Gambling mythologized
A multimethod qualitative study of U.S. sports betting advertising narratives

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Abstract
Online sports betting is an industry that has seen a huge surge in popularity in the US since 2018, and the companies behind this surge have enjoyed exponential increases in profits. Accompanying the increased interest in and profits of online sports gambling is a large spike in advertisements created by companies that offer online sports betting services. Although gambling is an activity that is recognized as highly addictive and potentially destructive for certain individuals, the companies that offer sports gambling services in the US face little to no government regulation in how they advertise their services. This study aimed to investigate the advertising narratives deployed by the four most popular online sports betting companies in the US (FanDuel, DraftKings, Caesars Sportsbook, and BetMGM) in terms of their frequency, using the precision afforded by the method of qualitative content analysis. Additionally, this study deployed semiotic analysis with the constructionist approach to representation and the concept of myth to examine how the most frequently used narratives in online sports betting advertisements draw on broader systems of meaning in order to persuade audiences. This study found that FanDuel, DraftKings, Caesars Sportsbook, and BetMGM most frequently used narratives of online betting and celebrity feature in their advertisements. Using semiotic analysis, this study found that the narratives of online betting and celebrity feature often translated to mythologized and often unrealistic depictions of sports betting which represented it as an activity that allowed sports bettors to align themselves on the same hierarchical level as professional athletes and Hollywood celebrities, while largely ignoring the risks that are inherently attached to gambling. The findings of this study stand as an exploratory accounting and examination of the currently unregulated advertising practices of the largest sports gambling companies in the US.

Keywords: Advertising, online sports betting, gambling advertising, qualitative content analysis, semiotic analysis, the American dream, semiotics, myth, representation
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1. Introduction

On 4 December 2017, the Supreme Court of the United States assembled to address New York Governor Phillip D. Murphy’s contention that the federal ban on sports betting, instituted in 1992, was an affront to state’s rights. The case was named Murphy v. National Collegiate Athletic Association, and in a 7-2 vote, the Supreme Court ruled that federal ban on sports betting was a violation of the 10th amendment and therefore unconstitutional (Liptak and Draper, 2018). In the years since the Supreme Court's decision, sports gambling has largely expanded beyond the barriers of Las Vegas casinos and horse racing tracks where it had been previously confined to. The majority of US sports gambling now takes place on online sports betting services that allow users to place wagers from the comfort of home and are provided by companies such as FanDuel, DraftKings, Caesars Sportsbook, and BetMGM. Today, sports betting in the US is a multi-billion dollar industry that has enjoyed massive surges in popularity and revenue in recent years, and the online sports betting companies at the vanguard of this surge have rapidly intensified their advertising practices in an effort to compete against one another and to persuade US audiences to use their services.

The phenomenon of online sports betting advertising presently exists in a peculiar state, namely due to the addictive nature of the services which are being advertised and its lack of regulation; in the US, the advertising of products which are considered to be addictive such tobacco, nicotine, and alcohol have been heavily regulated by government entities such as the Center for Disease Control and the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau since the 20th century in order to protect consumers and curtail the potential harm of those substances on the general public (Regulation, 2021; Alcohol Beverage Advertising, 2023). Gambling, while to some may be an innocuous pastime, is recognized by psychiatric professionals as an activity that can be extremely addictive in certain individuals. Financial ruin, strained relationships, anxiety, and depression are among the potential effects that gambling addiction can have on an individual (Jones, 2020). Since the federal legalization of gambling in the US in 2018, and since the advent of online and mobile gambling services, sports betting has never been more accessible in the US and yet, scant legislation has been set in place to dictate how online gambling companies may advertise their services. Currently, few lawmakers and politicians are lobbying for the regulation of gambling advertising (Tonko, 2023).
The aim of the present study is to generate an understanding of how the most lucrative online sports betting companies in the US (FanDuel, DraftKings, Caesars Sportsbook, and BetMGM) have chosen to depict their potentially addictive and harmful services to the general public in order to persuade audiences while largely unburdened by legislative intervention. Aided by the theories and methodologies afforded by the discipline of media and communication studies, the present study launched a comprehensive investigation into the recent tactics employed by online sports betting companies in order to ascertain what the most prominently used advertising narratives are and how those narratives draw on broader systems of representation to generate meaning and ultimately influence individuals to gamble on sports with their services.

1.1 Research questions

Two research questions were developed for the present study and aim to yield different yet cohesive results of the present climate of online sports betting advertising in the US.

RQ1: What are the most frequently-used narratives found in recent advertisements published by the most popular online sports betting companies in the US?

RQ2: How have the most popular online sports betting companies in the US drawn on broader ideologies in their advertisements to promote their services?

The first research question was formed in order to compile an objective account of the dominant narratives that US online sports betting companies employ in their advertisements. The purpose of this is to obtain a general understanding of the strategies that online sports betting companies use to draw both experienced and new sports bettors in to use their services, while largely unfettered by government regulation. In order to answer this research question, the method of qualitative content analysis and Krippendorff’s (2004) six components of content analysis will be deployed. This method is further discussed in section 5.1.

The second research question was formed with the intent of launching a deeper investigation into the ideological implications of online sports betting advertisements in the US. By applying Hall’s (1997) constructionist approach to representation (discussed in section 4.1), the individual visual components in the advertisements can be interpreted to reveal their symbolic meanings. Then, by
applying Barthes’ (1982) second order semiological system of myth (discussed in section 4.2) to
the advertisements, the sum of the signs in the advertisements can be analyzed for their ability to
draw on broader ideological systems in order to persuade audiences. Additionally, the mythical
concept of the ‘American Dream’ will be invoked in order to demonstrate how online sports
betting companies have drawn on fundamental aspirations of the American individual in order to
promote their services. To answer the second research question, advertisements published by the
online sports betting companies will be systematically dissected with the qualitative precision
that is afforded by Hall’s (1997) and Barthes’ (1982) approaches to semiology and the theoretical
notions of the American Dream.

Both of the research questions in the present study were formed with the ultimate goal of
generating an in-depth understanding of the content of online sports betting advertisements.
While RQ1 is concerned with identifying the dominant trends of narratives found within the
data, RQ2 is concerned with providing vivid and detailed interpretations of those dominant
narratives and explanations as to how online sports betting advertisements operate on broader
systems of meaning, such as the American Dream, to draw in customers.

2. Background
The following section aims to contextualize the research conducted in the present study by first,
providing a brief overview of what sports betting is today, as well as the history of sports betting
in the US. The historical relationship between the US and sports betting is necessary to
understand its current place in American society. Second, this section will take a look at the
regulatory bodies involved in online sports betting advertising.

2.1 US sports betting
The emergence of online sports betting is a relatively recent advent in the US gambling industry.
Companies such as FanDuel, DraftKings, BetMGM, and Caesar’s Sportsbook provide platforms
for sports bettors where they can wager on various aspects of upcoming sports matches and other
sports competitions, ranging from American football to professional golf to major league
baseball and many more. These companies’ services are accessible both via web browser and
their respective mobile device applications.
Sports betting in the US has roots that can be traced back to the 19th century when betting on horse races was the most popular form of sports wagering among American gamblers (Legal Sports Betting, 2023). Gambling on sports maintained a legally gray status in the US until the state of Nevada officially legalized gambling in 1931, followed by other states in the 1970s and 1980s (Legal Sports Betting, 2023).

Sports betting across the US saw a steady rise in popularity until 1992, when the Professional and Amateur Sports Protection Act (PAPSA) was signed by president George H. W. Bush. This federal statute effectively banned single-match sports wagering in all states except for Nevada (Heitner, 2010). Thus, sports betting became an illegal activity in 49 of the 50 states in the US. PAPSA governed the US sports betting industry from 1992 until 2018, when a Supreme Court ruling overturned the federal statute, deeming it unconstitutional (Murphy v. National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2018). Until this ruling, it was estimated that about $150 billion was being placed annually in “illegal wagers” in the US under PAPSA (Liptak and Draper, 2018). Essentially, this Supreme Court ruling lifted nearly all sports gambling restrictions that states faced, and allowed individual states to legalize sports betting under their own state laws. As of 2023, 36 states have legalized sports betting and 26 states have legalized “mobile sports betting” since the Supreme Court’s ruling in 2018 (Yakowicz, 2023).

What has resulted after this adjustment of US gambling laws is massive surges both in popularity and revenue of online sports gambling companies. Online sports gambling is estimated to be a $13 billion industry as of 2023 (Affleck, 2023), and in September 2022, the American Gaming Association (AGA) reported that “A record 46.6 million American adults (18%) [planned] to bet on the upcoming National Football League (NFL) season” (American Gaming Association, 2022). Many online sports betting companies have stepped up to take advantage of the newly instituted sports gambling laws and capitalize on the millions of Americans that can gamble on sports matches from the comfort of home, and the four companies that have prevailed in doing so are FanDuel and DraftKings to a greater degree, and Caesar’s Sportsbook and BetMGM to a lesser, but still significant degree (Silverman, 2022). FanDuel and DraftKings claim a staggering 74% combined market share of the online sports betting industry in the US, while Caesars Sportsbook and BetMGM comprise the majority of the remaining 26% market share (Mulheir,
These four companies’ control over the online sports betting market in the US was achieved through rigorous marketing campaigns and mammoth advertising spends, which will be discussed in the next sub section.

2.2 Online sports betting advertising and problem gambling

As previously stated, the four largest online sports betting companies (FanDuel, DraftKings, Caesar’s Sportsbook, and BetMGM) have seen great success in popularity and revenue since the 2018 overruling of PAPSA. This subsection will provide an overview of the advertising and marketing efforts of online sports betting companies since 2018 that has allowed them to take control of the online sports betting market in the US. Additionally, this section will endeavor to summarize the reported potential relationship between sports betting advertising and the psychiatric condition of compulsive gambling behavior.

To begin this section, it is important to touch on the laws and regulations which surround the advertising of gambling services in the US. Though the 2018 Supreme Court overruling of PAPSA legalized sports betting at a federal level, there has been no such federal legislation set in place to regulate sports betting advertising. Therefore, legislators at the state-level have been left to dictate how sports betting advertisers may promote their services. States such as Maine and North Dakota have passed state laws which limit or outright restrict gambling and lottery advertising, which online sports betting falls under (Dalsheim, 2022). However, in general, online sports betting companies have enjoyed the freedom to advertise their services with little pushback from state government entities. According to Dalsheim (2022), “gambling-related advertisements were about 1% of the total TV ad market” and that “from September 2021 through May 2022, sports wagering operators in the U.S. spent an estimated $282 million” to promote their services on TV alone.

This huge influx of sports betting advertising, largely unfettered by government intervention, is suspected to have had severe effects on those who suffer from gambling disorders. According to the American Psychiatric Association, ‘gambling disorder’ is a psychiatric condition which “involves repeated, problem gambling behavior” (What is Gambling Disorder?, 2021). In 2021, the National Problem Gambling Helpline Network received 270,000 inquiries from those suffering from gambling addiction; an increase of 45% from the previous year (Hernandez,
Keith Whyte, the executive director of the National Council on Problem Gambling, stated: “We expect that there is a higher rate now of people who were in recovery that have been lured back or tempted back into betting again due to the massive volume of ads” (Hernandez, 2022). It has only been very recently that US lawmakers are beginning to take notice and take action of this advent; New York congressman Paul D. Tonko introduced the ‘Betting on Our Future’ act in February 2023, just prior to the much-anticipated annual Super Bowl football match, and stated that during the Super Bowl, “tens of millions will be bombarded by ad after ad from DraftKings, FanDuel and others promising so called ‘risk free’ or ‘no sweat’ bets in their ruthless pursuit to get new customers hooked on their products” (Tonko, 2023). Furthermore, the congressman emphasized the threatening nature of gambling advertisements “to individuals prone to addiction” (Tonko, 2023). The ‘Betting on Our Future Act’ was designed similarly to previous advertising legislation which severely limited the advertising of tobacco products in the US in order to curtail tobacco and nicotine addiction (Tonko, 2023).

At this point, it is important to touch upon the role that the AGA plays in online sports betting advertising. The AGA is a gambling industry association whose members include FanDuel, DraftKings, and BetMGM, among many other online sports gambling companies and casinos based in the US (American Gaming Association, 2019). Caesars Sportsbook is not officially a member of the AGA, yet they do claim to “proudly support and participate in industry-wide responsible gaming awareness events” that are “sponsored by the American Gaming Association” (Caesars Sportsbook, 2020). The AGA claims that their mission is to “Foster a policy and business environment where legal, regulated gaming thrives” (American Gaming Association, 2023a). As such, the AGA has what they refer to as the “Responsible Marketing Code for Sports Wagering” (American Gaming Association, 2023b). This code includes six tenets which the AGA and its members vow to stand by:

1. “Respecting the legal age for sports wagering”
2. “Limiting college and university advertising”
3. “Supporting responsible gaming”
4. “Controlling digital media and websites”
5. “Maintaining the code”
While the advertising practices of online sports betting companies do not face regulation at the federal level, and very little regulation at the state level, their advertising practices are regulated to some extent via their AGA memberships and associations.

3. Literature review
An essential starting point for the present study is previous research of gambling advertisements in general and of online sports betting advertisements in particular. This section will provide a look at several studies which have examined gambling advertisements from different perspectives, with various methodologies and theoretical frameworks.

3.1 Content of gambling advertisements
A study conducted by Griffiths and Lopez-Gonzalez (2018) analyzed 135 sports betting advertisements published by sports betting companies based in the UK and in Spain with the method of content analysis, and found that the sports betting advertisements were male dominated, showing “no interaction between women” (p. 9). The study also found that the sports betting advertisements typically represented bettors “staking small amounts of money with large potential returns” (Griffiths and Lopez-Gonzalez, 2018, p. 9).

Deans et al. (2016) conducted a study which aimed to identify the main appeal strategies used by Australian sports gambling companies in their advertisements. Of the 10 major appeal strategies that Deans et al. (2016) identified, “sports fan rituals and behaviours” was found to be the most prevalent, as it was identified in 78% of their sample of 85 sports betting advertisements (p. 5). The study also found friendship and bonding to be a characteristic appeal of Australian sports betting advertisements, as gambling was often depicted as a social activity. Finally, Deans et al. (2016) found that male characters were much more prevalent in the advertisements than female characters.

Pitt et al. (2018) explored the content of 91 Australian sports gambling advertisements in terms of their potential ability to captivate children and younger demographics through interpretive content analysis. The research of Pitt et al. (2018) found a multitude of so-called “attention strategies” in the analyzed sports betting advertisements, which are defined as “aspects in advertising material that “grab” the attention of audiences to try to ensure people take an interest
in the messages contained within” (p. 266). These attention strategies included the use of characters, the use of humor, the use of animation, and the use of celebrities in the sports betting advertisements, among others (Pitt et al., 2018). According to Pitt et al. (2018) these attention strategies “have been demonstrated in public health studies as being particularly appealing to children”, and therefore, “children who are fans of sport and actively watch televised sport may be additionally impacted due to their high levels of exposure to this advertising” (p. 271).

The research of Håkansson and Widinghoff (2019) sought to “describe the extent and content of gambling in television advertising” in Sweden using statistical analysis (p. 2). Their study found that the gambling advertisements that aired on Swedish television channels had a tendency to promote features which Håkansson and Widinghoff (2019) recognized as “risky gambling behaviour”, such as “the rapidity and ease of gambling”, and “giving an impression of gambling as being either free or possible to carry out without money or with monetary bonuses” (p. 4). Of the data that were analyzed, “sports-related gambling” advertisements were prominent, albeit less so than online casino advertisements (Håkansson and Widinghoff, 2019, p. 5).

The research presented in this section offers valuable and diverse perspectives on the content and narratives of gambling advertising in countries such as the UK, Spain, Australia, and Sweden, however there appears scant research conducted on gambling advertising in the United States. Building on the research cited above, the present study will attempt to pinpoint the most frequently-used narratives found in US sports betting advertisements and explain the ideological significance of those narratives in the context of a shared culture.

3.2 Audience perspectives
Hing et al. (2014) claim that their research was the “first empirical gambling advertising study to focus specifically on Internet gambling” (p. 406), and explored whether there was correlation between online gambling advertisements and increased gambling consumption in Australia through interviews with 50 internet gamblers. A relevant finding from interviews with participants was “numerous examples of being tempted by Internet promotions, with a proportion unable to resist triggered urges despite earlier decisions to curtail gambling” (Hing et al., 2014, p. 402). Additionally, Hing et al. (2014) found that “there was no strong evidence that advertising and promoting Internet gambling converts many non-gamblers to Internet gamblers”
Furthermore, no participants in the study were lured into gambling for the first time by gambling advertisements. However, Hing et al. (2014) admit that their study was limited by the size of the data that was analyzed, stating that the sample was “too small for results to be generalizable” (p. 406). In any case, the study conducted by Hing et al. (2014) stands as a compelling first examination of online gambling advertising.

McGee (2020) explored how online sports betting has become a normalized activity among young adult males in the UK due to the ubiquity of online sports betting advertisements. McGee (2020) conducted semi-structured interviews with 32 adult males between the ages of 18 and 35 years who were living in England and in Northern Ireland and self-identified as active sports gamblers. Additionally, each participant created a “gambling diary” for 30 days which provided the researcher “a source of reflective insight into individual gambling behaviours (including number of bets, time spent gambling, intended and actual expenditure, location and social context)” (McGee, 2020, p. 90). This study produced an array of results that illuminate the effects of online sports betting advertisements on audiences’ online sports betting habits, with particular focus on young adult males. First, for many participants, online sports betting became an activity indivisible from sports enjoyment; McGee (2020) stated: “Participants described how the experience of consuming sport has become entwined with gambling practices, with many attributing this to the ubiquitous visibility of gambling advertising”, and further that some participants noted that the “casual staking of money was vital to their enjoyment of ‘watching the game’” (p. 90). Participants also highlighted the role that mobile phones play in their sports betting habits, and “reported an increased inclination to engage with, and increased frequency of participation in, sports gambling via ‘faceless’ mobile app technologies” (McGee, 2020, p. 91). Another result from McGee’s (2020) study was the correlation between special promotions featured in online sports betting advertisements, such as “free bet” offers (p. 92) and increased online sports betting behavior. Finally, McGee’s (2020) study found “gambling-related harm” as a commonality in the group of participants, as their sports betting habits led to “financial precarity” and contributed to “strained personal and family relationships, conflicts with employers, mental health struggles and a mortgage default” (p. 92). While this study focused on the effects of online sports betting advertising on a very specific age and gender demographic in a particular geographic area, it nevertheless points to the rather troubling implications that online sports betting advertisements have on individual audience members.
Killick and Griffiths (2020) conducted a study on sports betting advertisements in the UK which focused on sports gambler’s perspectives on the sports betting advertisements. Killick and Griffiths (2020) conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with UK sports bettors and used thematic analysis to identify the dominant themes in the participants' attitudes toward sports betting advertisements. Their research found that “sports betting promotions minimized perceptions of risk and encouraged feelings of control, and participants acknowledged that these promotions influenced their overall gambling intentions” (Killick and Griffiths, 2020, p. 812). This finding is particularly salient as it suggests that there is a correlation between the narratives of sports betting advertisements (i.e., minimized perceptions of risk and encouraged feelings of control) and audiences’ readiness to gamble.

4. Theoretical framework
This section will outline the theoretical framework that will guide the analytical process in the present study. Then, semiotic analysis and Stuart Hall’s (1997) constructionist approach to representation will be described and argued for as an effective framework for analyzing the content of advertisements. Next, a second system of semiotic analysis called myth, as outlined by Roland Barthes (1982), will be presented. Finally, the American Dream is discussed as a mythical concept which will be instrumental to the analysis of the present study.

4.1 Semiology and the constructionist approach
Semiology will be a key theoretical foundation upon which the empirical data used in this study will be interpreted. The term semiology was coined and broadly defined by linguist Ferdinand de Saussure as “A science that studies the life of signs in society” (Saussure, 1960, cited in Hall, 1997, p. 20). Semiology asserts that “since all cultural objects convey meaning, and all cultural practices depend on meaning, they must make use of signs; and in so far as they do, they must work like language works, and be amenable to an analysis” (Hall, 1997, p. 21). This assertion means that visual data (images) operate in the same way as language, though instead of comprising linguistic components, they comprise visual signs, which can be read and analyzed as texts when identified and connected to their symbolic functions. Signs, in this case, are defined as “words, sounds or images which carry meaning” (Hall, 1997, p. 4). The semiotic theory that will be used in this study is that of representation, which is defined by Hall (1997) as, “the
production of meaning through language” (p. 2). Furthermore, Hall (1997) proposes that language is not restricted to written and spoken words, but encompasses “any sound, word, image or object which functions as a sign” (p. 5).

The specific theory of representation that will be of use in the present study is the constructionist approach which presumes “that neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning in language. Things don’t mean: we construct meaning, using representational systems – concepts and signs” (Hall, 1997, p. 11). Furthermore, the constructionist approach asserts that “meaning depends not on the material quality of the sign, but on its symbolic function” (Hall, 1997, p. 11).

The constructionist approach claims distinctiveness from two other approaches to representation. The first is the reflective approach, which presumes that “meaning is thought to lie in the object, person, idea or event in the real world” (Hall, 1997, p. 10). This approach assumes that words have fixed meanings that are dictated by their material attributes. The second approach is the intentional approach, which asserts that the meaning of a word is dictated solely by the author or speaker (Hall, 1997). Hall (1997) recognizes that although authors may, and often do, have “private intended meanings”, the intentionalist approach is an ultimately flawed one, because meanings “have to enter into the rules, codes and conventions of language to be shared and understood” (p. 11).

The constructionist approach, on the other hand, succeeds where the reflective and intentional approaches fail; it proposes that a word’s meaning is not dependent on its material attributes, and it recognizes that a word’s meaning can exist beyond the author or speaker’s intention. In this way, according to Hall (1997), the constructionist approach “recognizes this public, social character of language” (p. 11). This is why the constructionist approach to representation was chosen as the theoretical framework in the present study; advertisements are inherently characterized by their mediums as mass communications. They are not, for instance, private correspondences that occur between two individuals, but rather they are created to communicate meanings to large, public audiences. While the creators of advertisements may have a specific target audience that they wish to reach, advertisements must be analyzed as communications
which operate on larger systems of meaning that go beyond the material qualities of signs that appear in the advertisements. Furthermore, it cannot be assumed that the meanings of the signs in an advertisement are dependent solely on the author’s intention, as it is the audience's reception (i.e., whether or not they are persuaded) which determines the successfulness of an advertisement. Indeed, “Meaning has to be actively ‘read’ or ‘interpreted’”, according to Hall’s (1997) outline of the constructionist approach (p. 17).

One cannot invoke the constructionist approach to representation without considering the work of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who separated signs into two elements: signifier and signified, the former being the form or the material sign, and the latter being the mental concept or idea with which the form is associated (Hall, 1997). As the constructionist approach assumes that the meanings of language are never fully fixed, then they require “an active process of interpretation” (Hall, 1997, p. 17). Thus, the work of the constructionist approach involves interpreting signifiers to reveal their signifieds. This will be achieved in the present study by employing an array of analytical tools afforded by semiotic analysis.

4.2 Semiology and myth

In addition to Hall’s (1997) constructionist approach to representation, another theoretical approach that will be deployed in the present study is Roland Barthes’ concept of myth. Like the constructionist approach to representation, myth is rooted in semiotics. It was developed and outlined by Barthes in ‘Myth Today’, an essay featured in his book Mythologies. Barthes (1982) describes myth as “a second-order semiological system” (p. 99). What he meant by this was that myth can only be identified in an image after an initial semiotic accounting of it has been conducted, which he calls the “first system of signification” (Barthes, 1982, p. 100). In the present study, this first semiotic accounting will be conducted through the aforementioned constructionist approach (identifying the signifier and interpreting its signified in order to illustrate the whole sign). Barthes (1982) states, “That which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second” (p. 99). This duality of systems is pictured below in figure 1.
As previously stated and is shown in figure 1, the first system’s sign is a signifier in the second; in the second process of signification, this signifier is interpreted to reveal its signified, and the combination of these two is what Barthes refers to as myth. Barthes (1982) developed some helpful terms to describe the different elements in the rather complex system of myth. In the first semiological system, the sign (i.e., signifier + signified) is called “meaning” (Barthes, 1982, p. 102). In the second semiological system, (i.e., when the sign becomes a signifier), it is called “form” (Barthes, 1982, p. 102). Then, Barthes (1982) refers to the signified of the form as the “concept” (Barthes, 1982, p. 102). Finally, in order to avoid ambiguity, Barthes (1982) calls the association of form and concept, or the mythical sign, the “signification” (p. 102). The purpose of a second process of signification, or myth, is to provide a deeper semiotic analysis of the given image. On Barthes’ concept of myth, Hall (1997) states: “The first completed meaning functions as the signifier in the second stage of the representation process and, when linked with a wider theme by a reader, yields a second, more elaborate and ideologically framed message or meaning” (p. 24).

Myth is a fitting and complementary extension of the constructionist approach to representation; Barthes (1982) stated that “Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message” (pp. 93-94). Likewise, the constructionist approach asserts that “meaning depends not on the material quality of the sign, but on its symbolic function” (Hall, 1997, p. 11). Myth simultaneously resonates with and builds upon the constructionist approach to representation, and the two semiotic approaches will act as a logically ordered and cohesive theoretical framework in the analysis of advertisements created by FanDuel, DraftKings, BetMGM, and Caesar’s Sportsbook.
4.3 The American Dream

A theoretical concept that will be used in the analysis of the present study is the so-called ‘American Dream’. The American Dream is a concept which “encapsulates the desires of the average American for opportunity and advancement” (Duncan, 2014, p. 44). A conceptualization of the American Dream proposed by Hauhart and Sardoc (2021) is that it is an abstract individual aspiration which is primarily defined by two main driving forces: “upward economic and social mobility” (p. 9). This means that the average American who is considered to be ‘chasing’ the American Dream is driven by the desire to advance economically and socially. Upward economic mobility can be simply understood as attaining monetary wealth, while social mobility is synonymous with status, and is associated with “forms of social capital that “money can’t buy” such as respect, prestige, and esteem” (Hauhart and Sardoc, 2021, p. 10).

Underpinning these two forces is the idea that the American Dream is a goal that is attainable by anyone, and that everyone has equal opportunity to achieve it. This sentiment is so deeply ingrained in the American ethos that it is reflected in one of the most notable documents in US history. Duncan (2014) states that the American Dream was “first defined” in the 1776 US Declaration of Independence (p. 44) which stated that “… all men are created equal” and, “that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (National Archives, 2023). From this perspective, the American Dream suggests a certain degree of fluidity in an individual’s economic and social status; American society gives its people the innate ability to attain greater wealth and higher social status than the ones they are born with or currently have. The American Dream can therefore be understood as a mythical concept that is characterized by the American individual’s equal opportunity to ascend economically and socially, and ultimately, lead a successful life.

The American Dream is a concept that can be traced back to the very motivations for the foundation of the US. The first settlers who sailed from England to America in the 17th century and established what would become the United States of America did so to break free from the religious oppression, social constrainment, and economic limitations that they faced in England (Hauhart and Sardoc, 2021). The US was founded on aspirations of upward social and economic mobility and therefore, the American Dream exists as a fundamental characteristic of American culture and a potent philosophy driving American life. The present study shall endeavor to
present the enduring presence of the American Dream by demonstrating that its notions are still found in contemporary media such as online sports betting advertisements and that they are operationalized to both captivate and persuade audiences.

5. Methodology
The following section will describe the methods used and the steps taken to analyze the data in the present study.

5.1 Qualitative content analysis
The first method used to analyze the data in this study was qualitative content analysis. The method content analysis is defined by Krippendorff (2004) as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (p. 18). Though it was traditionally developed as a quantitative research method, Krippendorff notes that “quantification is not a defining criterion for content analysis” (p. 87). Thus, content analysis as a qualitative research method is defined by Drisko and Maschi (2015) as “a set of techniques for the systematic analysis of texts of many kinds, addressing not only manifest content but also the themes and core ideas found in texts as primary content” (p. 82). It is important to note that in this definition, “texts” is not limited to written or verbal language, but includes any form of communication, which in the case of the present study is TV advertisements created by online sports betting companies. The ‘qualitative’ dimension of qualitative content analysis infers that the relevant data cannot be properly analyzed from a purely quantitative perspective, but requires an interpretive lens to be meaningfully examined.

5.1.1 Components of qualitative content analysis
According to Krippendorff (2004), content analysis can be understood as a method which comprises the following 6 components:

1. “Unitizing”
2. “Sampling”
3. “Recording/coding”
4. “Reducing data to manageable representations”
5. “Abductively inferring contextual phenomena”
6. “Narrating the answer to the research question” (p. 83).
The first component, unitizing, “is the systematic distinguishing of segments” (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 83). In other words, this is the process in which the data is separated into individual segments which are then analyzed independently from one another. In the present study, each video advertisement is considered one unit.

The second component is sampling, and is the process by which the scope of the data is selected. Krippendorff (2004) suggests that researchers follow “sampling plans” (p. 83) in order to achieve this, and the present study deployed what Drisko and Maschi (2015) refer to as iterative sampling. The sampling process is discussed in greater detail in section 5.3.

The third component of content analysis is to develop and define the coding categories that the data will be analyzed under the lens of. The coding categories in the present study were developed with two influencing factors; first, the coding categories are driven by the research question, as recommended by Rose (2016). In the present study, RQ1 seeks to identify the prevailing narratives in US online sports betting advertisements. Therefore, the coding categories have been devised with the intent of yielding results of different narratives used in the advertisements, as opposed to analyzing the more formal qualities of the advertisements such as lighting, camera angles, music, etc.. The second factor in mind when developing the coding categories for this content analysis was referring to previous research of gambling advertisements and online sports betting advertisements. Krippendorff (2004) suggests this as a strategy, stating that the researcher may “draw from available literature on or theories of the context of the analysis” when developing categories for research (p. 352). Namely, the content analysis conducted by Griffiths and Lopez-Gonzalez (2018) acted as an instrumental inspiration for the categories devised in the content analysis conducted in the present study.

The fourth component of content analysis is reducing the data, which Krippendorff (2004) states “serves analysts' need for efficient representations” (p. 84). In the context of qualitative content analysis, Krippendorff (2004) states that “rearticulations and summaries” is an effective approach to reducing data, elaborating that doing so will “reduce the diversity of text to what matters” (p. 85).
Krippendorff’s (2004) fifth component of content analysis is “abductively inferring contextual phenomena,” (p. 83) and is the stage which “moves an analysis outside the data. It bridges the gap between descriptive accounts of texts and what they mean, refer to, entail, provoke, or cause” (p. 85). Section 7.2 draws inferences of potential explanations for why the most certain narratives found in the data were used frequently by the online sports betting companies. Additionally, a subsample of online sports betting advertisements that were coded as corresponding to the most frequently occurring coding categories are analyzed with semiotic analysis to demonstrate how the advertisements draw on broader ideologies. This will provide more comprehensive and theoretically-founded inferences of the data.

Finally, the last component of content analysis is “narrating the answer to the research question” (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 83). This final step will summarize the results of the content analysis and explain their practical implications. Krippendorff (2004) explains that this step “amounts to the researchers' making their results comprehensible to others” (p. 85). Drisko and Maschi (2015) assert that “a description of patterns or regularities found in the data is the goal of qualitative content analysis” (p. 86), and this is precisely what the present study aims to do by following Krippendorff’s (2004) procedural approach to content analysis.

Qualitative content analysis was chosen as the method for the first phase of the present study’s analysis because of its ability to identify patterns in data sets. Drisko and Maschi (2015) assert that “a description of patterns or regularities found in the data is the goal of qualitative content analysis” (p. 86), and one of the main goals of the present study is to identify trends in the advertising narratives employed by FanDuel, DraftKings, Caesars Sportsbook, and BetMGM in order to make sense of the strategies that the companies use to persuade individuals to participate in online sports betting. Thus, the method of qualitative content analysis was chosen over other methods, such as textual analysis, because although it deals with qualitative data, content analysis inherently produces results that reveal trends in data sets.

5.1.2 Research paradigm of qualitative content analysis
The method of qualitative content analysis makes use of a constructivist epistemology (Drisko and Maschi, 2015; Mayring, 2014). Scholars of qualitative content analysis frequently point to the method’s hermeneutic qualities, i.e, its position as an interpretive method. Krippendorff
(2004) states that qualitative content analysts find themselves in a “hermeneutic circle”, stating that qualitative researchers “acknowledge the open-ended and always tentative nature of text interpretation” (pp. 87-88). Likewise, Drisko and Maschi (2015) state that “meaningful interpretations of latent and contextualized data is central to qualitative content analysis” (p. 91). As qualitative content analysis deals with qualitative data, interpretation stands as a component which is inseparable from the method.

Mayring (2014) states that the “hermeneutical position, embedded within a constructivist theory, tries to understand the meaning of the text as interaction between the preconceptions of the reader and the intentions of the text producer” (p. 7). However, while Mayring (2014) asserts that “qualitative content analysis remains interpretation”, they acknowledge that the qualitative content analyst still finds themselves operating within strict protocols which guide that interpretation, stating that they must interpret data “within the framework of content-analytical rules” (p. 30). The DNA of the constructivist epistemology can therefore be traced to the research paradigm of interpretivism. Blaikie and Priest (2017) state that one of the main characteristics of interpretivism is that it “aims to establish an objective science of the subjective; producing verifiable knowledge of the meanings that constitute the social world” (p. 101). Likewise, the interpretivist research paradigm mainly uses an abductive logic of inquiry which, according to Blaikie and Priest (2017), aims to “generate social scientific understanding and explanations based on everyday concepts and meanings” (p. 43). This is in-line with the fifth component of Krippendorff’s (2004) content analysis outline, “Abductively inferring contextual phenomena” (p. 83). As qualitative content analysis has hermeneutic qualities and uses an abductive logic of inquiry, the research paradigm of interpretivism was adopted for the use of qualitative content analysis.

5.2 Semiotic analysis

The next method that will be employed in the present study is semiotic analysis. This section will provide an overview of how semiotic analysis will be operationalized in the present study and present the research paradigm that was adopted for semiotic analysis.
5.2.1 Semiotic analysis operationalized

Semiotic analysis is a prominently-used method for the analysis of visual images. Rose (2016) states that the prominence of semiology is due to that it “confronts the question of how images make meanings head on” and further, that it “offers a very full box of analytical tools for taking an image apart and tracing how it works in relation to broader systems of meaning” (p. 106). Semiotic analysis is operationalized in the present study through the application of Hall’s (1997) constructionist approach to representation and Barthes’ (1982) second-order semiological system of myth. While both concepts are based in semiotic theory, they also provide a methodological approach to the analysis of visual data. A subsample of the data analyzed with qualitative content analysis was generated and analyzed in the semiotic tradition, using first, the constructionist approach and second, the mythical system. This entailed multiple viewings of each advertisement in the subsample, taking note of their signs through the constructionist approach, which, as previously stated, involves identifying signs in the advertisement and then stratifying those signs into their signifiers and signifieds. This process allowed for the deconstruction of the advertisements, pinpointing their individual visual components and delineating their symbolic meanings. Then, in the tradition of Barthes’ (1982) myth, the sum of the signs identified in each advertisement were analyzed as single signifiers. This process synthesized the advertisements in their totalities, and connected them to broader systems of meaning, such as the American Dream.

5.2.2 Research paradigm of semiotic analysis

Where the use of qualitative content analysis in the present study adopted the interpretivist paradigm, the use of semiotic analysis required the adoption of a different research paradigm. For semiotic analysis, the research paradigm of critical realism was employed. Blaikie and Priest (2017) describe critical realism as a paradigm which comprises three phases: “[establishing] a regularity”, “[proposing] an explanatory mechanism”, and “[looking] for evidence of its existence” (p. 160). The regularity, in the case of the present study, is online sports betting advertisements. It has been repeatedly demonstrated in this study that online sports betting advertisements exist, are pervasive, and largely unregulated. Furthermore, the dual-system semiotic analysis of advertisements outlined in the previous section presupposes that advertisements operate on broader ideologies in order to persuade audiences. These ideologies, then, might be what is considered the explanatory mechanisms put forth by the critical realist paradigm. Then, the ideologies which advertisements operate on are uncovered through the
systematic analysis afforded by semiotics. Thus, the three phases of Blaikie and Priest’s (2017) outline of the critical realist paradigm are fulfilled.

5.3 Empirical data

The empirical data that was analyzed in the present study was TV video advertisements published by the US-based online sports betting companies FanDuel, DraftKings, Caesars Sportsbook, and BetMGM. The video advertisements were collected from iSpot.tv, an extensive online database for TV advertisements. Established in 2012 and self-described as “the world’s only complete TV ad catalog”, iSpot.tv is a reliable repository for video advertisements that have aired on American television over the past decade (About iSpot, n.d.).

Advertisements published by FanDuel, DraftKings, Caesars Sportsbook, and BetMGM were chosen for this study because together, the four online sports betting companies control nearly the entire online sports betting market in the US (Mulheir, 2023). On data samples, Drisko and Maschi (2015) state that they “must be adequate to the exploration of the research question” (p. 97). With massive advertising budgets, partnerships with major sports leagues such as the NFL, and collectively comprising nearly the entire market share of online sports betting in the US, FanDuel, DraftKings, Caesars Sportsbook and BetMGM appeared to be the companies that are most representative of the US online sports betting advertising sector as a whole, and thus would be the best companies to examine in relation to the present study’s research questions.

As previously stated in section 6.1.1, the data was sampled through an iterative sampling plan. This means that the sampling process was flexible, and was “co-occurring with data collection and data analysis” (Drisko and Maschi, 2015, p. 96). The initial sampling phase involved gathering advertisements created by each of the four online sports betting companies that were recently published on iSpot.tv, which ranged between December 2021 and April 2023. An even amount of advertisements from each company (10 advertisements, 40 in total) were sampled to ensure that the results of the qualitative content analysis would not be partial to any of the four companies.

After the qualitative content analysis was conducted, a subsample of four advertisements (one from each of the online sports betting companies) was generated and each advertisement was
analyzed through semiotic analysis with the constructionist and mythical approaches. The advertisements that comprise the subsample are those which were coded as including the most commonly occurring narratives found in the data. A total of four advertisements were chosen for this phase of the analysis for several reasons; first, due to the scope of the study and time limitations, only a relatively small number of advertisements could be subjected to in-depth semiotic analysis occurring at two levels. Second, four advertisements were chosen in an effort to provide a semiotic analysis and varying perspectives of each online sports betting company analyzed in the first phase of the data analysis process (qualitative content analysis).

5.4 Reflection on methodology

As has been illustrated, the two methods driving the analysis in the present study are qualitative content analysis and semiotic analysis. This is a form of methodological triangulation, which is defined by Denzin (2009) as “the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon” (p. 297). Denzin (2009) elaborates on this research strategy, advocating for the use of “dissimilar methods” and stating that “the flaws of one method are often the strengths of another, and by combining methods, observers can achieve the best of each, while overcoming their unique deficiencies” (p. 308). The present study used two methods which may certainly be considered dissimilar, yet it is for this reason why the two methods were picked, and why they complement each other. Content analysis is a method that is encompassing and was instrumental in identifying trends in and making sense of the main sample of 40 advertisements that were analyzed. As such, it yielded broad, quantitative results concerning the most commonly used narratives by the online sports betting companies. On the other hand, semiotic analysis allowed for a subsample of the data to be analyzed with an intensiveness and thorough frame-for-frame critique that is not necessarily afforded by content analysis. Furthermore, the application of content analysis actually guided the use of semiotic analysis in the present study; by coding each of the 40 advertisements in the data sample through content analysis, the most prominent trends were identified, and advertisements which corresponded to these trends were then examined under the lens of semiotics. Thus the two methods, though arguably dissimilar and not commonly used together, provided a synergetic, complementary, and multifaceted approach to analyzing online sports betting advertisements.
The use of a methodological triangulation research strategy also plays a role in the validity of the results and was adopted as an efficient way to approach the research questions presented in the present study. Layder (2013) asserts that using multiple methods in qualitative research “allows the researcher to produce a dense and comprehensive coverage of the data”, and thus enhance the validity of the results (pp. 91-92). Though both methods chosen for this study are equipped to handle qualitative data, they produce different types of results. As its purpose is to identify trends in qualitative data, qualitative content analysis inherently yields quantitative results; in the case of the present study, qualitative content analysis was deployed to ascertain the frequency of certain narratives in a collection of US online sports betting advertisements. Semiotic analysis, however, elaborated on the results produced by qualitative content analysis to show how the most frequently occurring narratives were tangibly operationalized as persuasive messages by the online sports betting companies. Moreover, semiotic analysis allowed for the advertisements to be thoroughly dissected and then related to broader systems of meaning. These different types of results yielded by qualitative content analysis and semiotic analysis ultimately fulfill the research questions presented in the present study; whereas RQ1 aimed to identify the most commonly occurring narratives in the data sample, RQ2 aimed to interpret the uses of those narratives in an effort to grasp their ideological implications.

5.4.1 Limitations

While the previous subsection showed that the use of qualitative content analysis and semiotic analysis under the umbrella of a methods triangulation strategy was advantageous to this study, it was not without its limitations. One practical disadvantage that cropped up during the research was that content analysis and semiotic analysis are equipped to handle different sized data sets. However, this asymmetry in the methods was ameliorated through the creation of two data samples, outlined in section 5.3; the main sample, which was an appropriate size for qualitative content analysis, and the subsample, which was an appropriate size for in-depth semiotic analysis.

It is also important to note that there are limitations voiced by critics of semiotic analysis which concern the “representativeness and replicability of its analyses” (Rose, 2016, p. 143). The former limitation has to do with a semiologist’s choice of data, and whether it is truly representative of the phenomenon which they are attempting to examine. This limitation has
been addressed and dealt with in the previous subsection; the results of the qualitative content analysis conducted in the present study guided the creation of the subsample analyzed with semiotic analysis. Thus, the advertisements that were subjected to semiotic analysis in the present study are representative of the most frequently occurring narratives found in the main data sample by virtue of the rigorous coding process afforded by qualitative content analysis, and as stated, this connection between the two methods has kept the analyses framed within the present study’s research questions. The latter limitation, i.e., that of replicability, pertains to whether another researcher, using the same method and theoretical framework, would draw the same conclusions about the data as the semiologist did. The semiotic analyses conducted in the present study do not aim to “offer empirical generalizations about semiology” (Rose, 2016, p. 143), but rather, aim to provide some possible interpretations of the advertisements. Nevertheless, a conscious effort has been undertaken in the present study to clearly and carefully describe how each theoretically informed semiotic deduction was reached so that the interpretations may be traced back to the empirical data by way of semiotic theory.

6. Ethical considerations

As previously stated, the empirical data analyzed in the present study consists of advertisements that originally aired on US television and were accessed from iSpot.tv, a database for TV advertisements that is publicly accessible via the web. As such, no individuals participated in the present study, meaning that no private or personal data belonging to any individual was collected, analyzed, shared, or otherwise jeopardized throughout the present study’s development.

Although data belonging to individuals was not collected and handled, research guidelines as delineated by the Swedish Research Council were taken into account and adamantly respected throughout the research process. The Swedish Research Council (2017) warns against “research misconduct”, which includes data falsification, plagiarism of others’ work, and theft of others’ ideas, among other forms of “reprehensible behaviour” (p. 63). In the present study, measures were taken to ensure that all forms of research misconduct were avoided and that all of the ideas, concepts, and deductions presented are wholly original unless otherwise stated. All previously developed formulations that are presented in this study have been correctly cited and attributed to their respective authors per APA 7 guidelines. Additionally, in an effort to maintain transparency
in the research conducted in the present study, all of the URLs to the advertisements accessed via iSpot.tv have been provided in the appendix so that the reader may have direct access to the empirical data sample in its entirety.

7. Presentation and analysis of results

The following section will apply the theories and methods of qualitative content analysis and semiotic analysis put forth in the previous sections in relation to the advertisements published by FanDuel, DraftKings, Caesars Sportsbook, and BetMGM.

7.1 Qualitative content analysis results

In this section, the coding categories that were developed for the qualitative content analysis of the data in the present study will be discussed. The coding categories were developed in the initial stages of analyzing the advertisements through familiarization with the data. In other words, the coding categories listed below reflect the prominent themes identified in the advertisements after a preliminary look at the data. Additionally, and as stated in section 5.1.1, the coding categories were also developed with two criteria in mind (i.e., that they are driven by the research question and are drawn from previous literature on the research topic). Thus, the following coding categories were developed and consist of a combination of both novel and previously developed categories. Coding categories 1-3 listed below were developed by Griffiths and Lopez-Gonzalez (2018) while categories 4-9 are novel and developed for this study.

1. Risky behaviors- Advertisements that represent sports betting with risky behaviors such as alcohol consumption and eating unhealthy food (Griffiths and Lopez-Gonzalez, 2018).

2. Sports fan identity- This category includes advertisements that depict sports fans (i.e., individuals wearing specific sports team colors/jerseys, individuals celebrating goals, and other verbal and visual cues that suggest support for sports teams) (Griffiths and Lopez-Gonzalez, 2018).

3. Online betting- Advertisements that mention sports betting through online means, such as via their mobile applications and their websites (Griffiths and Lopez-Gonzalez, 2018).

4. Bet forgiveness- This category includes any advertisements which offer audiences forgiveness for bets (i.e., money back from any lost bets).

5. Ease of betting- Any advertisements that made specific mention of the simplicity of using their online sports betting service. This includes both temporal simplicity (the time it
takes to place a bet/register for an account) and spatial simplicity (mentions of where users can use their service from).

6. \textit{Use of humor}- Advertisements that used any kind of comedic visuals and/or dialogue in relation to the online sports betting service.

7. \textit{Featuring of celebrities}- This category includes any celebrity appearances in the advertisements.

8. \textit{Use of promotions}- this category includes any promotional content in the advertisements, such as offering audiences free bets for signing up or offering audiences chances to win special prizes for using their services.

9. \textit{Problem gambling support}- While every advertisement analyzed in the present study includes a responsible gaming message, per the AGA’s Responsible Marketing Code for Sports Wagering (discussed in section 2.2), this category includes any additional messages in the advertisements that discourage excessive gambling or offer any additional support for those who struggle with problem gambling. This category was included to identify if, and to what extent, online sports betting companies offer extra support for problem gamblers aside from AGA regulation.

Each advertisement was analyzed according to the coding categories listed above, and the results are listed below in figure 2. The coding categories were not mutually exclusive, and therefore the advertisements could be coded as belonging to several categories at once.

\textit{Table 1. Qualitative content analysis results}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Amount (percentage of total sample)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online betting</td>
<td>38 (95%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Featuring celebrities</td>
<td>35 (87.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of humor</td>
<td>28 (70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports fan identity</td>
<td>26 (65%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of promotions</td>
<td>22 (55%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risky behaviors</td>
<td>12 (30%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ease of betting 9 (22.5%)
Bet forgiveness 7 (17.5%)
Problem gambling support 1 (2.5%)

Note. Coding results.

The two most prominent themes that appeared in the online sports betting advertisements analyzed correspond to coding categories 3 (online betting) and 7 (featuring of celebrities). Of the total sample, 38 advertisements (95%) included visual and/or verbal depictions of online betting. These advertisements largely depicted online sports betting mobile platforms and promoted the companies’ respective sports betting smartphone applications. Additionally, 35 advertisements (87.5%) included celebrities that either advocated for sports betting or were depicted using the sports betting services. The prominence of these narratives may be traced back to the myth of the American Dream as outlined in section 4.3. The celebrities featured in the advertisements, which include Hollywood actors and retired professional athletes, may be interpreted as individuals who achieved the American Dream; considering the immense salaries that are typically enjoyed by Hollywood actors and professional athletes in the US, they represent upward economic mobility. Additionally, their existence as celebrities alludes to high social status (i.e., upward social mobility). As stated in section 4.3, the American Dream is underpinned by the precept that it can be achieved by any American individual. This sentiment is identified in the prominence of the online betting narrative and staunch promotion of the mobile betting platforms; the Pew Research Center (2021) found that about 85% of American adults own and regularly use smartphone devices. Thus, like the American Dream, the services offered by the online sports betting companies are available to the vast majority of American audience members. Specific examples of the notions of the American Dream found in the advertisements are discussed in greater detail in the coming subsections.

As stated in section 4.1, the ultimate goal of qualitative content analysis is to identify “patterns or regularities” in the data (Drisko and Maschi, 2015, p. 86), and some patterns in the co-occurrence of certain narratives cropped up during the coding process. For instance, advertisements that were coded to have employed humor also included celebrity feature; of the 35 advertisements that were coded with celebrity feature, 25 of them (about 71%) were coded to have included the use of humor. This is perhaps due to the specific celebrity spokespeople that represented the
online sports betting companies; celebrities known for their work in comedy, such as Kevin Hart, Jamie Foxx, J.B. Smoove, and Patton Oswalt were among those who appeared in the advertisements and were shown using or advocating for the use of the services offered by the four online sports betting companies. In doing so, these celebrities adopted comedic roles by either appearing in humorous situations or making humorous quips during the advertisements. Another trend of narrative co-occurrence that appeared during the coding process was that of sports fan identity, risky behaviors, and use of humor. Of the 12 advertisements that were coded to have included risky behaviors, six of them (50%) were also coded to have included both sports fan identity as well as the use of humor. The advertisements that were coded to include these three narratives were set in situations such as sports bars and sports-viewing parties, where characters were depicted watching and/or wagering on sports matches while drinking alcoholic beverages or eating unhealthy ‘party foods’. These advertisements also used humor and took lighthearted approaches to the act of sports betting.

In following Krippendorff’s (2004) theoretical framework of content analysis, the research question that drove this content analysis (RQ1) must be answered. Based on the above coding process, it can be surmised that US online sports betting companies rely chiefly on pushing the narrative of the ‘online’ nature of their services. To a slightly lesser but still significant extent, the online betting companies analyzed in this study tend to capitalize on celebrity features in their advertisements. The next subsection will attempt to decode a subsample of advertisements which employed these prominently-used narratives through semiotic analysis and the theoretical frameworks of representation and myth to reveal their ideological significance.

7.2 Semiotic analysis

The following section contains semiotic analyses of four online sports betting advertisements which, through qualitative content analysis, employed what were found to be the most common narratives in the data sample (online betting and celebrity feature). Hall’s (1997) constructionist approach as the first-order semiological system will be applied, will be followed by the application of Barthes’ (1982) second-order semiological system, in which the advertisements in their entirety will be analyzed as a single sign and connected to the broader ideologies in which they operate. This section will conclude with a summary and comparison of the semiotic analyses of the advertisements.
7.2.1 FanDuel

The advertisement created by FanDuel that was analyzed with the constructionist approach and mythical approach is titled “Third Inning” and was published on 4 April, 2023. The advertisement contains both an online betting narrative, as it features the FanDuel application operating on several mobile devices throughout the advertisement, as well as a celebrity feature, as it features US television sports commentator Lisa Kerney. The advertisement depicts a young male adult in a sports bar winning a bet via FanDuel’s mobile application, who is then launched into an interview with Lisa Kerney. She asks him, “What are you feeling right now?” (FanDuel, 2023). The bet-winner then replies “Lisa, I haven’t been this happy since the second inning.” (FanDuel, 2023). The advertisement then presents a special promotion, and concludes with a panel showing the FanDuel logo side-by-side with the Major League Baseball (MLB) logo, and underneath, a line of small text reads, “Official partner of Major League Baseball” (FanDuel, 2023).

The narratives of online betting and celebrity feature are introduced very immediately, as the advertisement’s ‘protagonist’ is depicted winning a bet on his mobile device and Lisa Kerney appears just two seconds into the 15-second advertisement. Screenshots of this sequence are shown below in figures 2, 3 and 4:

*Figure 2. Winning bet*

![Winning bet](image)

*Note. Protagonist winning the bet.*
A multitude of signifiers can already be identified in these three frames alone but what appear to be the most outstanding signifiers are the protagonist’s shocked expression upon winning the bet and his mobile device in the center of the frame in figure 2, the congratulatory ‘fist-bump’ between the protagonist and a faceless bar patron in figure 3, and finally, the appearance of Lisa Kerney and the sudden shift to an interview dynamic in figure 4.

In Figure 2, there is a connection between the protagonist’s excited expression and the mobile device he is holding as both appear at the very center of the frame. On semiotic analysis, Rose
(2016) states that advertisements can “depend on signs of humans that symbolise particular qualities to their audience. These qualities - these signifieds - are shifted in the advertisement from the human signifiers and onto the product the advert is trying to sell” (p. 115). With this in mind, it is important to carefully deconstruct the protagonist, as shown in figures 2, 3, and 4, as a sign. He appears to be a young adult male of average build, dressed semi-casually, and holding a mobile device. These signifieds represent the protagonist as an ordinary young man. Upon winning the bet, his facial expression changes to a look of excitement in figure 4 and he engages in a celebratory fist-bump. In figure 4, the protagonist enters into an interview dynamic with Lisa Kerney. His presence is further altered by the addition of a white towel draped over his shoulder and he is wearing a headset. Instantly, the protagonist suddenly adopts the role of a professional athlete who just gave a successful performance. To illustrate this, figure 5 is a screenshot taken from a post-game interview with one of the US’s most celebrated athletes, Michael Jordan, in 1992.

*Figure 5. Jordan interview*

![Jordan Interview](image_url)

*Note. Post-game interview.*

In figure 5, the interviewer is questioning Jordan (on the left side of the frame) about his recent success in a professional basketball match versus the Portland Trail Blazers (MJ23 His Airness Forever, 2018). As can be gleaned from the image, Jordan is wearing a very similar headset to that of the protagonist in FanDuel’s advertisement, and this type of post-game interview is a typical featurette of televised professional sports matches. Thus upon winning the bet, the protagonist assumes the role of a successful athlete and stands on the shoulders of US sports giants such as Jordan because he used FanDuels online sports betting service. This shift from
ordinary to extraordinary in the advertisement is suggestive of the experience that one can have of FanDuel’s service: one winning bet is all that stands between ordinary individuals and the success and celebrity typically enjoyed by professional athletes.

In returning to the constructionist approach, the signifiers are the protagonist’s average build and his semi-casual clothes. The signified, then, is a sense of ordinariness about the protagonist. Thus the sign is an ordinary adult male. This sign changes suddenly, when the ordinary adult male wins a bet with FanDuel’s service and accrues new signifiers (the towel and the headset) which, according to the constructionist approach, are equipped with their own signifieds. No longer is the protagonist an ordinary adult male, but he takes the role of a successful athlete whose success is of such importance that it merits an interview with acclaimed sportscaster Lisa Kerney.

It is also worth noting the sheer rapidity of this sequence; it occurs during the first seven seconds of the 15-second advertisement. The speed at which the protagonist is elevated from ordinary to celebrity is perhaps telling of how FanDuel attempts to present their service to audiences, that they too can hope to experience such a meteoric rise to fame and success from placing a single bet with FanDuel. Additionally, the protagonist tells Kerney that he hasn’t felt that happy since “the second inning” (FanDuel, 2023). A typical professional baseball match is divided into nine periods, called innings, and has a duration of about two hours and 45 minutes (Skiver, 2023). Thus the dialogue suggests that the protagonist won a similar bet just minutes before, during the second inning, and this points to the frequency of achieving success through their mobile application. Therefore, FanDuel’s advertisement promises both rapidity and frequency in winning, which in turn, can heighten ordinary individuals to the status of professional athletes. This message is solidified by the frame which succeeds the interview sequence, shown in figure 6:
In figure 6, the advertisement returns to the sports bar where the protagonist was first shown (see figures 3 and 4) and atop the bar is a banner that states: “Every at bat is a chance to win big” (FanDuel, 2023). The phrase “at bat” refers to every time that a baseball player stands at home plate and hits a baseball in an attempt to score a point for their team, and comprises the main action occurring in all baseball matches. The frame shown in figure 6 therefore reinforces the speed and frequency at which prospective FanDuel users can achieve success.

Figures 7 and 8 below are screenshots of the final two frames of FanDuel’s advertisement.

Figure 7. Promotional frame

Note. Bonus bets promotion.
Figure 8. Final frame

Note. Advertisement’s last frame.

Figure 8 once again employs the online betting narrative by depicting the FanDuel application operating on a mobile device, and also includes a new dimension by offering new customers a vague promotion which they refer to as a “no sweat first bet” (FanDuel, 2023). In figure 9, the FanDuel logo is presented side-by-side with the MLB logo and includes a subtitle which states: “Official partner of Major League Baseball” (FanDuel, 2023). These two frames will be discussed in greater detail in the mythical analysis of FanDuel’s advertisement in the next section.

7.2.2 FanDuel’s myth

By interpreting FanDuel’s protagonist as two separate signs (i.e., his ordinary version before he wins the bet, and his celebrity-athlete version after he wins the bet) through the constructionist approach, then both signs must be considered signifiers in the mythical approach. Additionally, Lisa Kerney (see figure 4) and the texts that appear in the advertisement (see figures 6, 7, and 8) must also be considered signifiers which help to comprise FanDuel’s myth.

The myth that FanDuel creates for its brand and its service in this advertisement is one of riskfree fame, success, and celebrity. By depicting the protagonist’s rise from ordinary to celebrity in such rapidity, FanDuel constructs a fantasy in which the hard work and perseverance that actual successful athletes must endure, before they arrive to the point where they find themselves in such celebrity situations as being interviewed by sportscaster Lisa Kerney, is mitigated. Thus a slightly manipulated form of the American Dream begins to take shape; while winning a bet is inherently associated with the attainment of wealth (i.e., upward economic mobility), FanDuel
also presents their service as a means for upward social mobility by alluding that it can give an ordinary individual, such as the protagonist in the advertisement, the opportunity to be interviewed by an acclaimed sportscaster. Though this myth of the American Dream is manipulated by the omission of the hard work that is typically associated with achieving it. The text in figure 6 communicates that such opportunities for instant fame and success or, achieving the American Dream, are virtually infinite; they are as many opportunities as there are ‘at bats’ in a baseball game. The advertisement then introduces a risk-free promotion (see figure 8).

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the phrase “no sweat” is an idiom used in relation to a task that “will not be difficult or cause problems” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Again, the simplicity of achieving fame and success is underpinned in the advertisement through this promotion. Finally, the advertisement concludes after FanDuel announces itself as the official partner of the MLB, one of the largest professional sports leagues in the US. It is one of the few organizations that has the power to assign athletic fame and success to individuals by recruiting them as professional athletes. By linking their brand with the MLB, it may be argued that FanDuel posits itself as a similar authority who can bestow fame and success onto individuals.

FanDuel’s “Third Inning” constructs a myth of online sports betting which subverts the ideology of achieving fame and success through hard work, and thereby presents what could be interpreted as a manipulated version of the American Dream; the protagonists’ winning bet both earns him money (upward economic mobility) and places him in an interview with an acclaimed sportscaster (upward social mobility). The signification, or Barthes’ (1982) mythical sign, is of FanDuel’s online sports betting service which promises audience instant access to the American Dream without the hard work.

7.3.1 DraftKings

The advertisement created by DraftKings that was analyzed with the constructionist and mythical approaches is titled “Tournament Excitement” and was published on 14 March 2023. The advertisement is 28 seconds long, features former college basketball and NBA player JJ Reddick, and promotes the DraftKings mobile sports betting application. The advertisement consists of Reddick showcasing his athletic abilities by performing various basketball-related stunts. During this sequence, Reddick narrates the advertisement by boasting about his successful career in college basketball in the US, stating that he scored “a record-breaking 457 buckets, to be exact”
Reddick then addresses the audience stating, “And with my new team, DraftKings Sportsbook, you can put up big numbers too” (DraftKings, 2023). A panel that presents a promotion in which new users can “Bet $5 to get $200 in bonus bets instantly” on the DraftKings mobile application appears, and the advertisement concludes with Reddick performing more basketball tricks, as he narrates: “Action so good, why bet college basketball anywhere else” (DraftKings, 2023).

Although DraftKings’ “Tournament Excitement” advertisement features only one character (Reddick) in a single setting, it can nevertheless be subjected to semiotic analysis and the constructionist approach. The first signs that are presented in the advertisement are Reddick performing basketball stunts (see figures 9 and 10) and Reddick addressing the advertisement’s audience (see figure 11).

*Figure 9. Reddick's performance*

![Reddick performing a lay up](image1.png)

*Note.* Reddick performing a lay up.

*Figure 10. Reddick scoring a point*

![Upward angle of hoop](image2.png)

*Note.* Upward angle of hoop.
Figure 11. Reddick addressing the audience

Note. Reddick holding the basketball and speaking to the audience. This sequence comprises the first 15 seconds of the advertisement and offers a small number of visual signs which, from the perspective of the constructionist approach, interact curiously with Reddick’s narrative monologue. To analyze Reddick as a sign in the advertisement, his signifiers may be broken down to the actions he performs (i.e., the basketball tricks) and his physical appearance. Reddick is depicted performing a multitude of basketball stunts such as scoring points from a distance, scoring points while close to the basketball hoop, and meticulous dribbling drills. These signifiers may be interpreted as representing the breadth of Reddick’s basketball abilities. Rather than showing Reddick performing any single basketball-related skill, he is depicted as a master of the sport, a sentiment that is echoed in his voiceover when he mentions his “record-breaking” career in college (DraftKings, 2023). It is also worth noting that at no point in the advertisement is Reddick without a basketball, whether performing stunts such as in figure 9 and 10, nor while he’s standing still such as in figure 11. DraftKings’ advertisement therefore can be seen as attempting to synonymize basketball talent with Reddick.

The next signifier that must be interpreted is the jacket that Reddick is wearing, which is equipped with its own cultural significance; often called a ‘letterman’ or ‘varsity’ jacket, the style of jacket that is characterized by stripes on the collar, hem, and sleeves have a long history that dates back to the 1890s, when early versions of them were first worn by “Ivy League athletes” in the US (Waters, 2022). This suggests some degree of appropriation on behalf of DraftKings; the Ivy League was originally an athletic conference held by a select few universities in the
northeastern US. Today, these universities, which include Harvard, Princeton, and Yale, among others, are associated with academic and social cachet, and are consistently listed among the top-ranked universities in the world (U.S. News Staff, 2022). Though Reddick did not play basketball for an Ivy League college, his varsity jacket in DraftKings’ advertisement may be interpreted as carrying signifieds of first, athleticism, and second, the collegial superiority often associated with the Ivy League. Additionally, Reddick’s jacket features the DraftKings logo on the left breast, where a team logo would typically be found.

In this subsection, Reddick has been interpreted as carrying the signifieds of basketball expertise, athleticism, and appropriated collegial superiority through his signifieds which included performing basketball stunts and his physical appearance.

7.3.2 DraftKings’ myth

The sign of Reddick identified through the constructionist approach in DraftKings’ “Tournament Excitement” advertisement was interpreted to be equipped with meanings of basketball talent, athleticism, and collegial superiority. The following subsection interprets this sign as a signifier using Barthes’ (1982) approach to myth, and proposes that in this advertisement, DraftKings posits their service as a way of achieving the American Dream by conflating sports betting with college basketball.

In order to demonstrate DraftKings’ construction of the myth of the American Dream, Reddick must be analyzed as a signifier in relation to the verbal elements of the advertisement, with focus on a particular segment of Reddick’s narration. After he touts his “record-breaking 457 buckets” during his successful college basketball career, Reddick tells audiences: “And with my new team, DraftKings Sportsbook, you can put up big numbers too” (DraftKings, 2023). Through this statement, DraftKings vaguely posits themselves as a team, of which Reddick is the newest member. Through the constructionist approach, Reddick was interpreted as a sign which is synonymous with basketball talent, and through this statement it is revealed that DraftKings has recruited Reddick’s basketball talent for their team. Reddick’s direct address of the audience then vaguely conflates the sport of college basketball with the activity of online sports betting.
Though his recruitment to the DraftKings team is based on his “record-breaking 457 buckets” during his college basketball career, he tells audiences that they too can “put up big numbers” with the DraftKings Sportsbook team (DraftKings, 2023). What follows this statement is the presentation of DraftKings’ aforementioned special promotion, shown below in figure 12.

*Figure 12. Special promotion*

Note. Promotional frame.

The promotion in figure 12 advertises an opportunity in which new users can bet a small amount of money to receive a relatively larger sum in “bonus bets” (DraftKings, 2023). This is interpreted as an opportunity for new users to join the DraftKings Sportsbook team and “put up big numbers” as previously posited by Reddick. Through this interpretation, DraftKings team consists of college basketball talent such as Reddick, as well as sports bettors.

DraftKings further conflates the sport of college basketball with online sports betting in the final frame of the advertisement, shown below in figure 13.
Figure 13. DraftKings' final frame

Note. DraftKings logo and Reddick scoring a point.

In Figure 13, Reddick scores a point and at the same time, the DraftKings logo appears in the center of the frame. As this final sequence plays out, Reddick narrates: “Action so good, why bet college basketball anywhere else” (DraftKings, 2023). According to DraftKings’ own glossary of “Betting Terminology”, the term “Action” is defined as “the amount of bets placed on a game or sporting event” (DraftKings, n.d.). The term ‘action’ may also be interpreted through its more broad definition, which according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary is simply, “a thing done” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.). From this perspective, DraftKings can be seen as further conflating basketball with sports betting by using the term ‘action’ in an unclear context (i.e., not specifying whether it is used in a sports betting context or if it is referring to Reddick’s ‘action’ of scoring the point in the final frame).

The myth of the American Dream can be identified in DraftKings’ conflation of sports betting and college basketball because the advertisement promises audiences upward economic mobility through the promotion pictured in figure 12 and through the notion of “putting up big numbers” with the DraftKings team (DraftKings, 2023). As demonstrated, audiences are also invited to join Reddick and become a member of DraftKings’ team, thus promising upward social mobility by way of becoming teammates with a ‘record-breaking’ basketball player such as Reddick. Additionally, the interpretation of Reddick’s jacket as a symbol appropriated from Ivy League athletic culture further contributes to the meaning of upward social mobility by assigning Reddick (and the DraftKings team) with the eliteness and collegial superiority that is often
associated with Ivy League universities. Finally, the mobile betting narrative communicates to audiences that these opportunities are equally available to everyone (who owns a smartphone).

In referring back to ‘mythical’ terminology, Reddick is what Barthes (1982) would refer to as the form, or, the second-order semiological signifier; the concept that is associated with the form is an unclear mixture of the act of sports betting and the act of playing college basketball. The signification (the mythical sign) is the American Dream by way of the DraftKings Sportsbook team, which consists of members who are both talented college basketball players, such as Reddick, as well as sports bettors who use their service.

7.4.1 Caesars Sportsbook

The advertisement published by Caesars Sportsbook that was analyzed with the constructionist approach and the mythical approach is titled “Going Full Caesar” and was published on 25 October 2022. The advertisement depicts what appears to be a star-studded dinner party, attended by actor Vince Vaughn, comedian J.B. Smoove, and several members of the Manning family who are known for their careers in the NFL. The advertisement opens with the characters sitting at a dinner table and being waited on by a servant in a dining room. Smoove, who plays the role of a modern Caesar and appears to be the host, tells his guests: “The more you play on my app, the more you earn on Caesars Rewards” (Caesars Sportsbook, 2022). One of the Manning brothers, Cooper, then announces that he’s “going full Caesar”, which the servant explains to the guests is “when you place a free bet while eating a Caesars Rewards meal at a Caesars Rewards location” (Caesars Sportsbook, 2023). A slow motion effect ensues and Cooper enters an apparent state of euphoria. The advertisement concludes with a panel that tells audiences that “every bet earns with Caesars Rewards” (Caesars Sportsbook, 2023).

Using the constructionist approach, the first signs that can be identified are the lavish setting of the advertisement and the characters in attendance. This is shown below in figures 14 and 15:
Figures 14 and 15 offer a plethora of signifiers of the setting; ornate furniture and plant pedestals line the room, portraits of Roman soldiers adorn the walls and the characters drink from jewelencrusted golden chalices. As a sign, the setting is what Rose (2016) refers to as a “paradigmatic sign”, or, one whose meaning is generated “from a contrast with all other possible signs” (p. 120). The dining room where the advertisement takes place is ornamented with immoderate decadence; not a single piece of furniture, tableware, or decoration is without baroque extravagance. Thus as a sign, the setting generates meaning from its distinction from
pedestrian, common, and subdued ornamentation. There is a conscious effort on behalf of Caesars Sportsbook to set their advertisement in an indulgent and ostentatious dining room as opposed to a more ordinary one. Additionally, each guest at the dinner party is of some cultural prestige; while Eli, Peyton, and Archie Manning each enjoyed successful careers in the NFL, Vince Vaughn is a prominent and award-winning actor, Cooper Manning is a TV personality and successful entrepreneur, and J.B. Smoove is an auspicious comedian, actor, and writer. The characters’ mutual presence at the dinner party may be interpreted as an individual sign, signifying a sense of exclusivity and celebrity of the dinner party. In fact, the sole character in the advertisement who isn’t of some celebrity note is the dinner party’s servant, pictured standing upright in figure 14.

The next sign that will be interpreted with the constructionist approach appears in the latter half of the advertisement, when Cooper Manning is “going full caesar” (Caesars Sportsbook, 2023). This sequence is shown below in figures 16 and 17:

*Figure 16. Cooper Manning eating*

*Note. Manning about to ‘go full Caesar’.*
In figure 16, Cooper can be seen, as noted by the servant, eating a Caesars Rewards meal while placing a free bet at a Caesars Rewards location, which, as shown in figure 17, thrusts him into a state of euphoria and bliss (‘going full Caesar’). The prominent signifiers that can be found in this sequence are the fork (signifying the Caesars rewards meal), the mobile device (signifying the free bet), and the Caesars Rewards card (signifying the Caesars Rewards location). Together, the signifiers carry a signified of indulgence; rather than doing one of these actions at a time, Cooper indulges in all three at one time and finds himself in an almost intoxicated state, in which he appears to be completely uninhibited and unaware of his surroundings. By interpreting this sequence as its own sign, Caesars Sportsbook encourages unconstrained indulgence in their services as a way to reach this Nirvana-like state.

7.4.2 Caesars Sportsbook’s myth

In this advertisement, Caesars Sportsbook constructs a myth of the American Dream veiled with neo-Roman iconography. To begin this mythical deconstruction of the advertisement, Smoove, who portrays a modern version of the Roman emperor Caesar, and the advertisement’s setting ought to be considered. Smoove’s character is pictured below in figure 18:
In figure 18, Smoove can be seen wearing a golden crown of leaves, a symbol of military achievement in ancient Rome which is known as the Civic Crown and is commonly depicted as being worn by Roman emperors such as Julius Caesar and Augustus (Arndt, 2021; University of Cambridge, n.d.). With the visuals of the modern Caesar portrayed by Smoove, the scene that plays out in Caesars Sportsbook’s advertisement may represent a Roman imperial banquet, an event which “allowed emperors to display political power and wealth” (Strauss, 2019 cited in Martyris, 2019). The setting shown in figures 14 and 15 are also identifiable in what is known about Roman banquets today; Raff (2011) states that “The dining room was one of the most important reception spaces”, elaborating further that “high-quality decorative fixtures”, such as “wall paintings”, and “portable luxury objects, such as artworks (particularly sculptures) and furniture” were common features of Roman banquet locales. Additionally, Martyris (2019) notes that a common feature of the attendance of banquets hosted by Roman emperors was a “lack of moderation”, a sentiment echoed when Cooper ‘goes full Caesar’ in the advertisement.

It is also important to note the servant’s dialogue and the advertisement’s setting in correlation with Smoove’s dialogue in the beginning of the advertisement. The servant notes that Cooper is placing a bet in a “Caesar’s Rewards location” (Caesars Sportsbook, 2022). Thus the setting where the advertisement takes place, which is interpreted as representing a neo-Roman imperial banquet, is a location that is accessible by Caesars Rewards members (i.e., users of the Caesars Sportsbook application). Furthermore, Smoove states, “the more you play on my app, the more you earn on Caesar’s Rewards” (Caesars Sportsbook, 2022). This statement directly
communicates to audiences the effects of using Caesars Sportbook’s online sports betting service: increased usage of the betting service equals increased access to situations such as the banquet depicted in the advertisement.

As has been demonstrated, Caesars Sportsbook heavily leans into associating their brand and service with imperialism of ancient Rome, particularly by representing a modern Roman imperial banquet. The modern Caesar portrayed by Smoove, the prestigious guests in attendance, and the lavish setting serve as Barthes’ (1982) concept of forms, whose associated concepts are upward social and economic mobility. Turning back to the concept of the American Dream, the setting of the advertisement carries the meaning of upward social mobility by representing Roman imperial banquet iconography and the celebrity guests which generates a blend of ancient and modern eliteness, prestige, and social cachet. The ornateness of the advertisement’s setting points to the upward economic mobility that is afforded by Caesars Sportsbook’s online sports betting service. Smoove’s dialogue then implies that access to this situation, which represents upward social and economic mobility, is predicated on the use of the Caesars Sportsbook online sports betting application, and therefore accessible by all who own a smartphone. From this perspective, Caesars Sportsbook presents their own unique formulation of the American Dream which promises sports bettors the prestige and illustriousness that was held by ancient Roman imperial royalty.

7.5.1 BetMGM

The advertisement published by BetMGM, analyzed with the constructionist approach and the mythical approach, is titled “Blockbuster: $1,000 Risk-Free First Bet” and was published on 23 January 2023. The advertisement includes an online sports betting narrative depicting the BetMGM application operating on a mobile device, and includes a celebrity feature, as actor and comedian Jaime Foxx appears in the advertisement’s leading role. The advertisement begins with a chaotic scene that resembles the aftermath of a shootout one might see in an action movie, and Foxx is depicted holding the hand of an apparently injured woman pinned under an overturned car as he encourages her to stay alive. Suddenly, the emotional scene is interrupted when the sound of a mobile phone vibration rings out and Foxx tells the woman, “wait a minute” (BetMGM, 2023). Foxx then takes his mobile phone out of his pocket to see a winning bet notification. The camera pans out, and it is revealed that Foxx and the woman are on a movie set.
surrounded by cameramen. Foxx announces that he has just won a bet, exclaiming “we got the money, baby!” (BetMGM, 2023). One of the movie set workers pleads with Foxx to focus, and Foxx and the woman return to the scene. The advertisement ends with a panel that presents a promotion in which first-time BetMGM users can get “$1,000 paid back in bonus bets, if [they] don't win” (BetMGM, 2023).

To analyze the advertisement with the constructionist approach, the first three frames that appear ought to be considered. They are shown below, in figures 19, 20, and 21:

*Figure 19. BetMGM's setting*

![Post-shootout scene.](image)

*Note.* Post-shootout scene.

*Figure 20. Injured woman*

![Woman pinned under a car.](image)

*Note.* Woman pinned under a car.
Figure 21. Close-up shot of Foxx

Note. Foxx encouraging injured woman to stay alive.

Figure 19 shows the apocalyptic scene in which Foxx and the injured woman are acting, and stands as the first identifiable sign in the advertisement. The signifiers that can be identified in this frame are the smoking police car covered in bullet holes, the overturned car on the left side of the frame, and the various wreckage and debris strewn about. The signifieds of these signifiers are a shared sense of a catastrophic event that had just occurred moments before. An additional signifier can be found in figure 20; to the left of the injured woman lies what appears to be a duffel bag filled with $100 bills and gold bars. Considering the other signifiers, the duffel bag signifies that Foxx and the injured woman were involved in a high-stakes robbery of sorts that had gone awry. The dialogue between Foxx and the injured woman which occurs in the close-up shots shown in figures 20 and 21 also implies closeness and a history between their characters; the woman apologizes, to which Foxx emphatically responds: “You don’t have to be sorry. You’ve never ran from anything in your life and you’re not going to start now. You’ve got to fight it!” (BetMGM, 2023). These first nine seconds of the 28-second advertisement establish a highly dramatic and emotional scene, and perhaps the culmination of the history between Foxx and the injured woman.

The scene is then promptly interrupted by Foxx’s mobile phone vibrating, which is revealed to be an alert from the BetMGM application notifying Foxx that he had won a bet. Foxx celebrates his win and the emotional scene is shown to be part of an on-going film shoot. This is pictured below in figures 22 and 23:
Figure 22. Winning bet notification

Note. Foxx checking his smartphone device.

Figure 23. Foxx interrupting the film shoot

Note. Foxx celebrating his won bet.

The winning bet notification that Foxx receives may be what Rose (2016) refers to as a “syntagmatic sign”, or a sign that generates meaning from its surrounding signs (p. 120). Prior to the appearance of the BetMGM notification, the advertisement is heavily emotional, as it depicts a woman on the brink of death as someone close to her urges her to stay alive. After the BetMGM notification appears, the advertisement adopts a lighter, less emotional mood. Foxx winning the bet via BetMGM’s mobile application takes precedence over smoldering wreckage, overturned cars, the duffel bag filled with money and gold, and even the injured woman.
Through this lens, we can begin to interpret the winning bet notification as a sign; its’ signifiers are the BetMGM logo, the video of the lion, and the large text that reads ‘WIN’. By accepting it as a syntagmatic sign (i.e., that its’ meaning is found in relation to the signs which precede and succeed it), its signified is that the notification is of such significance, that it takes precedence over the highly emotional scene. At this point, it is worth examining Foxx’s role in the advertisement in relation to his real-life profession. Foxx is a professional actor that has starred in Hollywood films since 1997 (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022), and even won the Academy Award for best actor in 2004 (IMDb, n.d.). Thus, Foxx assumes a semi-fictitious role as a movie star in BetMGM’s advertisement when the emotional scene is revealed to be a film shoot. In returning to the constructionist approach, the sign of the BetMGM notification is of such significance that it could break the focus of Foxx, an experienced Hollywood actor, and extract him from the sorrowful tone of the scene to complete elation when he sees that he has won a bet.

7.5.2 BetMGM’s myth

As previously demonstrated, BetMGM’s advertisement comprises two distinct acts; the first nine seconds, which appears to be the climax of an action film, and the remaining 19 seconds, in which the setting is revealed to be a film shoot. From the perspective of Barthes’ (1982) second order semiological system of myth, two dimensions of a Hollywood-related myth can be identified in this advertisement and shall be referred to as ‘the myth of the film’. The two dimensions will be discussed in turn.

The first dimension of ‘the myth of the film’ can be identified in the advertisement's first nine seconds, (i.e., its first act). In the previous sub-section, the main signs found in the first act were the post-shootout setting, the injured woman, and Foxx’s character. To analyze these signs as signifiers, per Barthes’ (1982) approach to myth, it may be worth looking at critical research of mainstream film, as the first act of BetMGM’s advertisement clearly presents a Hollywood film dynamic. The first act of the advertisement capitalizes on two concepts of film studies: event spectacle and narrative. Event spectacle, according to Lewis (2014) is a concept which refers to scenes in cinema in which “things happen to the characters, often putting them at risk of death or serious injury” (p. 217). Narrative, on the other hand, is what “drives the story forward”, and
“fleshes out the background and the characters” in cinema (Lewis, 2014, p. 217). In the advertisement, the chaotic post-shootout scene and the injured woman serve as the event spectacle, while the dialogue and the hinted-at closeness between Foxx and the injured woman serve as the narrative. On the relationship between the two concepts, Lewis (2014) articulates that they act jointly to bolster one another, stating that “the narrative establishes the emotional ties between the spectator and the characters in the film and the event spectacle then places them in dangerous situations so that the spectator’s emotional investment in the characters is heightened still further” (p. 218). Thus BetMGM’s advertisement employs a rather precise adoption of cinematic apparatuses that have identifiable effects on audiences and can even be identified in theoretical discussions of film.

The second dimension of the myth of the film is constructed in the advertisement’s second act, in which the emotional scene is revealed to be an ongoing film shoot. The advertisement adopts a meta-perspective of its first act by acknowledging that the scene that had just played out between Foxx and the injured woman was part of a film. The key signs in the second act that will be interpreted as signifiers according to the mythical approach are Foxx and his mobile device which featured the winning bet, the cameramen that appear behind Foxx (see figure 24), and the retinue of film set workers shown below in figure 24.

*Figure 24. Film set workers*

*Note.* Employees working on the film shoot.

Whereas the first dimension of the myth of the film can be seen as operating on theoretical concepts of a film’s ability to engage audiences, this dimension operates on the audience's broader knowledge of film production. The advertisement ascribes qualities to BetMGM’s online
sports betting service by representing the production of the fictitious film grinding to a halt due to Foxx’s distraction. This sequence is not, however, representing Foxx as unfocused in his profession; Foxx was decoded in the previous subsection as being an award-winning and prolific actor. Rather, the sequence of the film production being interrupted designates the BetMGM notification as being of higher importance than the film production. It is worth noting that the average production costs of a Hollywood film are approximately $65 million (Mueller, 2022). The high-stakes nature of this production is further reinforced by the 14 film workers shown in figures 23 and 24. By interpreting the setting of the film production as Barthes’ (1982) notion of form, the concept that is associated with it is that of a massively expensive and laborious investment. Thus BetMGM constructs a myth of film production, and a winning bet notification on BetMGM’s mobile application has such power over Foxx that it not only compels him to interrupt what is presumably a multi-million dollar enterprise, but also the efforts of at least 15 film professionals, including the actress who plays the injured woman.

BetMGM’s advertisement generates meaning in so far as the audience can grasp first, the tropes of Hollywood films (illustrated through event spectacle and narrative) and second, the massive financial investment that is typical of Hollywood film productions. BetMGM therefore constructs a two-dimensional myth of the film, in which both the conventions of a film’s narrative experience and the actual costs and efforts that Hollywood films require to come to fruition are acknowledged and assigned lower priority than a successful outcome on BetMGM’s online sports betting service.

7.6 Summary and comparison
The preceding subsections ventured to dissect advertisements created by FanDuel, DraftKings, Caesars Sportsbook, and BetMGM that were representative of the most common narratives found in the data sample (online betting and celebrity feature). The results of these analyses provide a look at the broad array of signification tactics that the online sports betting companies use to communicate meaning and promote their services to audiences.

One similarity can be found in the advertisements of FanDuel, DraftKings, and Caesars Sportsbook which were interpreted as using notions of the American Dream to promote their services; FanDuel was demonstrated as representing their online sports betting service as a proxy
for achieving the fame and celebrity of professional athletes while DraftKings constructs an image of their brand as a sports team, and conflates the act of sports betting with sports themselves. Both advertisements may be interpreted as capitalizing on the myth of the American Dream, as outlined in section 4.3, by promoting their services as means for upward economic and social mobility. FanDuel’s advertisement represented winning a bet through their service (i.e., the attainment of monetary wealth) as means for an ordinary person to be interviewed as a professional athlete (i.e., ascending in social status). Likewise, DraftKings’ advertisement invites audiences to first, attain monetary wealth by “[putting] up big numbers” and second, to join their team, of which JJ Reddick is a member, allowing them to achieve a higher social status. Caesars Sportsbook takes an alternate approach; rather than adopting a sports narrative as FanDuel and DraftKings did, Caesars Sportsbook veils the American dream with Roman iconography and implies that access to such mythical circumstances is granted via their online betting service. As stated in section 4.3, the American Dream is underpinned by the idea that any American person can achieve it; this sentiment can be identified in the online narratives used in the advertisements which promote FanDuel, DraftKings, and Caesars Sportsbook’s smartphone applications. As most American adults are smartphone users, the advertisements created by FanDuel, DraftKings, and Caesars Sportsbook communicate to audience members that they too can achieve upward economic and social mobility, or, the American Dream, via sports betting and their smartphone applications. To reiterate Hall (1997): “meaning depends not on the material quality of the sign, but on its symbolic function” (p. 11). With this in mind, the mobile phones and online betting services depicted in the advertisement take on symbolic meaning of access to the American Dream.

The advertisement created by BetMGM was the only unit analyzed with semiotic analysis that was not found to incorporate the notions of the American Dream in promoting their service. Instead, BetMGM draws on mythical representations of American film and audiences’ understanding of both Hollywood film conventions and film production in order to elevate the significance of their online sports betting service.

The analyses have demonstrated that the four advertisements employ the narratives of online betting and celebrity feature in different ways, using distinct visual components which, when interpreted as signs through semiotic analysis, construct various myths around their respective
online sports betting services. Using the narratives of online betting and celebrity features, FanDuel and DraftKings deployed sports-related myths, Caesars Sportsbook borrowed from Roman imperialism to posit their services as gateways to the American Dream, while BetMGM constructs myths of Hollywood film to heighten the importance of their service.

8. Concluding remarks
The aim of the present study was to launch an investigation into the narratives deployed recently in advertisements created by the largest online sports betting companies in the US. The recent surge in online sports betting, its addictive properties, and the lack of governmental regulation of the industry’s advertising practices made this subject a relevant and compelling case within the field of media and communication studies.

Using a methodological triangulation approach and deploying qualitative content analysis and semiotic analysis on a sample of TV advertisements created by FanDuel, DraftKings, Caesars Sportsbook and BetMGM allowed for a simultaneously encompassing and intensive examination of online sports betting advertising. Qualitative content analysis was the instrumental method that revealed that the most commonly-used advertising narratives in the empirical data were those of online betting and celebrity features. The use of semiotic analysis then built upon those results by showing that the narratives of online betting and celebrity feature took on symbolic representation in the advertisements; in the cases of FanDuel, DraftKings, and Caesars Sportsbook, sports betting was represented as a way for audiences to chase the American Dream. BetMGM differed by using Hollywood film myths to communicate the importance of their service. Altogether, the advertisements analyzed with semiotic analysis capitalized on the commonness of smartphone devices and celebrity prestige in their constructing persuasive messages.

The findings of the present study point to some significant societal implications. Unbothered by government regulation, online sports betting companies have been given free rein to, for the most part, ignore the serious risks that are inherently attached to sports betting in their advertising. In doing so, they have mythologized their services and promised unrealistic fantasies to audiences while lining their pockets with the lost bets of unlucky users. Section 2.2 of the present study
demonstrated that since the meteoric rise of companies such as FanDuel, DraftKings, Caesars Sportsbook, and BetMGM, cases of individuals affected by gambling disorder have risen steeply in the US, a trend which is suspected to have been due in part to the influx advertisements created by these companies. The results of the present study provide some initial explorations into the types of tactics used by US-based online sports betting companies to promote their potentially harmful services in a way that makes them appear harmless and even beneficial.

The advertising practices of sports betting companies should also be critiqued in the context of the current economic climate of the US in general, and in the context of the economic realities faced by the average American specifically. The US has seen sky-rocketing inflation rates in recent years, and economists foresee an economic recession on the horizon (Goodkind, 2023). Additionally, the US “[ranks] below average on measures of social support among the 37 countries of the Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation, whose members are mostly developed democracies” (McHugh, 2020). The average American sees less unemployment benefits, less maternity benefits, less disability support, and more exclusionary health insurance coverage than citizens of other developed countries such as France, Germany, and Denmark (McHugh, 2020). Furthermore, it is estimated that more than half of Americans currently exist in a state of financial precarity, with 58% “living paycheck to paycheck” (Dickler, 2023). The US economy is presently in a palpable state of fragility, and the average American can expect a substandard safety net in case of financial fallout. Meanwhile, companies such as FanDuel, DraftKings, Caesars Sportsbook, and BetMGM provide services where users can gamble away their life savings and plunge themselves into financial ruin at any time, from anywhere. As an attempt to persuade Americans to use their services, these online sports betting companies have constructed misleading myths of sports betting, in which it is represented as means for economic and social ascension in a time where the average American struggles with financial uncertainty. Whether these online sports betting companies have used the US’s adverse economic conditions to their advantage intentionally or negligently is immaterial to the fact that they have seen massive surges in revenue in recent years while the majority of the US audiences that they have marketed to experience economic insecurity.
The research conducted in the present study could be expanded and built upon in a number of ways. One aspect that was not addressed in the present study is that of the audience perspective. An ethnographic study of how audiences perceive and react to advertisements created by US based online sports betting companies, including interviews, focus groups, and participant observation would provide some insights of which particular features of US online sports betting advertisements encourage (or discourage) individuals to want to use their services. Another way in which the present study could be expanded is a more focused look at gambling addiction behavior in relation to the advertisements. This might involve sourcing a collection of triggers that cause individuals who suffer from gambling disorder to indulge their addictions, which could then be cross referenced with features and narratives found in online sports gambling advertisements. Such a study would provide concrete results of how online sports gambling advertisements might foment compulsive gambling behavior. The present study could be further expanded by examining if, and to what extent, US sports betting companies have targeted specific gender, ethnic, or social class groups in their advertising. For instance, in section 3.1, it was demonstrated that previous research has identified men as being represented much more frequently in sports betting advertising than women in countries such as the UK, Spain, and Australia, findings which point to sports betting as being a largely male-centric activity. A content analysis of US sports betting advertising with coding categories developed around gender, ethnicity, and social class features would produce insights of whether online sports betting companies have steered their advertising practices to appeal to and capitalize on certain societal groups. The results of such a content analysis, when informed with theory, would further contribute to pinning down the ideological foundations of US sports betting advertising and the motivations of online sports betting companies in a social context.

Clearly, there is still much research to be done on the subject of online sports betting advertising in the US, and whether or not such advertising will be regulated remains to be seen. The present study has ventured to provide an exploratory accounting of the narratives that FanDuel, DraftKings, Caesars Sportsbook, and BetMGM use in their advertising so as to represent how these companies, with massive profits and little advertising regulation, have conducted their advertising in recent years.
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https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/gambling-disorder/what-is-gamblingdisorder

Appendix

Included in this appendix are lists of all 40 of the advertisements and their corresponding URLs created by FanDuel, DraftKings, Caesars Sportsbook and BetMGM that were retrieved from iSpot.tv and analyzed as the empirical data in the present study. As of the date that this study was submitted for examination (21 May 2023), all of the URLs were functional and publicly accessible.

FanDuel:

4. https://www.ispot.tv/ad/2Hdx/fanduel-casino-play-it-again-offer-1000
7. https://www.ispot.tv/ad/1TEz/fanduel-nba-playoffs-same-game-parlays
8. https://www.ispot.tv/ad/1OtK/fanduel-popular-parlays

DraftKings:


Caesars Sportsbook
5. https://www.ispot.tv/ad/b8Ee/caesars-sportsbook-app-baseball-fans

BetMGM