**Gambling advertising still exists in Belgium despite a widely-reported “ban”**

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Gambling advertising is omnipresent worldwide, particularly within professional sports. This has raised concerns among the public, policymakers and academics (1–3), and some countries have therefore begun to restrict gambling marketing. Belgium is one of the first countries to “ban” gambling advertising in 2023 (4), and has urged other jurisdictions to follow (5). Belgium has also recently “banned” gambling-like loot boxes in video games, but without any meaningful effectiveness (6). This letter highlights how the advertising “ban” similarly allows gambling advertising to exist in various forms.

Although often presented as a general ban in the media (7,8), Belgium’s new gambling advertising regulation intends to ban all advertising forms, but includes a list of advertising forms that are explicitly permitted. The regulation prohibits forms of gambling advertising that enjoy worldwide popularity such as TV, social media, and radio advertising, as well as direct mail, email, or text message marketing (9–11). Gambling sports sponsorship is frequent in Belgium as it is elsewhere (2,12,13), and transitional arrangements are taken to ban most sport stadium sponsorship from 2025 and gambling shirt sponsorship only from 2028.

 Nevertheless, the regulation allows operators to still advertise to individuals who express their interest in gambling. As such, advertising is for instance allowed when consumers actively seek gambling-related content, by using gambling-related keywords in online search engines. Belgian gambling operators are therefore investing significantly in search engine advertising since the ban (see Figure 1 for an example). Gambling operators can also still advertise on their own channels, such as their websites and social media profiles, but notably under certain rules. Although sports sponsorships are restricted, gambling operators will still be able to sponsor amateur sports clubs, with one gambling operator recently announcing that it will provide 100 local sports clubs with free jerseys. Importantly, lottery products are exempt from the ban as they fall under a different regulation, and this allows the State Lottery to continue advertising their lottery products (but not their other gambling products) (14).

In light of the new regulation, gambling operators are actively seeking alternative strategies or loopholes, beyond the scope of the regulation, to enhance brand visibility. First, gambling operators are increasingly communicating about their corporate social responsibility activities on their channels in order to create media coverage –therefore using a loophole that has also been used by the tobacco industry (15). For instance, they have communicated about their sponsorship of charitable causes, which could be perceived as “cause-washing” (16), and they have set up foundations within sports clubs. They have also organized free prize-draws that do not require a gambling account to enter, started sports podcasts, and started providing live streaming of sports matches on their websites to drive traffic to their websites. These are just the novel tactics that we have observed thus-far, and which could be added to in future.

 Although it is promising that most gambling advertising has disappeared from public eye, there is no total ban on gambling advertising yet, meaning that gambling advertising still exists in Belgium.

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**Figures**

Figure 1. List of sponsored search results to a Google search for “Sportweddenschappen” [sports betting] made in Belgium on December 8 2023. © Alphabet inc.

