

WHAT MAKES RESPONSIBLE SPORTS BETTING MESSAGES WORK FOR SPORTS FANS?

Evidence based insights for operators, leagues, and policy makers.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The rapid expansion of legalized sports betting has increased pressure on operators, leagues, and regulators to demonstrate meaningful commitments to responsible gambling. Public service announcements (PSAs) have become a central tool in these efforts. However, some messaging strategies are not grounded in clear evidence of what actually drives effectiveness. This report provides empirical evidence on how responsible gambling messages are processed and what makes them work among sports fans. Based on a national experimental study of 734 NFL fans, the findings point to a clear conclusion:

For sports fans, effective responsible gambling messaging is driven by clarity, not creativity.

Messages that are clear, direct, and informational consistently outperform those that rely on emotional appeal, branding, or celebrity endorsement. While emotional content can capture attention, it does not translate into meaningful impact without substantive information.

What drives effectiveness

- Informational (central) processing is the primary driver of PSA effectiveness
- Messages perceived as useful and easy to understand are significantly more impactful
- Surface-level cues (e.g., celebrity, visuals) have limited influence

What does not work as expected

- Celebrity endorsements and league branding do not meaningfully improve effectiveness
- Emotion-driven messaging, when used alone, has limited behavioral impact
- Highly tailored segmentation strategies offer minimal additional value

What this means for industry

Current responsible sports betting campaigns often emphasize visibility, branding, and emotional engagement. The evidence suggests these approaches are misaligned with what actually drives outcomes.

To improve effectiveness, stakeholders should shift toward:

- Clear, concise, and actionable messaging
- Behavior-focused communication (not just awareness)
- Reduced reliance on celebrity or promotional-style creative

Bottom line

Responsible sports betting messages are most effective when they help consumers think, not just feel, and when they tell them what to do, not just what to avoid

1. The “Bet Responsibly” Messaging Gap

The rapid expansion of legalized sports betting in the United States has fundamentally reshaped the sports industry. Since the repeal of PASPA in 2018, betting has become increasingly integrated into the sports consumption experience, appearing across broadcasts, team partnerships, digital platforms, and in-venue environments. For many consumers, particularly highly engaged sports fans, betting is no longer a separate activity but an extension of how they watch, follow, and interact with sport.

This shift has created new expectations for operators, leagues, and media partners to demonstrate meaningful commitments to responsible gambling. In response, public service announcements (PSAs) have become one of the most visible tools used to promote safer betting behaviors. These messages, often encouraging consumers to “bet responsibly” or seek help if needed, are now embedded throughout the sports ecosystem. However, despite their widespread use, there is limited evidence that these messages are effective, particularly within the context of sports fans.

Much of the existing research on responsible gambling messaging has been conducted in traditional gambling environments or among general gambling populations. While this work provides valuable insights, it does not fully account for the unique characteristics of sports fans. Sports fans engage with betting in a fundamentally different context, one shaped by emotional attachment, team identification, social interaction, and continuous media exposure. Betting is often intertwined with entertainment, fandom, and real-time engagement, which may influence how responsible gaming messages are noticed, interpreted, and acted upon. As a result, approaches that may be effective in traditional gambling settings may not necessarily translate to sports-based environments.

This challenge is compounded by how responsible gambling messages are currently delivered within sport. In many cases, PSAs are embedded directly within betting-related content, appearing alongside odds integrations, promotional segments, or commentary tied to wagering. While this increases exposure, it may also reduce impact. Messages risk being perceived as part of the broader entertainment or promotional experience rather than as distinct behavioral guidance. At the same time, industry approaches to responsible gambling messaging often rely on assumptions that have not been rigorously tested in the sports fan context. Emotional appeals, celebrity endorsements, and repeated slogans are commonly used to increase visibility and engagement. Yet there is little empirical evidence demonstrating that these strategies meaningfully influence how sports fans think about or engage in betting behavior. These dynamics point to a critical gap. Responsible gaming messaging in sport has scaled rapidly alongside the growth of betting, but the evidence base guiding its design has not kept pace. More importantly, the unique psychological and behavioral context of sports fandom has largely been overlooked.

Addressing this gap requires a shift in focus. From simply delivering messages to understanding how those messages are processed and what drives meaningful outcomes. This report builds on that premise by examining how sports fans engage with responsible gambling PSAs and identifying the elements that most effectively translate into responsible play. In doing so, it provides an evidence-based foundation for designing messaging strategies that are better aligned with the realities of modern sports consumption.

2. Study Overview

To better understand what drives effective responsible gambling messaging in sport, this report draws on findings from a national experimental study of U.S. sports fans. The study focused specifically on sports fans, reflecting the increasingly central role this audience plays in the modern betting ecosystem. A total of 734 NFL fans were recruited through an online research panel, with all respondents indicating engagement with sports content. Participants were randomly assigned to view one of two responsible sports betting public service announcements (PSAs). One version reflected a more traditional, generic responsible gambling message, while the other incorporated league-related elements, including NFL branding and featuring NFL Hall of Fame Quarterback Kurt Warner. Following exposure, participants were asked to evaluate the PSA and report their reactions across several dimensions. The study focused on three core areas.

First, it examined how individuals process responsible gambling messages. Drawing on established research in communication and persuasion, the study distinguished between two types of processing: one based on careful evaluation of message content (informational or “central” processing), and one based on surface-level cues such as emotion, visuals, or the presence of a celebrity spokesperson (peripheral processing)¹. This distinction is critical, as different types of processing are associated with different levels of impact.

Second, the study assessed perceived PSA effectiveness, capturing how well the message resonated with participants. Rather than treating effectiveness as a single construct, the analysis identified three key dimensions: the extent to which the message provided useful guidance (social support and education), its ability to generate an emotional response (emotional engagement), and its capacity to encourage behavioral consideration (behavioral intentions)².

Finally, the study examined positive play outcomes. These outcomes reflect attitudes and tendencies associated with more controlled and informed betting, such as awareness of risks, personal responsibility, and the use of self-regulation strategies³.

Importantly, the study also explored whether these relationships differ across audiences. Measures of sports fandom and betting experience were included to assess whether more engaged or experienced bettors respond differently to responsible gambling messages.

This design allowed us to answer three key questions:

- How do sports fans process responsible gambling messages?
- What types of messages are perceived as most effective?
- Which aspects of messaging are most strongly associated with positive play outcomes?

¹ Reynolds, R. A. (1997). A validation test of a message elaboration measure. *Communication Research Reports*, 14(3), 269–278.

² Gilbert, J. R., & Royne Stafford, M. R. (2024). The responsible gaming intervention effectiveness scale (RG-IES). American Gaming Association. <https://www.americangaming.org/wpcontent/uploads/2024/09/RG-Intervention-Effectiveness-Scale-RG-IES-Report.pdf>

³ Tabri, N., Wood, R. T., Philander, K., & Wohl, M. J. (2020). An examination of the validity and reliability of the positive play scale: Findings from a Canadian national study. *International Gambling Studies*, 20(2), 282–295. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14459795.2020.1732442>

3. What the Data Shows

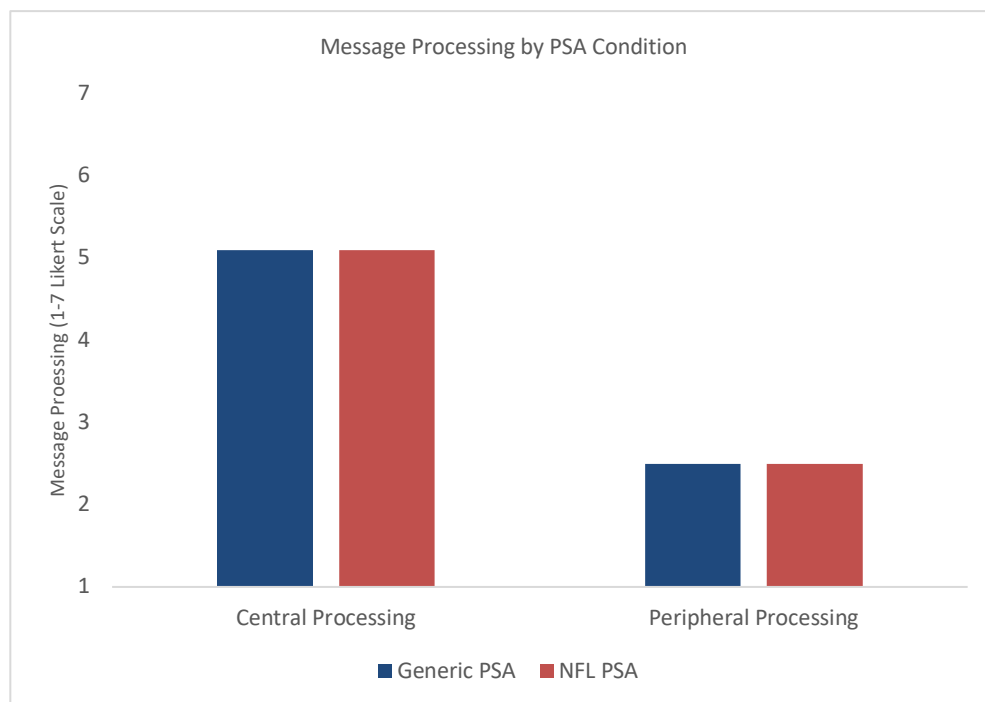
How Do Sports Fans Process Responsible Gambling Messages?

The first question examined how sports fans engage with responsible gambling messages. Specifically, whether they process them at a deeper, cognitive level (central processing) or rely on surface-level cues such as emotion or presentation (peripheral processing). The results show a clear and consistent pattern: Sports fans are capable of processing responsible gambling messages at a deeper, cognitive level, and this form of processing is far more influential.

Across all analyses, central processing emerged as the dominant driver of how messages were received (see Figure 1). When both processing routes were included in the model simultaneously, central processing showed strong, statistically significant relationships with all three dimensions of PSA effectiveness:

- Social Support & Education
- Emotional Engagement
- Behavioral Intentions

In contrast, peripheral processing played a much more limited role. Its effects were weaker and less consistent, contributing primarily to emotional engagement but not to the dimensions more closely tied to behavioral impact. This distinction is critical. It suggests that sports fans are not simply reacting passively to responsible gambling messages, they are actively evaluating them when given the opportunity. Messages that encourage this type of thinking are significantly more likely to resonate.



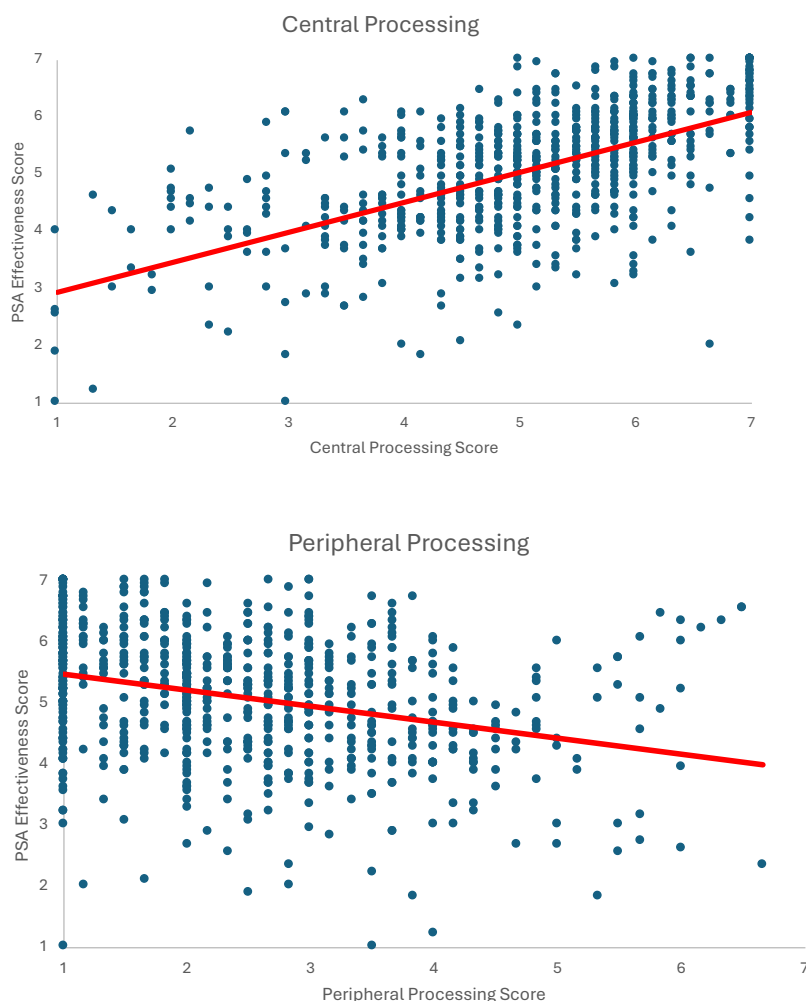
What Types of Messages Are Perceived as Most Effective?

The second question focused on what actually makes a responsible gambling message effective for sports fans.

The findings again point to a clear conclusion: Messages perceived as clear, informative, and actionable are consistently rated as more effective than those relying on emotional appeal or presentation features. Central processing was the strongest and most consistent predictor across all three dimensions of PSA effectiveness. This means that messages that encouraged participants to think about the content, rather than simply react to it, were more likely to:

- Be seen as useful and educational
- Generate meaningful engagement
- Prompt consideration of behavior

Notably, central processing was not limited to informational outcomes. It also had a strong relationship with emotional engagement, suggesting that informational clarity can drive emotional response, not just the other way around. By comparison, peripheral elements such as emotional tone, visuals, or spokesperson presence showed weaker and less consistent effects. These features may enhance how a message feels, but they do not substantially improve how it is evaluated or whether it influences behavior.



Which Aspects of Messaging Drive Positive Play Outcomes?

The third question examined whether effective messaging translates into responsible gambling attitudes and behaviors, referred to here as positive play. The results show that not all aspects of message effectiveness are equally important.

Behavioral intention is the strongest and most consistent link between messaging and positive play outcomes.

When the three dimensions of PSA effectiveness were modeled simultaneously (social support and education, emotional engagement, and behavioral intentions) only one emerged as a consistent predictor across all four positive play dimensions:

- Honesty and Control
- Personal Responsibility
- Gambling Literacy
- Pre-commitment

Behavioral intention, whether the message made individuals think about taking action, was the key driver across all outcomes. In contrast:

- Social support and education showed more selective relationships
- Emotional engagement had the weakest and least consistent effects

This finding is particularly important for industry stakeholders. It demonstrates that awareness and engagement alone are not sufficient. Messages must move beyond informing or resonating, they must prompt individuals to consider specific action.

Audience Effects: Sports Fandom and Betting Experience

In addition to message characteristics, the study examined whether responsible gambling messages are received differently across audiences. Specifically, whether levels of sports fandom and betting experience influence how messages are processed and how they translate into outcomes.

The results indicate that audience differences play a limited role in shaping message effectiveness.

Across analyses, the core relationships between message processing, PSA effectiveness, and positive play outcomes remained largely consistent regardless of fandom or betting experience. While there were some instances where higher levels of fandom or greater betting experience were associated with slightly stronger relationships (particularly in relation to behavioral intentions) these effects were modest and not consistently observed across all outcomes.

Importantly, there was no evidence to suggest that highly engaged sports fans or more experienced bettors are fundamentally less responsive to responsible gambling messaging. Nor was there strong evidence that these groups require substantially different messaging strategies. Instead, the same key drivers of effectiveness, particularly clear, informative, and actionable content, were consistently associated with stronger outcomes across audience segments.

These findings suggest that message design matters more than audience segmentation. While individual differences may shape how messages are interpreted at the margins, they do not alter the core mechanisms through which responsible gambling messaging influences attitudes and behavior.

4. Recommendations for Practice and Policy

The findings from this study point to a clear need to realign responsible sports betting messaging with how fans actually process information and what drives behavior. The following recommendations translate these insights into practical guidance for operators, leagues, media partners, and policymakers.

Design Messages That Tell Fans What to Do

Responsible gaming messaging should move beyond general reminders and focus on specific, actionable behaviors. Messages such as “bet responsibly” communicate intent but provide limited guidance. In contrast, messages that prompt concrete actions (such as setting a deposit limit, taking a break after a loss, or pre-committing to a budget) are more likely to influence behavior.

Recommendation:

- Use directive language (e.g., “Set a limit before you start betting”)
- Provide clear examples of responsible behaviors
- Emphasize actions that can be taken immediately

Prioritize Clarity and Simplicity in Message Design

The effectiveness of responsible gaming messaging is driven by how easily it can be understood and processed. In fast-paced sports environments, messages must compete for attention with game action, commentary, and other betting-related content. Complex, abstract, or overly stylized messages are less likely to be processed at a meaningful level.

Recommendation:

- Use concise, plain language
- Focus on one key message per execution
- Avoid jargon, ambiguity, or overly creative formats

Use Emotion Strategically, But Anchor It in Information

Emotional appeal can help capture attention and create relevance, but it is not sufficient on its own to drive behavioral outcomes. Messages that rely solely on emotion may be engaging but lack the informational substance needed to influence decision-making.

Recommendation:

- Pair emotional elements with clear, actionable guidance
- Ensure that emotional tone supports, not replaces, the core message
- Avoid messages that prioritize tone over substance

Reconsider the Role of Celebrity and Co-Branding

The findings indicate that celebrity endorsement and league branding do not meaningfully improve the effectiveness of responsible gambling messages. While these elements may increase visibility or align with broader marketing strategies, they do not enhance how messages are processed or whether they influence behavior.

Recommendation:

- Focus investment on message content rather than spokespersons
- Use branding to support credibility, not to carry the message
- Evaluate campaigns based on impact, not reach or recognition

Focus on Core Message Quality Before Segmentation

The findings show that responsible gambling messages are broadly effective across different levels of fandom and betting experience, with only modest variation. This suggests that improving the core message design should be the primary focus, rather than developing highly segmented campaigns.

Recommendation:

- Prioritize message clarity and actionability as a baseline
- Use segmentation selectively, where clear differences are demonstrated
- Avoid overcomplicating messaging strategies without strong evidence

6. Conclusion

The rapid integration of sports betting into the fan experience has made responsible gambling messaging more visible than ever, but not necessarily more effective. This study provides clear evidence that some current approaches may be misaligned with how sports fans process information and what drives meaningful outcomes.

Across findings, a consistent pattern emerges: effective messaging is defined by clarity, usefulness, and the ability to prompt action. Messages that encourage deeper engagement with content, rather than relying on emotional appeal or presentation features, are more likely to influence how sports fans think about and approach their betting behavior. Most importantly, messages that lead consumers to consider specific actions are the strongest drivers of responsible gambling outcomes. At the same time, the results suggest that these principles apply broadly across sport audiences. Differences based on sports fandom and betting experience are relatively modest, reinforcing the importance of getting the core message right before pursuing more complex targeting strategies.

These findings point to a necessary shift in how responsible sports betting messaging should be approached. Moving forward, stakeholders must prioritize evidence-based communication strategies that focus on behavioral impact rather than visibility alone.

The most effective responsible sports betting messages are not those that are most noticeable, but those that are most useful.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Brandon Mastromartino is the Founder and Principal of Experiential Insights, a research and advisory firm focused on consumer behavior, marketing, and policy issues in sports business, sports betting, and gaming. He also serves as Director of the Institute on Sports Wagering and Gaming and is an Assistant Professor in the L. Robert Payne School of Hospitality and Tourism Management at San Diego State University. His research examines consumer behavior in the sports and gaming industries, with a particular focus on sports fans, sports bettors, and the marketing and policy environments that shape their decisions. He also investigates regulatory frameworks, responsible gambling practices, and the broader societal implications of the rapidly evolving sports wagering landscape. In 2024 he was named one of “25 People to Watch” in the gaming industry from Global Gaming Business Magazine and in 2025 was named an ESPN Research Fellow from the International Gaming Institute at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

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