

Welcome Inside the Casino Cottage Challenging the Notions of “Risk” in Online Casino Advertising through a Context-Attentive Discourse Analysis of a Swedish Brand’s Ad Videos from 2014-2022

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Volume 4, Number 1, 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1098533ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29173/cgs148>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

University of Alberta Library

ISSN

2563-190X (digital)

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Article abstract

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Cite this article

Kroon, Å. (2023). Welcome Inside the Casino Cottage: Challenging the Notions of “Risk” in Online Casino Advertising through a Context-Attentive Discourse Analysis of a Swedish Brand’s Ad Videos from 2014-2022. *Critical Gambling Studies*, 4(1), 38–52. <https://doi.org/10.29173/cgs148>

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CRITICAL gambling studies



ISSN: 2563-190X. Available Open Access at <https://criticalgamblingstudies.com>

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APA Citation: Kroon, A. (2023). Welcome inside the casino cottage: Challenging the notions of “risk” in online casino advertising through a context-attentive discourse analysis of a Swedish brand’s ad videos from 2014-2022. *Critical Gambling Studies*, 4(1), 38–52.

<https://doi.org/10.29173/cgs148>

Article History:

Received September 2022

Accepted March 2023

Published March 2023

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Welcome Inside the Casino Cottage: Challenging the Notions Of “Risk” In Online Casino Advertising Through a Context-Attentive Discourse Analysis of a Swedish Brand’s Ad Videos From 2014-2022

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Abstract: Gambling advertising’s use of celebrities, humor, and representations of happy people who Win Big, in narratives told in brashly colored, high-pitched ads, are argued to increase the risk for gambling problems, or worse, addiction. Online casino ads have been subject to particular legislative attention partly for these reasons, as well as for being increasingly targeted to women who, by some, are judged to be especially vulnerable to such marketing. This paper presents a context-attentive, multimodal discourse analysis of a Swedish online casino brand’s advertising videos from 2014-2022. The study illustrates how general statements regarding risk in relation to (online casino) gambling ads’ content overshadow their potential cultural meanings to audiences, for instance, when it comes to issues relating to national identity. It is argued that one should, to a greater extent, treat these adverts as complex and socio-culturally rooted texts whose content may not so easily be written off as simply “risky,” to women or otherwise.

Keywords: Feminization, multimodal discourse analysis, online casino advertising, risk, Sweden

Article History: Received September 2022; Accepted March 2023; Published March 2023

Available Open Access from <https://doi.org/10.29173/cgs148>

Introduction and Position of Study

Gambling advertising is often connected to various “risks,” whether to public health more generally, or to problem gamblers specifically. However, what constitutes risk or harm in relation to gambling ads and (problem) gambling/gamblers is not always clear. The Swedish Gambling Market Report (Statens offentliga utredningar, 2020:77, p. 182) relies on there being a “sufficiently likely connection between the extent of gambling ads and the existence of gambling problems” when discussing the issue of risk and proposing regulatory changes. Håkansson and Widinghoff (2019, p. 1) suggest: “Intuitively the content and extent of gambling-related commercial advertising may influence gambling behaviors and the risk for gambling-related problems.” In Sweden, gambling advertising is governed by the principle of “moderation” (Spellag, 2018, p. 1138). Upon judging an ad’s adherence to the value of moderation, it should be particularly important to consider the risk of the marketed game in relation to the development of problem gambling (Finansdepartementet, 2022).

To distinguish high-risk gambling ads from those which advertise games of lower risk for gambling

problem development, The Public Health Agency of Sweden makes use of an adjusted variant of ASTERIG (Peren, 2011), an assessment tool used to classify which games are judged to be particularly risky according to a 10-point risk scale. However, Delfabbro and Parke (2021) identify limitations with the ASTERIG risk criteria as well as noting that the tool omits important dimensions of risk. Nevertheless, according to its current modified use in the Swedish context, games with a high-risk potential are those which have a short time frame between betting and result, fast payments of winnings, possibilities of long gambling sessions, particular light and sound designs, and are often available via the Internet. Importantly for this study, (online) casino games fall within this category (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2021b). As a consequence, marketing for “high-risk” online casino gambling will also be considered high-risk in relation to gambling addiction and is therefore subject to potentially stricter judicial restrictions in upcoming legislative amendments.

Online casino marketing has already been subject to extra restrictions during the COVID-19 crisis in Sweden and elsewhere (Finansdepartementet, 2020; Hayer et

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al., 2020). However, statistics from The Public Health Agency of Sweden (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2021a), as well as recent research, show no general growth of problem gambling in the Swedish population during the pandemic. Indeed, in a study using player data from Sweden, Norway, Germany, and Finland, Auer, Malischnig and Griffiths (2023) find a significant reduction in online casino gambling among sports bettors during the pandemic. Although online gambling as a whole has increased, Swedes' engagement with online casino gambling has decreased since 2015 (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2022). Other researchers claim to observe opposite trends in Sweden (Håkansson, 2020) as well as in Canada (Price, 2022). Nevertheless, because of the negative discourse around gambling ads in general and online casino ads in particular, there is an overwhelming support for a ban of online casino ads among the Swedish population. One survey of Swedish citizens found that 71% supported such a ban and only 5% were against it (Kroon & Lundmark, 2020).

When it comes to the alleged risk of online casino ads, women are pinpointed as being particularly vulnerable. This risk is picked up in the Swedish Gambling Market Report (Statens offentliga utredningar, 2020:77, p. 176) where it is used as a part of an argument for more restrictive measures in relation to this marketing than are currently in place. Such linkages are a part of a recurring "feminization" argument in relation to gambling which refers to more women gambling, becoming problem gamblers, and seeking help for their gambling (Volberg, 2003). Women are increasingly described as the new demographic for the gambling industry towards which so-called pink gambling commercials are targeted (Cassidy, 2020). Indeed, Wardle (2017) argues that there has been a (re)feminization of gambling in Britain where online gambling offers a kind of private sphere particularly attractive to women. In the Swedish context, Håkansson and Widinghoff (2019) argue for the existence of a female focus in online casino commercials on Swedish TV where content components seemingly more often target women than men. Relating this result to a psychological vulnerability argued to be found in women seeking gambling disorder treatment (Håkansson et al., 2017), the authors suggest that increased attention ought to be paid to the ways in which gambling is advertised in relation to the female population (Håkansson & Widinghoff, 2019).

However, from a critical point of view, Palmer Du Preez et al. (2021), show that there is a tendency within gambling studies to frame women gamblers within a discourse of vulnerability and risk. This tendency, they argue, perpetuates, and reinforces traditional and stereotypical constructions of women and women's roles in the family. A narrative literature review by McCarthy et al. (2019) concludes that there is a substantial lack of research on women's gambling, and that we therefore know little about the factors that

influence women's engagement with gambling products, and the impact of industry tactics.

In this paper, it is argued that the tendency to first and foremost discuss and judge gambling ads in terms of risks, as exemplified above, produces predictable and locked positions (gambling ads/online casino ads = bad, harsh(er) regulations = good). At the same time, their functions as producers and distributors of complex meanings for particular audiences are mostly overlooked. A gambling ad is a cultural text which is produced and distributed with the ultimate communicative purpose of promoting gambling products/services from a particular brand. In doing so, the marketed products/services may be represented in a myriad of ways in order to appeal to the target audience(s). Ads communicate desired qualities connected to the brand, and help organize relationships between producers and consumers over time (Lury, 2004). A brand, Lury argues, is to be viewed as an object of possibility which emerges out of relations with its products/services, and out of relations to its environment, be it markets, competitors, the state, consumption and everyday life. It is an object that is dynamic, constituted as it is by mixed, layered, and heterogenous images (Lury, 2004).

Thus, this study investigates the deeper layers of meaning in a particular brand's gambling ads by deconstructing their (semiotic and discursive) representations. This means that the analysis is concerned both with *how* meaning is constructed through various multimodal means, and with what *consequences* for the understanding of the ads from the audience's point of view (cf. Hall, 2013, p. xxii). To clarify, there is no exploration into the audience's *actual* meaning-making processes. Rather, it is assumed that advertisements presuppose consumers who are "thought into" the texts (Kress, 1987). These abstract consumers are shaped by the brand's target group preferences and the social and cultural contexts of the ads' production, and can be uncovered through a careful analysis of the various communicative choices that are made (Kress, 1987). An overarching interest of this study is to understand how audiences are communicated with so as to hopefully become attracted to buying the brand's gambling products and services, while at the same time maneuvering the constructed self-evident "truths" about gambling ads, that is, that they are a menace to society and should be further restricted or banned.

Aim, Research Questions and Research Gaps

The aim of this study is to problematize some of the "risk" issues and arguments with regards to online casino gambling advertising that are recurrent in political and public discourse and in gambling research as mentioned above. The problematizations will be made in relation to a context-attentive, multimodal analysis of the content of the Swedish online casino gambling operator Casinostugan's marketing material

from 2014, 2019 and 2021/22. The study will highlight unique socio-cultural elements that ought to be made relevant as “risk” is discussed in relation to such advertising. The research questions which will be dealt with in an interwoven fashion in the analysis are as follows:

1. What are the main narratives, discourses and salient character(s) in Casinostugan’s video ads and how have these evolved over the chosen time-period?
2. How are the main narratives, discourses and salient character(s) in Casinostugan’s video ads multimodally constructed?
3. In what ways do the chosen multimodal resources connote to facts, feelings, objects or atmospheres related to identified high-risk content?
4. In what respect does Casinostugan convey feminization of the online casino gambling practice in their ads?
5. How can current notions of risk in relation to online casino ads be problematized given the Casinostugan case?

The reasons for this study are multifold given existing gambling studies research with its dominant disciplines being psychology, psychiatry, and neuroscience (Nicoll & Akcayir, 2020). Questions regarding gambling advertising are formulated through a “medical filter,” where the ads are primarily treated as a variable that contributes to problem gambling (Pedroni, 2018, p. 185). For this reason, gambling research has been criticized for pathologizing the gambling advertising issue rather than discussing its (potential) social harm in a broader public perspective (Bouguettaya et al., 2020). As gambling studies’ primary concern when it comes to advertising is its impact on vulnerable individuals or groups, research includes studies on recall and awareness (Djohari et al., 2019), attitudes and behaviour (Hing et al., 2019), gamblers’ perceptions (Killick & Griffiths, 2022), and affective responses to marketing (Lamont et al., 2016). It is well-known that the retrospective self-assessments of impact that are generated in these studies come with substantial methodological limitations (Binde & Romild, 2019). In comparison to impact, the *form* and *content* of gambling advertising is much less examined (Gunter, 2019). However, Nicoll & Albarrán-Torres (2022, p. 171) offer a nuanced take on how the use of familiar cultural iconographic choices in digital gamble-play media camouflage risk in gambling products, simultaneously calling for additional studies that pay attention to such iconographic expressions in relation to gambling products.

Risky elements in gambling ads according to current research may be when gambling is portrayed as a fun and carefree activity experienced together with friends (Deans et al., 2016). Such a narrative may convey a sense

of illusionary control in relation to the consumer and may therefore be problematic (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2018). Celebrity participation also constitutes a risk as it might make gamblers less risk averse and less hesitant about gambling (Lamont et al., 2016). Portrayals of big wins and joyous feelings, inclusions of bonus offers and free spins, emphasis on quick cash-outs, luxury and power may equally be risky (Håkansson & Widinghoff, 2019), as may the use of humor (McMullan & Miller, 2009). Taken together, these risk elements are seen to contribute to a normalizing of gambling in society; that is, gambling is promoted as a socially acceptable leisure activity which is seen as problematic (Killick & Griffiths, 2022; McMullan & Miller, 2009; Parke et al., 2014).

Gambling studies’ interest in gender has also been limited even though the number of women (problem) gamblers has risen (McCarthy et al., 2019; Venne et al., 2020). When content is looked at, though, gambling ads are generally found to be quite gender stereotypical, as for example, when men are represented as central actors in sports betting ads while women are sexually objectified (Deans et al., 2016). Also, male gamblers are more commonly linked to skill, rationality, and control (Jouhki, 2017) while women are connected to luck, chance, and emotions (Cassidy, 2014). Underscoring the fact that gambling products can be infused with gender stereotypes, Nicoll and Albarrán-Torres (2022) show how iconographies which invoke typically feminized values such as cuteness, romance and domesticity are used to attract young women into engaging in digital gamble-play on their phones. However, recent research which examines masculinity and masculine positionings in relation to post-feminism and emotionality in Swedish sports betting commercials show that traditional traits, values, and ideas connected to men and gambling are being (at least superficially) challenged by new and seemingly more complex representations (Goedecke, 2021).

Lastly, Anglophone countries dominate in gambling studies (Nicoll & Akcayir, 2020) which results in analyses of gambling advertising characteristics remaining culturally homogenous (Torrance et al., 2021; cf. Guillou-Landreat et al., 2021). This in-depth Swedish study, although limited in scope, provides a contribution to counter these imbalances.

Materials and Methods

The case chosen for analysis is the online casino brand Casinostugan (Eng. The Casino Cottage), nowadays belonging to the global ComeOn Group along with 16 other brands. It was launched in 2014 and quickly became “a smash” according to Stefan Leijon, then Creative Director at A New Dialogue. This was the small advertising design studio which landed the commission of branding Casinostugan and producing ads for the Swedish market. Leijon was interviewed via Zoom in a semi-structured interview aimed at understanding the communicative choices made in the branding of Casinostugan from a key informant’s point

of view, prior to any scientific explanations (cf. Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Casinostugan constitutes a suitable case for the purposes of this study. It is a licensed brand specifically oriented at the Swedish market with a wide broadcast advertising distribution; it offers a variety of online casino games and has become a well-known brand on the Swedish market away from “the giants,” a position it has earned through extensive television advertising, particularly during its start-up years. Importantly, it is not chosen to represent online casino ads in general even though it belongs to that overarching category. Rather, through its socio-cultural uniqueness, it will be used to showcase some of the problems in relation to current knowledge about gambling advertising, specifically when it comes to risk and feminization arguments.

Five video ads aired on Swedish television from 2014, 2019 and 2021/22 of approximately 20-30 seconds each have been explored in-depth. The criteria for selection were that the ads should a) capture the evolution of the brand’s design from its start to the present, b) have been distributed widely (on television), and, preferably, c) include different contexts and salient participants. The videos are publicly available on YouTube using the search word “Casinostugan.” The translations of case examples and interview quotes from Swedish to English have all been made by the author.

The theoretical framework is informed by multimodal (critical) discourse analysis (MCDA) (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Machin, 2013). Gambling ads are treated as “potent semiotic texts” (Butkowski & Tajima, 2017, p. 1042) that construct meaning by articulating socially constructed perspectives on reality through the use of a variety of semiotic resources, e.g., language, sound, music and (moving) images (cf. Fairclough, 1993). As audiences, we do not merely register adverts neutrally, nor do we automatically get affected by them. Ads are representations of ideas, values, priorities and world views (cf. Ledin & Machin, 2018) with which we engage in a co-construction of meaning, based on the semiotic resources that are made available to us in the text and our own culturally rooted understandings of what is going on. These ideas, values, priorities, and worldviews form discourses which refer to and construct knowledge around certain topics. Discourses, in turn, shape our ideas, values etc. about the topic, activity, or situation, and are therefore connected to questions of power and truth (Hall, 2013). A particular focus with MCDA is how texts recontextualize, and therefore transform, social practices, and how practices

that look commonsense may contain ideological meanings (van Leeuwen, 2008). The analysis focuses on the overall multimodal construction of the ads’ narrative and their discourses, the role and design of the salient character(s), and connects these to the socio-cultural context in which the ads are designed, distributed and produced. The observations are then related to common “risk” features mentioned in literature when it comes to gambling ads as well as to elements communicating feminization. Feminization will here be used in an expanded sense from the way it is used in existing gambling studies where it often simply refers to “more women doing something” (Wardle, 2017, p. 185). It refers to how values, ideals, stereotypes, traits, and social roles related to women and femininity may be manifested and exploited in the design of Casinostugan’s gambling ads to specifically attract female gambling consumers.

Results

Narratives, Discourses, and Salient Characters in the Early Casinostugan Ads (2014-15)

In the first video ad to launch the Casinostugan brand and its products, *Welcome inside the cottage* (August, 2014), the audio element is initially dominant as one hears a cacophony of sounds (a man’s animated voice bursting out excitedly, *ten thousand...*) on top of the whirring sound of gaming wheels. These are connected to the visual representation of an old-style television set spinning the word *JACKPOT* in colorful letters on its screen. The frame is switched to what can be recognized as a breakfast table set outdoors. One sees a red-checkered, table-clothed surface scattered with a coffee cup, butter on a tray, a tube of caviar paste, a cheese sandwich, a jar of milk, and, at one end of the table, held between a pair of hairy hooves, a newspaper. The introductory discourse of *Ugh* is heard from a masculine-sounding, low voice and a window is forcefully shut with a hoof to muffle the excited sounds inside. This is followed by the utterance *casino commercials can be so stressful* while an old-style radio is shut off with a hoof (Figure 1).

Visually, the frame is then switched to a scenery of a typical Swedish red cottage in the country seemingly taken from the small bridge in front of it (Figure 2). The same voice-over, in a slow-paced, northern-Swedish accent and low tone of voice, says, *here, we take things at our own pace*.

Figure 1. Turning Off “Stressful Casino Advertising” (2014)



Figure 2. Lake View of The Casino Cottage (2014)



From the point of the window being shut, the audio track consists of an upbeat, 4/4 tact tune that is reminiscent of an – in equal measure – popular and hated Swedish music genre labeled “dansbandsmusik” (Eng. dance band music) which bears similarity to genres such as country, swing and Eurovision pop. Wearing an orange-green checkered shirt, what is to be known as the early symbol of Casinostugan, Ture the Moose, comes into a new shot where he is sitting by the breakfast table, talking calmly in a frontal medium shot addressing the audience, *and if we want some excitement there is always Casinostugan*. There is a shot switch to Ture’s hoof holding an iPad (or similar screen)

which shows spinning gaming wheels before zooming out over the railing to the small lake and birch trees in front of the cottage, while saying, *for what casino in the world can beat this* with reference to the view. The same shot is held while Ture finishes off his talk in a voice-over, *I even got my first two deposits doubled. You get that as well from what I hear. Casinostugan. For us who want to win in peace and quiet*. A circle-formed graphics emphasizing the bonus offer is shown and the ad is rounded off by Casinostugan’s “cross-stitch” looking logotype over the shot of the scenic lake view; the cross-stitch design further enhancing the connection to home and coziness (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Displaying bonus opportunities in a homey way (2014)



A similar narrative is presented in the ad's winter versions, *Into the warmth* and *Welcome inside the Christmas cottage* launched a few months later (November and December 2014, respectively). The cottage and its surroundings are now clad in snow while frosty winds can be heard sweeping around it at nighttime. But, inside there is a warm fire going, and Ture, dressed in a warm sweater on top of his shirt, iPad

in hoof, connects with the viewer by announcing, *lucky there is both warmth and excitement in Casinostugan*. A shot of the hearth and lit candles in the cozy cottage is shown before Ture repeats the same bonus offer from the previous ad and the slogan *for us who want to win in peace and quiet* ahead of the round-off logotype (Figures 4-5).

Figure 4-5. Winter and Christmas Time in the Casino Cottage (2014)



According to Machin and Mayr (2012, p. 52), "settings are used to communicate general ideas, to

connote discourses and their values, identities and actions." The most prominent idea or symbol

represented by the settings in these early Casinostugan ads is “the Swedish dream” of owning a red cottage with white corners. This dream or ambition remains high on Swedes’ lists of their favorite leisure living accommodation (Trendrapporten, 2021). The cottage dream idea is impregnated by a certain nostalgia signified by the old-style media technologies, which, together with the objects on the breakfast table, also connote the simple pleasures that can be enjoyed peacefully, away from modern, hectic, city life and the constant race for the latest model. The catchy but potentially irritating slogan, the dance band tune, fulfills the function of further strengthening the bond to Swedish country life, conjuring up images of dance pavilions in the countryside where people go to get tipsy and dance cheek to cheek, or so the stereotype goes.

In the context of the gambling ad, the red paneled cottage wall first seen behind the breakfast table, and then in full view during both the summer and the winter season, connotes a distinct type of values related to “Swedishness;” namely calmness, quietness, safety and a welcoming and friendly atmosphere. The job of designing the concept for Casinostugan targeted at the Swedish consumer began with Creative Director Stefan Leijon gathering his colleagues in a workshop in 2014. Leijon was himself reluctant to work with gambling company customers, but eventually brainstormed ideas of Swedishness. The Swedish summer cottage (Sw. sommarstuga) was deemed the perfect positive, recognizable and desirable symbol for Swedes with its traditional timber walls, red paint, white corners, and windowpanes.

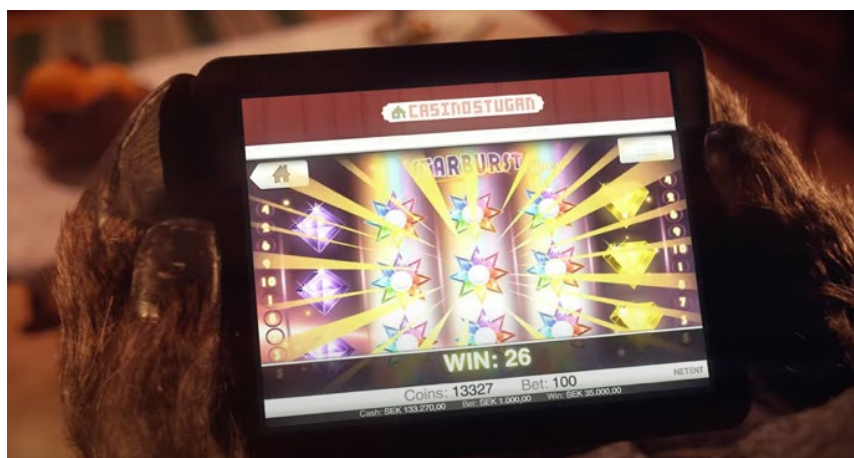
Interestingly, before the ads are rounded off, the scenic view of the lake, as well as the cozy, candle-lit cottage living room, go out of focus as the bonus offer is “stamped” across the frame. From a visual modality point of view, this graining of detail and out-of-focus

appearance of the two desirable settings, a summer lake by a cottage, and a warm, cozy cottage close to Christmas, convey significant messages (cf. Ledin & Machin, 2020). The sharp and detailed images before the bonus is displayed show Ture’s environments (who gambles with Casinostugan). However, the fuzzy images can be said to portray what you *could have*, your desired dreams, if you (also) gamble with the company, that is, deposit money, make use of their bonuses and possibly that way make your dreams come true.

The initial comment in the *Welcome inside the cottage* ad connects to the general and self-evident discursive “truth” about gambling ads as loud and annoying, an attitude from which the Casinostugan ad distances itself audio-verbally by Ture (*casino commercials can be so stressful*). Also, pictorially the distancing is achieved by showing hooves shutting windows to the ad sounds on TV, and by turning off the radio to restore the calm serenity of the cottage surroundings.

The main function of a casino gambling ad is, of course, to encourage people to gamble with the company. Seemingly though, in both ad examples, gambling as a social practice is de-prioritized in relation to what is portrayed as the main thing, enjoying the beauty and calmness of country life (on a summer day or a windy, snowy winter night). Gambling, when mentioned, is done *if we want some excitement* in the cottage and *lucky there is both warmth and excitement* to be had should “we” want it. The “we” is designed to align Ture with the audience who, supposedly, also enjoys (or wants to enjoy) his way of living and shares the occasional excitement of gambling. Visually, gambling as an activity is only seen in short sequences showing gaming wheel graphics on Ture’s iPad screen (Figure 6).

Figure 6. 3-Second Shot of Gaming Activity (2014)



Gambling, then, is first and foremost represented as a practice that may add value to one’s quiet country life rather than be enjoyed in a hectic, frantic, and

dramatized way, chasing big wins. It is downgraded in relation to what is portrayed as the main quality of life, made explicit in phrases such as *for what casino in the*

world can beat this (showing the cottage lake view or the cozy log fire). Also, allegedly, gambling with Casinostugan is something entirely different (and hence better) than annoying gambling companies that loudly try to attract consumers via other media technologies, thus disturbing the much-valued peace of Ture's cottage. As a social practice, gambling is recontextualized from an external, loud, and lively activity to an internal one. It is something to be enjoyed alone within the confined walls of a cozy cottage. Money or wins are not in focus other than as "deposits" which are "doubled," by the company, focusing on gambling as a gift rather than a give-away of personal resources, thus concealing the actual practices of gambling from explicit view (cf. Kroon, 2020). Comparisons can here be drawn to the arguments in Nicoll and Albarrán-Torres (2022) regarding the iconographic strategies of digital-media play where "camouflaging" is used to construct a sense of what Gephart (2001) calls *safe risk* gambling.

The fact that Ture, the main represented participant in Casinostugan's early ads, is not only a fictional character, but a person in a moose suit could result in a purely comical effect, causing the audience to write the brand off as slightly ridiculous and childish. However, one could argue that the comical ambition is not prioritized but only achieved for a surprise effect when the hooves are shown doing human things, putting a log on the fire or holding a newspaper before Ture the Moose's entire identity is revealed and he starts talking to the audience "on camera" (see Figure 7 for an example). A moose cow was not even considered as a possibility according to Stefan Leijon; the stallion moose having, supposedly, a natural broad appeal irrelevant of gender of the audience. Of course, this makes it a normative and patriarchal communicative choice which means the ads are still highly gendered, if not in a feminized way.

Figure 7. Ture The Moose (2015)



When looking closely at the communicative achievements of having a moose as the main character in this online casino ad campaign, a multifold of purposes can be discerned. From the production point of view, an actor in a moose costume was not only much more cost-effective than an expensive celebrity, but stood out from the crowd when it came to existing personalities in gambling ads, according to Stefan Leijon. The moose as a symbol for casino gambling is not exclusive to the Swedish Ture and Casinostugan but is used as a symbol for other casino venues such as The Crazy Moose Casino Mountlake Terrace in Washington, USA, and in the name as in Casino Moose Jaw in Canada. There are also casino games such as the video slot game Moose Vamoose which features an animated goofy-looking moose accompanied by atmospheric banjo music.

Phillips (1996) states that animals have commonly held cultural meanings to people, arguing that animal-

based characters in advertising can convey those meanings and transfer them to products. The moose has a particularly prominent role in Swedish culture, so much so that it is considered a most "spell-binding" and "gracious" national symbol for Sweden (Johansson, 2019). The animal even has its own humorous comic magazine, *Hälge*, animated by Lars Mortimer. The narrative focuses on the somewhat melancholic moose *Hälge* and his life in the woods outside of the village of Avliden (Eng. Deceased). Also, "Ture Skogman" is a play on a popular singer/composer/actor Thore Skogman who rose to Swedish fame in the mid 1950's and was known for his jolly personality and upbeat, accordion-based, sing-along melodies and fun lyrics. The "skog" in "Skogman" also translates to "forest." In addition to these culturally relevant associations, the interest in moose in Sweden has spiked from 2019 and onwards as the Public Service Broadcaster Sveriges Television (SVT) started airing *Den stora älgvandringen* (Eng. The Great

Moose Migration) as a “slow TV” event (cf. Leyda & Brinch, 2020; Puijk, 2021). The 3-week-long program captures walking and swimming moose 24/7 and has become very popular among audiences and is commissioned for a fifth season in 2023.

Ture the Moose in Casinostugan is anthropomorphized in the sense that he is given a human name referring to a male person, Ture, and he is dressed in men’s clothing (shirt, sweater) on his upper body (Figure 7). Furthermore, he speaks in Swedish and orients to the audience in familiar ways with regards to body language, gestures, and gaze. If not in a voice-over, Ture’s character addresses the audience in frontal medium shots in looks-to-camera like many broadcasting orientations where a “mediated quasi-interaction” (Thompson, 1995) is established with viewers. The look-to-camera is a common broadcasting strategy when it comes to constructing a “communicative relationship” with the audience (Scannell, 1989). The “eye” connection also suggests intimacy and closeness to Ture as a “represented individual” (Ledin & Machin, 2020).

The associative value-laden links between Ture the Moose and the product, Casinostugan, can now be unpacked. Although highly recognizable as an esteemed giant of the Swedish forest, it is rare to spot a moose in the wild. It is often talked of as majestic and mystic. Rarity, superiority and uniqueness in a world of cheap and loud forgettable copies may thus constitute important values transferred from moose to the online casino brand. Similarly, the moose is a shy and, normally, non-aggressive animal with huge, kind-looking, brown eyes which are replicated onto Ture. Thus, sentiments of kindness, caring and friendliness are also conveyed through the fictional animal and transformed onto the Casinostugan brand. Ture’s reassuringly male, northern dialect and low base voice connote not only the prior value of casualness and a slowness of pace, but also a grown-up sphere and values of trustworthiness and sincerity. Northerners in Sweden are, stereotypically of course, known for their extreme lack of a stressful lifestyle, devotion to nature

and their minimal small talk abilities. The voice of Ture therefore connects the brand to nature, a casual, outdoor lifestyle and a no-stress attitude to life, which is the opposite of the standard image of a busy and loud (online) casino environment.

The usage of a moose character has some further benefits in relation to the audience. For one, it steers clear of the recurring public debate in Sweden regarding the unethical and potentially immoral behavior of sports celebrities as they engage in gambling advertising (Arvidsson, 2018). It also plants the online casino gambling activity in the land between fiction (through the obviously fictional character) and reality (through the anthropomorphism and realistic settings) where “anything can happen,” and where you are kept safe with the help of the reliable casino company and the reassuring Ture. Perhaps the (superficial) power relation effect can be said to bear some resemblance to the influencer-representing-an-ordinary-gambler who tries out games in casinos and posts review videos on YouTube (Nicoll & Johnson, 2019). Instead of larger-than-life celebrities, “ordinary gamblers” as well as a non-threatening moose here construct a sense of identification and authenticity in relation to the audience.

Narratives, Discourses, and Salient Characters in the Later Casinostugan Ads (2019-22)

Jumping forwards in time to 2019 and 2021/22 respectively, several significant changes regarding the Casinostugan narratives and discourses can be seen. Notably, as ownership has changed, the advertising agency that designed the earlier ads has also changed. Ture the moose has become slightly redundant as a visible symbol for the brand but is mostly present in voice-overs. Instead, in 2019, one meets the character, Marie. She is seen gambling at Casinostugan on her phone in her living room recliner. Beside her is, supposedly, her male partner who is watching football on TV (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Marie Gambling on Her Phone (2019)



When Marie is said to win 44 000 Swedish crowns with which she can do whatever she wants, she looks over at the man and apparently wishes him away as his recliner is suddenly empty and he shows up among the audience on the TV screen. Upon noting his absence, Marie shuts off the TV with her remote control with a slight smirk on her face while Ture-as-voiceover says, *well, sometimes it pays off to take it easy*. An image of the trademark Ture rounds off the ad as he speaks the brand name reassuringly from an opening in a red timbered wall.

The Marie ad may be argued to invoke a certain type of female empowerment as she is the main character and gets to erase her boring hubby from her life with her winnings. However, she is portrayed in a slightly malicious rather than positive way signified by her bored and mocking facial expression as she beams the man away from his recliner. Incidentally, her character illustrates a commonly expressed and “problematic gender-biased discourse” in gambling studies (cf. Palmer Du Preez et al., 2021) where women

predominantly gamble because they are escaping personal pressures, are bored, lonely, socially isolated, depressed or buying time from problems (Corney & Davis, 2010). This contrasts with what gambling studies find men to primarily do, that is, gamble for the enjoyment and excitement of the game (Samuelsson et al., 2019). Although Marie is the winner of money here, she comes across as a stereotyped “man hater,” if in a slightly underplayed way.

In one of the latest video ads released in July 2021 (also broadcast in 2022), a group of lads are seen sitting around in an ordinary-looking, slightly dated kitchen. Two are booking a trip with “The Finland Ferry,” a well-known Swedish leisure trip choice for those wanting to stock up on tax-free booze and go dancing to corny, live music while crossing the waters to Finland on a 24- hour round-trip (Figure 9). The third lad interrupts the pair booking the trip online with an *Oooo I just won with Casinostugan. Upgrade the cabins!* The Ture voiceover then invites the audience into Casinostugan with 200 free spins and the ad ends.

Figure 9. Cabin Upgrade Made Possible by Winnings (2021-22)



Here, the participants are all male including the voiceover which is recognizable as Ture. The constructed audience address is thus solely communicating male identities, activities and bonding. The slightly dated kitchen design and simple kitchen furniture, along with the lads’ casual looks and clothing, connote a working/middle-class, rural context where it may still be (stereotypically) cool to book a Finland ferry trip, an activity which may simultaneously be considered distinctly unhip by an urban, contemporary, young audience. Although no longer focusing on cozy cottage life, Casinostugan continues to primarily situate its participants away from urban, stressful living, and place them in the more slow-paced life in the country. The brand also continues to emphasize moderate winnings (enough to upgrade the cabins) rather than luring audiences by constructing Big Win scenarios.

Discussion and Conclusion

The pathologization of issues posed by gambling advertising in much research, and the (almost) sole focus on risk with regards to extent and certain targeted content features, tend to generate the same “truth” with little variation; (online casino) gambling ads pose a risk to the public and problem gamblers’ health. The underlying assumptions about their impact on people’s minds, and even on particular vulnerable groups such as women, seem reminiscent of The Hypodermic Needle Theory from the 1920’s (Lasswell, 1927). The theory presupposed that people were highly influenced by media content in more or less the same way, passively accepting what they were exposed to. Today, this way of thinking is deemed highly inadequate when it comes to understanding communication and media influence. However, it serves as an uncomplicated and therefore attractive media effects model to politicians

who need to show legislative action in relation to serious societal challenges (cf. Livingstone, 1996).

Arguments relating to risk seem based, at least all too often, on what seems to be “the generic gambling ad” containing gender and ethnic stereotypes, larger-than-life celebrities and the promotion of unattainable dreams and wins. The analysis of Casinostugan exposes another type of gambling ad content which, subsequently, is in need of another kind of risk assessment and discussion. Casinostugan positions its brand on the Swedish market in 2014, five years ahead of a de-regulation of the Swedish gambling market, but in relation to an already critical discussion around gambling ads. The main discursive strategy for the brand becomes one of Othering – Casinostugan offers the opposite to what everyone else is offering; no annoying commercials, no celebrities, no promotion of unrealistic dreams and visions, and, notably, no or very little feminization.

The Othering discourse is a positioning which is largely accomplished, I argue, by means of banal nationalistic (cf. Billig, 1995) representations of Sweden. This refers to how a sense of a Swedish identity and Swedish nationhood is being reproduced through recognizable signs and symbols in the everyday consumption of television (ads). The most prominent objects and ideas in this banal national representation are the Swedish cottage dream associations, the connection to nature through the majestic Swedish moose, and the stereotypical expressions of “boring,” undramatic yet recognizable country, working-class life. The brand thus organizes a relationship with consumers which consists of an inclusive “we” who enjoy Casinostugan’s lazy living, country-life concept, and simultaneously, a “we” that Others the hyped-up, energy-boosted Big Win ads that make up the competition at the time. The collective message, from an audience point of view, is that gambling with Casinostugan is equal to “being a true Swede,” banally acknowledging such “typical” Swedish values as moderation, quality and stability.

Embedded within and/or around the Othering and banal nationalism discourses is a discourse of coziness. It could be argued that this discourse is where the real ideological work is going on, which makes it the most interesting one from a risk argument perspective. It is manifested in images such as the cozy red cottage, the many indoor representations (as opposed to the loud, annoying (and risky) outdoors which is quite literally shut out by Ture as he slams the window in the first 2014 ad), and in images such as the cozy fire which provides warmth against the chilly wind and snow outside the cottage in the wintertime. Not least, the coziness is personified, or rather, anthropomorphized, in the Ture character’s looks and actions, oriented as they are to establishing a warm, friendly, easy-going and symmetrical power relationship with audiences. The discourse of coziness works in a similar way to the process of camouflage (Nicoll & Albarrán-Torres, 2022),

in this case by recontextualizing (potentially harmful) gambling into safe risk-taking which you can engage in if we want some excitement in the otherwise quiet and cozy cottage.

As ownerships, design studios, and advertising strategies have changed since 2014, the described discourses have become less clearly articulated. Ture no longer fronts the brand in a prominent position. Instead, several different characters occupy leading roles, as part of a more heterogeneous brand narrative. However, the feminized address is still by and large absent apart from the odd female character and the cross-stitched-looking logotype connoting traditional feminine-coded practices (embroidery). The brand still keeps the low-key profile by representing ordinary people winning moderate sums, still appealing to the Swedish ideology of not overdoing anything but opting for what is “lagom” (moderate). Of course, these types of brand representations may be equally seductive to a specific audience who find the cultural references of moderate gambling appealing. Interestingly, it is not this type of ideological construction of moderation that the regulators target in their proposals for more gambling ad restrictions. Rather, those suggestions seem based on their sheer volume, or on ideas of the dangers with the generic and excessively represented gambling ads on which much gambling research arguments on risk seem to be based.

I conclude by repeating the argument which formed this study’s starting point. Gambling ads, including online casino gambling ads, should be recognized as complex, multimodally constructed and layered texts which are produced, consumed and made sense of in a particular socio-cultural context. These contextually sensitive factors need to be made relevant in our analyses if we are to understand the gambling ads’ meaning-making potentials and their “risks” in a more nuanced, and in-depth way.

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Acknowledgements

Åsa Kroon wishes to thank Stefan Leijon, Creative Director at House of Lions, formerly Creative Director at A New Dialogue, for his kindness and willingness to share his experiences of, and insights into, designing and launching the brand Casinostugan.

Conflict of Interest and Funding Declaration

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. Neither has the author been funded by any other bodies than the faculty for the last three years. The author has never received any funding from any agency connected to gambling at any time. This study was conducted independently from any influence of the gambling industry in Sweden or elsewhere. The interviewee, Stefan Leijon, consented to be interviewed for the study with the explicit aim to provide a background to the Casinostugan design concept. As a courtesy, he was given the option to fact-check a late draft which he accepted. This did not result in any changes from the original draft. In no way has Leijon, or any person connected to his design studio at the time, been involved in any part of the design or execution of this study. Thus, the author has exercised complete control and independence over the study, in every respect.

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