

The NCAA's Campaign to "Draw the Line" against Gamblers Harassing Student-Athletes

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Abstract: College student-athletes have increasingly become targets of abusive messages from fans who lost money gambling on their games. The National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) concern about student-athlete mental health and well-being led it to launch the "Draw the Line" campaign in 2024 to address harassment stemming from sports gambling. This article evaluates the NCAA's Draw the Line campaign through public health communication and agenda-setting theoretical frameworks. Public health communication campaigns must address the audience resistance barriers to behavior change, specifically the applicability to self and the efficacy of treatment recommendations. Agenda-setting addresses each of these audience resistance barriers through issue exposure and the facts emphasized in the messaging influencing public salience. The NCAA hopes that greater awareness and the proper information about sports gambling and abusive messages being sent to student-athletes will curtail this harassment behavior.

Keywords: Gambling, College Sports, Public Health, NCAA, Communication.

The NCAA's Campaign to "Draw the Line" against Gamblers Harassing Student-Athletes

College student-athletes have increasingly become targets of abusive messages from fans who lost money gambling on their games. NCAA President Chalie Baker described, "The horrific messages we are seeing across online platforms is absolutely unacceptable. Angry fans are sending numerous abusive messages and threats to student-athletes, publicly and privately, because of lost bets placed on the athlete's performance in a game" (Heath, 2025, para. 7). The harassment of student-athletes is due to the convergence of sports gambling being legalized in 2018, the proliferation of sports gambling through the ease of placing bets from mobile devices, the many different types of bets possible, the marketing of sports gambling, and social media facilitating the transmission of messages to student-athletes (Springer, 2025).

The NCAA's concern about student-athlete mental health and well-being led it to implement education programs about the various harms of sports gambling (Heath, 2024a). The NCAA also appealed to state legislatures to reform sports gambling laws, especially restricting individual player proposition bets (Myers, 2023b). The NCAA then felt that a public communication campaign was needed. In 2024, the NCAA launched its "Draw the Line" campaign to address student-athlete harassment stemming from sports gambling. The NCAA produced a commercial in 2025 called "Don't Be a Loser" that aired during the men's and women's college basketball tournament and other college championship events to raise awareness about the problem (Heath, 2025).

The purpose of this article is to analyze the NCAA's (2024a) Draw the Line campaign through an application of communication theoretical frameworks that enable an evaluation of what the campaign achieves, identify its current gaps, and prescribe steps that the NCAA should consider. Research on health communication campaigns provides instructive ideas about the actions and messaging needed to resonate with the public. Atkin and Rice (2013) argued that a public health communication campaign must address the audience resistance barriers to behavior change, specifically the applicability to self and the efficacy of treatment recommendations.

Agenda-setting theory addresses each of these audience resistance barriers. Agenda-setting indicates that exposure of an issue can increase its public salience (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Applicability to self is accomplished by issue awareness. Agenda-setting also indicates that the facts emphasized in the media messaging can be perceived as more salient by the public (McCombs et al., 2014). The efficacy of treatment recommendations reflects how an issue is framed. The awareness and framing of the issue demonstrating applicability to self and the efficacy of recommended treatment options may determine the extent to which a public health communication campaign will influence behavior change.

It must be noted that issues have competing frames with other organizations highlighting facts that are to their benefit. The NCAA's Draw

the Line campaign exists in a sports gambling environment where betting is promoted by gambling companies as fun, harmless, and socially acceptable (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017; Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2024; Winters & Derevensky, 2019). Sports gambling is presented with an overemphasis on the likelihood of winning and risks of engaging in this behavior minimized (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017). Sports organizations benefit from an increase in gambling, leading to more interest and higher viewership of games (Das et al., 2025; Paul & Weinbach, 2015).

The financial benefit of gambling presents a contradiction for sports organizations which also have a responsibility to safeguard their athletes (Hayday et al., 2025). The NCAA hopes that greater awareness and the proper information about sports gambling and abusive messages being sent to student-athletes will curtail this harassment behavior. The NCAA should use public health communication campaigns and agenda-setting research as strategic guides for crafting an effective initiative. A theoretical evaluation of a prominent public health communication campaign has value where addressing the gaps in the literature can lead to steps to improve the initiative.

Literature Review

Public Health Communication Campaigns

Communication plays a central role in generating awareness of and encouraging people to engage in specific health behaviors (Dorfman & Wallack, 2013; Rice & Atkin, 2013). Rice and Atkin (2013) defined public communication campaigns as

purposive attempts to inform or influence behaviors in large audiences within a specific time period using an organized set of communication activities and featuring an array of mediated messages in multiple channels generally to produce noncommercial benefits to individuals and society. (p. 3)

The true value of a public health communication campaign is its influence on the communities and stakeholders that it was intended to benefit (Valente & Kwan, 2013). Dorfman and Wallack (2013) pointed out that “public education campaigns are largely governed by the idea that people need more and better personal information to navigate a hazardous health environment” (pp. 335-336). They added, “Campaigns fill the knowledge gap by focusing on developing the right message to deliver to the largest number of people through the mass media. Finding the right message is central to the campaign and extremely important” (p. 336).

Agenda-setting and Framing

The agenda-setting framework inspired by McCombs and Shaw examines the concept of communication influence. The original agenda-setting study found that the amount of media exposure that an issue receives

influences its public salience (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The increase in issue awareness is essential as McCombs and Reynolds (2002) stated that “establishing this salience among the public so that an issue becomes the focus of public attention, thought, and perhaps even action is the initial stage in the formation of public opinion” (p. 1).

Agenda-setting research extended from the original idea of media exposure influencing the public salience of issues to focus on the transfer of salience of issue attributes, the characteristics or qualities that are presented (McCombs et al., 2014). Agenda-setting is linked to the concept of framing in that the message content can influence the public’s perceived importance of a topic and its attributes (McCombs et al., 2014; Scheufele, 2000). Entman (1993) explained, “To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (p. 52). The framing of an issue involves the words or phrases used, people mentioned, people quoted, and the pictures presented with the assumption that subtle message presentation changes might influence how audiences interpret issues (Scheufele, 2000).

Agenda-setting researchers further indicate that an issue and its attributes can be transferred from the media to the public in “networked relationships” (McCombs & Guo, 2014, p. 256). McCombs and Guo (2014) claimed that when the media bundle an issue with an attribute, they become “salient in the public’s mind simultaneously” (p. 257). In this scenario, the exposure of an issue and one of its core attributes presented together indicates that they are inseparable.

The agenda-setting function, therefore, has been summarized as a process in which the media may successfully influence what issues the public thinks about and how the public thinks about those issues (McCombs et al., 2014). However, when studying how media agendas are constructed, researchers pointed out that individuals and organizations can attempt to influence media coverage or can play a role in helping an issue receive exposure and raise its awareness by using their website, social media, and marketing communication platforms. These individuals and organizations are hoping to have issues framed from their perspective (McCombs et al., 2014; Ragas, 2015).

Framing in Public Health Communication Campaigns

Understanding agenda-setting and framing is useful in exploring issue and attribute salience related to the behavior change objectives of a public health communication campaign (Guo & Vu, 2018). The campaign needs to reach multiple target audiences through multiple communication channels to maximize issue exposure potential (Rice & Atkin, 2013) and, thus, increase the salience of that issue as indicated in agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Public awareness is a necessary condition for health-related issues; however, behavior change is the only act that will contribute to improved individual health (e.g., getting screened for colon or breast cancer, having cholesterol or blood pressure checked). Messaging must resonate with individuals and positively impact their behavior. The facts presented and emphasized in the public health communication campaign, the way that the message is framed, perform an agenda-setting role that can shape how the public thinks about the issue (McCombs et al., 2014).

Public health communication campaign scholars offer what this message framing needs to entail to best influence behavior. Atkin and Rice (2013) identified audience resistance barriers to behavior change as the central reason why health communication campaigns do not resonate with the public. These resistance barriers exist at each stage of audience response, from message exposure to behavioral implementation. At any stage, audience members could interpret the messages as disturbing, irrelevant, or uninformative, which might cause them to disregard the communication and not engage in any recommended behavior.

Two prominent audience resistance behaviors are applicability to self and the rejection of unappealing recommendations (Atkin & Rice, 2013). It is necessary for communication message framing to emphasize that the health condition can occur and to offer a plausible, effective treatment option(s) in response to these audience resistance barriers. For Atkin and Rice's (2013) applicability to self audience resistance barrier, the message must include that the individual can be afflicted if engaging in behavior that jeopardizes one's health. Applicability to self speaks to issue awareness. The communication goal is to demonstrate that the health-related behavior can have a personal impact. Awareness could be communicated through statistics, language, or stories that define the scope of the problem.

Applicability to self through awareness might arouse interest, concern, and motivate further exploration of the issue, especially an individual's paying attention to and seeking to act on potential treatment recommendations (Atkin & Rice, 2013). The more individuals believe they are susceptible to a condition, the more motivated they are to evaluate the efficacy of the recommended treatment (Yzer et al., 2013). Individuals must believe they are empowered to prevent or solve the problem for them to engage in the required behavior. Individuals will process the message and take the appropriate action to cope with the health threat when they understand the seriousness of a threat and believe they can successfully avert it (Yzer et al., 2013).

Gambling Behavior

Public health communication campaigns must recognize the specific environmental conditions and competing frames that are associated with the activity. In the case of student-athlete harassment, there is a combination of two problematic areas: sports gambling and social media. Engaging in each

activity can lead to some form of individual gratification, but also harmful outcomes.

Sports gambling is a function of what is legally permissible, the methods of wagering and types of wagers allowed, and how the activity is promoted (Winters & Derevensky, 2019). The technological ease of placing a bet through online and mobile platforms is contributing to an increase in sports gambling. Even if not attracting new gamblers, existing gamblers can place bets more frequently (Winters & Derevensky, 2019). These gamblers might chase losses with their next wager at a higher amount as they try to break even (Berman, 2024). The many types of bets that are possible also lead to more wagering. Bets can be placed on a team's game and season results, and an array of individual proposition outcomes based on a player's performance. Proposition bets are among the most popular and, as a result, most profitable for sports gambling companies (O'Connell & Diamond, 2025). In-game wagering, where odds are constantly changing, allows for continuous betting on team or player outcomes.

Beyond what is legally permitted, sports gambling behavior is influenced by how the activity is promoted (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017; Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2024; McGrane et al., 2023). Mentions of sports gambling are ubiquitous in sports television and online content (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2024; McGrane et al., 2023). Advertisements in 2026 promoting DraftKings and FanDuel now appear in all 50 states, as these companies participate in prediction markets in states where gambling is illegal (Santaromita & Vanbiber, 2026). There is evidence that this frequent exposure leads to gambling behavior (McGrane et al., 2023; Syvertsen et al., 2022).

Sports gambling is then presented as fun, harmless, and socially acceptable (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017; Winters & Derevensky, 2019). Lopez-Gonzalez et al. (2017) found that sports gambling messages have an overemphasis on the skill and knowledge of the gambler and a deemphasis on the role that luck could play in the outcome of a sporting event. There is also an overemphasis on the likelihood of the gambler winning the bet, with risks of engaging in this behavior minimized (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017; Winters & Derevensky, 2019). Indeed, gambling advertisements often feature prominent athletes and celebrities promoting more risky bets with the opportunity for higher winnings (Berman, 2024; Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2024). The negative consequences of gambling are significant for vulnerable populations, especially individuals with gambling addiction tendencies and the youth population (Derevensky et al., 2010; Monaghan et al., 2008).

Responsible gambling messaging is designed to prevent problem gambling by promoting safer gambling attitudes and behaviors (Gaudett et al., 2025). Individuals, however, often view responsible gambling messages as not pertinent for them, thinking they do not have a gambling problem, and that these campaigns are instead intended for those with more severe addiction (Gaudett et al., 2025; Houghton & Moss, 2024). The more

effective responsible gambling campaigns have been found to focus on specific risks associated with the activity and led individuals to reflect on their gambling behavior and potential harms, rather than generic messages that, for example, merely state “gamble responsibly” (Gaudett et al., 2025; Houghton & Moss, 2024). When calls for responsible betting are presented by gambling companies, they have focused on wagering education, such as understanding odds, rather than ceasing to participate in the activity (Berman, 2024).

Complicating the issue is that state governments, sports leagues and teams, and media companies benefit economically from an increase in sports gambling. State governments view sports gambling as a source of tax revenue and job creation (Santaromita & Vanbiber, 2026). Sports gambling has been shown to increase the viewership of games, which benefits sports leagues, teams, athletes, and media companies (Das et al., 2025; Paul & Weinbach, 2015). Sports media companies understood that more people would be wagering on sports games as gambling became more widely legalized. They created television, online, and social media content tailored for the sports gambling audience, knowing that they desire information and analysis to make them smarter gamblers and increase their chances of winning (Bruell & Ramachandran, 2018). Leagues and teams sell sponsorships to sports gambling companies who use those exposure platforms in their quest to acquire customers (Beaton, 2020).

All sports leagues prohibit their players and team officials from certain types of sports betting, but players have recently been indicted for their alleged involvement in fixing games in the NBA (Diamond et al., 2025) and MLB (Radnofsky & Diamond, 2025). Thirteen former men’s college basketball players at six universities were being investigated by the NCAA for unusual betting activity surrounding their games (Wright & Heath, 2025). The Nevada Gaming Control Board arrested several players from Fresno State in 2026 for fixing games in 2025 (Dorson, 2026).

Social Media Behavior

Social media platforms contribute to the level of student-athlete harassment. Social media as a vehicle for abuse toward an individual is enabled by anonymity (Kearns et al., 2023; Sanderson & Weathers, 2020), messages rapidly amplified through sharing tools (Hayday et al., 2025; Kavanagh et al., 2022), and public message boards or direct messaging capabilities (Lover et al., 2017). Direct messages have been shown to be more vicious and threatening because it is harder for the sender to be identified (Springer, 2025). Finally, difficulties exist in creating regulations for effectively surveilling and reporting online abuse and prosecuting these incidents (Hayday et al., 2025; Kavanagh et al., 2022).

Athletes are the most frequent recipients of hateful messages on social media (Hayes, 2022; Kearns, 2023; MacPherson & Kerr, 2023). Athletes receive abuse if not meeting fans’ performance expectations, as a target of sexist or racist messages, or for political stances (Kavanagh et al.,

2022; Kearns et al., 2023). Social media messages referencing violence are common, including threats of bodily harm and death (Sanderson et al., 2020). Ensuring the mental health of athletes, particularly college athletes, should be a priority, but there is insufficient training and education about online abuse (Hayday et al., 2025). Gambling has emerged as a major reason for abusive messages targeting athletes (Springer, 2025). NCAA President Charlie Baker summarized that fans' abusive messages because of gambling losses "severely threaten student-athlete mental health and well-being, while harming the college athletics environment" (Heath, 2025, para. 7).

Method

The NCAA's (2024a) Draw the Line campaign is the public health communication initiative intended to curtail the harassment of student-athletes caused by gambling. This article examines the Draw the Line campaign and tests whether it adheres to the principles outlined in the public health communication campaign literature, especially the audience resistance barriers to behavior change, and sufficiently applies what is known from agenda-setting and framing research. The publicly accessible actions and communication of the NCAA are used as the data set. Assessing an organization's actions and communication about an issue is a common research approach if intending to learn its perspective (Barnett, 2005; Chewning, 2015).

The NCAA's actions were ascertained by first examining its website, www.ncaa.org. A tab for the Media Center appears at the top of the website. There is a "news" link when the Media Center tab is highlighted. Clicking on the news link provides a listing of NCAA news archives. A "search by keyword" option is available. The word "gambling" was put into the search bar in the "news" link. The timeframe of the search was from 2023 through 2025. In 2023, gambling seemingly became a larger issue for the NCAA as there are only two statements yielded from searching the word "gambling" from 2019 through 2022.

The search revealed that the NCAA released 31 statements about gambling since 2023. There were eight statements in 2023 and 2024, and 15 statements in 2025. These statements outline student-athlete education efforts, report survey results that show gambling behavior on campuses, advocate for provisions in states' gambling laws, and explain a partnership with the data science firm, Signify Group, which monitors online abuse. The statements related to the work of Signify Group are on December 11, 2023, May 17, 2024, October 10, 2024, and June 10, 2025. Quotes from NCAA President Charlie Baker appearing in the NCAA's official statements are included to provide commentary about issues and a rationale for institutional actions.

The statements directly detailing the NCAA's Draw the Line campaign, launched in 2024, are on March 19, 2024, and March 18, 2025. The statement on March 18, 2025, introduced the NCAA's Don't Be a Loser

commercial, which first aired during the men's and women's basketball tournaments (Heath, 2025). The commercial ends with the website, ncaa.org/drawtheline. Further details of the Draw the Line campaign were then gathered using a progression for how an audience member might learn of the harassment of student athletes and seek more information. There are links on the Draw the Line website to the NCAA's gambling learning e-resources, a promotional campus toolkit, information about seeking assistance for gambling addiction, and the NCAA's comprehensive college sports gambling website, <http://www.ncaa.org/sportsbetting>.

Once a description of the NCAA's actions and communication is provided, analytical comparisons can be made to the claims offered in the public health communication campaign, agenda-setting, and framing literature. These frameworks are used to analyze the NCAA's efforts by examining where there is adherence with the theoretical ideas and where there are gaps. Specifically, the analysis is seeking if the applicability to self and efficacy of treatment recommendation barriers are satisfied in the NCAA's campaign. The analysis also focuses on how the NCAA achieves public salience of the issue and what it chooses for its message framing strategy. This approach aligns scholarly concepts with practical techniques and lends insight into what is occurring in the strategic practice of public health communication campaigns.

Findings

The NCAA's Confronting Gambling

The NCAA was proactive in efforts to confront the growth of sports gambling by educating its student-athletes and athletic department officials about sports betting awareness, gambling addiction, student-athlete well-being, and protecting the integrity of competition. In 2022, it partnered with Epic Risk Management, a firm that provides universities with in-person workshops, prerecorded sessions, and on-demand virtual resources (Myers, 2023a).

The NCAA advocates for state legislatures to pass sports gambling laws that protect student-athletes from harassment or coercion. It asked states to establish a mandatory reporting system that places those who harass student-athletes on a list that prohibits them from wagering on games (Myers, 2023b). The NCAA requested states allocate revenue generated from sports gambling toward education initiatives, specifically effects directed to college students. It wanted sports betting advertisements to include information about problem gambling, convey prohibitions on harassment related to sports gambling, and offer a student-athlete harassment hotline. The NCAA hoped for referrals of harassment behavior to law enforcement and increased penalties for gamblers who harass student-athletes. Further, the NCAA sought to prohibit those younger than 21 from betting on sports (Myers, 2023b). The NCAA also called for the elimination of proposition bets on a college athlete's individual performance. The position of the NCAA is that "these types of bets target

the individual for harassment and are more easily manipulated, threatening competition integrity” (Heath, 2024a, para. 3).

Social media is a prominent topic in the NCAA Sport Science Institute’s (2024) *Mental Health Best Practices* report. The NCAA focuses on four points: (1) the creation of healthy environments that support mental health and promote well-being; (2) procedures, including mental health screening tools, for identifying student-athletes with mental health symptoms and disorders; (3) action plans that outline referral pathways of student-athletes to qualified providers; and (4) licensure of providers who oversee and manage student-athlete mental health care (McGuire, 2024). A statement released by the NCAA about how it is prioritizing student-athlete mental health features a section on the harms of gambling (McGuire, 2024).

Monitoring Online Abuse

In December 2023, the NCAA hired Signify Group, a company that uses data science and artificial intelligence, to identify online abusers, the frequency of abuse, and the nature of the messages directed at student-athletes, coaches, officials, and championship committee members (NCAA, 2023). Signify Group’s initial findings were reported using data collected through the men’s and women’s basketball tournaments. The American Gaming Association (2025) estimated that \$3.1 billion is wagered annually on the men’s and women’s basketball tournaments. Abuse towards student-athletes increased for higher-profile events and 15-25% of abuse surrounding these events is betting-related. One in three high-profile student-athletes received an abusive message from someone with a betting interest (Heath, 2024a).

There were over 54,000 comments and posts during the 2024 NCAA basketball tournaments flagged for abuse or threats that were reviewed by human analysts. Social media companies were notified of nearly 4,000 messages. Some abusive messages were elevated to law enforcement. Women’s basketball student-athletes received approximately three times more threats than men’s players (Heath, 2024a).

A summary of Signify Group’s threat assessment covering more of the college sports year was provided in October 2024. This report showed that over 72,000 messages were flagged for abusive content. More than 5,000 messages were reported to social media companies. Betting-related abuse represented 12% of all harassing messages, trailing only sexually abusive messages at 18%. The study found that 80% of the total abuse was directed at student-athletes who participated in the men’s and women’s college basketball tournaments (Heath, 2024b). NCAA President Charlie Baker stated of these results:

Fans have to do better, social media companies have to do more to identify and remove this content, and we all need reminders about responsible social media usage. Student-athletes come to college hoping to fulfill their athletic and academic dreams, and our job at

the NCAA is to provide them with the most fulfilling experience possible. We will exhaust all options to reduce the harassment and vitriol student-athletes are experiencing too often today. (Heath, 2024b, para. 4)

Baker has discussed his concerns in numerous keynote speeches at National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics (NACDA) and Women Leaders in Sport conferences in recent years.

NCAA Draw the Line Campaign

As data about student-athlete harassment was being collected by Signify Group, the NCAA launched its Draw the Line campaign in March 2024 to coincide with the men's and women's college basketball tournaments (NCAA, 2024c). The campaign aims to educate college students about the negative effects of sports betting. The Draw the Line campaign was presented on social media platforms. Universities and conferences were provided with a toolkit that contained resources to promote the initiative on their campuses. For example, poster templates could be displayed on campus featuring a hallmark statistic, such as "1 in 10 college students are pathological gamblers" (NCAA, 2024b, p. 4).

The Draw the Line campaign was initially aimed at college students before evolving in its second year to a more visible public initiative with a television commercial that first aired during the NCAA basketball tournaments in March 2025. The commercial entitled "Don't Be a Loser" focused specifically on student-athletes receiving abusive messages from fans who lost a bet. The voice-over content of the commercial states:

There's losing, and then there's being a loser. Game time comes with enough pressure. Way too often people are betting on sports, losing, and taking it out on the athlete. Only a loser would harass college athletes after losing a bet, but it happens almost every day. Root for your team. Get crazy when the buzzer sounds. But don't harass anyone because you lost the bet. It's time we draw the line and put an end to the abuse. Brought to you by the NCAA. (NCAA, 2025b)

The commercial features on-screen graphics that read, "game time comes with enough pressure," "one in three student-athletes have experienced betting-related harassment," and "college athletes deserve support" (NCAA, 2025b). The final frame of the commercial has the website address, ncaa.org/drawtheline, where fans can go to learn more information about the NCAA's sports gambling initiatives.

The NCAA (2024a) Draw the Line website contains the statement, "sports betting is everywhere – your friends, family, and classmates are placing bets, ads are impossible to miss, and the prevalence of harassment from angry fans who lost a bet continues to increase" (para. 1). Visitors can

watch the Don't Be a Loser commercial on the NCAA (2024a) Draw the Line website. An explanation of the Draw the Line campaign is also provided, with the NCAA (2024a)

calling on fans to curb abuse directed at you and your teammates. College athletics is no place for harassment. You should be supported and celebrated for your academic and athletic achievements, not targeted with threats and abuse by Losers. It is time we Draw the Line and put an end to the abuse. (para. 2)

The Draw the Line website highlights the key findings from Signify Group's 2024 research and provides a link to its complete report (NCAA, 2024a). Links to the NCAA's e-learning resources, membership toolkit, ncaa.org/sportsbetting website, and phone numbers for gambling addiction appear on the website. The ncaa.org/sportsbetting website is separated into the following sections: What's the NCAA rule about sports betting? What's the issue surrounding sports betting? Why is the NCAA concerned about sport betting? What is the NCAA doing about sports betting?

Research by Signify Group continued in 2025 by monitoring the accounts of 2,032 players, 346 coaches, 136 teams, and 269 game officials and tournament selection committee members during the men's and women's college basketball tournaments. There were 54,096 messages flagged for potential abuse or threats. Human analysts confirmed 3,161 messages as abusive and reported them to social media companies, which then restricted some users' accounts and removed abusive posts from their platforms. Ten incidents were referred to law enforcement. The one encouraging result was that abuse related to betting declined 23% (Myers, 2025a). Jonathan Hirshler, Signify Group's CEO, explained that sports betting-related abuse "is often the trigger for the most egregious and threatening content we detect" (Myers, 2025a, para. 9). Hirshler added, "By supporting the NCAA in demonstrating that abusers can be identified and will be reported to law enforcement — where criminal thresholds are broken — it is possible to see a deterrent effect in play" (Myers, 2025a, para. 9).

The problem, however, continues as the NCAA reported in November 2025 that 36% of Division I men's basketball student-athletes experienced social media abuse related to sports betting within the last year (Myers, 2025b). The NCAA also found that 29% of those basketball players had an interaction with a student on campus who bet on their team (Myers, 2025b).

Discussion

The NCAA determined that a public health communication campaign was needed to address the harassment of student-athletes by gamblers who lost a bet. The effectiveness of the NCAA's Draw the Line

campaign is considered by evaluating its achievements, identifying current gaps, and prescribing steps that the NCAA should consider. Theoretical frameworks are helpful in making those determinations.

Public health communication campaigns must recognize the audience resistance barriers to behavior change of applicability to self and the efficacy of treatment recommendations (Atkin & Rice, 2013). The resistance barrier of applicability to self is addressed by communicating issue awareness. Airing commercials during the highly watched NCAA basketball tournaments is designed to achieve maximum issue exposure. The NCAA, through its Draw the Line campaign and the Don't Be a Loser commercial, is performing an agenda-setting function of exposure raising the public salience of the issue of student-athlete harassment by gamblers.

The facts emphasized through the campaign can increase the salience of those issue attributes (Entman, 1993; McCombs et al., 2014). Framing through words, statistics, or stories about individuals affected can build awareness, depict the scope of the problem, and influence audiences (Scheufele, 2000). McCombs and Guo (2014) described that a topic and its attributes can be transferred from the media to the public simultaneously as a networked relationship. The NCAA is trying to link gambling and harassment by claiming that gambling invites harassment, and social media facilitates this abusive behavior.

While the literature informs as to what a public health communication campaign needs to achieve, applying the principles of applicability to self (exposure) and efficacy of treatment recommendations (framing) have limitations in the context of the NCAA's efforts to curtail student-athlete harassment due to gambling. Theoretical frameworks engage with the specific variables of each situation. For example, in terms of agenda-setting the NCAA's student-harassment problem cannot be solved solely by exposure. The NCAA is relying on its Draw the Line campaign to make the abusers more aware of the harmful effects their behavior is causing. It is hoping the phrasing in the Don't Be a Loser commercial forcefully referring to the abusers as "losers" is a repudiation that will resonate with the gamblers. Statistics are also used to indicate the level of harassment. Perhaps this knowledge might prevent those individuals from sending abusive messages to student-athletes.

A level of awareness can be presumed if the Draw the Line campaign commercials are placed during popular programming, such as the college basketball tournaments. This article, however, notes the limitation of mere awareness when behavior change is ultimately needed. Communicating awareness is easier than influencing health-related behavior. The NCAA should have its public campaign provide treatment recommendations and evidence that supports their efficacy to induce behavioral change, as suggested by Atkin & Rice (2013). Not having messaging in the NCAA's Draw the Line campaign about the treatment recommendation audience resistance barrier is a missed opportunity.

The unique dynamic in this case is that the person the NCAA is trying to adopt a behavior change and the person being affected by the negative behavior are two different individuals. While campaigns need to reach multiple audiences (Rice & Atkin, 2013), the public health communication literature specifically in need of refinement is for campaigns where there are perpetrators and victims, such as in situations of abuse and harassment. Defining the “self” in the context of the NCAA’s campaign can take on different meanings. The “self” in the Don’t Be a Loser commercial is primarily those who post and send hurtful messages to student-athletes. The “self” could be the student-athletes to make them more aware of their social media profiles and the seriousness of receiving abusive messages.

The case of the NCAA informs the public health communication campaign framework that in such instances where there can be multiple intended audiences, perhaps different message framing is needed for each individual type. The NCAA’s current public communication strategy can be deemed insufficient in this regard because a single message is designed to reach two different groups of people. To overcome this flaw, multiple messages and placement options should be explored for these different audiences. For example, certain Draw the Line messages should be placed where they have an increased chance of being noticed by gamblers (e.g., sports gambling websites or sportsbook locations), with different messages placed on college campuses to reach that audience.

Messaging directed at gamblers could address the underlying behavior leading to the harassment, their betting on games. Interestingly, the NCAA is not asking individuals to change their gambling behavior in its campaign, only to stop harassing student-athletes. The NCAA could more forcefully argue for individuals to be more responsible gamblers, if not completely refrain from the activity. Responsible gambling messaging could be the treatment recommendation that is seemingly missing from the NCAA’s campaign. The suggestions put forth for effective responsible gambling campaigns where there is a focus on individual risks and potential harm from engaging in the activity are insightful for developing such messaging (Gaudett et al., 2025; Houghton & Moss, 2024). This article focuses on the NCAA’s perspective and its efforts. A study that examines the gamblers’ motivation, behavior, and assists with understanding what prompts them to harass student-athletes would be helpful as it could instruct the NCAA’s future campaigns.

Messaging toward student athletes could explain how to react and the services already available at a university to help them cope with these distressing messages. Beyond the individuals at the center of the conflict, messaging could be directed at university officials to point out that harassment is possibly happening to their student-athletes. The NCAA Student-Athlete Needs, Aspiration and Perspectives (SNAP) study, a 19-question survey administered through a mobile app directed at Division I

athletes to learn their perspective on a series of college sports issues, includes fan behavior from sports gambling (Myers, 2025b).

Both institutions and athletic departments should be proactive in providing mental health training for student-athletes and staff. In addition, mental health counseling support should be readily available, whether housed in athletics or in collaboration with campus counseling centers. It is vital that athletic departments normalize the importance of focusing on mental health and reduce the stigma surrounding seeking help (Gross et al., 2020). Awareness of these issues, especially within athletic departments, should inspire programming to student-athletes that reviews the impacts of social media usage, dangers of gambling, and interactions with non-athlete students regarding these topics. The NCAA continues to form partnerships to confront sports gambling-related harassment, such as those with Epic Risk Management and Signify Group. The NCAA announced a partnership with Venmo in 2025, in which the payment platform will help monitor harassment as requests for payment are being sent to student-athletes by those who lost a bet (Purdum, 2025).

Public messaging might also be aimed at lawmakers. The NCAA is advocating for laws that restrict individual player proposition bets and place harsh penalties on those who harass student-athletes. Dorfman and Wallack (2013) emphasized that in public health communication campaigns, changing some individual behaviors is not sufficient and that policy decisions of a larger societal scale are often needed. The NCAA has assisted in getting four states to eliminate proposition bets on student-athletes (Myers, 2025b). The NCAA could use its campaign to ask the public to contact their congressional or state legislative representatives and encourage them to pass laws that protect student-athletes. More direct communication efforts to lawmakers can support the issue salience objectives of a public campaign.

The environmental conditions affecting the public health communication campaign related to gambling need to be recognized. The campaign does not happen in a vacuum. The public is receiving competing messaging from gambling companies that advertise frequently during sports events. These advertisements depict gambling as socially acceptable and do not emphasize the risks involved in betting (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017; Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2024; Winters & Derevensky, 2019). The framing competition that exists for the NCAA is the overall sports gambling messaging that the audience receives. The Draw the Line campaign must overcome the bombardment of communication promoting sports gambling, which includes sports gambling companies' advertisements, sponsorship of professional leagues and teams, and wager possibilities consistently being discussed on prominent sports media programming outlets, such as ESPN.

Another environmental condition is that the NCAA has to navigate its own contradictions on the topic of sports gambling. The NCAA is the only major sports league to prohibit sponsorships and advertising during game broadcasts from sports gambling companies (Myers, 2025b). The

NCAA, however, benefits to some degree from an increase in gambling. Gambling has led to higher viewership of games (Das et al., 2025; Paul & Weinbach, 2015). The NCAA's Division I administrative committee even adopted a proposal to allow college athletes and athletic department staff to bet on professional sports (Wright, 2025). That plan was quickly reversed and the ban remains (NCAA, 2025c).

The NCAA must offset the business benefits of gambling with its responsibility to protect student-athletes. Evidence suggests that the problem of harassment remains. The SNAP survey in February 2026 had 7,493 respondents (a response rate of 13%) from 154 universities. It revealed that 46% of Division I men's basketball players experienced online, verbal, or physical abuse from gamblers who lost bets (Kelderman, 2026; NCAA Research, 2026). The NCAA continued its Draw the Line campaign in 2026 with a new commercial that aired during the NCAA men's and women's basketball tournaments (Kelderman, 2026). This article focused on the origins of the Draw the Line campaign in 2024 and its expansion from social media through the development of a commercial that aired prominently during the college basketball tournaments in 2025. The continuation of this campaign infers that the NCAA believes its efforts are necessary and to some degree effective. After all, the NCAA could have ceased the campaign or designed a different approach.

The NCAA is using its Draw the Line campaign to curtail the abuse of student-athletes by fans who lost money gambling on their games. The argument being presented here is that the NCAA's best opportunity for success is by adhering to the principles outlined in the public health communication campaign literature, especially the audience resistance barriers to behavior change (Atkin & Rice, 2013), and recognizing the agenda-setting and framing messaging influence potential (McCombs et al., 2014). On this measure, there is a strategy to achieve exposure and awareness. A current gap in the NCAA's approach is that one message is intended to influence multiple individual types. The identified gaps in the campaign should be used to prescribe the next steps that the NCAA should consider to improve its initiative. One next step could be different messaging for different groups, most notably messaging to gamblers about responsible gambling, the underlying cause of harassment. This is the NCAA's opportunity to incorporate a treatment recommendation in its campaign and make it more complete and compliant with public health campaign scholarship.

STATEMENT OF COMPETING INTERESTS

Not declared

ETHICS APPROVAL

N/A

RELATIVE CONTRIBUTIONS

John Fortunato was familiar with public health communication campaign and agenda-setting and framing, and gambling marketing literature. Lisa Rubin was familiar with NCAA policies, social media, and university interactions with student-athletes. Both worked on the description of the Draw the Line campaign. Both authors approved the final version.

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RESEARCH PROMOTION

College student-athletes have increasingly become targets of abusive messages from fans who lost money gambling on their games. This article evaluates the NCAA's Draw the Line campaign through public health communication and agenda-setting theoretical frameworks. Public health communication campaigns must address the audience resistance barriers to behavior change, specifically the applicability to self and the efficacy of treatment recommendations. Agenda-setting addresses each of these audience resistance barriers through issue exposure and the facts emphasized in the messaging influencing public salience.

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