research snapshot

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Peers influence social norms and create social pressure to wager on sports among young men

What this research is about

Sports wagering is becoming popular among young men. There are three main reasons to its increasing popularity. First is the ease of access through multiple online and mobile betting sites. Secondly, gambling industry's marketing tactics have aligned sports wagering with sports teams and matches. Thirdly, promotions and incentives have been used to target male sports fans between the ages of 18 to 35 years. Importantly, they have been used to embed sports wagering within social networks of young men. Peer groups often form social norms that communicate about individual and group identities. Research has found that marketing has an important role in shaping identities via the products and brands that people buy. To date, there is limited research on how gambling identities may be formed in relation to sports wagering. This study explored how Australian men constructed social norms and rituals about sports wagering within their peer groups.

What the researcher did

The researchers interviewed 50 Australian men by phone about sports wagering. Participants were between the ages of 20 to 37 years. They were all fans of and had gambled on either the National Rugby League (NRL) or Australian Football League (AFL). The NRL and AFL are two major sporting codes and attract 50% of all sports wagering in Australia.

Participants were asked about their gambling behaviours, types of games they engaged in, and gambling beliefs. A range of questions were used to prompt discussion about sports wagering within peer groups. These included questions about expectations within peer groups about sports wagering, as well as positive and negative experiences. The researchers analyzed the interviews for common themes.

What you need to know

The researchers interviewed Australian men, ranging in age from 20 to 37 years, about sports wagering within their peer groups. They identified four major themes. First, sports wagering was considered to be a normal and socially acceptable activity for sports fans. For some participants, heavy promotion by the gambling industry was a sign that sports wagering was a popular activity. Secondly, sports wagering was embedded in existing social rituals and established new rituals. Many participants described wagering as a normal "add on" to being a sports fan and watching sports with their peers. Thirdly, language use among peers encouraged gambling. Sports wagering had become more common in peer discussions about sports. Many felt that the conversations helped them relate and created a sense of social connectedness. Finally, peer pressure was a reason why some young men engaged in sports wagering. This study suggests that sports wagering poses a new health threat for young men.

What the researcher found

Many participants (68%) had low or moderate problems with gambling. Four participants experienced problem gambling. Participants with greater gambling problems spent more money weekly and had multiple mobile or online accounts with sports wagering providers. There were four major themes:

Sports wagering was considered to be a normal and socially acceptable activity for sports fans

Three key reasons emerged as to why. First, gambling was heavily promoted and sponsored by the gambling industry and sporting codes. For some participants, heavy promotion was a sign that sports wagering was a popular activity and many sports fans gambled on sports. Secondly, participants noticed that sports wagering had become more common in peer discussion about sports. Thirdly, sports wagering was associated with minimal stigma and guilt as compared to other forms of gambling.

Establishing new gambling rituals and behaviours

Sports wagering became embedded in existing social rituals and established new rituals. Participants described wagering as a normal "add on" to being a sports fan and watching sports. Many belonged to a Punter's Club, which was a group formed with friends or workmates to bet on sports. For these participants, belonging to a Club had a number of benefits, including social connectedness and being able to rely on others' knowledge when making a bet.

The shaping of gambling/sport discussions

Language use among peers encouraged sports wagering. Conversations about sports often involved a discussion about gambling options and markets. Most participants felt that the discussions helped them relate and created a sense of social connectedness.

Socio-cultural pressure to gamble

Peer pressure was a reason why some participants engaged in sports wagering. They found it difficult to not gamble when all their friends were doing so. Others said they just followed the behaviours of their friends. Some expressed negative opinions about how gambling had dominated peer discussions.

How you can use this research

Public health and intervention providers can use this study to raise awareness of the risks of sports wagering. Public health may want to monitor marketing tactics used by gambling industry and the impact these tactics have on risky gambling behaviours. Social marketing campaigns can be developed to counter the portrayal of sports wagering as being normal and socially acceptable for sports fans.

About the Researcher

Emily G. Deans and **Samantha L. Thomas** are affiliated with the Centre for Population Health Research, School of Health and Social Development, Faculty of Health, Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. **Mike Daube** is with Public Health Advocacy Institute of Western Australia, Curtin University, Perth, Australia. **Jeffrey Derevensky** is with the International Centre for Youth Gambling Problems and High Risk Behaviours, McGill University, Montreal, Canada. Questions about this study can be addressed to Emily G. Deans at edeans@deakin.edu.au.

Citation

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