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Responsible Marketing Communication in Online Gambling: A Systematic Review of Strategies Targeting Youth

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the marketing communication strategies used by online gambling and betting (OGB) operators and their impact on young people, a group that is particularly vulnerable to gambling. Through the application of the conceptual framework of the conversion funnel and a systematic review of the literature, the communicative strategies and tactics deployed in each phase of the player's journey are comprehensively analysed. The results reveal that strategies such as normalization of the game, personalized promotions and emotional narratives generate cumulative effects that increase the risk of problematic behaviours among young people, from the misperception of control to the intensification of compulsive patterns. On the basis of these findings, a good practice guide that offers clear guidelines for operators to use communication in designing more ethical and responsible gambling experiences is proposed. This work not only contributes to the understanding of the marketing communication dynamics of the sector but also lays the foundation for future research and the development of regulatory policies that prioritize the protection of vulnerable users without compromising the commercial viability of the sector.

Keywords: Gambling, Betting, Digital Marketing Communication (DMC), Youth Digital Vulnerability, Responsible Communication.

INTRODUCTION

The term Online gambling and betting, hereinafter OGB, refers to the forms of gambling related to chance and economic risk that are accessible through internet platforms. OGB includes games in which the result is completely random, such as lottery, bingo, or slot machines, and games in which knowledge and skills are assumed to have a certain advantage, such as sports betting or blackjack. With respect to economic risk, there is the possibility of earning or losing money, which adds motivational value (Carcelén-García, Durán-Vilches, & Galmes-Cerezo, 2024).

The role of betting operators' digital marketing communication (DMC) strategies is reviewed from the perspective of their ethical responsibility and has become a social concern (Narros-González, Galmes-Cerezo, & Carcelén-García, 2022). Government of Spain (2020), an attempt to regulate this field has been made with "Royal Decree 958/2020, on commercial communications for gambling activities". However, the Supreme Court has resolved the annulment of several articles of the regulation in response to the appeal filed in 2024 by the Spanish Association of Digital Gaming. As a result, several limitations on commercial communications from OGB operators have been removed.

Young people are especially vulnerable to OGB (Sánchez Romero & Álvarez González, 2018; Carcelén-García, Díaz-Bustamante Ventisca, & Galmes-Cerezo, 2023; Pitt, Thomas, Bestman, Daube, & Derevensky, 2017), and DMC strategies can increase excessive gambling behaviour in young people (Di Censo, Delfabbro, & King, 2024). Thus, business objectives must be balanced with the protection of vulnerable users to ensure the responsible

design of online gambling experiences. This study has two objectives. The first one (OB1) is to analyse the digital marketing communication strategies used in each stage of the digital conversion funnel in detail, evaluating their specific role on the young and most vulnerable users. The second objective (OB2) is to identify patterns and dynamics that can contribute to promoting risky behaviours, as well as opportunities to reorient these communicative practices towards a more responsible design.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vulnerability of Young People to OGB

Digital vulnerability describes the predisposition of certain individuals or groups to suffer harm due to their access to and exposure to digital media. In this context, young people, who spend a large part of their time in online environments, are especially vulnerable to the risks inherent in this type of interaction (Fuente-Cobo, 2017; Galmés-Cerezo, Maestro-Espínola, & Carcelén-García, 2022; García-Jiménez, Suárez-Álvarez, & Montes-Vozmediano, 2022; Sánchez Romero & Álvarez González, 2018).

Currently, young people grow immersed in a completely digitized environment, integrating activities mediated by smart devices into their daily lives (Garitaonandia, Karrera-Xuarros, Jiménez-Iglesias, & Larrañaga, 2020). This digital ecosystem, which evolves every day, transforms the risks they face (Díaz-López, Maquilón-Sánchez, & Mirete-Ruiz, 2020; Pastor, García-Jiménez, & López-de-Ayala, 2022).

The idea of young people being immersed in a digital ecosystem led us to reflect on their vulnerability to OGB. For this purpose, we identified several factors, such as 1. accessibility to online gambling platforms; 2. the perceptions, attitudes and behaviour of young people towards gambling (Carcelén-García, Durán-Vilches, & Galmes-Cerezo, 2024); 3. the normalization of OGB among young people as one more leisure activity (Pitt et al., 2017); 4. the exposure of minors to simulated gambling and to the reward boxes in e-games, which generate a dangerous habit, which, in many cases, precedes gambling with money (Close et al., 2023; Drummond, Sauer, Ferguson, & Hall, 2020; González-Cabrera et al., 2024; Hing et al., 2022; Kim, Wohl, Gupta, & Derevensky, 2017; Kim, Lee, & Jung, 2013; Kristiansen & Severin, 2020; Li, Mills, & Nower, 2019; Spicer, Nicklin, Uther, & Lloyd, 2022; Spicer et al., 2024; Zendle & Cairns, 2019); and, finally, 5. the exposure of minors to GMO advertising, fostering problematic long-term consumption patterns, similar to those observed with alcohol and tobacco (Nyemcsok et al., 2018).

Conversion Funnel and Marketing Communication Strategies

The conversion process involves the use of communication strategies to attract potential customers to a website and encourage them to complete a specific action, such as making a purchase. This process is crucial for optimising return on investment in DMC campaigns. The conversion funnel model, widely applied in online sales platforms, identifies the stages consumers go through before completing a conversion, enabling the prediction of behaviours and the enhancement of strategies (Amazon, n.d.). This model operates within a multichannel context, where consumers interact across various platforms before conversion, and it does not follow a linear process (Verhoef, Neslin, & Vroomen, 2007).

The funnel is divided into five key phases: awareness, consideration, conversion, loyalty, and advocacy (Amazon, n.d.; Colicev, Kumar, & O'Connor, 2019; De Haan, Wiesel, & Pauwels, 2016).

In the awareness phase, the goal is to ensure that consumers recognise and remember the brand through strategic touchpoints such as display advertising and social media (Deans, Thomas, Derevensky, & Daube, 2017; Drummond et al., 2020); in the conversion phase is where the customer completes the desired action, such as making a purchase, triggered by tactics such as call-to-action buttons and personalised offers (Biswas, Abell, & Chacko, 2024). Loyalty focuses on encouraging repeat purchases through loyalty programmes and tools such as email marketing and mobile applications (Yadav & Rahman, 2018; Steinhoff & Palmatier, 2016;); and finally, in the advocacy phase, satisfied customers share their experiences through reviews or incentivised social media engagement (Yani-de-Soriano, Javed, & Yousafzai, 2012).

Within the realm of DMC strategies, once the stages of the conversion funnel have been identified, professionals employ the customer journey map to design an optimal user experience. This tool enables marketers to visualise and structure the various touchpoints between the consumer and the brand throughout their journey of awareness, consideration, decision-making, and loyalty (Kuehnl, Jozic, & Homburg, 2019; Lemon & Verhoef, 2016; Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014).

OGB Communication Strategies in the Conversion Funnel

Based on the reviewed prior literature, the following section outlines the various marketing communication strategies implemented by OGB, categorised according to their function within the OGBs' conversion funnel (**Figure 1**).

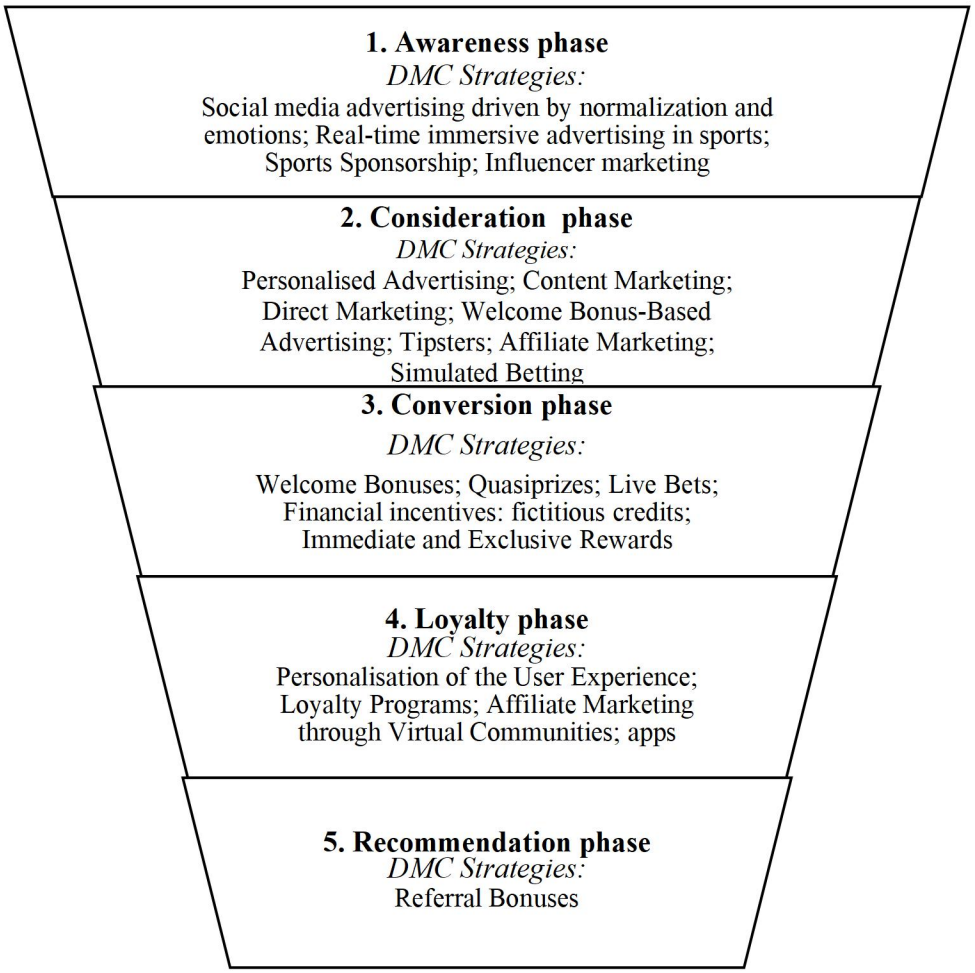

Figure 1. DMC Strategies at Each Stage of the Conversion Funnel

OGB Operator Brand Awareness Phase

In the initial stage of the conversion funnel (**Table 5**), OGB operators aim to capture consumer attention through online advertising, influencers, and celebrities, focusing on three main narratives: normalization, emotions, and associations with sports.

The primary narrative is normalization, which presents gambling as a harmless, everyday activity linked to player knowledge and skill (Deans, Thomas, Daube, & Derevensky, 2016, 2017; Milner, Hing, Vitartas, & Lamont, 2013; Pitt et al., 2017; Sohn & Son, 2024; Thomas et al., 2018). This is achieved through social scenarios and the omission of responsible gambling messages. For example, Killick and Griffiths (2020) found that only 8.51% of 3,375 OGB tweets during the Premier League included responsible gambling messages. OGBs also use entertainment and friendship-based advertising to recruit potential clients (Killick & Griffiths, 2023; Thomas et al., 2023). Constant exposure to gambling ads, particularly on social networks, desensitises the public, making gambling appear as a standard leisure activity (Deans et al., 2017; Noble et al., 2022).

The emotion-driven narrative associates gambling with excitement and personal satisfaction, emphasising success and status while downplaying risks (Guillou-Landréat et al., 2021). Ads promote live gambling and social settings involving alcohol and celebrations (Lopez-Gonzalez, Guerrero-Solé, & Griffiths, 2017). On social media, especially during sporting events, emotional hashtags are used to engage users and attract initial attention (Killick & Griffiths, 2020). Conceptual metaphors such as "gambling like love" or "natural environment" shape perceptions, creating a deep emotional bond between the gambler and the activity, encouraging rational and active participation (Lopez-Gonzalez, Guerrero-Solé, Estévez, & Griffiths, 2018).

OGB operators also use immersive advertising during sports broadcasts, where commentators promote real-time betting, highlighting only the positive aspects and shifting focus from the sport to the bets (Deans et al., 2017; Killick & Griffiths, 2020, 2023). Sponsorship agreements with sports teams further enhance visibility and attract new clients (Guillou-Landreat et al., 2021), although such agreements are restricted in Spain by Royal Decree 958/2020 (Government of Spain, 2020).

Finally, operators collaborate with influencers and/or celebrities to promote online gambling. The aim is to encourage potential clients to aspire to the luxurious lifestyles of these figures, enhancing trust and reducing perceived gambling risks, particularly among younger people (McMullan, Miller, & Perrier, 2012; Pitt, McCarthy, Randle, Daube, & S. L. Thomas, 2024; Savolainen, Sirola, Vuorinen, & Oksanen, 2022).

Collectively, these communication strategies foster a positive perception of online gambling, maximising its appeal.

Consideration Phase of the Brand and the Products of OGB Operators

Once OGB operators capture consumers' attention, they focus on three key objectives in the second stage of the conversion funnel: maintaining interest, prompting comparisons to encourage bets, and driving users to place them (**Table 6**). A critical strategy at this stage is personalised advertising, intensifying once users show initial interest. This strategy exploits repetition, becoming particularly aggressive when users try to avoid gambling (Bestman, Thomas, Pitt &, 2016; Marionneau, Ruohio, & Karlsson, 2023;), ensuring continuous exposure and increasing the likelihood of website visits and engagement with promotions.

Segmentation technologies allow operators to tailor ads based on user behaviour, gender, or age, enhancing relevance and effectiveness. Such ads are particularly impactful on social media, where they often go unnoticed as advertising and spread through peer interactions that normalise or promote skill-based control (Griffiths & Killick, 2022), especially among younger users (Kristiansen & Severin-Nielsen, 2022; Noble et al., 2022). Personalisation enables precise targeting, with strategies focused on women, emphasising security and social acceptance (Guillou-Landreat, 2021; McCarthy, Thomas, Pitt, Daube, & Cassidy, 2020; McCarthy et al., 2022; Ouzem & Prasad, 2015), young men, reinforcing masculinity-related stereotypes (Thomas, Lewis, McLeod, & Haycock, 2012; Deans et al., 2016), and vulnerable groups like minors and problem gamblers (Emond & Griffiths, 2020; Hing et al., 2022; Kristiansen & Severin, 2022; Pitt et al., 2017).

Content marketing plays a key role in maintaining interest. Kaakinen, Sirola, Savolainen, and Oksanen (2019) show that young people are influenced by group norms that normalise gambling. This effect is reinforced by messages during competitions, stimulating curiosity and engagement with betting platforms (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017; McMullan et al., 2012). Such strategies pose a significant risk, framing gambling as an integral part of sports entertainment, circumventing age restrictions and contributing to normalisation (Singer, Wöhr, & Otterbach, 2024).

Direct marketing is another highly effective tool. Through emails and push notifications with promotions, operators create a sense of accessibility and standardisation of bets during sports events (Bestman et al., 2016; Sohn & Son, 2024). Similarly, welcome bonuses and deceptive promotions encourage platform exploration (Killick & Griffiths, 2020; Marionneau et al., 2023). Welcome bonus advertising is especially concerning for attracting young players, as many ads fail to clarify terms and conditions, leading to misleading advertising (Killick & Griffiths, 2020; Marionneau et al., 2023). Consequently, several countries are moving towards banning such practices (Government of Spain, 2020).

Affiliate marketing through Tipsters involves affiliates receiving incentives when users place bets via their websites (Houghton, Moss, & Casey, 2020). These "experts," offering supposedly “free” advice, often promote risky decisions, creating a false sense of security (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017; McMullan et al., 2012). Additionally, tipsters show luxurious lifestyles and are linked to celebrities, generating aspirations and exploiting biases (Gonzálvez-Vallés, Barquero-Cabrero, Caldevilla-Domínguez, & Barrientos-Báez, 2021; Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017, 2018). Influencers also promote tipsters on social media, further reinforcing and normalising OGB (Barrientos-Báez, Gonzálvez-Vallés, Barquero-Cabrero, & Caldevilla-Domínguez, 2022; Peyró, Oñate, & Comes, 2024).

Simulated betting, another key strategy, gives users the perception of high chances of winning, encouraging gambling as an appealing option. Users exposed to these trial bets, where winning appears easy, develop a false sense of control (Killick & Griffiths, 2023). The conclusion of this stage marks a critical juncture, with users developing a positive attitude and heightened intention to engage in OGB.

Conversion Phase on OGB Operator Platforms

In the conversion phase (**Table 7**), OGB operators implement strategies designed to transform the initial

intention of users into active participation. These tactics seek not only to complete registration but also to encourage recurring engagement through incentives such as welcome bonuses, quasiprizes and live bets, which appeal to psychological factors such as the perception of control, excitement of profit, and dissociation from profit risk (Cemiloglu, Arden-Close, Hodge, & Ali, 2023). Welcome bonuses stand out as an initial bait strategy (Pitt et al., 2017; Marionneau et al., 2023), presenting themselves as a free advantage but accompanied by restrictive conditions that force users to make repeated bets to obtain benefits, generating dependency from the beginning (Challet-Bouju et al., 2020; Hing et al., 2019). It also favours continuous gaming patterns, with a high risk of problematic behaviours (Griffiths & Killick, 2022). Additionally, the use of the quasiprize, an illusion of having been close to winning, motivates players to continue betting, especially young people, who perceive this intermittent reinforcement as a sign of progress (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017; Savolainen et al., 2022).

Live betting, where users can make predictions during the sporting event and the betting options change dynamically according to the progress of the event. This strategy ensures that emotional reinforcement is intensified by offering immersive and dynamic experiences (Vieira, Kim, Clark, Tabri, & Wohl, 2023). OGBs also use expressions such as 'cool' or 'exciting' targeted at young people to stimulate intense emotions and impulsive decisions (Bestman et al., 2016; Guillou-Landrèat et al., 2021). Moreover, financial incentives such as fictitious credits reduce the initial risk perception, encouraging the user to continue betting with real money after exhausting these credits, which reinforces a false sense of control over the game (Challet-Bouju et al., 2020; Hing et al., 2019; Singer et al., 2024). Furthermore, these fictional credits require continuous gaming conditions, which are not clearly specified at the time of use. Finally, the increased odds capture the user's attention by offering immediate and exclusive rewards, intensifying the appeal of the game and consolidating patterns of impulsive behaviour, especially during live sporting events (Griffiths & Killick, 2022; Onwuegbusi, Roberts, Sharman, & Hogue, 2023). These strategies not only increase user activity but also reinforce their connection with the platform through emotionally intense and favourable-looking experiences (García-Pérez, Krotter, & Aonso-Diego, 2024).

Loyalty Phase of the Brand and the Products of OGB Operators

In this phase (**Table 8**), the main objective of operators' DMC is to ensure that a user who has registered and played becomes a frequent player and does so on their platform.

The main strategies are as follows: personalization of the user experience, loyalty programs, affiliate marketing with virtual communities, and mobile betting applications (apps).

In user experience personalization, the journey of each user is tracked directly, and the key moments at which an incentive is needed to encourage users to continue playing are identified (Di Censo et al., 2024; Estévez, Lopez-Gonzalez & Griffiths, 2018). For example, Killick and Griffiths (2023) consider that redemption promotions, carried out after a loss, constitute a key strategy to encourage players to continue gambling. Houghton et al. reported that habitual gamblers use this type of incentive to reduce the risk of economic loss and consider that this attitude could serve to internally self-justify themselves without perceiving the negative consequences of excessive gambling (Mbango & Madoro, 2022). Additionally, they observed that, in periods of abstinence from gambling, the communication stimuli of an operator reminded users of the enjoyment associated with the game and thus encouraged them to play again (Houghton, Punton, Casey, McNeill, & Moss, 2023).

Loyalty programs aim to identify players most likely to become loyal users and offer them preferential plans that provide benefits unavailable to other users. The main elements of an OGB loyalty program include tangible rewards, free play, promotions, gifts, credit, intangible rewards, preferential treatment, specialized service, and tiered status (Wohl, 2018). This strategy rewards users as they increase their gambling activity, with a collateral effect that can encourage compulsive behaviour (Hing et al., 2019). According to Noble et al. (2022), loyalty programs reinforce a perception of exclusivity, not only strengthening compulsive habits but also reducing the perception of risk. Research by Delfabbro and King (2021) shows a positive correlation between using a loyalty program and experiencing problematic gambling behaviour.

OGB virtual communities are not created or directed by operators but can be linked to them through affiliate strategies. Online gambling and betting communities serve as forums for discussing and sharing gaming experiences. As players engage more, they identify with group norms and are influenced by the community. While some communities can positively influence and act as social support mechanisms (Martin-Vicario & Gómez-Puertas, 2022), most encourage frequent gambling and increased purchase intent (Sirola, Kaakinen, & Oksanen, 2018; Sirola, Kaakinen, Savolainen, & Oksanen, 2019; Sirola, Savela, Savolainen, Kaakinen, & Oksanen, 2021). Affiliate strategies play a crucial role in betting, with OGB platforms offering a percentage to publishers when users place bets via their sites. These partnerships often involve websites, like tipsters and online communities, which help normalise gambling and reduce perceived risks (Houghton et al., 2020). Through affiliate programs, operators encourage frequent purchases by providing players with daily stimuli and direct links to games or bets.

Mobile betting apps are essential tools for building loyal users and ensuring a lasting player-operator relationship. Downloading the app indicates a player's intention to bet regularly. Research by Hing et al. (2024) shows that young users often download apps for the convenience of instant betting anytime, anywhere, indicating an inherent risk. James, O'Malley, C., and Tunney (2019) found that app downloads led to persistent use. Users who download these apps often opt-in for personalized messages about attractive bets and promotions. These direct messages, received almost daily, are highly effective, triggering quick, impulsive responses that may foster problematic behaviours (Russell, Hing, Browne, & Rawat, 2018).

Recommendation Phase of the Brand and the Products of OGB Operators

In the recommendation phase (**Table 9**), current users become brand ambassadors, driving organic growth through word of mouth. By incentivizing users to recommend the platform to friends and family, operators are able to expand their customer base inexpensively and strengthen the engagement of existing users (Haenlein & Libai, 2017). One of the most commonly used incentives is the referral bonus, which offers shared rewards for both the referring user and the new player, taking advantage of the social influence of personal recommendations. These bonuses, which can be in cash, free bets or redeemable points, are based on the trust of friends, which increases their effectiveness compared with other tools of communication (Dunlop & Ballantyne, 2021).

However, the conditions for accessing these bonuses are often complex or restrictive, which limits their real value and can generate frustration among users. The referring user often does not receive the reward until the new player meets requirements such as minimum deposits or additional bets, which can erode trust and decrease the effectiveness of the strategy in the long term (Guillou-Landreat et al., 2021; Marionneau et al., 2023). Additionally, operators resort to the psychology of intermittent rewards, using these bonuses not only to attract new users but also to retain existing ones, encouraging the return of players to the platform (Guerrero-Solé, Lopez-Gonzalez, & Griffiths, 2017). However, the lack of transparency in the incentive conditions can undermine user confidence if the rewards do not materialize or if they are perceived as unattainable (Marionneau et al., 2023). This lack of clarity can affect users' willingness to continue recommending a platform, especially when the benefits are not sufficiently rewarding or achievable (Di Censo et al., 2024; Yani de Soriano, 2012).

METHODOLOGY

To address the objective of the study, the following research questions are posed: (RQ1) How do the digital marketing communication strategies of OGB operators influence the promotion of responsible gambling against the generation of risky behaviours in young people? (RQ2) What role do gambling operators' communication strategies play in shaping young people's gaming experience throughout the conversion funnel? (RQ3) What implications and recommendations can be derived to promote more communication responsibility during OGB consumer experience?

Research Design and Approach

To answer the research questions, this study adopts a qualitative approach based on a Systematic Literature Review (SLR), following the principles of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA). The SLR made it possible to rigorously filter the most relevant studies, guaranteeing a transparent, exhaustive and reproducible process on the basis of solid and updated evidence (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021; Ramírez-Montoya & Lugo-Ocando, 2020; Wang & Ayob, 2024). This approach facilitated the selection and analysis of literature using explicit criteria, ensuring the quality of the findings (Urrútia & Bonfill, 2010). The application of PRISMA not only enables the standardisation of the study selection process but also minimises publication bias and enhances the traceability of the results (Rethlefsen et al., 2021).

Data Collection Methods

A systematic search was conducted in high-impact academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and ABI/Inform Collection, with the aim of identifying relevant studies in the fields of sociology, psychology, marketing, and communication. The search strategy involved combinations of key terms such as "online gambling", "online betting", "marketing communication strategies", "digital conversion funnel", "sports betting", "digital marketing communication", and "youth vulnerability", among others.

Boolean operators (AND, OR) and wildcards (*) were employed to optimise the retrieval of studies addressing both the stages of the conversion funnel and the specific tactics used by online gambling operators.

To ensure the quality and relevance of the studies analysed, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were established (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publications	Peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2012 and 2024	Non-peer-reviewed sources or publications prior to 2012
Topical focus	Studies addressing DMCs in online gambling	Clinical research on gambling addiction
Language	English or Spanish	Other languages
Study design	Empirical studies, systematic reviews or meta-analyses	Opinion papers, editorials, or grey literature

Study Selection Using the PRISMA Framework

The study selection process was conducted following the four phases of the PRISMA model: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021), as presented in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Phases of the PRISMA Model and Results

Phase	Description	Outcomes
Identification	Systematic search in academic databases and selection of key terms	320 studies retrieved
Screening	Removal of duplicates and initial filtering based on titles and abstracts	210 studies pre-selected
Elegibility	In-depth assessment of full-text articles based on inclusion and exclusion criteria	103 studies selected
Inclusion	Final selection of studies relevant to the SLR	103 studies included in analysis

Below is the PRISMA flow diagram, which provides a detailed illustration of the study selection process (**Figure 2**).

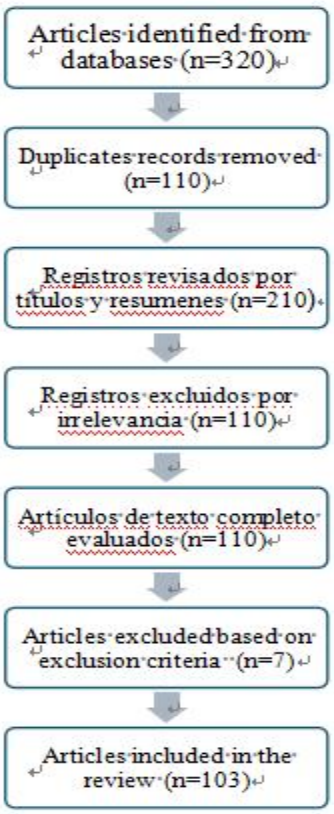

Figure 2. PRISMA Framework

Data Analysis Methods

The analysis of the selected studies was conducted using a structured approach based on thematic analysis, a method that allows for the identification, categorisation, and interpretation of key patterns within the collected data. This process adhered to a series of clearly defined steps to ensure methodological rigor and consistency in the synthesis of conclusions. Initially, the studies were read thoroughly to familiarise the researcher with the content and to grasp the principal findings. Following this, key concepts were identified and coded, grouping them into major themes related to DMC strategies in the gambling industry. The coherence of these themes was then evaluated in relation to the research objectives, with refinements made to ensure their clarity and relevance. Finally, the findings were synthesised and organised into a coherent narrative, which facilitated a comprehensive interpretation of the results (**Table 3**).

Table 3. Data Analysis Methods

Stage	Description
Familiarisation	A comprehensive review of the selected studies to gain an in-depth understanding of the impact of DMC on online gambling.
Code generation	Identification of key concepts and coding of recurrent patterns related to DMC strategies employed by online gambling operators.
Theme development	Organisation of codes into overarching themes that reflect the relationship between strategies for player acquisition and retention.
Theme review	Assessment of the thematic coherence in relation to the study's objectives, ensuring the themes' relevance to research on online gambling
Theme refinement	Refinement of the identified themes to delineate their impact on player behaviour and vulnerability.
Synthesis of findings	Integration of the themes into a coherent narrative, facilitates an understanding of DMC strategies and their influence on players' decision-making processes.

Ethical Considerations

Since this research relies on a systematic review of existing literature, it does not require the collection of primary data or direct engagement with human subjects. Nonetheless, ethical standards were rigorously observed during the process of selecting and analysing the studies, ensuring both the integrity of the academic work and the transparency of the findings' interpretation.

The results obtained are presented below, organised according to the phases of the conversion funnel and the key patterns identified in the literature.

RESULTS

This study systematically classifies and describes the DMC strategies employed by OGB operators that have been identified in the literature as potentially harmful to young consumers. The classification follows a structured approach based on the stages of the conversion funnel, ensuring a comprehensive analysis of how these strategies are deployed throughout the player's journey. Each stage of the funnel is systematically represented in tabular format, incorporating the data extracted from the systematic review and its implications for communication practices and consumer protection.

Table 4 presents the key criteria used for categorising the reviewed studies, along with the corresponding stage of the conversion funnel in which each reference has been classified.

Table 4. Characteristics of the Studies

Characteristics of the 103 studies reviewed			
Study Methodology	**Country of Study**	**Study Area**	**Conversion Funnel Stage/ Number of References**
Qualitative: 20 Quantitative: 55 Mixed: 10 Literature review: 17 Guide/Report: 1	Australia: 25 Canada: 4 South Korea: 1 Denmark: 2 Spain: 23 Finland: 6	Computing: 2 Communication: 5 Education: 2 Marketing: 12 Businesses: 5 Sociology: 23	Stage 1 Awareness: 29 Stage 2 Consideration: 30 Stage 3 Conversion: 12 Stage 4 Loyalty: 20 Stage 5 Recommendation: 6

Characteristics of the 103 studies reviewed			
Study Methodology	**Country of Study**	**Study Area**	**Conversion Funnel Stage/ Number of References**
	France: 3 Netherlands: 1 Italy: 1 Malta: 1 New Zealand: 1 South Africa: 1 UK: 24 US: 11 Vietnam: 1	Health: 54	

The following tables present the key findings for each stage of the conversion funnel. The SLR has identified, for each phase: the behavioural objective, the influence of strategies on emotions, the influence of strategies on attitudes, and the DMC strategies employed (**Tables 5**, **Table 6**, **Table 7**, **Table 8** and **Table 9**).

Table 5. Summary of the OGB Operator Brand Awareness Phase

	Key Findings	**References**
Behavioural objective	To achieve a positive perception of OGB, fostering a favorable attitude toward its purchase	Sirola et al., 2018, 2019, 2021; Hing et al. 2019
Psychological constructs	Perception of gambling normalization and ability to control their gambling behaviour	Deans et al., 2017; Milner et al., 2013; Pitt et al., 2017; Sohn & Son, 2024; Thomas et al., 2018
	Associative learning, linking OGB to the positive values of sports.	Deans et al., 2017; Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2018; Guillou-Landréat et al.,2021; Killick & Griffiths, 2020, 2023.
	Identification with social success through association with influential individuals.	Guillou-Landréat et al., 2021; Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017; Killick & Griffiths, 2020
	DMC Strategies	
Social media advertising driven by normalization and emotions	Advertising based on entertainment and friendship to facilitate the initial acquisition of potential customers	Killick & Griffiths, 2020; 2023; Thomas et al., 2023; Noble et al., 2022; Deans et al., 2017.
Real-time immersive advertising in sports	Advertising displayed during live sports events featuring special offers designed to reinforce a gambling-oriented perspective on sports	Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017; Deans et al., 2017; Killick & Griffiths, 2020, 2023; Griffiths & Killick 2022, Guillou-Landréat et al., 2021
Sports Sponsorship	The OGB operator sponsors a sports team or a tournament to give visibility to attract new customers	Guillou-Landréat et al., 2021.
Influencer marketing	Collaborations with influencers and athletes to make potential players identify with them	McMullan & Miller, 2012; Pitt et al., 2024; Savolainen et al., 2022.

Table 6. Summary of Consideration Phase of OGB Operators

	Key Findings	**References**
Behavioural objectives	Achieving user access and engagement with the OGB platform and its products	Bestma et al., 2016; Hing et al. 2019; Sirola et al., 2021; Sohn & Son, 2024
Psychological constructs	Favorable perceptions of OGB through association with sports	McMullan & Miller, 2010; McMullan et al., 2012; Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017; Singer et al., 2024
	Learning and information retention through repetitive messaging	Bestman et al. 2016; Griffiths & Killick, 2022; Marionneau et al., 2023
	Selective attention to personalized messages	
	Social identity and aspirational group belonging	Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017, 2018; Gonzálvez-Vallés et al., 2021; Barrientos-Báez et al., 2022; Peyró et al., 2024

	Key Findings	References
	Credibility bias without critical analysis	Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017; Kristiansen & Severin-Nielsen, 2022; Noble et al., 2022 McMullan et al., 2012
	DMC Strategies	
Personalised advertising	Use of cookies and algorithms to deliver tailored ads	Bestman et al. 2016; Griffiths & Killick, 2022; Marionneau et al., 2023;
Content marketing	Online content about OGB associated with sports	McMullan & Miller, 2010; McMullan et al., 2012; Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017; Kaakinen et al., 2019; Singer et al., 2024
Direct marketing	Sending emails and mobile push notifications with promotional offers	Bestman et al., 2016; Killick & Griffiths, 2020; Marionneau et al., 2023; Sohn & Son, 2024
Welcome bonus-based advertising	Ads featuring a promotional bonus to encourage first-time play on the platform	Killick & Griffiths, 2020; Marionneau et al., 2023
Tipsters and affiliate marketing	Affiliate programs with recommenders who receive financial incentives for each bet placed by a referred player	McMullan et al., 2012; Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017, 2018; Houghton et al., 2020; Gonzálvez-Vallés et al., 2021; Barrientos-Báez et al., 2022; Peyró et al., 2024
Simulated Betting	Trial bets functioning as an OGB platform simulator	Killick & Griffiths, 2023

Table 7. Summary of Conversion Phase on OGB Operator Platforms

	Key Findings	References
Behavioural objective	Encouraging users to register and begin using the operator's platform	Cemiloglu et al., 2023 García-Pérez et al., 2024; Griffiths & Killick, 2022;
Psychological constructs	Arousal and impulsive behaviour patterns	Bestman et al., 2016, Guillou-Landrèat et al., 2021; Killick & Griffiths, 2022; Cemiloglu et al., 2023; Onwuegbusi et al., 2023; Vieira et al., 2023; García-Pérez et al., 2024
	Illusion of control and reduced risk perception	Hing et al., 2019; Challet-Bouju et al., 2020; Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017; Savolainen et al., 2022; Singer et al., 2024
	Intermittent reinforcement enhances player motivation to continue participating	Pitt et al., 2017; Hing et al., 2019; Challet-Bouju et al., 2020; Marionneau et al., 2023; Griffiths & Killick, 2022.
	DMC strategies	
Welcome bonuses	Incentive in the form of a registration bonus on the platform	Pitt et al., 2017; Hing et al., 2019; Challet-Bouju et al., 2020; Griffiths & Killick, 2022; Marionneau et al., 2023.
Quasiprizes	Techniques highlighting near wins despite losses	Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2017; Savolainen et al., 2022
Live bets	Live bets that adjust based on event progression	Pitt et al., 2017; Guillou-Landrèat et al., 2021; Vieira et al., 2023
Financial incentives	Fictional credits are subject to conditions of continued play	Hing et al., 2019; Challet-Bouju et al., 2020; Singer et al., 2024
Immediate and exclusive rewards	Incentives granted are instantly after registration or the first deposit	Griffiths & Killick, 2022; Onwuegbusi et al. 2023; García-Pérez et al. 2024

Table 8. Summary of the Loyalty Phase Review

	Key Findings	References
Behavioural objective	Encouraging users to develop the habit of	Sirola et al., 2018, 2019, 2021;

	Key Findings	References
	betting and playing on the OGB's platform	Hing et al., 2019
Psychological constructs	Impulsive decision-making and the promotion of a sense of exclusivity	Noble et al., 2022
	Perceived control over risk and the normalization of gambling	Houghton, et al., 2020 Noble et al., 2022
	DMC Strategies	
Mobile betting applications (apps)	Offering bonuses to customers who consistently spend and develop purchasing habits	Hing et al., 2024 James et al., 2019 Russell et al., 2018
Personalisation of the User Experience	Identifying key moments and providing special promotions	Estévez et al., 2018 Killick & Griffiths 2023 Houghton et al., 2023
Loyalty Programs	Identifying likely loyal players to offer special promotions and credit	Hing et al., 2019 Noble et al., 2022
Affiliate Marketing through Virtual Communities	Linking the OGB platform with a virtual community that normalises habitual gambling.	Sirola et al., 2018, 2019, 2021. Houghton et al., 2020

Table 9. Summary Recommendation Phase of OGB Operators

	Key Findings	References
Behavioural objective	Turning users into brand ambassadors, driving organic growth through word-of-mouth	Haenlein & Libai, 2017
Psychological constructs	Effectiveness based on friends' trust	Killick & Griffiths, 2023 Dunlop & Ballantyne, 2021
	Psychology of intermittent reward	Guerrero-Solé et al., 2017 Marionneau et al., 2023
	Perception of deceptive or unattainable rewards	Yani de Soriano et al., 2012 Di Censo et al., 2024
	DMC Strategies	
Referral incentives	Offering shared rewards for both the referring user and the new player, consisting of cash bonuses, free bets, or redeemable points	Yani de Soriano et al., 2012 Guerrero-Solé et al., 2017 Haenlein & Libai, 2017 Dunlop & Ballantyne, 2021 Guillou-Landreat et al., 2021 Killick & Griffiths, 2023 Marionneau et al., 2023 Di Censo et al., 2024

DISCUSSION

The review conducted has highlighted a vast body of literature on the communication strategies employed by OGB operators. However, no significant scientific corpus has been identified that comprehensively addresses the player experience, from initial contact to retention. In this context, the collection and systematisation of these scientific references have enabled their integration into the OGB conversion funnel model, providing an analytical framework for understanding their impact on the generation of potentially harmful gambling experiences for young individuals.

The results of the systematic analysis (**Table 4**) reveal the geographical and methodological diversity of existing studies, as well as a notable research gap in the field of Communication and Marketing. Australia, the United Kingdom, and Spain emerge as the primary contributors to this area of research. However, certain regions, such as Latin America, Africa, and Asia, remain underrepresented, presenting opportunities for future studies in these areas. Additionally, a clear predominance of quantitative methodologies has been observed in the reviewed studies. This aligns with the need to identify behavioural patterns in the online gambling context, while also highlighting the relevance of qualitative research methods, such as open-ended surveys or focus groups, for exploring latent perceptions and attitudes among players.

The SLR indicates a stronger academic interest in studying DMC strategies from disciplines such as Health Sciences and Sociology, rather than from Communication or Marketing-specific fields. This bias may suggest that,

within the communication sector, there is insufficient awareness of the risks associated with irresponsible communication practices in the OGB industry.

Moreover, existing literature tends to focus predominantly on DMC strategies applied to the first four stages of the conversion funnel, rather than the final two (**Table 4**). This bias indicates a prevailing concern with acquiring new users, while paying less attention to analysing how players who engage with the platform are subsequently encouraged to develop gaming habits. This disparity is particularly significant, as the formation of gaming habits may pose health risks and represent a particular danger for vulnerable groups, such as young people.

Focusing on the case of Spain, the 2022–2023 Study on Gambling Prevalence in the General Population in Spain reports a rise in problematic gambling among young people. Approximately 22% of players are under the age of 25, with concerning figures regarding the proportion of players experiencing problematic gambling behaviours. For instance, 36.5% of young people aged between 18 and 25 have engaged in online betting, of whom 12.45% have exhibited signs of addiction (Dirección General de Ordenación del Juego, 2023). These findings suggest that current industry measures are ineffective in preventing problematic gambling among young individuals. Neither Royal Decree 958/2020 (Government of Spain, 2020) nor the "Safe Gambling" initiatives mandated by the Spanish Government for online OGB platforms have yielded satisfactory results in protecting this vulnerable demographic. Furthermore, the industry's resistance to regulatory changes underscores the necessity of exploring new approaches that actively involve stakeholders in the search for solutions.

All of the above highlights the urgent need to develop a responsible communication framework that not only raises awareness among industry professionals but also promotes effective practices to protect young people from problematic gaming experiences. In this regard, the SLR systematic review has enabled the identification of a series of recommendations for the responsible design of young people's gaming experiences. The following provides these eight recommendations as a responsible communication guide for marketing and communication professionals within the OGB industry:

A. Designing the gaming experience with transparency and informed consent

An ethical design involves presenting terms, success probabilities, and withdrawal policies clearly and understandably. For instance, welcome bonuses often come with conditions unknown to users upon acceptance. These requirements must be explicit and supported by practical examples.

Transparency also demands that any affiliate program involvement be disclosed each time. When users reach a gambling platform via an influencer, tipster, or online betting community, it must be stated that the affiliated site owner receives an incentive from the operator each time a bet is placed.

Advertisements on external sites promoting the platform must be honest and non-manipulative, accurately presenting odds and game consequences, possibly featuring testimonials from responsible players.

B. Designing the gaming experience to enhance risk awareness and discourage impulsive decisions

Responsibly designed experiences should avoid elements like deceptive timers, incentives to continue playing, or intrusive notifications that can encourage harmful gambling behaviour. Visual and auditory stimuli should be used ethically, and animations, sound effects, and other stimuli that exaggerate the game's appeal should be moderated.

When designing the journey for young players, warning messages should be included at strategic points to highlight the risks of gambling, reinforcing the perception of its potential dangers.

C. Personalizing the gaming experience to avoid risky behaviour

To enhance player engagement through recurring participation, protecting user data should take precedence over player monitoring. Personalisation helps prevent risky behaviours by identifying patterns of problematic conduct and offering warning messages or suggested breaks. It also adjusts the gaming experience to responsibly meet user needs. For example, if a player shows a history of continuous losses, the platform could pause personalised ads, display risk warnings, and encourage setting betting limits for control. To mitigate impulsive behaviours, platforms could implement automatic breaks during prolonged sessions.

Loyalty programmes, which offer select users special benefits to enhance their experience, can also be approached responsibly. Currently, these programmes reward increased gambling activity, which may encourage compulsive behaviours. However, targeting at-risk players with rewards for responsible gaming could promote less compulsive behaviours using strategies like temporary breaks or financial limits.

D. Designing the gaming experience detached from the positive values of sport

The association of betting with values linked to sports, such as improvement, health, or companionship, can

lead players, particularly young sports fans, to normalise OGB and justify harmful behaviour. Gambling ads should avoid being placed in sports programmes or tournaments, or using colours and images that suggest a healthy sport. Moreover, betting brands should refrain from sponsoring sporting events or athletes.

E. Avoiding use of web space frequented by minors attract OBG players

Given the vulnerability of minors and adolescents, OGB advertising on platforms with high minor interaction, such as social networks (YouTube, TikTok, Instagram), should be restricted. Sponsored content and operator advertisements must not be included on video games and eSports platforms, such as Twitch, which are popular with young gamers and feature freemium games accessible on mobile devices or consoles.

F. Designing gaming experiences that allow self-regulation

A responsible design must empower users so that they can manage their activity in a conscious way and can protect themselves against the risks of OGB. This includes allowing users to set custom limits on usage time and weekly spending. For example, operators could manage the user experience so that when users approach 90% of their weekly limit, they receive an alert that they will be reaching their established limit. It would also be useful to provide a detailed history of activity so that users can reflect on their behaviour and make decisions, including the option of temporary or permanent self-exclusion.

G. Integrating responsible gambling messages into the user experience of OGB platforms

Operators should integrate responsible gambling into their platforms, prioritising prevention and active education. For effectiveness, messages must be highly visible and designed to capture the user's attention, rather than being buried in small print at the bottom of the page. For instance, dynamic reminders about gaming risks could appear at key moments, such as during login or before placing large bets. These messages could be enhanced with eye-catching graphics or pop-up notifications. Design-wise, this should be implemented without disrupting the core platform functionality, ensuring a balance between engagement and the promotion of responsible gambling.

H. Designing the experience aimed at teaching young people to play responsibly

The design of the OGB experience should focus on active education and promoting healthy behaviours to prevent gambling-related problems among young people. This should include clear, accessible educational content on gambling risks, such as debt, social isolation, or loss of control, presented through interactive tutorials or mini-games that engage users. For example, tools to simulate responsible gambling scenarios would allow users to practice setting limits and managing impulses.

Interactive questionnaires are another useful tool to guide young users' gaming experience, allowing them to evaluate their behaviour regularly and receive personalized recommendations based on their responses. These could be complemented by graphs showing trends in time or money spent, helping users make informed decisions.

These proposals aim to shift the sector towards a more responsible communication approach, balancing commercial interests with user protection and enhancing the operator's reputation.

CONCLUSION

This study constitutes a significant contribution when analysing the DMC strategies employed by OGB operators through the conceptual framework of the conversion funnel. This approach allowed us to break down the communication strategies and their differentiated impact at each stage of the consumer journey, from initial recruitment to recommendation.

Throughout the analysis, the main objectives of the study have been achieved, providing a comprehensive understanding of the impact of this commercial communication on the behaviour of young people, a particularly vulnerable group. First, strategies such as the normalization of the game, personalized promotions and emotional narratives can both promote responsible gambling and intensify risky behaviours in young people. Second, the conversion funnel model made it possible to identify how these strategies vary throughout the phases, generating cumulative effects that increase youth vulnerability, from the misperception of control in the initial phases to the intensification of compulsive patterns in the final stages. Finally, the study synthesizes its findings in recommendations aimed at mitigating these risks, offering concrete guidelines for using communication to foster a more ethical and responsible design of gambling experiences.

These recommendations include measures to ensure transparency in promotions, regulate psychological incentives such as quasiprizes and artificial urgencies, and limit the use of highly personalized and manipulative messages. Additionally, they highlight the need to incorporate educational narratives that promote responsible

gambling and to avoid practices that reinforce patterns of compulsive behaviour. This set of recommendations not only provides a guide for operators towards more ethical practices but also constitutes a tool for legislators and regulators in the creation of regulatory frameworks that balance the protection of users with the commercial communication dynamics of the sector.

Our SLR approach, not only complements the current literature but also facilitates the identification of theoretical gaps and unexplored areas, highlighting the need for future research of interest to marketers.

Notably, young people's exposure to DMC strategies can negatively impact their health. The precise analysis of these practices and their ability to represent a risk at each stage of the gambling experience that has been conducted constitutes an essential step towards promoting an ethical transformation in this sector.

This study has explicitly addressed the research objectives (OB1 and OB2) and research questions (RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3) throughout the analysis. OB1 and OB2 have guided the breakdown of DMC strategies and the identification of patterns that may foster risky behaviours, ultimately leading to recommendations for a more responsible design. Consistently, RQ1 and RQ2 have been answered through the analysis of the impact of these communication strategies at each stage of the digital conversion funnel and their cumulative effects on youth vulnerability. Additionally, RQ3 has been addressed through the proposed guidelines aimed at mitigating these risks and promoting more ethical communication practices. Thus, the research objectives and questions have been systematically reflected in the conclusions, ensuring a clear connection with the study's findings.

Ultimately, in the online context in which young people are especially vulnerable to OGB marketing communication strategies, this study not only accurately breaks down how these strategies affect each stage of the conversion funnel but also lays the foundation for an ethical evaluation in the online gambling industry. The good practice guide, which is applicable to operators, legislators and regulators, is intended to transform current dynamics into a more ethical and responsible model. This approach not only seeks to balance business interests with the protection of young consumers but also opens the door to new ways of designing responsible digital experiences, inspiring other sectors with similar dynamics to adopt principles of ethics and sustainability. For example, in the health industry, issues such as obesity or mental health require responsible digital communication strategies that prioritise users' well-being and promote responsible behavioural change.

In conclusion, this work represents an essential step towards a safer, more transparent gambling environment aligned with the values of social responsibility.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The present study, which includes a systematic review, has allowed an in-depth analysis of the DMC strategies used by online gambling operators and their impact on young people. This approach has provided a detailed and nuanced interpretation of the results; however, it does not include a meta-analysis, which limits its ability to offer consolidated quantitative estimates that more broadly reflect the widespread impact of these strategies. Future studies could complement this analysis by integrating meta-analysis techniques, conducting experimental research to assess real-time user responses, and undertaking longitudinal studies to examine the long-term effects on loyalty and gambling patterns. Likewise, conducting a UX analysis could be highly enriching to observe the real impact of operators' strategies on young players. This approach would expand the external validity of the findings and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Additionally, a promising line of research would be to explore how DMC strategies impact differently on the basis of sociodemographic variables such as gender, socioeconomic level or educational level. This approach would help to identify particularly vulnerable subgroups and to design more specific interventions adapted to their needs, promoting ethical and inclusive communication practices. For example, it would be relevant to analyse whether certain advertising tactics are perceived differently by young men and women or how economic barriers influence decisions to participate in games of chance.

Another relevant line of research would be to evaluate the role of government regulations in moderating the risks associated with online gambling promotion. In this sense, it would be especially valuable to analyse how regulations such as "Royal Decree 958/2020" in Spain have influenced the practices of operators and the perception of risk by users. Case studies on the implementation and enforcement of these regulations could provide key information for developing more effective and balanced policies that protect vulnerable users without compromising the sustainability of the sector.

Similarly, on the basis of this research, it would be interesting to analyse whether those responsible for communication follow the recommendations set forth and therefore are being responsible. For this purpose, a

content analysis messages of the OBG operators and a heuristic analysis of the design of the consumer experience of the operators' platforms could be conducted. Similarly, artificial intelligence is presented as a promising tool to design more responsible communication strategies and to identify and mitigate risks associated with problematic gambling behaviours.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest was declared by the authors.

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