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Loopholes and logos: How ‘decoy brands’ perpetuate gambling advertising in Italian football

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An oversaturation of gambling advertising in professional sports is a common feature in jurisdictions that have liberalized gambling. This trend was first apparent in Australia (Hing et al., 2014, 2017; Milner et al., 2013) and across Europe (García-Pérez et al., 2024; Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2018; Newall et al., 2019; Torrance et al., 2021), but has recently emerged in North America (Wheaton et al., 2024b, 2024a). Some jurisdictions, such as Belgium (De Jans et al., 2024) and Italy (Wilson et al., 2024), have imposed legal restrictions on advertising to counter this oversaturation. In contrast, the UK government continues to rely on industry self-regulation following its recent review on gambling legislation (DCMS, 2023). This UK self-regulation is limited in scope (McGrane et al., 2024; Torrance, Heath, Andrade, et al., 2023), and many UK-based researchers argue that legal restrictions mirroring those implemented elsewhere in Europe are needed (Wilson et al., 2024). However, it is important to monitor industry compliance in jurisdictions with those legal restrictions, as even small loopholes might be exploited. Indeed, loopholes in Belgium are already being exploited (De Jans et al., 2024). Similarly, we highlight how gambling operators are increasingly using what we term ‘decoy brands’ to re-saturate Italian football with gambling logos.

An audit of European football sponsorships in the 2023/2024 season revealed an Italian club with a front-of-shirt sponsor "Betitaly.pay", a payment services company with a logo nearly identical to a corresponding gambling operator (Torrance, Heath, & Newall, 2023). We demonstrate that this trend has expanded in the 2024/2025 season. Specifically, analysis of five Italian Serie A highlights shows, viewed via a VPN from Italy, identified nine distinct gambling decoy brands, as shown in Table 1. Supporting screenshots are available at <https://osf.io/m29rz/>.

One decoy brand was observed on players’ shirt-sleeves, with the rest occurring on pitchside billboards. In all instances, the decoy brand used the gambling operator’s usual branding (e.g., LeoVegas and bet365) that could be easily inserted into any search engine to access gambling services, but then added a suffix that is not directly related to gambling (e.g., LeoVegas.News and bet365scores.it). When visited, these links lead to basic web pages that feature snippets of sports news. Therefore, irrespective of whether these practices are in breach of the law as interpreted by the Italian Communications Authority in Resolution No.132/19/CONS, by promoting their branding, these gambling operators are acting against the spirit of the law, which, *inter alia*, aimed to eliminate all gambling advertising from professional sports. Given gamblers’ attentional biases towards gambling stimuli (Farr et al., 2024), Italian policymakers should be aware of potential loopholes that the gambling industry may look to exploit to undermine legislation aimed to protect gamblers from harm.

Table 1*List of Matches, Locations, and Gambling Decoy Brands Observed*

Match	Location Found	Decoy brand
Cagliari vs AC Milan	Pitchside billboard	Admiral
Cagliari vs AC Milan	Pitchside billboard	Bet.News bet365scores.it
Inter Milan vs Napoli	Pitchside billboard	Betsson.sport
Genoa vs Fiorentina	Shirt sleeve	Betway scores
Atalanta vs Udinese	Pitchside billboard	bwin.tv
Genoa vs Fiorentina	Pitchside billboard	betwin360.tv
Juventus vs Torino	Pitchside billboard	Eurobet.live
Atalanta vs Udinese	Pitchside billboard	LeoVegas.News
Cagliari vs AC Milan	Pitchside billboard	888free.it

Ethics approval

Not required (commentary, which used freely available information).

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Relative Contributions

CH, JT, and PN conceived the study. CH conducted data curation. All authors contributed to the writing and reviewing of the manuscript. All authors approved the final version.

Competing interests

CH has no disclosures. In the last three years, JT has received; (1) Open access publication funding from Greo Evidence Insights, (2) Conference travel funding and a minor exploratory research grant from the Academic Forum for the Study of Gambling. L.Y.X. has provided paid consultancy for Public Group International Ltd (t/a PUBLIC) (Companies House number: 10608507), commissioned by the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to conduct independent research on understanding player experiences of loot box protections, since October 2024. L.Y.X. was employed by LiveMe, then a subsidiary of Cheetah Mobile (NYSE: CMCN), as an in-house counsel intern from July to August 2019 in Beijing, China. L.Y.X. was not involved with the monetisation of video games by Cheetah Mobile or its subsidiaries. L.Y.X. undertook a brief period of voluntary work experience at Wiggin LLP (Solicitors Regulation Authority number: 420659) in London, England, in August 2022. L.Y.X. has contributed to research projects enabled by data access provided by the video game industry, specifically Unity Technologies (NYSE:U) (October 2022 – August 2023). L.Y.X. has been invited to provide advice to the UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and its successor (the Department for Culture, Media and Sport; DCMS) on the technical working group for loot boxes and the Video Games Research Framework. L.Y.X. was the (co-)recipient of three Academic Forum for the Study of Gambling (AFSG) postgraduate research support grants (March 2022, January 2023, and July 2024) and a minor exploratory research grant (May 2024) derived from ‘regulatory settlements applied for socially responsible purposes’ received by the UK Gambling Commission and administered by Gambling Research Exchange Ontario (GREO) and its successor (Greo Evidence Insights; Greo). L.Y.X. accepted funding to publish open-access academic papers from GREO and the AFSG that was received by the UK Gambling Commission as above (October, November, and December 2022, November 2023, and May 2024). L.Y.X. has accepted conference travel and attendance grants from the Socio-Legal Studies Association (February 2022 and February 2023); the Current Advances in Gambling Research Conference Organising Committee with support from GREO (February 2022); the International Relations Office of The Jagiellonian University

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Research Promotion

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