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THE INFLUENCE OF OPINION LEADERS ON ONLINE GAMBLERS' DECISION-MAKING

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ABSTRACT

In the context of online gambling, opinion leaders play a pivotal role in promoting platforms. These figures include influencers, sports experts, tipsters, streamers, professional players and public figures. This article examines the characteristics of opinion leaders and their influence on young gamblers. The methodology is based on a digital community of young players who share their perspectives on the marketing strategies employed by betting companies. The findings indicate that the presence of other players or influencers has a more persuasive effect than other forms of promotional strategy.

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1. Introduction

Relationships between companies and their customers are grounded in trust. This trust is initially shaped by prior knowledge of the brand, and subsequently by the quality of service and the satisfaction derived from it. In the process of building trust, companies can employ various strategies to strengthen it. Among these are multichannel marketing, advertising and the use of influencers.

With the rise of social media in the digital environment, influencers have become so significant for brands that investment in paid endorsements has increased by 54 per cent over the past three years (Infoadex, 2024). Numerous studies have questioned these figures due to the potentially harmful effects of paid recommendations on consumers, particularly in sectors such as food, lifestyle, beauty and gaming, where such influence may impact physical or mental health, especially among young people (Antoniou, 2024). Indeed, research conducted by the European Commission (2024) on compliance with European regulations regarding unfair commercial practices found that 97 per cent of influencers published content with commercial intent, yet only 20 per cent systematically disclosed this. Despite being a rapidly growing sector with addictive potential, influencers associated with online gambling were not included in this study by consumer protection authorities, revealing a persistent lack of knowledge about such figures within the sector.

The number of studies examining the impact of online gambling on young people has increased steadily in recent years (Eisend and Tarrahi, 2022; Hartmann et al., 2024), with Spain emerging as one of the countries conducting the most extensive research in this field (Bolat et al., 2025). Governments have also begun to take incremental steps towards regulating gambling by placing restrictions on mechanisms designed to encourage participation, which are particularly harmful to young people due to their design (Hartmann et al., 2024), their connections to video games (Martínez et al., 2024) and their links to mobile phone use (Gonzálvez-Vallés et al., 2021). Some studies have explored the media and commercial impact of public figures, professional players and sports experts (De Jans et al., 2024), while others have focused on the persuasive role of tipsters in encouraging gambling (López-González et al., 2021). However, there remains a gap in our understanding of how young gamblers feel when engaging with influencers. The aim of this study is to identify the characteristics of such influencers from the perspective of young online gamblers. To this end, a novel qualitative methodology was employed, based on a digital community in which sixteen young participants reflected on their relationship with gambling influencers in a self-analytical manner.

2. Trust as the Key to Persuasion

2.1. The Authority Figure

Persuasion in marketing refers to the act of influencing another person's state of mind through communication, so that they believe or do something (Druckman, 2022; Moya Morales, 2020). In this context, persuasion benefits the sender, the receiver and also the influencer, who, according to the knowledge model of persuasion, possesses ulterior and self-interested motives (Eisend and Tarrahi, 2022). Within a marketing framework, this influencer aims to elicit specific evaluations, intentions and behaviours from the consumer (Eisend and Tarrahi, 2022).

Knowledge of persuasion begins to develop from the age of five and increases with age, reaching its saturation point in old age (Eisend and Tarrahi, 2022). In early childhood, it is closely linked to the authority figure within the family. The Royal Spanish Academy defines a prescriber as a person who orders or determines something, with prescription typically emanating from an authority figure.

Various theories explain how young people are influenced by authority figures. Albert Bandura's social learning theory emphasises the observation and imitation of authority figures' behaviour as fundamental to learning (Manzueta, 2022). Piaget and Vygotsky's constructivism associates learning with interaction with the environment and significant social figures in the individual's life (Rochat, 2024). Skinner's operant conditioning proposes that learning is reinforced through consequences, such as rewards or punishments (Manzueta, 2022). David Kolb highlights learning through concrete experiences (experiential learning), while Deci and Ryan's theory of the need for competence suggests that young people seek guidance from authority figures because they need to feel competent (Rochat, 2024). Across these theories, the authority figure remains central to guiding the individual's behaviour.

Influencers are particularly important in the case of young people, as they are at a stage of cognitive development that requires guidance (Eisend and Tarrahi, 2022). Hence, the significance of family and teachers in the early stages of life. For young people, parents and teachers serve as primary figures of values, skills and knowledge, exerting a major impact on all areas of their development.

As young people reach adolescence, additional authority figures emerge, a change that has intensified in recent years due to early access to technology and social media (Gonzálvez-Vallés et al., 2021). These typically include: (1) celebrities, such as athletes, musicians and actors, with whom adolescents often identify aspirational lifestyles; (2) influencers or content creators on social media, perceived as closer to young people than celebrities, thus influencing areas such as trends and political opinions; (3) friends and peers, who are highly influential because of adolescents' need to belong to a group; (4) technological tools, such as virtual assistants and artificial intelligence, which are increasingly important in providing information and guidance; and (5) virtual communities, where individuals with experience in specific topics serve as role models.

Children and young people are generally more vulnerable to the influences of social media and digital platforms (Bolat et al., 2025), as they are less likely to recognise hidden motives and manipulative actions. They are less familiar with coping strategies and tend to make more favourable assessments (Eisend and Tarrahi, 2022). A lack of maturity also contributes to the normalisation of certain behaviours within peer groups that they might not consider acceptable in other contexts (Gonzálvez-Vallés et al., 2021).

Interactive gaming platforms employ persuasive interfaces to maximise user engagement, using features such as rewards, reminders and praise. Players may be aware of the persuasive intent and potential harm of operators' design techniques, which can lead to unfavourable opinions of the brand (Eisend and Tarrahi, 2022). However, when these techniques are explained to players, their positive attitude may increase, potentially preventing the addictive effects of such activities (Cemiloglu et al., 2024).

2.2. Influencers on Young People in Online Gambling

The most common types of influencers in online gambling include sports experts, professional gamblers, public figures, celebrities, influencers, tipsters and streamers. Gambling operators frequently use famous individuals, whether players, experts or actors, in conventional advertising channels such as television, radio, press and the Internet. As influential figures, these individuals increase participation and normalise gambling-related behaviours, thereby reducing perceived risks (Torrance et al., 2024). This gives rise to significant concerns regarding the perceptions and attitudes of children and young people, who admire these figures and regard them as relatable and trustworthy. Consequently, young people may perceive gambling as glamorous, without distinguishing between promotional and non-promotional content (Bolat et al., 2024). The literature extensively documents the omnichannel nature of gambling advertising and the high level of exposure to which minors are subjected, which in turn influences their subsequent behaviour (Hartmann et al., 2024).

Influencers and tipsters are often confused, although they represent distinct roles. Influencers are content creators who establish relationships of trust with their audience and produce both commercial and non-commercial content on social media (Antoniou, 2024). The European Commission (2024) has identified several problematic practices among influencers, which extend beyond covert promotions (such as failing to disclose advertising) to include the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes, the encouragement of risky behaviours, whether physical or psychological, and the promotion of excessive consumption (Antoniou, 2024). These practices tend to have a greater impact on many young people, who perceive influencers as authoritative figures. Trust in their advice can sometimes result in credit card debt, owing to young people's unfamiliarity with deferred payment plans (Antoniou, 2024). The metaverse is now bringing many of these influencers together within user communities possessing advanced knowledge, specifically created for online gaming enthusiasts (Bonales-Daimiel et al., 2023). These influencers collaborate with brands and affect users through actions directed at avatars, with their activities subsequently amplified across other social networks by their followers.

Tipsters, meanwhile, are sports betting experts who provide recommendations on betting opportunities, usually in exchange for money (Yüce et al., 2023). They represent a specific group within

the gambling sector and have become the most significant trend in the sports betting industry in Spain in recent years. However, addiction problems among young people have raised concerns about their activity, particularly regarding the psychological manipulation of individuals (Torrance et al., 2024). Indeed, the study by Gonzálvez-Vallés et al. (2021) found a clear and positive relationship between gambling, tipsters and addiction. Regardless of the accuracy of these tipsters' predictions, some studies suggest they improve random decisions (Gruettner et al., 2021), while others indicate they do not (Riley et al., 2023). Their success largely stems from young people's interest in games of skill, or strategy, as opposed to games of chance, which are non-strategic (Mangat et al., 2024). Skill-based games, which are usually preferred by men, create a mistaken belief among players that they have greater control, leading them to consider tipsters as reliable experts (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2021).

In recent years, the figure of the streamer has gained prominence. A streamer specialising in online gambling is a person who broadcasts their gameplay and bets live. They are particularly associated with the Twitch platform, which is fostering a convergence between the experiences of video game players and other sectors (Abarbanel and Johnson, 2020). This convergence is facilitating a natural adaptation of gaming techniques to gambling, which is especially attractive to young people, the age group that plays video games most frequently (Macey et al., 2024). Streamers generate income through various means, including monthly subscriptions, one-off donations, sales of small pieces of code, advertising or sponsorship, often linked to setting goals that their viewers help them to achieve (Abarbanel and Johnson, 2020).

The literature identifies specific characteristics that make these influencers appealing to gamers. In particular, users value their transparency and authenticity (Bonales-Daimiel, 2023), which fosters trust in their recommendations. Their active engagement in discussions on technological and current issues, combined with their ability to convey trust (Bonales-Daimiel, 2023), positions them as leaders of conversation and, consequently, influential figures before their audience (Bolat et al., 2025).

In the case of tipsters, two characteristics predominantly influence users' choice: profitability and speed. They often associate themselves with celebrities and display a luxurious lifestyle, implying that these comforts result from online betting (Gonzálvez-Vallés et al., 2021). They are admired as experts or winners who have succeeded in making a living from their bets. The fame and success surrounding them encourage others to imitate their behaviour, aspiring to emulate their lifestyle (Torrance et al., 2024).

Regarding streamers, despite considerable legal controversy surrounding this type of channel (Kharismanto and Phahlevy, 2024), they generate a high level of engagement among young people. Viewers are attracted by the excitement of live broadcasts, the charismatic personalities and sense of humour of the streamers, and the opportunity to identify with figures who create a community and a sense of permanence, allowing interaction and participation (Abarbanel and Johnson, 2020).

3. Methodology

The object of this study is to examine the influence of online communication influencers associated with betting and online gambling companies on young people. A series of research questions are posed, including: Who are the influencers in online gambling? What elements most affect their influence on the target audience? To what extent is the audience aware of this influence?

Based on these questions, the following general and specific objectives are proposed:

(GO): To understand the influence of influencers on young people through online gambling advertising campaigns.

(SO1): To identify the influencers recognised in these strategies.

(SO2): To analyse the persuasive elements associated with these influencers.

(SO3): To explain how these elements influence young people.

Given that this study employs a qualitative methodology, no working hypotheses are proposed; the research will be developed based on the objectives set out above.

In order to address the proposed objectives, a qualitative experimental methodology was employed using the digital community technique. The digital community constitutes 'a virtual space created specifically for research, where a qualitative sample of people interact digitally, sharing fragments of

their lives and exchanging opinions with the aim of generating knowledge about the social reality under study' (Durán et al., 2023, p. 184).

This approach allows participants to express themselves freely from three perspectives: individual, group and social, over a relatively extended period. To facilitate this, three fundamental tools are used within the digital community: the personal blog or diary, the forum and the social blog. The personal blog serves as a private space for the participant's most reflective and intimate expression, as it is not shared with other community members and is accessible only to the research team. The forum is a communal space designed to encourage group conversation, where all members can share and exchange ideas and opinions based on their interactions. Finally, the social blog provides a platform where participants can freely and voluntarily express and share their interests with the rest of the community, while engaging with the stories created by their fellow members (Durán-Vilches et al., 2023).

The sample selected for this digital community consisted of 16 young people of both sexes (14 males and 2 females, reflecting the predominantly male player profile according to the DGOJ), aged between 18 and 30, who engage in online gambling activities such as poker, roulette, slots and casino games, as well as other forms of betting including sports betting.

During the month in which the digital community was active, topics were proposed to generate debate and encourage reflection on participants' opinions regarding the marketing strategies of gambling operators. They were also asked to suggest measures that could be included in these strategies to protect players and prevent addiction. All participants took part in discussion forums and maintained diaries. Three diaries were produced, one of which focused specifically on advertising and its effects, and was used for this research.

Subsequently, work was conducted with the participants over the following two weeks to collect and systematise the results relating to the impact of these issues on the individuals under study.

4. Results

4.1. Profile of Influencers

Of the 16 participants, a total of five mentioned influencers spontaneously in the diary or forum when asked about the persuasion strategies used by online gambling companies: four in the diary and three in the forum, with two participants mentioning them in both. In other words, almost half of the participants identified influencers as a persuasive element employed by these companies.

Two types of influencers were mentioned: those who actively gamble and those who endorse gambling through their image, such as players from teams and sports on which bets are placed.

What qualities do these influencers possess? Individuals who spontaneously emerged in participants' discourse and were recognised as influencing message reception have been identified. This represents an inductive derivation, as no pre-established categories were used; rather, they emerged organically from the data. Importantly, this question was never explicitly suggested to participants. The following profiles therefore emerged:

Online gamblers. Individuals who gamble on social media but are not identified as streamers or tipsters.

Professional athletes. Football players or other sports professionals whose image appears in advertising by online gambling companies.

Only one mention of streamers appeared in the discourse, which is surprising given that they are considered one of the most influential groups. One participant stated:

'I already mentioned a little about how the industry works when it comes to attracting customers. I still think that their ads are very tacky and not very appealing. The best advertisement is to build a physical gaming hall and go in and play for the first time. The only ads I usually see are from streamers on Twitch. At night, if you channel surf, there are many casino advertising programmes, but I personally don't find them appealing at all' (Diary, male, 21 years old).

The content produced by streamers was noted as the only aspect perceived as attractive, compared with the very 'cheesy', poorly produced advertising elsewhere.

There is no mention in the discourse of tipsters—individuals who predict bets by analysing various sporting events to identify valuable winnings.

To analyse the influence of these influencers, a deductive process was employed, drawing on persuasive communication theory, which offers a series of elements that affect the persuasion process. These elements were selected for the coding process and served as categories. In this case, the focus was on elements of the source that impact its influence. The elements of the source in the persuasion process are as follows (Moya Morales, 2000):

- *Credibility* — the credibility of a source depends primarily on the competence and sincerity with which it is perceived.
- *Attractiveness* — aesthetic appeal and physical beauty increase the source's power of influence.
- *Power* — this refers to the source's ability to control the outcomes available to the receiver, or more directly, to administer rewards and punishments.
- *Similarity with the receiver* — similarity in attitudes, personality, background or other characteristics. A particularly important form of similarity derives from belonging to the same social group or category. Generally, sources sharing the same social identity as the receiver tend to be more influential. This element is closely related to the psychological concept of social reinforcement, which leads individuals to believe that if something has worked for someone else, it will work for them as well.

There are additional elements of the communication process that contribute to the influence exerted by these individuals. These relate to the receiver but are known to the prescriber, and include heuristic behaviour, for example, recent successes, whether real or not, remain fresher in young people's memory or lead them to believe that successes are more likely. Other elements include a preference for quick gains, reflecting a short-term mindset common among young people; biased optimism, whereby young people tend to be more optimistic; and a lack of financial knowledge.

The method used to obtain the results is deductive, beginning with theory to organise and code the information provided by the interviewees. In the coding process, phrases were used as the units of record, as they held the greatest significance. To present the results, each significant unit of record is discussed individually before analysis, rather than presenting themes resulting from categories followed by representative units. This approach was considered appropriate due to the complexity of the expressions, as it allows for a more in-depth analysis.

4.2. Results on players as influencers

4.2.1. Credibility through Competition ('top winners')

> '… or for example, this time when I put it on, they were showing the top winners so you could see that you can win' (Diary, male, 21 years old).

The individual believes these people are the top winners and does not question whether they win or lose in the same way. For him, their status at the top confers competence, which makes them credible. The individual is aware of this technique, as he explicitly expresses it.

4.2.2. Power ('immortal')

> 'The most persuasive thing is, as I said, that they teach the top winners, showing figures that are clearly impossible for any mortal to achieve. At the same time, you can see that they try to provide as much stimulation as possible, with photos, videos, lights... to encourage people to play' (Diary, male, 21 years old).

The individual uses the metaphor 'any mortal', placing the players in a superior, almost immortal state, as if they possess superpowers, like superheroes. This grants them a power that others cannot attain, 'impossible to achieve'. The belief is charged with emotion.

4.2.3. Power and Likeness

> 'These are the most famous compulsive gamblers in Spain. There isn't a young person who likes gambling who doesn't know them. It's a pleasure to see them' (Diary, male, 21 years old).

In this case, the individual blends beliefs and emotions, recognising the power of these players and their social recognition. He uses the terms 'compulsive gamblers' and 'it's a pleasure to see them' in the same sentence, an antithesis that reveals a feeling of admiration. The influence of similarity in age,

indicated by the phrase 'young person', is also evident. This criterion introduced by the individual suggests that age similarity affects their decision to follow these players.

4.2.4. Similarity and Competition

> 'People who bet 20k on a roll of the dice and just as they lose thousands of euros, there are other days when they win triple that amount. They are real, they show what they win and also what they lose' (Diary, male, 22 years old).

The phrase 'they are real' reflects the power of similarity in influence. The participant has previously explained how these individuals play and how the process works to justify it. He uses the neutral term 'people' rather than 'players'. The statement 'they show what they win and also what they lose' uses the adverb 'also' to reinforce credibility, as it implies they could choose to conceal their losses but do not. This also indicates a level of credibility based on the competence of these individuals, who win and lose substantial sums of money.

Furthermore, their continuous presence across various social networks means consumption occurs on demand, whether alone or in groups, and often alongside other activities.

> 'They used to be on Twitch and YouTube, but their videos are on all platforms—X, Instagram, TikTok, everywhere. I've seen them at all hours of the day, alone and with friends. I don't have a set schedule; I can watch while I eat or before I go to bed. That's the good thing about the Internet, there are no restrictions on time or place' (Diary, male, 22 years old)

4.2.5. Similarity and Excitement

> 'These videos make you want to play like no advertising in the world can. Just writing about them makes me want to watch them for hours and then try my luck. They're really enjoyable.'

The text contains highly emotional expressions linked to the impact of watching these influencers play. Phrases such as 'it's great', 'honestly' and 'not even the best advertising in the world' reveal that seeing people like themselves playing provokes an emotion that directly encourages the viewer to play 'and then try my luck'.

The similarity with the game allows this feeling to transfer to everyday situations, producing the same persuasive effect with strong connotative power.

> 'It's most persuasive when you're out for drinks with your friends and you talk about it and a silly smile comes on your face and that says it all. This is the most attractive advertising, as well as the bonuses that 'give' you money or increased quota.' (Diary, male, 22 years old).

The power of images showing these influencers winning provokes a strong emotion that individuals recognise and clearly express a desire to experience. The phrase 'people celebrating' captures this impact.

> 'The images of people celebrating a victory make me want to feel those emotions too, and with the idea of receiving 'free' money, it's quite tempting' (Diary, male, 24 years old).

4.3. Results on Athletes as Influencers

The following question was posed in the forum: What advertising or promotional strategies do you believe make you feel most vulnerable, and why? The responses are presented below, following the same criteria used for the diary.

4.3.1. Power

> 'For me, the advertising strategies that catch my attention the most and make me feel most vulnerable are those in which athletes, who are my idols, sponsor betting companies. It's hard to resist when you see someone you admire and follow promoting these services. It also affects me when my favourite club advertises betting, as it creates an emotional association between my passion for sport and the temptation to gamble, which increases my vulnerability' (Diary, male, 21 years old).

Expressions of considerable emotional weight, grounded in admiration for athletes, are evident throughout: 'idols', 'who you admire and follow'. The participant also recognises the cognitive pattern involved, stating that the advertising 'creates an emotional association' and 'increases my vulnerability'.

> 'The most vulnerable advertising strategies are those that use things you identify with, whether it's your football team that you watch every day or, worse still, your national team in the European Championship. Clearly, watching the matches with more excitement makes you want to bet even more' (Forum, male, 22).

Identification with athletes or teams exerts significant influence. This is based not only on admiration but, above all, on a sense of belonging to a group with which the individual identifies and admires. The frequency of sporting events ensures that their impact is continuous.

> 'I think a great advertising strategy that gaming halls have is the constant televisions outside the numbers come up, you feel like playing. Also, seeing other people playing and winning is the best advertising there can be' (Forum, male, 21 years old)

When asked about proposals to develop communication strategies aimed at protecting gamblers, the presence of sportspeople was once again mentioned spontaneously.

> 'I also think it's crucial to stop using sports figures and clubs to promote gambling, as this can create a false sense of security and attractiveness towards gambling. Instead, we could focus campaigns on the mental health and well-being of gamblers, emphasising that gambling should only be a form of entertainment and not a solution to financial problems' (Forum, male, 20 years old).

It is clearly stated that such endorsements 'create a false sense of security and attractiveness towards gambling'. In other words, professional athletes generate feelings of security, possibly due to their credibility derived from their abilities, as well as attractiveness because of their social power. Emotional elements are evident in the discourse connected to this reasoning.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

The transformation taking place in digital media is leading to constant changes in the online gambling sector, where the figures of recommenders are becoming mixed and do not have clear lines. Unlike previous studies, which identified influencers and tipsters as the main prescribers for young people, this study clearly shows that streamers, players who broadcast their bets live and interact extensively with their audience, are the most influential figures.

After analysing the data, the general conclusion is that influencers are one of the elements that most influence online gambling communication strategies, according to the individuals participating in the study. References to these individuals arise spontaneously in the discourse and contain emotionally charged words that reflect this impact on decision-making processes.

More specifically, different conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, there is a difference between online gamers and sportspeople. While the former are authority figures due to the credibility they gain from their skills (they play live and everyone can see how good they are), in the latter's authority comes from their skills as professional sportspeople and, especially, from the identification that comes from belonging to a club or national team.

It is worth highlighting as a conclusion the high level of influence that athletes have during the sporting events in which they participate. Considering that sporting events take place every week for more than ten months of the year, there is a very high level of persuasive messages that are difficult to control. In fact, this is something that the participants themselves say they would ban in advertising. This restriction has disappeared with the current regulations. It would be interesting to explore the reasons why this measure has been revoked when it has such a negative impact on the most vulnerable audiences.

The authority conferred on online players is closely linked to the emotional experience of watching them play live and the credibility this gives them. It should be borne in mind that participants acknowledge that they access this content at any time of day, alone or in company, and that this motivates them greatly (Eisend and Tarrahi, 2022).

In both cases, this coincides with the idea that young people seek guidance from authority figures because they need to feel competent (Rochat, 2024). In this case, the use of influencers promotes a lack of confidence in one's abilities, as there is little room for anything other than luck in gambling. Therefore, the influencer creates a context of false competition and security when it comes to gambling. For this reason, their presence is so harmful.

In conclusion, the high impact of similarity in the persuasion process can also be observed. Both online gamblers and athletes share the same age and values as the subjects; if we add the characteristics of youth, which increase the effects of persuasion, such as heuristic behaviour (examples of recent successes, real or not, are fresher in the memory of young people, which makes them believe that successes are more real); quick gains (young people have a short-term mindset), biased optimism (young people tend to be more optimistic), and a lack of financial knowledge.

In summary, this qualitative analysis has highlighted the high power of persuasion exercised by influencers in online gambling, and its causes: credibility and similarity combined with emotion make these people figures of authority. Combined with the omnichannel nature and immediacy of digital media, this has a high impact on young people who, due to their vulnerability, may be prone to addiction. It would be of great interest to continue these studies, both qualitative and quantitative, in order to obtain more data on this subject.

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