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Irish children's exposure to and perceptions of gambling marketing in sports

What this research is about

Gambling is increasingly advertised at sports events. There are concerns about the risks to children and youth from gambling marketing. Research has found that gambling marketing downplays the risks of the activity. Research has also shown that young people are increasingly aware of gambling brands. In previous studies, children were found to be able to match gambling sponsors to their sports teams. Children also had an understanding of various gambling activities, especially sports betting. Some young people thought that gambling is a normal aspect of sports, in part due to the high frequency of sports betting marketing.

This study aimed to explore Irish children's exposure to and perceptions of gambling marketing in sports. The researchers focused on the following aspects: (1) spaces where children are exposed to gambling marketing when they watch sports; (2) what children's views are on the tactics used by gambling operators to market their products; and (3) how gambling marketing shapes children's perceptions of the relationship between sports and gambling.

What the researchers did

The researchers conducted six interactive, face-to-face focus groups with 51 children aged 14–17 years. The children lived in the border regions between Ireland and Northern Ireland. They all regularly watched sports broadcasts through mass media or social media at least once a week. Children who had attended a gambling awareness/education workshop in the past 12 months were excluded from the study.

The researchers used photo elicitation techniques and group activities during the focus groups. The use of national and popular sports team marketing images and group activities provided the children with talking points. The researchers ensured that gambling logos were kept to a minimum and that most photos showed a non-gambling sponsor and an unbranded image. The focus groups were divided into two age ranges: 14–15 and 16–17 years old. The length of the focus groups ranged from 70 to 90 minutes.

What you need to know

Gambling marketing portrays gambling as normal part of sports. This can create a public health risk, given the harm associated with gambling. This study explored Irish children's exposure to and perceptions of gambling marketing in sports. Six focus groups were carried out with children aged 14–17 years who regularly watched sports. The researchers identified four main themes. First, sports consumption was mostly through mobile social media. Second, exposure to gambling marketing was high. Advertising for gambling was frequently seen on social media platforms as well as in everyday spaces and conversations with peers. Third, there were mixed responses about perceptions regarding gambling marketing through sports. Fourth, participants were skeptical of the claims made in gambling marketing.

What the researchers found

The researchers identified four themes from the data. The first theme was related to sport consumption via mobile social media among youth. In the focus groups, it was clear that the participants preferred to watch sports through social media over mass media. Participants aged 14–15 years mentioned Snapchat as their favourite platform, while those aged 16–17

mentioned TikTok was their favourite. Different social media platforms were used for different purposes, with TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube being used to reduce boredom. Some participants also used Instagram and YouTube for sports information. On the other hand, Snapchat was used to communicate with peers, and WhatsApp was mainly used to communicate with family and coaches/administrators at their local sports club.

The second theme was related to exposure to gambling marketing through sports, both online and offline. Participants mentioned being exposed to gambling marketing across various mass media and social media sites. YouTube was most frequently mentioned as the platform where they saw gambling marketing. Participants also mentioned exposure to gambling marketing in everyday spaces, such as on high/main streets, and during chatter with peers.

The third theme was related to perceptions of commercial involvement in sports. Participants understood the concept of a sponsor and its commercial purpose. But they thought that gambling marketing was targeted to older people, rather than themselves. Participants were also asked to rank how suitable certain sponsors are for sports. Four focus groups ranked gambling sponsors as the most suitable sponsors for a sports team, compared to other sponsors like fast food companies. Despite that, some participants suggested that gambling sponsorship was not right for sports. They thought that sponsorship from sports drink and supplement companies would be more appropriate. Participants expressed concerns about the influence of athletes/celebrities advertising for gambling on their followers.

The fourth theme was related to how participants were resistant to and skeptical of gambling marketing. Participants showed an understanding that marketing reinforces the idea of gambling as a normal aspect of sports. Some participants were resistant to marketing tactics that glamorize gambling. They were also critical about the dangers of gambling and thought that people in positions of social power, such as celebrities, should be responsible and set better examples.

How you can use this research

This study can be used to better understand the perceptions of Irish children regarding gambling marketing through sports.

About the researchers

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Citation

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