The WAGER, Vol. 30(10) – Sports betting in the media: Before and after legalization

September 30, 2025

Sports betting has become more and more of a public health concern in Canada, especially since it became legalized in 2021. This legalization generated a lot of media coverage and led to increased gambling marketing, including televised commercials and social media posts. Advertisements that promote sports betting play a role in the industry's growth, but can also amplify the harm that individuals experience from gambling. This week, The WAGER reviews a study by Paul Weston and Luke Clark that compared the portrayal of sports betting in the media before and after its legalization in Canada.

What was the research question?

How do portrayals of sports betting in leading Canadian newspapers differ before and after sports betting was legalized?

What did the researchers do?

The researchers referred to the top 15 Canadian newspapers based on daily average circulation numbers, and searched them for articles on sports betting. They identified 56 articles dated before legalization and 90 dated after legalization (146 articles total), and then coded each article for seven main themes:

1. Legality: references to the federal bill that legalized sports betting,
2. Industry change: impacts of legalization on gambling operators,
3. Technology: mobile/online access to sports betting,
4. Marketing & communications: sports betting promotions,
5. Integrity: effects of sports betting legalization on the integrity of sports,
6. Reform: discourse on potential changes to gambling regulations, and
7. Gambling harm: information on gambling harms and responsible gambling tools.

The researchers then examined the presence of each theme in all the articles and compared how frequently each theme appeared before and after legalization.

What did they find?

Overall, the most common themes among all the articles were legality (86%), industry change (84%), and marketing & communications (69%). Gambling harm (24%) and reform (16%) were the least common. Themes of industry change, marketing & communications, technology, and gambling harm increased after legalization, while themes of legality, integrity, and reform decreased (see Figure).

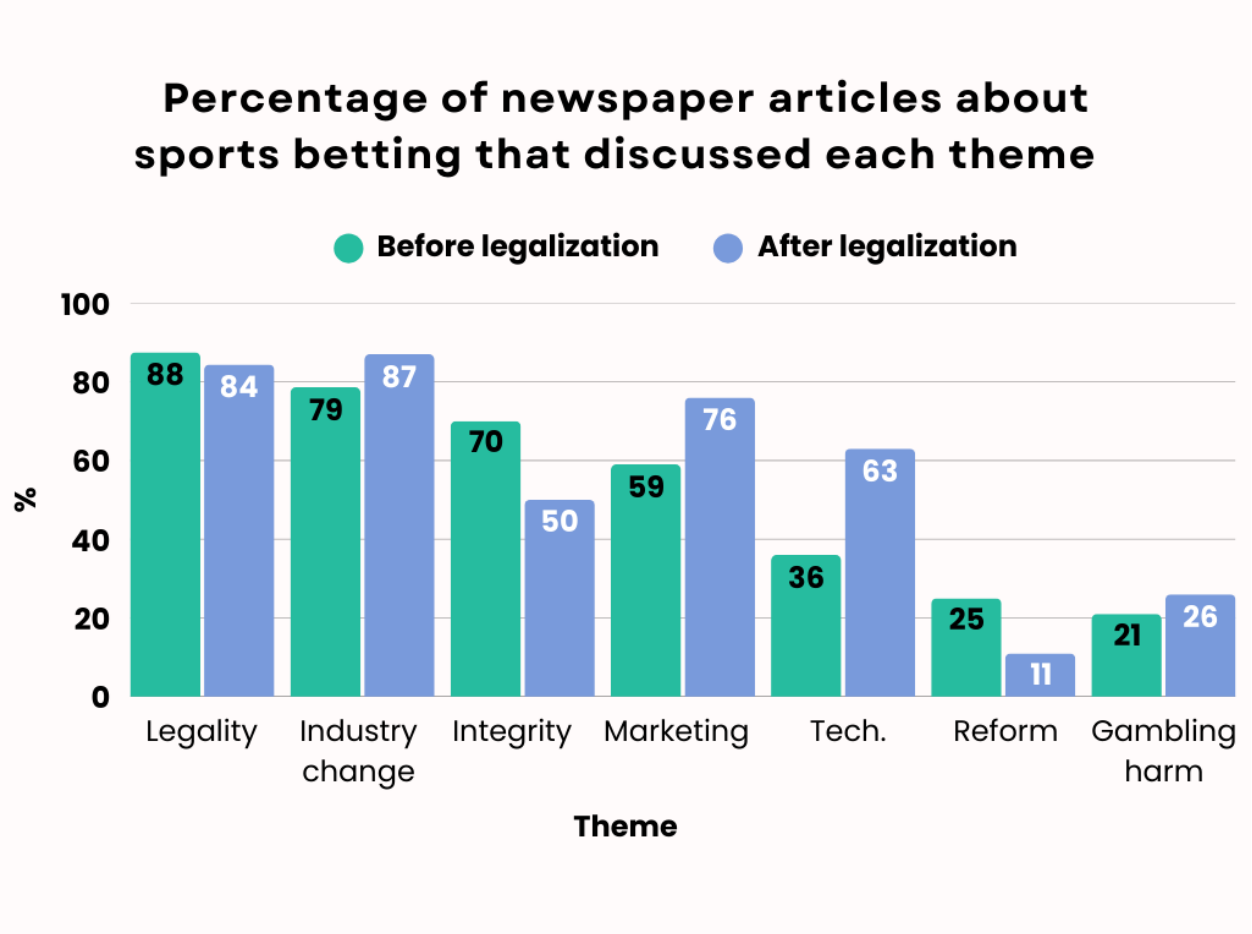

Figure. Presence of themes in newspaper articles, comparing before and after legalization of sports betting in Canada. Click image to enlarge.

Why do these findings matter?

The legality of gambling and the changing nature of the gambling industry were most commonly represented, while gambling risks and regulations were the least represented. This suggests that newspaper coverage of sports betting focused on industry and economic considerations rather than gambling harms. This is important to address because as sports betting continues to expand, accessible resources and the dissemination of responsible gambling information are needed to reduce potential gambling-related harms that individuals experience.

Every study has limitations. What are the limitations in this study?
Over 40% of the articles were from one newspaper outlet, which might have affected the results. Additionally, this study only examined newspaper articles, so it is not representative of online content and other forms of media that might have discussed sports betting.

For more information:
Individuals who are concerned about their gambling behaviors or simply want to know more about problem gambling may benefit from visiting the National Council on Problem Gambling or Gamblers Anonymous. Additional resources can be found at The BASIS Addiction Resources page.

— Annette Siu

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