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Understanding mediated sports consumption by Irish children: a qualitative study exploring their exposure and understanding of gambling marketing, risks and harms

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Abstract

Background Gambling marketing communications create a public health risk by increasing the normalisation of gambling in sports. In a context where broad level studies report significant underage gambling, currently no evidence exists on how these communications are received by children in the Republic of Ireland (hereafter Ireland) and Northern Ireland. To build this evidence base and provide granular detail below broad level data, this study explored the sport consumption habits and views of Irish children (aged 14–17 years) on their exposure, awareness and perceptions of the relationship between sport and gambling.

Methods Drawing on a constructivist approach to data collection, 6 face-to-face focus groups were staged with a total of 51 youth sport consumers from both sides of the border region on the island of Ireland.

Results Four main themes were established. First, mediated sport consumption was predominantly via mobile social media. Second, we found that their exposure to gambling marketing was high and while frequently seen through social media channels it was also prevalent in peer-to-peer conversations and on the main street. Third, we found mixed responses on their perceptions about gambling and sport. While many felt that sport and gambling were a good fit, they were aware of the financial risks involved. Few children understood the wider social risks with gambling harm. Fourth, children were sceptical of claims made in gambling communications. These findings highlight concerns about how exposure to gambling marketing is impacting children's views on sport and on gambling. These views need to be taken into consideration when broadcasters and sport organizations are entering into commercial associations.

Conclusions Gambling marketing is noticed by children watching mass and social media, and in the towns in the border regions of the island of Ireland. Our study provides children's viewpoints on this topic which complements the larger quantitative studies in Ireland and Northern Ireland that highlight the growing prevalence of children and gambling. This study not only extends the literature on the exposure, awareness and perceptions of children

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on the island of Ireland but provides crucial evidence to public health advocates in this region demonstrating the pervasiveness of gambling communications in and around children's spaces.

Keywords Gambling, Gambling marketing, Sports media, Social media, Children, Public health, Resistance, Ireland, Northern Ireland

Background

There has been a longstanding historical relationship between sports and gambling [1]. Nevertheless, the frequency of marketing communications of gambling opportunities at sports venues [2], through mass broadcast sport communication [3, 4], and through social media [5, 6] is ever increasing. This increase is in part due to the liberalisation of certain gambling markets and the failure of existing legislation to keep abreast of new technology. Research on gambling marketing and sport consumption has produced a consensus that these communications create a public health risk by increasing the normalisation of gambling in sports [7–12]. The saturation of these marketing messages and the innovative tactics deployed by gambling operators across the multiple physical and virtual sites of sport creates substantial public health risks for children.

Concern about the risks to children and young people¹ from gambling and gambling marketing and the potential gamblification of sports are long-standing [2, 9, 13–16]. Thomas and colleagues ([21], pg. 7) recently reviewed the impact of gambling marketing on children and highlighted how marketing “plays a role in positively shaping, influencing and normalising young people’s gambling attitudes and future consumption intentions”. These relevant areas include marketing exposure, awareness/recall and perceptions and intent.

Research on the effects of gambling advertisements on children and young people’s (aged 12–19) attitudes and behaviours revealed “that youth are observant of advertisements for multiple forms of gambling activities including casinos, lotteries, poker, internet and scratch tickets” ([20], pg., 30). Additionally, the increased exposure of young people to gambling communications downplays the risks associated with the activity [17]. Young people have considerable exposure to commercial gambling advertising [2, 11, 15, 18]. Exploring children and young people’s (aged 13–18) perceptions of this gambling advertising, McMullan and colleagues [15] found that youths were aware of the persuasive intent behind gambling advertising they consumed. Australian data suggest that children aged under 11 years receive the greatest exposure to gambling advertising through television among those under 18 s. In addition, findings

have suggested that the placement “of gambling advertisements per hour in sport TV compared to non-sport TV...is responsible for a greater level of exposure to young people, who watch sports in very large numbers” ([25], pg. 3). These studies reinforce public health concerns around the exposure of young people to gambling communications.

Research has also suggested that young people are increasingly aware of gambling brands. Pitt and colleagues state that “sport is a powerful mechanism for influencing young people’s brand awareness and subsequent product preferences” ([11], pg. 480). For example, other research has revealed how children in Australia (aged 5–11) could match a gambling sponsor with the correct sports team, with older children more likely to identify correctly [19]. In the same context, research has explored child and parent recall of gambling sponsorship, indicating that more than 75% of young people were able to recall at least one example of a sports betting brand [20]. This study also explored young people’s (aged 11–16) awareness of the timing and placement of gambling advertising on mass and social media. Their findings revealed that 91% of participants recalled television advertising and that almost 75% were able to recall gambling advertising in sports. Although teens are not universally homogenous—even in the Global North—a similar study in the UK found that 46% of young people could do likewise [8]. Children (11–16 years) could provide high levels of recall but could also explain the distinctive aspects of advertising and identify the gambling brand’s colours [21].

Research has explored the factors that influence Australian young people’s gambling attitudes and consumption intentions. The young people studied by Pitt and colleagues [22] understood a number of different forms of gambling activity but possessed greater knowledge of sport betting given its saturation through elite sport broadcasts. In another study, young people had an over-exaggerated perception of sports betting’s popularity, with the belief that many adults were engaged in sports betting [12]. For some young people, the concept of gambling is considered a normalised part of sport [10, 23–25]. Young people’s opinions about sports gambling marketing reinforced the normalisation of gambling and sport, with young people reflecting that the frequency of gambling advertising should be decreased to prevent this [25]. This rejection of these marketing themes is

¹ In the larger study from which this paper comes from we use the term children for those under the age of 18. Previous literature has used terms such as adolescents, teenagers or young people for children in their senior childhood years.

important, as other young people in different countries also choose to ignore or outright reject these themes [15].

Context

The above research has explored the appeal of gambling marketing and youth exposure, awareness, and perceptions from self-contained, liberalised betting markets in Australia [5, 11, 12, 20, 24], Great Britain [8, 10] and Canada [15, 16]. The situation on the island of Ireland (with a combined population of 7.2 million) is somewhat different. On the island of Ireland there is a border between two countries, Ireland and Northern Ireland - of which the latter is part of the United Kingdom. This land border region joins 6 counties of Ireland and 5 from Northern Ireland. The area consists of a population intermixed between the politics of national identity (Irish/nationalist, British/unionist, Other) and/or religion (Catholic, Protestant, Other). The border is porous, people within this region travel across the border for education, employment or leisure yet some communities exist in isolation to those of other identities, religions and traditions. This unique region on the island of Ireland where previous studies have suggested that these layers impact young people's cultural choices [26].

Despite being two jurisdictions, the region has a shared media market for sporting events, especially Gaelic sports, English football, rugby, horseracing and darts. As the same broadcasters can carry programming in each country, both regions are exposed to the same advertising communications and marketing. Nevertheless, the legislation and industry regulations between countries does differ. Legislation governing the regulation of gambling and codes of practice governing broadcasting, advertising and communication differ. Ireland and Northern Ireland each have their own legislative acts on gambling but are both characterised as outdated that has not kept up with technological advancements. In both jurisdictions there are self-regulating industry-funded agencies that are responsible for establishing and managing advertising and broadcasting codes of practice² These codes concern the regulation of gambling advertising in each country, and

² In Ireland advertising standards are governed by the Advertising Standards Agency of Ireland's *Code of Standards for Advertising and Marketing Communications in Ireland* (ASAI) whereas in Northern Ireland they are governed by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) and the Committee of Advertising Practice's (CAP) *UK Code of Non-broadcast Advertising and Direct and Promotional Marketing* (CAP Code) and the *UK Code of Broadcast Advertising* (BCAP Code). Both the ASA and the ASAI are industry associations that regulate their own industry and both are members of the International Council for Ad Self-Regulation, nevertheless they are stand-alone organisations. These codes list a range of 'rules' that prevent communications appealing to children and clarify that harm and exploitation should be avoided. Each code details a complaint system however the Irish Broadcasting Code requires complainants to go directly to the broadcaster in the first instance, unlike the advertising code, while both codes operating in Northern Ireland permit complaints direct to the self-regulating agency. Advertising on social media is on a platform-by-platform basis.

what operators can and cannot do in terms of marketing within that jurisdiction.

Despite being a significant gambling market, research on gambling, gambling marketing and sport in Ireland and Northern Ireland is nascent [10, 27–33], and this is first study on this island to qualitatively explore the voices of children.

Methods

Study aims, design and setting

This study aimed to understand the sport consumption habits and explore the levels of exposure, awareness and perceptions of sport and gambling among children (aged 14–17 years) from the border regions of the island of Ireland. Three research questions directed our research study.

1. In which sport consumption spaces are children exposed to gambling marketing?
2. What are children's views on tactics used by gambling operators to market their products?
3. How does gambling marketing shape children's perceptions of the relationship between sport and gambling?

Understanding how exposure to gambling messages develops awareness and shapes perceptions about the relationship between sport and gambling is vital for informing parents and educators with public health messaging and for policy makers to better shape their legislation and regulations. This is of particular importance given the situation in Ireland and Northern Ireland, where from recent population level data it has been revealed that 3.33% [34] and 2.3% [35] of adults, respectively, now experience harm from gambling.

Recruitment and samples

Given their experience working with children, recruitment was initiated through local sports partnerships and community associations from the border regions of the island of Ireland. After presentations by the research team, key stakeholders from these organisations contacted parents and children, sharing recruitment flyers and participant information sheets. Participants who were regular sports consumers (defined as watching broadcast sports through mass or social media at least once per week) and residing in the border regions of the island were included. The exclusion criteria included those outside the required age range, those located outside the border regions and those who had attended a gambling awareness/education workshop within the previous 12 months. Attendance at such a session would enhance the participants' general understanding of the area, thus reducing their general sport consumer

perspective. It was also impressed upon these stakeholders to ensure that attendees could bring a friend and to balance the gender split to ensure as equal a possible distribution across gender.

The focus groups were located in 3 regional towns in Ireland and Northern Ireland: Derry/Londonderry, Letterkenny and Newry. While each focus group was held in an area of marginal deprivation [36, 37], it should be noted that some of the sporting clubs were rugby unions and athletics, which are usually associated with middle class communities [38]. Once each group was able to commit sufficient numbers for the focus group to occur, the research team negotiated times and venues with each group prior to staging. The focus groups were conducted on the familiar premises of the sporting club or community association from which the participants were drawn.

Convenience sampling through this approach was used to recruit 51 children (females= $n=21/41%$; boys= $n=30/59%$) aged 14–17 years. Focus groups grouped people into age cohorts (14–15 years, $n=28$; 16–17 years, $n=23$). Further quality checks were undertaken at the beginning of the focus groups where the inclusion and exclusion criteria were confirmed by the researchers. Prior to the commencement of the focus groups, all those aged under 18 years (children) signed a statement of assent while their parent/guardian signed statements of informed consent.

Procedure

A series of six interactive, face-to-face focus groups employing photo elicitation techniques and group activities were performed. To minimise a limitation of focus groups with children we ensured that power relations between children of different ages did not limit the input of younger participants [15, 39]. To account for this, the focus groups were segregated by two age ranges, 14–15 and 16–17 years old. Participants were also encouraged to bring a friend who also fit the inclusion criteria [15, 40] to avoid the possibility of attending the session on their own. Drinks and snacks were available to the participants, and they were encouraged to access these beverages at any time in the meeting [39]. The length of the focus groups ranged from 70 to 90 min (each having an intermission of 10 min) and focused on a series of questions and activities related to the research aims of the project. The focus group questions were developed to generate conversation and followed a semi-structured approach to ensure flexibility during data collection. A schedule of these questions is contained in the supplementary file. To manage and guide the discussions, we ensured that the focus group questions did not begin with topics on gambling or gambling marketing. We focused initially on sport media consumption patterns, something we felt all the participants would have some

experience of and could discuss. Following this we only situated gambling marketing within a broader discussion of media use, consumption preferences, commercial associations through sport and the use of celebrity influencers on and offline.

Photo elicitation is a projective technique that has been used in previous research to engage young people [19, 41]. These have been described as “often inherently enjoyable, which can be engaging for young people and hence maintain their interest throughout the data collection process” [42]. While most focus groups encourage participants to share their thoughts, opinions and ideas, the use of images and basic tasks provides participants with talking points. The images used in our study were selected by the researchers prior to the focus groups and that national and popular sports team marketing images were chosen on the basis of their relevance to the audience. These images were used consistently through all the focus groups. While this approach does not permit the children to capture their own images, the sensitivity of the topic required us to select the images used to manage the discussion [43]. By doing this, we were able to ensure that gambling logos were kept to an absolute minimum and that most images showed a non-gambling sponsor or an unbranded image. The images used in this study are outlined in Table 1.

Managing engagement and encouraging noncommunicative participants to engage is one of the other major limitations of focus groups with children [39, 44]. To mitigate against this we used both the images to launch discussion and ensured two members of the research team conducted each focus group. This involved one leading the conversation and the other engaging the participants whilst keeping looking out for those disengaging from the conversation. Having two researchers engage with the participants during this process encouraged further conversation, eliciting responses from the participants that are reflective of their own experiences of sport and views on gambling marketing.

Analysis

In this study, the qualitative data were managed through NVIVO 12.0 using thematic analysis [45]. All focus groups were transcribed manually verbatim following each session. Data analysis began following the first focus group and continued throughout the entire data collection process. An inductive approach to thematic analysis was adopted to explore the participants’ exposure, awareness and perceptions on the relationship between gambling and sport. The themes and subthemes developed through the data analysis process form the foundation for the results section below. During this coding process, data saturation occurred prior to the final focus group when it became clear that no new codes were being

Table 1 Photo elicitation methods used in all focus group procedures

Commercial Association	Details	Example used
Image 1	Featured jersey Jersey main sponsor	Irish National Rugby Union / Dublin Gaelic Athletic Association International Communications Provider
Image 2	Featured jersey Jersey main sponsor	English League 1 Football Club International Fast-Food provider
Image 3	Featured jersey Jersey main sponsor	English Premier League Football Club International Gambling Operator
Celebrity Influencer (CI)	Description	
CI1 image 1:	CI1 with confused look on face, standing in public bar facing camera with mobile phone in hand and television screen on wall behind	
CI1 image 2:	CI1 with happy look on face and remote control in hand sitting on couch with partner (both watching unseen TV) with sport broadcasters sitting either side of pair.	
CI2 image 1:	Image of CI2 Instagram profile containing name, bio, links and 6 small images	
CI2 image 2:	Image of CI2 Instagram tweet with image of betting slip on Superbowl 2023 worth over US\$500,000. Betting slip image shows odds for the outcome and value of bet.	

created. We carried out the final focus group to ensure this was the indeed the case and the focus groups ceased following this [46]. To enhance the trustworthiness of our approach and to reduce the potential for individual researcher bias, codes and the resulting data were double checked by another member of the research team [47]. The relativist yet critical constructivist approach provided flexibility, as it allowed us to relate our data to existing theories in the analysis phase.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ulster University Research and Ethics Committee (REC.23.0002).

Results

The results we present offer insight into young sports fans' exposure, attitudes toward and perceptions of gambling and the relationship between gambling and sport. From the above analysis, four themes were drawn from the data.

Theme 1: No longer fighting for the remote: youth sport consumption via mobile social media

The participants were asked about their mediated sport consumption patterns across mass and social media. In all the focus groups, it was clear that the majority of children in this study did not consume their sports via mass media. No longer seeking to control the remote television, they preferred to consume sports through social media and only watched mass media when the event

many of them wanted to see was already showing via their parent's or older sibling's selection on the household television; some examples included Ultimate Fighting Chamoionship, Aintree Grand National and English Premier League football.

Given this appetite for social media, each participant was asked about their usage and to identify their favourite platforms. Daily usage of Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp, TikTok and YouTube was recorded by the participants. For participants aged 14–15, Snapchat was their favourite platform, while for participants aged 16–17, TikTok was their favourite platform. The rationales for these preferences were further explored. Participants offered distinct preferences and usage patterns, stating that TikTok, Instagram and YouTube were mostly used to alleviate boredom. TikTok was the most cited platform for this purpose, as the participants frequently mentioned spending hours watching TikTok *"because if it's like... boring, you can swipe it away..."* 16-year-old male Letterkenny. They liked this platform as *"It's like, entertainment... short... you don't have to concentrate."* 15-year-old female, Letterkenny. This group made frequent references to how enjoyable time on the platforms where *"it's all short videos that you can watch truly quick... and you can watch it anywhere."* 17-year-old male, Letterkenny. Some used TikTok for live sport consumption and highlights, the former being difficult to obtain legally when it was difficult to obtain on mass broadcast methods. One of the key benefits of TikTok was the ability to obtain what they wanted

easily— “without rewatching the boring parts.” 17-year-old male, Letterkenny.

Instagram and YouTube were also used to alleviate boredom; however, some used the former for sport information. “You can determine about stuff, like what’s happening... and you can check out the rugby pages and stuff to see when the next match is...” 14-year-old male, Derry/Londonderry. However, there were some who used Instagram purposefully for more than entertainment. Athletes and coaches were asked how to improve their sports technique. They also indicated that they could be influenced to purchase sports-related items, such as spikes, if an athlete they followed posted or endorsed them.

Like for example, Caroline O’ Hannon wears Vypr socks, so like... that kind of put it into our minds to buy them for netball and to help improve play... However, you kind of also learn about the little bits... about like the things that they do that you can also implement...” 15-year-old female, Newry.

Potential performance improvements were also a motivator for using YouTube. “I would use to determine how to do certain techniques...” 15-year-old male, Derry. It provided an opportunity to “learn about the little bits... about like the things that they do that you can also implement...” YouTube’s grassroots sport broadcasting made it possible for some to review matches where they personally had been involved, in order to improve performance for future events. Others also highlighted the platform’s usefulness for consuming live-streamed sporting events that were not shown via mass media: “Well normally all the netball platforms from the Super League are livestreamed on YouTube so that’s... you can watch a whole match then...” 17-year-old female Newry.

Participants suggested that the WhatsApp and Snapchat platforms were important methods of communication; however, each platform fulfilled a different purpose. WhatsApp was predominantly associated with ‘family group chats’ 14-year-old female, Derry/Londonderry, such as communicating with their coaches and administrators at their local sports club, while Snapchat was the preferred method for peer-to-peer communications “would be used for talking to your mates”, 15-year-old male, Newry.

Theme 2: Exposure to Gambling Marketing through Sport: Offline and Online

The participants across all age ranges were asked about their exposure to gambling marketing through sports. Participants were exposed to gambling marketing across a variety of mass and social media sites, to displays in betting shops on high/main streets and to discussions with peers at school. These myriad forms of exposure indicate

a saturation of gambling communications in these children’s lives.

Several participants reported witnessing gambling marketing through multiple social media channels, including TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube. Among these platforms, YouTube was most frequently mentioned, with references to advertising before and during YouTube videos: “Like you always see them when you’re watching YouTube, like every two videos...especially if the team is sponsored by one of them”. Additional thoughts suggested that the timing and duration of the ads were frustrating—the videos were unable to be skipped after a short introduction, i.e., 30 seconds. “Especially on YouTube because they would come up quite a lot!” 17-year-old female, Letterkenny ‘Yeah, I mean you can’t even skip them!”, 17-year-old male, Letterkenny.

Participants referenced mass marketing strategies, such as television advertising and jersey sponsorship. “Ads on the tv, or like [when] watching a football match, you see ads on the shirts for betting” 14-year-old male Derry/Londonderry. When asked about their recall of gambling messaging, references to celebrities who have endorsed gambling companies were made: “

Researcher: Okay, and what types of people do you see on YouTube, can you think of any?

Respondent: Jose Mourinho. I just know that he was on an ad that said he was special [participant references a gambling operator advertisement where Jose was a brand ambassador].

Researcher: and he did it for a gambling company, was it?

Respondent: It was for [identified correct gambling operator] 15-year-old male Derry/Londonderry.

Further references to gambling companies arose when discussing commercial associations in football, i.e., a gambling operator’s shirt sponsorship of the Everton Football Club or advertisements within the venues of broadcasted events, “It’s on like the advertisements, you see it on all the big advertisements at the Octagon [Ultimate Fighting Championship]” 16-year-old male, Letterkenny. ‘Bet365? Yeah, I always hear that one when I’m watching football... like in the ads and stuff.” 17-year-old male, Newry.

Several participants mentioned that informal chatter about gambling increased during high-profile sporting events such as football.

“Well like during the world cup, there was a lot of people in my school who would have been betting... like a lot of the boys. They almost have bets within each other, and then they bet on the football league

through the apps and stuff to see who could get the most money out of it.” 17-year-old female, Newry.

As indicated above, Irish children are exposed to gambling marketing across all broadcast sports media and other settings. Children are exposed to and can associate numerous gambling brands and sport properties that are linked together.

Theme 3: Perceptions and misunderstandings about commercial involvement in sport.

Participants in the focus groups understood the concept of a sponsor and its commercial purpose. When asked why a sports organisation might want a sponsor, they stated, *“they’d get more money” 14-year-old female, Derry/Londonderry* for *“paying for players”* or *“training gear” 16-year-old female Letterkenny* or *“well, supporters of the team might be more inclined to go to their company” 16-year-old male, Derry/Londonderry*. These acknowledgements were shared across all focus groups and was consistent for each of the three sponsorship examples. Participants also understood that there would be an element of trans-actionality between the club and the sponsor, as each party would obtain something in exchange for their involvement with one another.

Of the 6 focus groups, 4 groups scored the gambling sponsor as the most suitable sponsor, with the other groups including as second and only one group positioning it last. Of those who prioritised the gambling sponsor, rationales included, *“Because like it promotes betting for their supporters, it goes along with the sport!” 14-year-old female, Newry*, or *“other than like the other ones [other sponsors used as examples] people actually bet on football.” 14-year-old male, Newry.*

“Well, anyone watching sports. Therefore, if you see [gambling operator] when you’re watching [football club]... that’s another thing, they’re a good fit... “When the match is about to start, there’s advertisements for a [gambling operator] and you’re sitting there... its instinct” 15-year-old male, Derry/Londonderry.

There was an interesting discussion about the suitability of certain sponsors, with the fast-food sponsor generating much discussion. Five of the 6 focus groups ranked the fast-food company as the least suitable sponsor. They cited reasons such as *“people might associate that team with being unhealthy” 16-year-old female – Derry/Londonderry*, or *“Like, [fast food sponsor] is a fatty food... and like, it wouldn’t be associated with sports... like the players wouldn’t be having [fast food sponsor]... every night...” 15-year-old male, Newry* citing an unhealthy association with sport, or inconsistent with sporting ideals -

“I wouldn’t walk around with [fast food sponsor] on it... “16-year-old female – Derry/Londonderry, “It doesn’t truly look right.” 17-year-old female, Derry/Londonderry. Another stated, “If it’s a sports team, it should probably be sponsored by something associated with the sports brand... like Adidas or Nike... or sports supplements, Lucozade or sports drinks or something...” 16-year-old male – Derry/Londonderry.

We then sought to understand who the children thought were the actual targets of these messages. In response, participants in this age range consistently identified perceived target audiences to be anyone else but them. At no stage did they perceive that they could be part of a potential target audience or an indirect target audience, consistently citing older targets, *“people over 18”, “there’s like a pile of old people at [this club’s] matches, so it’ll get people gambling on [gambling operator]” 14-year-old male, Derry/Londonderry*. Others disassociated themselves from being the target of the message for them personally.

“Most likely, trying to get like old people who are retired with a bit of money, and they’re just trying to give them something to do. Like my granny, she will like, play the lotto and stuff, she does that every week so it’s probably trying to get older people to do that, bet on the match and stuff like that.” 15-year-old Derry/Londonderry.

The discussion of issues around the use of a CI to push gambling messages produced a range of responses from children.

Two images of the first CI were shown, the first picturing him on his own in a bar with a phone in his hand and sport on the screen behind him. It was a screen shot of a gambling brand advert but shot to exclude any visible branding. The second was a screen shot of the same influencer, not alone but with his wife and two horse racing pundits, on a sofa in a living room. Each group had participants who immediately recognised the celebrity, and their responses to the first image identified the activity as gambling because of the visuals of the sport on TV, while the CI had his phone in hand.

Researcher: *Therefore, see in this image, why do you think he has his phone in his hand?*

Respondent: *He’s gambling.*

Respondent: *He’s putting in a bet.*

Researcher: *Yeah, he could be. Do you notice anything else about the image or in general?*

Respondent: *He might have lost the bet; he looks quite upset.*

- Letterkenny 14–15 group

Some participants were able to recall or place the CI in the advert, *"I've seen it before [on YouTube]. It's [recalls correct brand name] ... he's in a [correct gambling brand] ad, so"* 15-year-old male Derry/Londonderry.

When the second image was shown, the difference in settings was noted.

"Well like in the first one it's more aimed towards football fans because it's kind of in that pub setting and with people around and everyone watching football on the tv... whereas the second one... is more like anybody. He's got the [phone] in his hand and she's not holding anything, she's just like supporting him with her hand on his shoulder and like... 'you can do this' type of thing... you know like 'guys you can do this, and your wife will support you.'" 17-year-old male, Newry.

When asked who this influencer would appeal to, similar responses to the jersey sponsorship were offered; *"Dads", 16-year-old female, Newry. "18 and above", "16 and up" – 17-year-old male, Letterkenny "probably 18 to like 19." 16-year-old male Letterkenny, "An older generation? Well, he's an ex-football player...," "Yeah, some people might be like 'Oh, I used to love him'" exchange between multiple participants 14–15 group Newry.*

First, reactions to the images were mixed, and more critical perspectives are discussed in the next theme, but a number of participants understood the transactional nature of his gambling activities: *"It's a paid partnership," "He's in a partnership so he has to be getting paid; they must be giving him the money to do that," – 17-year-old male, Derry/Londonderry. "I think the more people he influences, the more he will get paid," 15-year-old male, Derry/Londonderry "Well, it's a rich, famous person advertising a brand" – 17-year-old female, Derry/Londonderry "Well, I think he's just having fun, like. He's doing what he loves, he's having the craic (fun)" 15-year-old male, Derry/Londonderry.*

"Well, he's quite a big influencer and he's known by quite a lot of people so... if he's like showing that then it must be okay... and it shows that he has quite a lot of money, so he obviously knows what he's doing..." 16-year-old male, Newry.

The following benefits to the gambling brand were also noted: *"Attention to the brand... and by working with [CI2], they get that kind of attention."* However, participants also acknowledged a certain level of personal recklessness in these actions for the CI.

"Well, he's not truly taking it seriously because he's joking about the amount of money he's putting on,

the caption shows he doesn't truly care what the outcome is," "I don't care about the money I earn" 14-year-old female, Letterkenny.

There was also concern expressed for the influence he would have on his followers, *"fair enough, I mean it's his money, he's getting paid for it and he'll spend money on it... it's just that he's promoting it to so many followers."* 15-year-old male, Derry/Londonderry.

"It's kinda like, trying to get more people, I mean with the number of followers he has... it's like... he would get quite a lot of people to start betting and then they'll keep doing it and keep doing it...then it'll get repetitive and they'll lose their money." 15-year-old male, Derry/Londonderry.

"Especially because he's such a high influencer, and he has so many fans that they're going to be influenced by him and what he does... they're going to follow the trends or whatever he's doing, they'll follow." 15-year-old female, Letterkenny.

Theme 4: resistance and scepticism

As some of the conversations around perceptions of gambling marketing highlighted, a range of gambling marketing reinforces the normalisation of gambling activity in and around certain sports. However, some of the participants demonstrated resistance to some of these communications and the glamorisation of gambling. Although the impact of this marketing on behaviour was not the focus of our research, some children in this study were dismissive of gambling and found it to be unappealing. Common replies included *"It's a bad habit", "It's a waste of money," 15-year-old female, Derry/Londonderry and "It would kind of give you the impression that it's okay to gamble all the time because they're kind of promoting it... and it's like, not a great one..." 14-year-old female, Derry/Londonderry.* Some of the older children extended the impacts of gambling to more than the individual: *"I think it could be bad, it could be supporting gambling addictions like... Like they could be a truly good person with a family and everything."* 15-year-old female, Newry.

Despite gambling advertisements being viewed by children as more appropriate than fast food, that does not appear to mean that they are appropriate per se, as some participants also suggested that gambling associations were not right for sport. The following excerpt from the Newry 16–17 focus group demonstrates how one young person articulated concerns about commercial partnerships and sports.

Respondent 1, male: *It kind of takes it away from the sport... because if sport is associated with gam-*

bling and betting and then it'll be all put down to sport... and then sport will get like... what's it called... like a negative image out in the world and like people might be like "oh, I don't want to go into that sport because they're just like... promoting gambling" and then the amount of people who have suffered because of gambling, that's the kind of mindset people could get whereas sport is kind of the opposite and it brings a lot of good into areas and stuff...

Researcher 1: So, you feel like having sports associated with these types of companies could outweigh the good that the sport contributes to our society?

Respondent 1, male: Yeah.

Respondent 2, male: I wouldn't have sleepless nights over it....

All respondents: [laughter]

Respondent 1, male: However, I would say that they could maybe try and find something more suitable for fans to watch and for the team to not be... hypocritical. They probably promote things... you know they all say 'Be Gamble Aware' but the people on top... they want you to put all your money into the business.

Researcher 2: Why do you think that they are hypocritical? What makes you say that?

Respondent 1, male: Well like... I was also thinking of more like [fast food sponsor] ... like promoting things... like these players are eating healthier and training all the time but like... they're promoting something that could like effect your health

Researcher 1: And do you think that gambling could affect your health in any way?

Respondent 1, male: It would probably impact your mental health, yeah.

- Newry 16–17 focus group

The second influencer's online public pronouncements about his betting also faced criticism from the participants.

"It's like he's making it okay... For people to just put that much money in as if to say like... I cannot understand the like... I don't know how to explain it. It's like he's cracked the code so he's gonna get that much money... or like... that kind of thing and he's promoting it to people like 'oh, well I know what I'm doing so youse will know what you are doing' and like... you can crack the system and make this much money... type of thing." 16-year-old male, Newry.

"You don't want to be boasting and influence the wrong people like. Because then people could like go and then there could be people who then see it, start doing it and then... you could even have a family like and say it's one of the parents, and then they

go betting and just keep putting money into it, it's like, it's an addiction like, they just keep doing it and just keep doing it." 15-year-old male, Derry/Londonderry.

Some children felt that influencers should do better online, "because influencers are supposed to influence people to do great or good things, and he's like... convincing people to gamble which isn't good." – 17-year-old female, Letterkenny. Evident from the above are strong critiques from participants about the dangers of gambling and the responsibility of those who are in positions of social power to reconsider their messaging or to set better examples: "I'd say he's trying to associate gambling with a good lifestyle, like gambling will make you rich. I think it's truly biased, and you can see through it." 16-year-old male, Letterkenny.

Discussion

In this study, we explored Irish children's exposure, awareness and perceptions of gambling marketing through sports. Our focus was guided by three research questions: In which sport consumption spaces are children exposed to gambling marketing? What are children's views on tactics used by gambling operators to market their products? How does gambling marketing shape children's perceptions of the relationship between sport and gambling? Our main findings support and extend the body of international studies [8, 11, 12, 16, 19–21] that have demonstrated that children are exposed to and aware of gambling marketing through various mass and social media and through social relationships with siblings and peers and from everyday environments, such as the high/main streets in our participants' local towns, and we extend this to the youth contexts on the island of Ireland. Their perceptions of gambling marketing were mixed, with as many uncritical of the practice because of its commercial benefits for sport organisations as there were those who were sceptical of it. While this resistance paints a silver lining, there is cause for concern when the findings are synthesised.

Children demonstrated their purposeful use of social media (to improve sporting skills and to follow certain events), which was balanced with habitual use (the relief of boredom). Most of their online exposure to gambling marketing was through purposeful use of global platforms such as Instagram and YouTube. Gambling promotions on TikTok were mentioned by only a few participants across the focus groups. From a public health perspective, the link between boredom and risky gambling has been found internationally [48, 49]. Given that our participants used social media purely to relieve boredom, this created a vulnerable market that operators, at best, may be unwittingly exposed to.

Our findings show that these participants view gambling as an increasingly normal part of sport, which we established by the number of groups that ranked this sponsor first among unhealthy options and telephone companies. This extends the body of international literature on the normalisation of gambling [14, 50] through sport to the island of Ireland. Our data revealed that they perceived gambling operators as commercial sponsors with a good fit between what they sell and the products they sponsor.

Throughout these focus groups, children routinely disassociated themselves from these messages and offered the perceived targets as either young or older people than them. Even though these indirect associations are waved away by children, the awareness of a variety of gambling operators means that exposure to these adverts, directly or not, builds an understanding of their brands and differences between them. As such, this exposure is at best inadvertent, or at worst deliberate, brand positioning in young consumers' minds. Third-person effects [51] focus on the indirect effects of media influence, which posits that people perceive the persuasive effects of marketing to have a greater impact on others. Nevertheless, children in this study were not mere cultural dupes; they were able to critique these communications and link the practice of gambling to personal and social harm, demonstrating a good critique of the tactics used by gambling operators. These findings support calls for children to be engaged more extensively in policies that impact their lives [52].

The children in this study were all sports consumers, and ethical restrictions meant that we could not delve into gambling behaviours when mentioned. The fact that they did not follow the two celebrity influencers we used in our study does not mean that they did not follow teams or athletes for news or information – whether for general match information and updates or tips on techniques or product suggestions, they were involved. Foundational studies [53, 54] on sponsorship have demonstrated that very involved sport fans are more receptive to the brands that sponsor their team. Our study revealed that children purchased sports kits recommended by influencers on Instagram. A broader public health risk is that if children who follow sports feel that gambling is a normal part of sports and that they follow and are influenced by personalities on social media, then current regulations in both jurisdictions are woefully unprepared to counteract this. Children report being heavily exposed to gambling marketing through social media, particularly YouTube and Instagram. While many were uncritical of its influence on their opinions, it should be noted that this familiarisation may lead to an increased chance of underage experimentation with gambling as they progress through adolescence.

Limitations

There were several limitations in our approach to addressing the exposure, attitudes, and perceptions of young Irish people. First, the project design focused on children from the border regions of Ireland and Northern Ireland. While this area is representative of children on the island of Ireland, a recruitment strategy across the entire island would have ensured this; unfortunately, this was impracticable within our resources. Second, in our efforts to ensure that children were drawn from the same sporting or community club and attended the focus groups with a friend, combined with using two facilitators to drive engagement, there were a number of children, particularly the girls within each focus group, who provided minimal input, limiting the volume and quality of the data generated. Finally, while carrying out this study, our focus was on commercial associations between gambling and sport. From this, we gleaned a significant amount of information on children's social media habits and preferences. Upon reflection, there is a wider responsibility that researchers should consider when performing research on the Commercial Determinants of Health (CDoH) and children. The use or overuse and ramifications of social media usage should potentially be addressed in future studies.

Further research

From our findings, future research opportunities are apparent. First, there is a need to continue these qualitative explorations into the commercial determinants of the health of children in this region. While gambling is one of these pressures, the children in this study did feel that sponsorship from sports drinks and supplement companies would be more appropriate associations for sports clubs. This presents a challenge to design research that can situate children within the multiple commercial messages received from myriad media channels that potentially impact their health and wellbeing and in doing so, not only learn from them, but also support the development of resources that could empower the notions of resistance into advocacy for change.

In this context, we also need to address issues of gambling, gender and young women. Recent survey results from the Department of Communities in Northern Ireland revealed that approximately 1 in 4 (27%) girls aged 12–17 gambled in the last 12 months [55], while approximately 1 in 5 (18%) girls gambled over the same period in Ireland [56]. Despite recruiting 40% of girls to our focus group panels, there is a need to ensure future studies recruit specifically from this group [57, 58], given the limitations we report above.

Conclusion

Increased gambling marketing communications combined with technological advancements in liberalised betting markets have created a techno-social environment that presents public health risks to many populations, including children. Population level studies have shown concerning levels of gambling disorder amongst adults in Ireland at 3.3% [34] and Northern Ireland at 2.3% [35]. In Ireland “between one in four and one in five (22.9%) 16 year olds... reported that they had gambled for money in the last 12 months”, with approximately 10% of these meeting criteria for excessive gambling [56]. Additionally, children and gambling in Northern Ireland has revealed not just the prevalence of regular gambling of 11–16 year olds (30%) but shown significant differences between this practice and socio-economic status and/or the propensity to gamble online [55]. Of concern for our research, 15% of these children were encouraged to spend money on gambling as a direct result of gambling marketing. These statistics reveal the levels of childhood gambling and their exposure to environmental factors that support the practice but this study has heard from children on the island of Ireland who are exposed to multifaceted marketing communications in mass and social media as well as in other spaces in their daily lives. This exposure has created an awareness of gambling, its major operators, and an uncritical acceptance of gambling’s normalisation within sports. While these children demonstrated agency in their critique of gambling operator tactics, they disassociated themselves from being the targets of these tactics. On this basis public health interventions could include actions to inform the public of these assumptions while clearly further research on advertising and young people is required across the island. Finally, there is a pressing need for governments in both regions to develop robust legislation that positions gambling and its personal, social and community-level harms as public health issue. Reframing gambling harm around a public health lens could then create some meaningful limitations and restrictions on various gambling communications – and the multiple media channels that distribute them – that these children see in their everyday lives.

Abbreviations

ASA	Advertising Standards Authority (UK)
ASAI	Advertising Standards Authority Ireland
BCAP Code	UK Code of Broadcast Advertising
CAP	Committee of Advertising Practice
CAP Code	UK Code of Non-broadcast Advertising and Direct and Promotional Marketing
CDoH	Commercial Determinants of Health
CI	Celebrity Influencer
Ireland	Republic of Ireland

Supplementary Information

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Supplementary Material 1

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Author contributions

All of the authors have made substantive intellectual contributions to the study. PK, AK, JO made substantial contributions to the conception of the study. EM and PK have made substantial contributions to the acquisition of the data. EM and PK have made substantial contributions to the analysis of the data. All of the authors have made substantial contribution to the interpretation of the data. PK and ME drafted the manuscript, AK and JO revised it critically for important intellectual content. All the authors read and approved the final manuscript. All the authors have agreed both to be personally accountable for the collective contributions and to ensure that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated, resolved, and the resolution documented in the literature.

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Data availability

The data set used in this research is based on focus group transcripts with young people aged 14–17 from the border regions of the island of Ireland. Although this qualitative data is anonymised we assured confidentiality to the participants and their parents. Further details on data availability can be obtained from Dr Paul Kitchin pj.kitchin@ulster.ac.uk.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ulster University Research and Ethics Committee (REC.23.0002). To take part in the research, participants signed statements of informed assent and their parent/guardian then signed documents stating their informed consent for their children/wards to take part in the study.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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