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## **The influence of football celebrity endorsements on the attention paid to advertising: eye tracker research related to amateur online poker players in Portugal**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this research is to determine how football stars influence the attention paid to online poker advertising and whether a corresponding nationality might influence the perception of audiences between 18 and 24 years of age, which is the adult age group most vulnerable to this type of game. Using an eye tracking technique, a sample of 60 Portuguese young people who are amateur online poker players has been studied. The results suggest that affinity with a sports star increases the level of attention paid to the image of the star. Otherwise, the poker hand registers the greatest amount of attention. Sports stars who are currently playing attract more attention than those who are retired, and smiles make it possible to attract even more attention from the audience. These stars facilitate advertising brands in associating online gaming with a form of leisure.

### **Introduction**

In 2016, the Portuguese Tourism Institute began issuing administrative authorizations for gaming operators and online gambling. By the end of 2021, there were 26 licensed operators, with Pokerstars and 888 Poker being the only ones that have an online poker license, all pursuant to Decree-Law 66/2015, of 29 April. With regard to growth, this sector has expanded exponentially in recent years. In 2021, the revenues of these operators totalled 508.5 million euros, of which 49.58% were sports bets (77.28% allocated to football), and the remaining 50.42% corresponded to online gambling. The number of newly registered players was 856,200, of which 37.33% were between 25 and 34 years of age, although the sector with the strongest growth (+35.90%) was the profile

between the ages of 18 and 24, which already represents 21.80% of players<sup>1</sup>. No data have been provided regarding gender differences, so the closest estimate for neighbouring Spain is that 82.73% of active players are men, versus 17.27% who are women<sup>2</sup>, with men being precisely the ones who are exposed to higher rates of pathological behaviour derived from gambling<sup>3</sup>. The highest concentration of Portuguese players have been found in Porto (21.7%), Lisbon (19.6%), and Aveiro-Setúbal (15.9%)<sup>1</sup>.

Despite such growth, online gambling involves a number of risks due to the disorders it can produce in people who engage in irresponsible gambling practices. This situation, together with the dramatic increase in the sector's advertising campaigns, has become a concern for the governments of European countries, as it could become a problem for society from the perspective of addiction, especially for the youngest members of society. For these reasons, the aim of this research is to determine how football stars influence the attention placed on online poker advertising and whether a corresponding nationality influences the perception of 18-24 year olds, which is the group of adults who are most vulnerable to this type of gambling.

### *The profile of gamblers and the risks involved*

Gambling can result in cognitive, emotional and behavioural disorders in the case of irresponsible, compulsive or pathological gambling<sup>4</sup>, but its harmful effects are tripled when the game is played online due to the ease of access, availability of free time, lack of control<sup>5</sup>, and suggestions made through advertising<sup>6</sup>, among other factors. Young university students between 18 and 24 years of age are the ones who are most vulnerable<sup>7</sup>, in addition to adolescents, due to their status as minors with an especially high level of susceptibility<sup>8</sup>.

Despite the fact that the player profile is mostly male, the proportion of female players increases in the online game environment<sup>7</sup>, though a feeling of guilt and shame still persists, which explains why their sessions are shorter and involve less spending. Moreover, the motivation to play results from boredom in the search for leisure activities<sup>9</sup>. In a previous investigation carried out with regard to the advertising of online gambling in Spain<sup>10</sup>, the scarce presence of female players in advertising compared to male players was highlighted by *Autocontrol*, the association in Spain that issues rulings on compliance with self-regulation codes, when it ruled that the fulfilment of parity with regard to the presence, or tasks, performed by women in advertising was not necessary, but stated that their presence should be 'a reflection of a diverse and pluralistic society of men and women'<sup>11</sup>.

Online players show a certain fidelity to their playing discipline. In a study with eye tracking among young men from 18 to 35 years of age, poker players showed greater preference in the attention paid to images of this game compared to other types of leisure play<sup>12</sup>, and the same situation occurred with players of other types games regarding their attention to the games they most preferred to play. Non-players, on the other hand, paid more attention to board games rather than games of chance.

Poker players have been classified into three groups<sup>13</sup>: recreational, with less likelihood of addiction; online players, who have the highest rate of being self-perceived

experts; and multiple players, which is a group too large to limit the classification to the type of poker played. Poker players who play specifically online are classified from an economic and financial point of view into three categories: professionals, whose only source of income is online poker; semi-professionals, who play for money but have other means of income; and amateurs, who do not depend on poker money for income<sup>14</sup>.

### *The theory of parasocial interaction and its application to sport*

The concept of parasocial interaction was first formulated by Horton and Wohl<sup>15</sup>, who suggested that media audiences would engage in a new form of social interactions with prominent figures they had previously seen on television. They argued that audiences might experience the illusion of an interpersonal relationship with media communicators from a distance. They labelled this type of relationship *parasocial*, and they proposed that audiences would respond to media characters as if they were in a typically social or interpersonal relationship, even though there is only one-way communication. Individuals would eventually learn to interact with the stylised images presented by the mass media<sup>16</sup>, even without two-way communication taking place.

These parasocial connections explain why audiences perceive that famous media personalities are communicating directly with them<sup>17</sup>, thus exerting an influence on the viewers' perceptions, who emulate the celebrity's behaviour whenever possible<sup>18</sup>. In the end, these parasocial relationships allow the fans and consumers of these celebrities to experience a deep sense of connection, commonly referred to as "fandom"<sup>19</sup>. This high level of intensity enables the development of the viewer's parasocial relationship with celebrities and the contextual scenarios in which they appear<sup>20</sup>. At that point, consumers can see the values of the celebrities and they can exert their influence, reaffirming the parasocial relationship and demonstrating their loyalty to the celebrity<sup>21</sup>.

With a more contemporary focus, Hull and Lewis<sup>22</sup> suggest that the concept of parasocial interaction might play an important role in the preference that people develop toward sports media personalities, although younger audiences prefer social networks to television as they allow greater involvement<sup>23</sup> in parasocial relationships between athletes and fans<sup>24</sup>, applying this theory to the action of influencers on social networks as well<sup>25</sup>. Despite this situation, the existence of parasocial relationships does not depend on the type of media used<sup>26</sup>, since what is important is the audience's desire to be part of the social world of the celebrity, who becomes the role model to follow<sup>15,27</sup>.

In this regard, Hartmann, Stuke and Daschmann<sup>28</sup> have pointed out that positive parasocial relationships between Formula 1 drivers and their fans increased the level of interest displayed by the audience. Similarly, a study by Spinda, Earnhardt and Hugenberg<sup>29</sup> found that parasocial interaction among fans of the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) led to increased activity among the devotees and an upsurge in fandom. Kassing and Sanderson<sup>30</sup> investigated fan-athlete interaction on Twitter, as well as on athletes' websites in the field of professional cycling. Finally, researchers have also studied how the motivations for following social networks or parasocial athletes differ on Twitter<sup>31</sup>, and which traits affect the creation of parasocial tendencies in individuals<sup>32</sup>.

### *Gambling advertisements and celebrity endorsement*

Given the fact that advertising encourages participation in gambling<sup>33</sup> this research aims to identify the attention that this promotion draws in young online poker players. For more than two centuries, the European football business, betting operators, and the media have maintained ties in order to connect with audiences, but digitisation has meant that audiences have become active participants, surpassing their role as mere spectators<sup>34</sup>, and the marketing of bets has been integrated into the financial practices of many football clubs<sup>35</sup>. By associating gambling with sports and its qualities of health and leisure, the mainstreaming of gambling as a form of entertainment has become possible<sup>36</sup>. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that a higher frequency of television sports consumption by young adolescents has an impact on their increased intention to participate in betting, and this fosters a positive attitude toward gambling operators, with this feeling occurring much more frequently among the male audience<sup>37</sup>.

An evaluation of televised advertisements related to online gambling between 2006 and 2010 in the USA shows that the emphasis has shifted from humour, profit and leisure to the use of celebrities, emotion, trust and friendship; in other words, they now focus more on the emotions of the game rather than the game itself, which is a consequence of having begun to attract people who have already experienced the positive feelings associated with gambling<sup>38</sup>.

Celebrity endorsement allows brands to attract attention to their advertising and generate spontaneous recall, which is more effective when the celebrities are sports personalities as opposed to TV presenters, actors or musicians<sup>39</sup>. It is essential for an audience to be receptive to the message endorsed by any celebrity<sup>40</sup>, but when a famous athlete appears in an advertising context consistent with the athlete's professional experience, there is a commanding transfer of the athlete's persona to the brand's image<sup>41</sup>, thereby equating the brand with some of the sports star's personality traits<sup>42</sup>.

The search for celebrity support of brands through different forms of advertising is no coincidence, and the scientific literature on the subject clearly shows the elevated level of esteem they obtain from the public thanks to the high degree of attention, interest and memories generated, as well as the economic return<sup>43</sup>.

Among the benefits, one can also observe an influence on consumer purchase decisions, which is affected by their perceptions of the advertisements and the promoted brand<sup>44</sup>. However, if the athlete were in a scandal at some point, this would produce a negative reaction in the audience that would influence consumer behaviour<sup>45</sup> and reduce the value of the advertising or sponsoring company itself, especially among those who do not identify with it<sup>46</sup>. Therefore, athletes are already working on their personal brand on the basis of the four main advertising appeals they offer: endorsement experience, confidence, attractiveness, and enticement<sup>47</sup>.

To be more specific, the presence of sports stars in the advertising of online gambling is a consequence of the positive values that sports can bring to brands in the mind of the public<sup>48</sup>, and as professional football becomes a sports industry<sup>49</sup> with global, media-driven, hyper-commercialisation<sup>50</sup>, big sports stars soon learn to identify with the

corporate culture of football clubs that have been turned into sports trademarks<sup>51</sup>, and secondly, to identify with the brands they represent.

Attractiveness, credibility, confidence, experience, skills, and sympathy based on the appearance, behaviour or personality of sports stars, are variables that impact consumer behaviour<sup>52</sup>. However, beyond their traditional role as product prescribers, they also allow brand equity to be generated when there is consistency between corporate identity and their image as sports athletes<sup>53</sup>. This improves their affinity with the audience when the message conveyed by sports stars is more natural and less controlled by brand discourse<sup>54</sup>, allowing all of this activity to achieve symbolic, experiential and emotional brand benefits associated with a fan of a sports star regarding his or her sense of belonging, identification and sense of purpose, while at the same time achieving the objective of persuasion by the advertising campaign<sup>55</sup>. In the end, public loyalty to the brand increases<sup>56</sup>, which explains why football clubs have amassed such high levels of loyalty to the point where some organizations have even become corporate brands<sup>57</sup>, and authentic lovemarks<sup>58</sup>.

The fighting spirit of sports competition inherent in the show itself, both in victory and defeat, is a key element in understanding the transformation of football players into celebrities<sup>59</sup>. Two quintessential cases are those of Portuguese player Cristiano Ronaldo and Brazilian player Neymar Jr. Neymar has transcended the sports field as a result of his notoriety in the media narrative as a celebrity who has been transformed into a model capable of influencing the behaviour, ideology, and image of young Brazilians who see him as a representation of their aspirations<sup>60</sup>. Cristiano Ronaldo, on the other hand, has been considered a global celebrity with an especially strong impact on young fans of his country who see their own aspirations of social position in his personality<sup>61</sup>, while at the same time their identity is shaped by masculine rhetoric<sup>62</sup>.

The level of a brand's affinity is determined by the attraction and interest of the participants toward the brand<sup>63</sup>, and this influences the self-regulation objective of the subjects when they process the information<sup>64</sup>, hence the importance of identification with the celebrity. Apart from affinities that consumers have toward certain countries, and consequently toward their products and the advertising of their brands, negative attitudes toward foreign countries in general as a consequence of ethnocentric tendencies have an impact, and this is demonstrated by a preference for that which is national<sup>65</sup>.

The presence of these sports celebrities is a vehicle for transmitting values and lifestyles, despite the fact that the cult of their personality blurs the boundaries between the person, or subject, and what that person represents<sup>66</sup>. The media participate in this social construction of the hero's identity by contextualizing the sporting event in mythical semantics<sup>67</sup>, and the informative value of the sports stars increases the attention that the media pay to all of their activities, despite the fact that sensationalism and the immediacy of social networks, even having allowed greater interaction and commitment between sports athletes as brand ambassadors and the public<sup>68</sup>, have increased the risk to brands with regard to misconduct by celebrities<sup>69</sup>. Misdeeds have an especially negative impact on fans when they refer to transgressions of moral, ethical or legal standards<sup>70</sup>, resulting in negative consequences for the brands that rely on their image, despite the fact that previous familiarity with the brand mitigates these negative effects<sup>71</sup>.

We only need to check the social network statistics of these two sports stars to see the high number of fans they had at the end of August 2022, highlighting Cristiano Ronaldo with 477.0 million followers on Instagram, compared to 177.0 for Neymar, respectively. Despite fan loyalty from countries with a strong affinity as well as fans of quality football, we cannot ignore the detractors created by the sports stars when changing clubs. Thus, two days after Cristiano Ronaldo's presentation by Juventus in July of 2018, he lost 1.2 million followers on Twitter, probably all of whom were fans of Real Madrid, which was the club he was leaving.

As a result, the contribution that sports stars make to brands seems to be relevant, and they have become a resource used in the advertising of gaming, and especially online poker. In fact, celebrity endorsement has been cited as the key factor in China's Macau City becoming the world's leading destination for casino tourism in 2006, even surpassing Las Vegas<sup>72</sup>. By combining celebrity endorsement with advertising, it is possible to influence people's emotions, their attitudes toward brands and, consequently, their consumer behaviour<sup>73</sup>. Furthermore, gambling advertisements often depict characters and situations that are filled with emotion and celebration, which promotes a social representation of gambling behaviour<sup>35</sup>. In short, a high level of parasocial interaction by celebrity endorsers might have a positive influence on brand credibility and product involvement<sup>74</sup>, yet the following research questions must be answered first in order to make that determination: What levels of attention do audiences pay to sports stars who endorse online poker advertising? Does the affinity of the audience to the nationality of the sports star have an influence on attention? Do celebrity endorsers compete with gambling itself in terms of capturing attention, or do they induce their own specific narratives? Are there differences in attention based on the gender of the audience?

## **Materials and Methods**

### *Objectives*

The overall objective of this research is to determine how public affinity with the nationality of sports stars influences the attention paid to the advertising in which they appear, particularly that of online poker.

The specific objectives are the following:

- To establish differences in the attention paid to a sports celebrity in advertising according to the affinity of the audience.
- To verify the attention that gambling receives in relation to the sports star who promotes it.
- To analyse the attention given to the sports star in relation to other individuals next to whom they appear in the advertisements.
- To identify differences in attention according to gender.

### *Research instrument*

To achieve these objectives, neurocommunication, or neuromarketing<sup>75</sup>, has been used as a way of measuring the cognitive processing of advertising campaigns based on a

combination of Psychology, Neuroscience and Economics<sup>76</sup>. Using the biometric technique of eye tracking, precise information on the visual attention paid by subjects has been obtained from ocular movements toward certain areas of interest (AOIs)<sup>77</sup>, and in this way, the limitations of surveys and focus groups in the transmission of behaviour by individuals of which they are not always aware have been resolved<sup>78</sup>. Nevertheless, there are still certain limitations, due to the fact that by simulating a natural viewing environment, the use of non-intrusive equipment takes precedence, resulting in measurements that are usually less precise than in the health sciences, where more complex brain activity equipment is used, such as electroencephalography (EEG) and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI)<sup>78</sup>.

### *Sample*

A total of 60 young Portuguese university students took part in the study between May and July, a period in which none of the major world events related to the subject under study were broadcast. Moreover, it was conducted in the mornings and afternoons at the University of Aveiro on a voluntary basis, even though two subjects did not provide valid answers. Identification of those subjects who did not pay attention was recorded by using the software and live monitoring of the gaze plot on another computer located in the room next to the one where the experiment was carried out. The sample size is suitable for a neuromarketing study, the validity of which starts from 15 subjects<sup>79</sup>. In this convenience sample, the selection filter profile was an amateur online poker player, a university student between 18 and 24 years of age, someone who plays at least once a month, and who achieves the present distribution of players by gender. Taking into account that professional and semi-professional players prioritize income generation, amateurs were selected for this study, as they were expected to be more receptive, in theory, to the advertising of the brands. In any case, although it appears that people who gamble in the sports field are motivated by money, the issue of whether or not they are sports fans does not seem to have a strong influence<sup>80</sup>. The profile of young university students from 18 to 24 years of age was also delimited, as scientific literature considers this group the most vulnerable, with the exception of minors, who have increased susceptibility. Currently, 85% of players are men (group 1) and 15% are women (group 2), though the disproportional random sampling used was not representative (83% vs. 17%). The choice of using the University of Aveiro was prompted by its proximity to Oporto, just 80 kilometres away, and to the fact that this university attracts students from many other Portuguese cities, with Oporto and Aveiro accounting for 37.6% of the active players in Portugal.

### *Data collection*

In this research, eye tracker model TOBII X3-120 and TOBII Studio software have been used for data collection, which provides the average attention results of each subject, statistically analysing the data obtained with SPSS v.25.

The stimuli, presented randomly, are two extended versions of the advertising campaign entitled *The Game*, from the online poker brand known as *Pokerstars*, which

are easily comparable for providing a similar view of the game as a form of leisure entertainment and featuring sports stars of the highest calibre. In stimulus 1 (S1), the protagonist is Portuguese football player Cristiano Ronaldo (CR), and in stimulus 2 (S2), Brazilian footballer Neymar Jr. is accompanied by the ex-footballer Ronaldo Nazario, also from Brazil. As the participants are Portuguese nationals, the choice of this advertising campaign allows for a comparative evaluation of the spectator's affinity with the sports star. In all versions of the advertisement for this brand, top-level football players have appeared, so it is not possible to include a third stimulus without the presence of celebrity endorsers. Therefore, all subjects were exposed to an identical experimental situation and viewed the same stimuli while being monitored. As such, an exploratory study has been established with an intra-subject design and random assignment to the different levels of experimental treatment (image sequences). The stimuli were introduced randomly, and the occurrence of each was randomly rotated<sup>75</sup>.

The following dynamic areas of interest (AOIs) have been delimited in both stimuli, which allows us to follow the attention paid to the following elements when watching videos with movement (Table 1):

*[Table 1 over here]*

The dependent variable is the attention that subjects pay to stimuli and their corresponding areas of interest. The independent variables are the gender of the participants, the age (all of them are amateur poker players and from Portugal, geographically), and the protagonist of the stimuli, either a Portuguese or Brazilian sports star. The heat maps are qualitatively assessed, and the AOI attention is quantified according to the number of fixations (fixation count - FC), the duration of fixations (fixation duration - FD) and the time that elapses before the first fixation on the stimulus occurs (time to first fixation - TFF).

### *Ethics statement*

This research was given a favourable report by the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Applied Communication Studies of the Faculty of Media and Communication at Complutense University of Madrid. In accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, participants signed the informed agreement for their voluntary participation and their anonymous contribution resulting from the use of the accumulated data.

## **Results**

The attention registered by the logo of the advertising brand (Table 2) was similar in the two stimuli, both in the number of fixations (FC=20.19 vs. 17.97;  $p=0.113$ ) and in the average duration of each fixation (FD=0.35 vs. 0.36;  $p=0.611$ ). The only significant differences occurred when recording the first attention to the logo stimulus, this being a natural consequence of the different moments in which it appeared in the advertisement, since the total duration of its presence as well as the size and position within the advertisement were similar.

*[Table 2 over here]*

In the initial questionnaire to which the participants responded, 41.67% stated that Cristiano Ronaldo was their favourite footballer, while another 26.67% mentioned other Portuguese players, yet there was no preference for Neymar. The figure of 93.33% indicated that the Portuguese National Football team was their favourite squad, and regarding brands, 46.67% of the participants rated Pokerstars as their favourite online poker site. Consequently, the conscious responses of the subjects already reflected an affinity with the sports stars according to their nationality.

In this regard, the face of Portuguese footballer Cristiano Ronaldo and that of the Brazilian player Neymar provided different results (Table 3). Quite significantly, Neymar's face recorded the first attention (TFF=128.60 vs. 120.79;  $p=0.000$ ), although it was a consequence of the different moments in which they were first seen in the respective advertisements. Although Cristiano Ronaldo received substantially more average eye fixations (FC=128.60 vs. 120.79;  $p=0.001$ ), the average duration of each fixation was significantly longer in the case of Neymar (FD=0.21 vs. 0.23;  $p=0.030$ ).

*[Table 3 over here]*

The poker hands in both versions of the advertisement (Table 4) appear at the same time and have the same duration. Hence, there are no significant differences regarding the first attention to the stimulus (TFF=39.55 vs. 38.11;  $p=2.12$ ). However, it is significant to point out that Neymar's hand registered a higher number of ocular fixations (FC=19.70 vs. 29.67;  $p=0.000$ ), and of longer duration (FD=0.22 vs. 0.27;  $p=0.000$ ), which seems to confirm a lower level of interest in the celebrity and more interest in the product when there is no affinity by nationality.

*[Table 4 over here]*

When comparing the sports stars' two rival female players who have a leading role in both advertisements (Table 5), a significant difference can be seen between the greater attention paid to Cristiano Ronaldo's rival than to Neymar's, both in the number of eye fixations (FC=46.70 vs. 30.05;  $p=0.000$ ) and in the duration of each of those fixations (FD=0.24 vs. 0.17;  $p=0.000$ ). Thus, appearing seated next to a sports star seems to diminish the attention in favour of the bigger star, yet appearing in an independent shot allows more attention to be captured. Although a faster first attention toward Cristiano Ronaldo's female rival was equally significant (TFF=28.67 vs. 38.93;  $p=0.000$ ), once again, this is a consequence of her previous appearance in the advertisement.

*[Table 5 over here]*

In stimulus S2, two Brazilian sports stars shared the advertisement. One is a current player, Neymar Jr., and the other is retired, Ronaldo Nazario. The face of Neymar (Table 6) registered significantly faster first attention (TFF=29.07 vs. 91.51;  $p=0.000$ ), which is a consequence of an earlier appearance in the advertisement, with more ocular fixations (FC=120.79 vs. 91.09;  $p=0.000$ ) and a longer duration for each of them (FD=0.23 vs. 0.21;  $p=0.026$ ), even though both of the athletes appeared on the screen for exactly the same amount of time during the advertisement.

*[Table 6 over here]*

A comparison of the poker hand of Neymar Jr. with that of Ronaldo Nazario (Table 7) showed consistency in the results obtained by the faces of both sports stars, since the former obtained faster first attention (TFF=38.11 vs. 107.35;  $p=0.000$ ), which again is a

consequence of an earlier appearance in the advertisement, as well as a higher number of fixations (FC=29.67 vs. 23.83;  $p=0.000$ ), each one of longer duration (FD=0.27 vs. 0.18;  $p=0.000$ ), and all of these categories showed significant differences.

*[Table 7 over here]*

With the aim of verifying whether the difference of attention between the sports star currently working and the one who is retired also occurred between the sports star and an anonymous person in the advertisement when sharing the scene, the differences in attention between Cristiano Ronaldo and the pizza delivery man were analysed at the moment when the two of them took a selfie together (Table 8). Despite sharing the same scene, it was confirmed that Cristiano Ronaldo recorded the first attention (TFF=92.70 vs. 95.93;  $p=0.000$ ), with a greater number of eye fixations (FC=8.26 vs. 4.29;  $p=0.000$ ) and with significant differences in both cases. Moreover, there was a longer duration of each ocular fixation, though the difference was not significant (FD=0.28 vs. 0.26;  $p=0.101$ ).

*[Table 8 over here]*

Despite the fact that the number of online female poker players is still below 20%, and in this research, they represented 17% of the sample, there are hardly any differences in the attention they registered compared to the men (Table 9). In stimulus S1, women recorded more eye fixations on Cristiano Ronaldo than on the pizza deliveryman (FC=3.98 vs. 5.80;  $p=0.001$ ). In stimulus S2, women paid significantly more attention to the logo of the advertising brand (FC=16.90 vs. 23.10,  $p=0.017$ ; FD=0.38 vs. 0.28,  $p=0.006$ ), and in addition, they registered a significantly higher number of eye fixations toward the female poker player who was the rival of the leading sports star (FC=31.10 vs. 25.00;  $p=0.015$ ). In all other cases, the differences were insignificant.

*[Table 9 over here]*

The qualitative analysis of the heat maps provided interesting data that complemented the quantitative research and confirmed greater attention registered toward the sports star when allied with the nationality of the public. When Cristiano Ronaldo appeared together with other anonymous protagonists (Figure 1), he always captured nearly all of the attention, except in the comical scene he shared with the pizza deliveryman when they took a selfie, where he registered higher attention, but not close to all of it. However, when Neymar Jr. appeared together with another participant, either a sports star or a female rival, the attention was shared. The importance of the smile in attracting attention should be pointed out, as the heat maps reveal.

*[Figure 1 over here]*

When the cards appeared in the foreground (Figure 2), this took precedence over the poker chips, although the shot and the movement of the camera caused attention to be progressively diverted toward the chips. This is where the influence of the sports star disappears in order to put the spotlight on the product being promoted.

*[Figure 2 over here]*

By contrast, when the beginning of the scene included the face of the sports star, the attention started shifting from his face to the cards, and ended up focusing on the poker chips. This issue can be seen more clearly by watching the movement of attention

in the gaze plots (Figure 3). As such, it appears that the celebrity can serve as a point of attention that directs the action away from himself toward the product.

*[Figure 3 over here]*

However, when the shot is more open, both Cristiano Ronaldo and Neymar attract more attention than the game itself (Figure 4). In these types of shots, the product itself, or the brands if that were the case, would go unnoticed by the public.

*[Figure 4 over here]*

In the moment prior to the final bet (Figure 5), the faces of the two stars grabbed the attention for the close-up, yet it was observed that the attention sought a greater area, given that the gestures of the protagonist might indicate a bluff that the participants are trying to guess, and it bears recalling that these were amateur online poker players, so an affinity for the game itself can be seen.

*[Figure 5 over here]*

The smiles captured more attention than the game itself (Figure 6) in the scenes in which they shared the same shot, a consequence of being associated with the joy of the winner, and a response to the interest of the advertising brands in linking the game to diversion and fun. This issue is controversial, as sports stars may be minimizing the risks of compulsive gambling when the entertaining aspect is not combined with healthy leisure, both when a game is won, and when it is lost.

*[Figure 6 over here]*

Finally, the sexist portrayal of women that online poker advertisers are capable of transmitting cannot be ignored, as refuge is taken in the masculine ideal that scientific literature has identified in the sports star protagonists of these advertisements (Figure 7), given that the overall statistics of attention toward the rival players of the sports stars is identified in the heat maps, and that the cleavage of the female players registered more attention than their face or their play, both by the group of men, and to a lesser extent by the group of women.

*[Figure 7 over here]*

## **Discussion**

The theory of parasocial relations was applied to this research to determine whether consumers who have an affinity for this type of advertising message, speaking of amateur online poker players, make a stronger connection with sports stars who endorse this product, as well as the contextual settings in which they appear (specifically poker gaming environments) due to the fact that they share the same nationality.

The results have confirmed that the audience was engaged in parasocial relationships with sports stars through their support of these celebrities in online poker advertising<sup>22,39</sup>, in such a way that their affinity with the stars, especially by young fans from the same country<sup>61</sup>, increased the attention toward their image as a prior step to their emulation in the context in which the stars appeared<sup>20</sup>. On the other hand, the lack of affinity increased attention to the poker hand, highlighting the parasocial interaction between football and poker fans, corroborating previous studies applied to other sports<sup>29</sup>. Likewise, the fact that the smiles attracted more attention and associated online gambling

with leisure confirms that advertising can promote gambling participation<sup>33</sup>, but also the positive values that sports can transmit to brands in the mind of the public<sup>70</sup>.

The sample of this research shows that the player's profile is still mostly male-dominated<sup>2,9</sup>, given the fact that even having established a quota of female participants that matched the 17% of current female players, the percentage of women coincided (17%) without the need to limit the number of men who participated on a voluntary basis.

Regarding the presence of female poker players in the advertisements analysed, it is necessary to take into account the gender factor in the attention paid by participants to their cleavage, especially by men, who exhibited greater intensity, but also by women in general. This confirms the use of sexist elements in the advertising of online gaming<sup>10</sup>, which received similar attention from both genders, though the attention was stronger among males. Although the differences registered in attention toward the group of women hardly differed from that of the men's group, what stands out is that it showed a significantly higher number of eye fixations toward the female poker player who appeared next to Neymar Jr., yet recorded a significantly higher number of eye fixations toward Cristiano Ronaldo when he appeared next to the pizza delivery man, so it seems that affinity toward national origin might have enhanced attention toward the Portuguese footballer.

The fact that the participants were filtered according to being amateur players was reflected in the attention results, with the sports stars taking precedence over the game, and the game outperforming the betting chips, confirming that this type of player, with less probability of addiction, does not give priority to income in their decision to play poker<sup>13,14</sup>.

In previous research conducted by the authors in Spain<sup>81</sup>, based on these Pokerstars advertisements, it became clear that Spanish university students between the ages of 18 and 24 with no affinity for the sports star focused their attention and emotion on the moments of group enjoyment. Attention levels were lower than all the other stimuli presented, which in their entirety were online poker advertisements with no celebrities.

Therefore, we conclude that the association of online poker with sports stars through advertising seeks to mainstream the game as a healthy form of leisure entertainment<sup>36</sup>, and this encourages a positive attitude toward the game by utilising the emotion, trust and friendship shown by sports celebrities in advertising<sup>38</sup>. Finally, the special influence that Cristiano Ronaldo has on young football fans of the same nationality<sup>61</sup> has been confirmed. It has also been demonstrated that the attention attracted by his role as a sports celebrity is more important than the attention paid to the products he advertises.

This conclusion confirms that the appearance of sports celebrities in advertising influences the perceptions of consumers who follow them, highlighting the attraction and friendliness that characterises athletes in endorsements<sup>82</sup>. For all these reasons, it seems necessary to promote greater regulation of the advertising of online gambling in order to safeguard the rights of vulnerable audiences, in addition to counteracting the activities of influencers on social networks<sup>25</sup>, which can also be seen in other sectors where addiction is a risk, such as the boom in cryptocurrency investments.

## Conclusions

The suggestive power of advertising to which young people are exposed can make them more vulnerable to the disorders caused by irresponsible gambling, and as advertising encourages the consumption of online gambling, the fostering of responsible advertising by brands is a priority.

Before the sports stars first appeared in the two versions of the advertisement, the attention registered by the brand logos was similar in both cases, although with greater intensity by the men's group. Therefore, it seems that a similar presence in the advertisements managed to capture similar attention in the participating subjects.

However, when considering the presence of sports stars and their affinity with the public, the conscious reactions of the young Portuguese participants indicate that 41.67% viewed Cristiano Ronaldo as their favourite football player, while Neymar Jr. did not appear in any of the answers, a question that reflects an emotional attachment based on the nationality of the participating subjects.

There were no differences in faster attention paid to the faces or the poker moves of the sports stars, regardless of whether they were Portuguese or Brazilian, since the significant differences that existed were a consequence of their appearance in ads at different times.

Cristiano Ronaldo received a greater number of eye fixations toward his face, although of shorter duration than in the case of Neymar. However, Neymar drew significant attention to his plays, with a greater number of eye fixations and longer duration, which suggests that when there is no affinity between the audience and the sports star, the game of poker they promote gains prominence over the celebrity.

Moreover, the current sports star received significantly more attention, both to his person and to his play, when compared to the retired sports star of the same nationality, despite having a similar role in the advertisement.

The female rivals of the sports stars captured more attention when they appeared in a shot opposite the football player, while the attention was monopolised by the sports star when he appeared next to the female rival in the same shot. The pizza deliveryman also received significantly less attention when he joined Cristiano Ronaldo in a selfie.

The qualitative analysis of content based on heat maps detected that the smile of the sports star increased the ability to attract attention, an issue that was applicable to the rest of the leading players in the advertisements, and this allows the brand to reinforce the association sought between online poker and a healthy form of leisure entertainment.

The gaze plots and heat maps also proved that the participants focused their attention on the cards rather than the chips in the close-ups of the game itself, despite the fact that the camera's approach and movement ended up shifting the final attention to the chips. The usual course of the attention in the scenes in which the bet is made goes from the face of the sports star to the chips until the end of the game. However, when the shot is wider, both Cristiano Ronaldo and Neymar received more attention than the play itself. Attention to the players' faces before the final bet offered a heat map that reminds us of the points captured by facial recognition software, so it seems that the amateur players were trying to guess if there was a bluff in the play.

Amateur gamblers prioritised attention to the sports stars over gambling, and the gambling over the betting chips, so their priority was not revenue, which reduces the risk of addiction. Thus, it can be concluded that endorsement by sports stars in advertising encourages the mainstreaming of gambling as a healthy form of leisure based on the emotion, trust, and friendship shown by these celebrities in advertising, with a particular impact on young fans of the same nationality.

The main implication for sports management is to focus on negotiating the potential contract for the image rights of their football players, and on preventing their football stars from promoting products and brands that might imply a problem of reputation for their football clubs.

On the other hand, sponsoring brands should take advantage of the public's affinity with the nationality of the sports stars in order to attract attention in a highly competitive market, ensuring that advertisers include among their objectives the awareness of irresponsible, compulsive or pathological gambling<sup>83</sup>. While the advertising of online gambling is specifically controlled in the neighbouring country of Spain by regulations that establish time restrictions on such activity<sup>84</sup>, such regulations in Portugal are included within the Advertising Code. Moreover, after modification of Article 21<sup>85</sup>, the special protection of minors and players at high risk was established in line with other European countries, promoting social responsibility and the playful aspect of the game without undervaluing non-players. The law also helped to avoid generating a feeling of fast and easy income, suggestions of social success, special skills for the game, or gratification from engaging in compulsive practices. Since the year 2020, a manual of best practice has been in existence. Although its application is not mandatory for the sector, it recommends establishing time restrictions on the advertising of online gambling operators in the media, as well as avoiding real-time advertising during sporting events. Finally, several legislative bills are currently being drafted in order to amend the aforementioned Article 21 of the Advertising Code in this direction.

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## **Notes**

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6. Chóliz, 'Effect of legalization'.
7. Hing et al., 'Risk factors'.
8. Delfabbro et al., 'Longitudinal gambling patterns'.  
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9. McCormack et al., 'Study of gender differences'.
10. Mañas-Viniegra, 'Autorregulación de las marcas'.
11. Autocontrol, 'La historia de Justino'.
12. McGrath et al., 'Eye-tracking study'.
13. Dufour et al., 'Latent class analysis'.
14. Zaman et al., 'Motivation profiles'.
15. Horton and Wohl, 'Mass communication and para-social interaction'.
16. Levy and Mark, 'News as para-social interaction'.
17. Giles, 'Parasocial interaction'.
18. Rasmussen and Ewoldsen, 'Treatment via television'.
19. Spitzberg and Cupach, 'The flames of fandom'.
20. Russell et al., 'Consumption of television programming'.
21. Brown and Basil, 'Parasocial interaction and identification'.
22. Hull and Lewis, 'Broadcast sports media'.
23. Boehmer, 'Mediated sports in social media'.
24. Frederick et al., 'Parasocial interaction and fan motivations'.
25. Kim, 'Parasocial interactions on Instagram'.
26. Tran et al., 'connectedness to celebrity endorsers'.
27. Rubin et al., 'Local television news viewing'.
28. Hartmann et al., 'Positive parasocial relationships'.
29. Spinda et al., 'Mediated friendships'.
30. Kassing and Sanderson, 'Fan-athlete interaction'.  
Kassing and Sanderson, 'Expressions of parasocial interaction'.
31. Frederick et al., 'Why we follow'.
32. Sun and Wu, 'Influence of personality traits'.
33. Felsher et al., 'Lottery playing amongst youth'.
34. López-González and Tulloch, 'Enhancing media sport consumption'.
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36. Lamont et al., 'Gambling on sport sponsorship'.
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40. Tran et al., 'connectedness to celebrity endorsers'.
41. Kim et al., 'Celebrity-advertising context congruence'.
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46. Yoon et al., 'Sports stars and their sponsors'.
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63. Aaker and Lee, 'Role of self-regulatory goals'.
64. Petty and Cacioppo, 'Attribute-Relevant Cognitive Responses'.
65. Oberecker et al., 'Consumer affinity construct'.
66. Cardoso-Da-Silva and de-Páscoa-Rodrigues, 'Construção de celebridades'.
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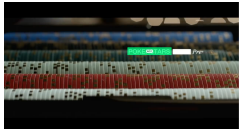
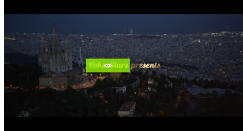
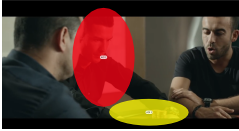

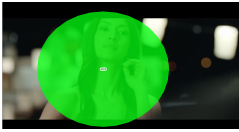
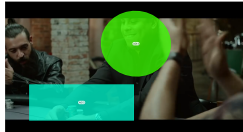

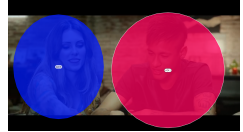
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## Tables

**Table 1.** Areas of Interest (AOI) of the stimuli

AOI	Stimulus 1 (S1): Cristiano Ronaldo (CR)		Stimulus 2 (S2): Neymar	
AOI 1	Advertiser's Logo		Advertiser's Logo	
AOI 2	CR's face		Neymar's face	
AOI 3	CR's play		Neymar's play	
AOI 4	Rival female poker player		Ronaldo's face	
AOI 5	CR in the selfie		Ronaldo's play	
AOI 6	Selfie with Pizza delivery person		Rival female poker player	

**Table 2.** Mann-Whitney U test between similar AOIs

Fixation	S1-AOI 1	S2-AOI 1	<i>p</i> -value
TFF (Mean)	41.95	10.82	*.000
FC (Mean)	20.19	17.97	.113
FD (Mean)	0.35	0.36	.611

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ .

**Table 3.** Mann-Whitney U test between similar AOIs

<b>Fixation</b>	<b>S1-AOI 2</b>	<b>S2-AOI 2</b>	<b><i>p</i>-value</b>
TFF (Mean)	16.15	29.07	*.000
FC (Mean)	128.60	120.79	*.001
FD (Mean)	0.21	0.23	*.030

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ .

**Table 4.** Mann-Whitney U test between similar AOIs

<b>Fixation</b>	<b>S1-AOI 3</b>	<b>S2-AOI 3</b>	<b><i>p</i>-value</b>
TFF (Mean)	39.55	38.11	.212
FC (Mean)	19.70	29.67	*.000
FD (Mean)	0.22	0.27	*.000

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ .

**Table 5.** Mann-Whitney U test between similar AOIs

<b>Fixation</b>	<b>S1-AOI 4</b>	<b>S2-AOI 6</b>	<b><i>p</i>-value</b>
TFF (Mean)	28.67	38.93	*.000
FC (Mean)	46.70	30.05	*.000
FD (Mean)	0.24	0.17	*.000

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ .

**Table 6.** Mann-Whitney U test between similar AOIs

Fixation	S2-AOI 2	S2-AOI 4	<i>p</i> -value
TFF (Mean)	29.07	91.52	*.000
FC (Mean)	120.79	91.09	*.000
FD (Mean)	0.23	0.21	*.026

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ .

**Table 7.** Mann-Whitney U test between similar AOIs

Fixation	S2-AOI 3	S2-AOI 5	<i>p</i> -value
TFF (Mean)	38.11	107.35	*.000
FC (Mean)	29.67	23.83	*.000
FD (Mean)	0.27	0.18	*.000

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ .

**Table 8.** Mann-Whitney U test between similar AOIs

Fixation	S1-AOI 5	S1-AOI 6	<i>p</i> -value
TFF (Mean)	92.70	95.93	*.000
FC (Mean)	8.26	4.29	*.000
FD (Mean)	0.28	0.26	.101

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ .

**Table 9.** Mann-Whitney U test between similar AOIs

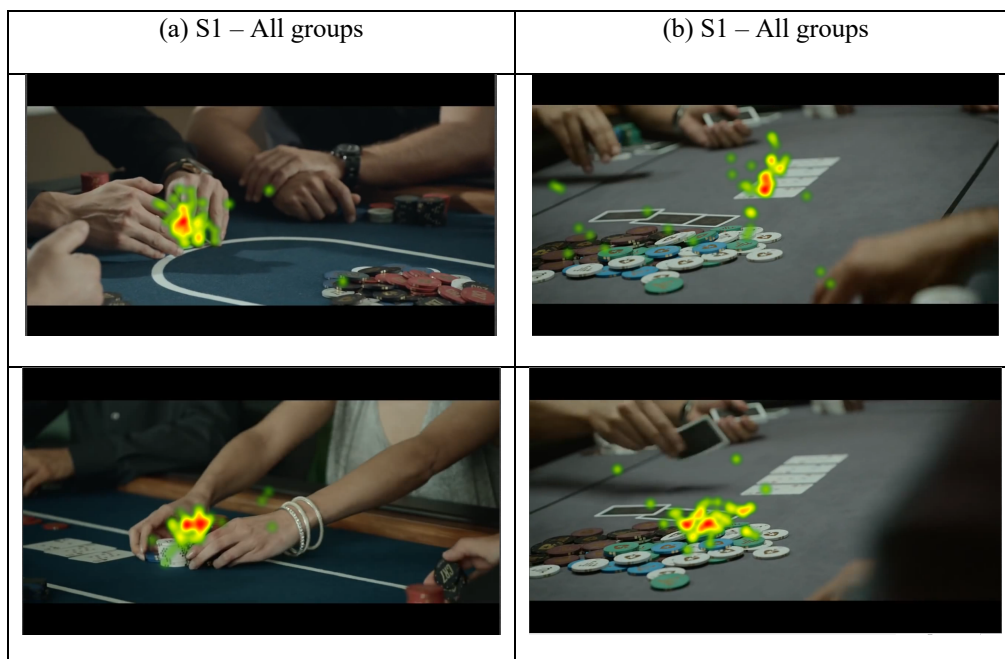
S1				S2			
AOI	FC (Mean)		<i>p</i> -value	AOI	FC (Mean)		<i>p</i> -value
	Male	Female			Male	Female	
AOI 1	19.84	21.90	.261	AOI 1	16.90	23.10	*.017
AOI 2	128.79	127.70	.877	AOI 2	120.37	122.80	.696
AOI 3	20.04	18.00	.088	AOI 3	29.27	31.60	.157
AOI 4	47.10	44.70	.283	AOI 4	91.56	88.80	.393
AOI 5	8.40	7.60	.259	AOI 5	23.75	24.20	.741
AOI 6	3.98	5.80	*.001	AOI 6	31.10	25.00	*.015
AOI	FD (Mean)		<i>p</i> -value	AOI	FD (Mean)		<i>p</i> -value
	Male	Female			Male	Female	
AOI 1	0.36	0.31	.143	AOI 1	0.38	0.28	*.006
AOI 2	0.21	0.20	.406	AOI 2	0.23	0.22	.336
AOI 3	0.22	0.21	.352	AOI 3	0.27	0.29	.967
AOI 4	0.24	0.23	.664	AOI 4	0.21	0.20	.304
AOI 5	0.29	0.26	.348	AOI 5	0.18	0.17	.261
AOI 6	0.27	0.25	.543	AOI 6	0.17	0.18	.835
AOI	TFF (Mean)		<i>p</i> -value	AOI	TFF (Mean)		<i>p</i> -value
	Male	Female			Male	Female	
AOI 1	42.27	40.41	.202	AOI 1	12.13	4.54	.692
AOI 2	16.09	16.44	.902	AOI 2	29.07	29.07	.340
AOI 3	39.54	39.55	.942	AOI 3	38.10	38.16	.490
AOI 4	28.79	28.08	.893	AOI 4	91.53	91.46	.287
AOI 5	92.68	92.77	.202	AOI 5	107.48	106.73	.096
AOI 6	96.38	93.77	.228	AOI 6	38.82	39.48	.274

Note: \*  $p < 0.05$ .

## Figures



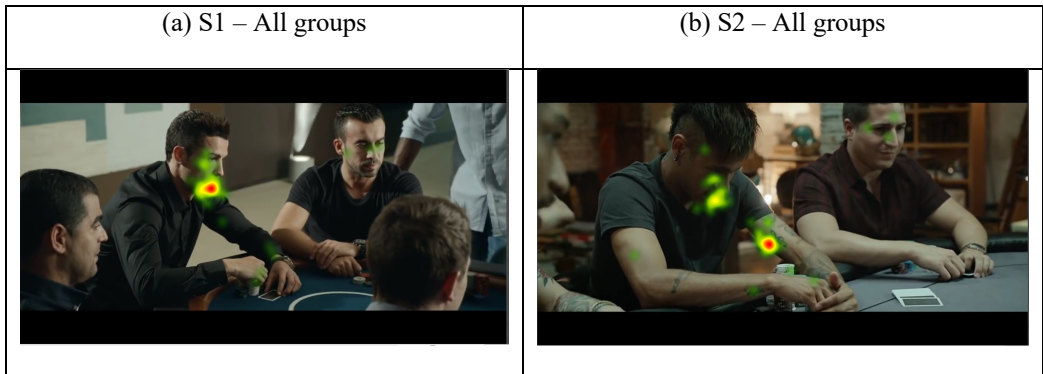
**Figure 1.** Heat maps of the stimuli.



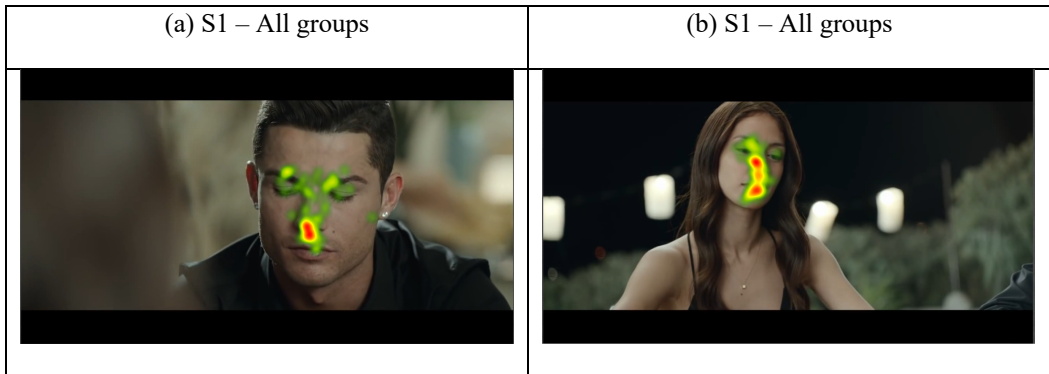
**Figure 2.** Heat maps of the stimuli.



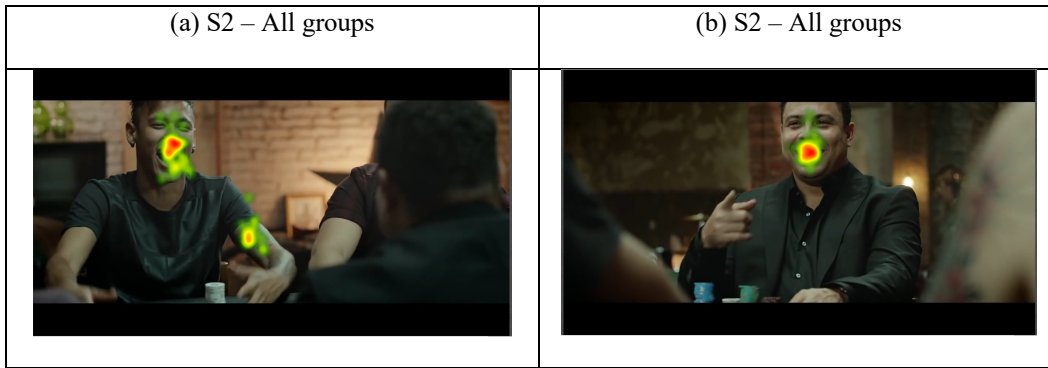
**Figure 3.** Gaze plots of the stimuli.



**Figure 4.** Heat maps of the stimuli.



**Figure 5.** Heat maps of the stimuli.



**Figure 6.** Heat maps of the stimuli.



**Figure 7.** Heat maps of the stimuli.