometimes, the prizes—such as a team shirt with the players' autographs—were related to the sport at hand, but equally often the prizes could be movie tickets, which could interest all kinds of social media users. In addition to competitions, the posts could encourage followers to comment on tonight's games or name their favorite athletes. This way of utilizing references to the world of sports shows an awareness of the fact that an important part of sports fandom is to support one's favorite team regardless of the team's success (Norris et al., 2015). By commenting, the fans manifest support for their teams while the post reaches a wider audience.

To engage followers to register for the company's customer loyalty program, the material contained competitions and special offers for "loyal customers only." Although the competitions with special prizes such as VIP tickets to the Ice Hockey World Championship games or special offers of "two tickets for the price of one" to the Davis Cup tennis match were marketed exclusively for registered customers only, these posts would always include a registration link for the Veikkaus customer loyalty program, enabling instant redemption of the loyal customer benefits (for a discussion, see Wohl, 2018).

To maintain a successful social media presence, companies need to keep the content fresh and frequent and include incentives to engage their followers (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Veikkaus's competitions and other sports-referring gimmicks had significantly more comments and reactions compared to other content, proving the strategy to be successful. By doing this, Veikkaus acts as a promoter that is—through innovative means—trying to engage people with the world of sports and its own brand. In Table 2, we have summarized the sports-related social media genres and their functions in the content of Veikkaus's sampled social media posts of 2018, 2019, and 2020.

Table 2. Summary table. Claiming, acquiring, and justifying the relevance of Veikkaus through sports-related social media content.

	News agency	Journalist	Engager of people
Role	Following, updating, and reporting on sports in a news format	Providing the public with behind-the-scenes access to the world of sports with a profound relationship with teams and stars, acquiring insight into the personal lives of athletes	Encouraging the public to participate in and engage with sports-related gimmicks and competitions
Genre	Sports news	Journalistic storytelling	Brand engagement
Temporality	Urgency and immediacy in suggesting a necessary continuous engagement with sports	Long-term involvement in the people and phenomena in the world of sports; keeping the public committed and invested over time	Raising the public's interest in the world of sports within a limited timeframe to participate in quick games and gimmicks
News epistemology dimension	<p>Claiming relevance through the production of immediacy, factuality, and expertise</p> <p>Claiming relevance by having inside information and good contacts with all types of sports at all levels (international, national, local)</p>	<p>Acquiring and justifying relevance through rare, in-depth behind-the-scenes access to the world of sports</p> <p>Providing evidence of credibility and justifying the news agency role by producing high-standard journalistic stories and videos</p>	<p>Following the logic of social media customer engagement</p> <p>Attention-grasping "support function" for social media coverage</p> <p>Important as a branding strategy</p>

Discussion

We have studied the ways in which the Finnish state gambling monopoly Veikkaus communicates about sports on social media. We focused on the ways in which this communication serves the company's role as a producer of sports news and stories. We argue that it serves the company's gambification aspirations and helps it to create a social role for itself. Next, we recapitulate our empirical findings and explain their significance in three broader views.

Our analysis provided evidence that the company produces sports news posts that follow the logic of real-time news as conceptualized in terms of news epistemological logic. In our material, Veikkaus was onsite, in real time, adding information about the sports events as situations evolved. The role of the audience is to wait for updates that are relevant to the story. Sports news posts can focus purely on sports, for example, by providing updates on sports events or access to a wide range of livestreaming of sports without any references to gambling. Equally, the posts can consist of straightforward sports-betting content with tips and winning sums presented as sports news.

Posting journalistic stories, from within and behind the curtain of the world of sports, helps the company to build credibility and long-term engagement, thereby emphasizing the relevance and reliability of the sports news production. In addition, the company communicates around sports through competitions and social media engagement features that ensure activation and integration of audiences with wide coverage of the company's messages.

What, then, can we conclude on the ways in which Veikkaus engages in this "sophisticated gambification activity" that normalizes gambling and the role of the company as a significant social actor through the social media content analyzed in the current study?

First, the study points out how sports-related social media flows establish legitimacy and legacy to the gambling company, its brand, and its products through the cultivation of a sports news agency status. It is no surprise that global gambling companies post sports content in their social media flows (Houghton et al., 2019; Killick and Griffiths, 2020; Thomas et al., 2015), but our study has picked apart the postings, providing evidence and explaining the communication tactics used by companies. Based on the number of followers on social media alone, Veikkaus can be seen as constituting the largest single sports-related social media channel in Finland. However, Veikkaus is not officially counted as a media organization in overviews of the Finnish media landscape (see e.g., Ojala & Matikainen, 2022; Reunanen et al., 2022). In terms of reach and resources spent on producing news and stories, Veikkaus is very much aiming to become part of the Finnish mass media sector. This position is enabled by its longstanding marriage to the world of sports.

Second, Veikkaus has clearly invested considerable resources in journalistic storytelling, which includes in-depth personal interviews of sports stars and thorough backstage reporting from all over the world. As a sponsor, Veikkaus has excellent access to sports events and sports practices. This role needs, however, to be critically scrutinized, as the company has a direct interest in keeping the public invested with gambling products and gambling as an activity.

Third, and quite thought-provoking, Veikkaus's investments in its news agency role and journalistic activities are enabled by the revenues that stem from citizens' gambling. In other words, the Finnish people's gambling habits fund the synergy between the role of Veikkaus as a media company and the world of sports. One can compare this to the largest Finnish media organization, The Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE), which is a public service funded by a public service tax. But in terms of social media followers, the gambling-funded state monopoly holds a more prominent role in the Finnish sports news and communication scene. This paradox of a gambling company being more followed than sports accounts of mainstream media should be acknowledged as being an important part of gambling normalization. It is noteworthy that sports journalism, while at times considered trivial, is nevertheless extremely popular and thus reaches significantly large audiences (Perreault & Bell, 2022).

One might question whether the legal restrictions on gambling marketing work in the company's favor as a motive for coming up with more innovative commercial communication strategies, as in the case of sports news production. Due to the Finnish public's high trust in its national media (Ojala, 2021), consumers are not likely to perceive Veikkaus's sports news as a part of the company's commercial communication aimed at marketing, normalizing, and selling gambling products. It is even more of a concern if the democratic process of the free press is jeopardized by industry-driven journalism taking over the journalistic genre of sports news. By taking on the role of a sports media organization, Veikkaus is involved both in self-legitimizing work and in a rather invisible, yet powerful, gambification of the public sphere.

Conclusions

This study has furthered our understanding of the ways in which the gambling industry can utilize 1) a marriage with the world of sports and 2) its social media presence for carving out a role for itself in the realm of sports news reporting and journalism. We have only studied one gambling company, which holds a special place in Finnish society. Future studies could use this study as a springboard or model for producing evidence of similar social media content patterns by the global gambling industry. Also, in this paper we did not address the great gender imbalance of the posts. Future studies should provide proof of how skewed content,

such as the underrepresentation of women, serves the same commercial aspirations as the sports news provider role unfolded in the present study.

Declaration of conflict of interest

None declared.

Statement of Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethics approval

Not required. This study used publicly available social media postings by the Finnish state-owned gambling monopoly.

Funding

The authors disclose receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Jääskeläinen has received funding from the Finnish Foundation for Alcohol Studies (FFAS). The work of Jääskeläinen, Hellman and Lindeman is funded through a cooperation contract with the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare for the execution of the Lotteries Act section 52. The section 52 research is funded by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.

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