



A Review Article

Youth Sports Betting and Problem Gambling in the Global and Nigerian Context: A Review

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Abstract

Sports betting, once confined to physical venues, has experienced an explosive surge in the popularity of online participation, particularly captivating young adults. This narrative review explores the current global perspectives of sports betting and its attendant implications for youths. We examined the prevalence, factors, potential risks, and effects such as financial losses, psychosocial issues, and problem gambling. This review presents current evidence on sports betting among youths and identifies trends, factors, potential harms, regulatory framework, and research gaps while recommending future directions to mitigate the challenge.

Sports betting is a predominant form of gambling in the Americas and Europe. Interestingly, Nigeria also has a considerable proportion of youth involvement in this activity. Preferences for the type of sports vary across countries and depend on the most popular sports in the region, with football being a top choice in Spain and Nigeria. Online bet platforms are gaining traction due to convenience. Socio-demographic factors like age, gender, income levels, unemployment rates, and marketing campaigns play pivotal roles in sports betting. Participants can be motivated by monetary, recreational, social, or enhancement and coping reasons. Aside from obvious financial losses, sports betting has been implicated in academic failures, depression, suicidal ideation, and other social vices. Problem gambling and its attendant issues have also become an emerging problem for many countries as it poses a threat to their most productive population. However, it is crucial to note that the legalization and regulation of sports betting remains a highly contested subject in different countries. There is a need for stringent regulation and a collaborative approach to address gambling harms. Betting companies can take responsibility for creating public awareness of responsible gambling and harm reduction in sports betting. Additionally, they can make financial commitments toward the rehabilitation of problem gamblers.

Keywords: Gambling; Young adults; Adolescents; Nigeria; Prevalence; Marketing

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Introduction:

Gambling is an entertainment service involving staking money on chance-driven events, with the potential to win more than is wagered but a possibility of participants losing over time [1,2]. Commercial gambling encompasses many activities, including lotteries, number games, sports betting, horse betting, poker and other card games, casino table games, and electronic gaming machines. Several studies establish sports betting as the most common form of gambling, especially among young people [3–9]. Sports betting is placing a monetary wager on the outcome of one or more sporting events, including specific occurrences or non-occurrences within those events, or on the overall outcome of a competition [10]. It is a form of gambling where individuals predict the outcome of sporting events to win money. Until the mid-1990s, sports betting was limited to in-person wagers on horse and greyhound races. Two significant changes occurred; firstly, some bookmakers expanded their offerings to include team sports, and secondly, telephone and internet betting was introduced in Victoria, Australia [11]. By 2008, telephone and internet betting were available in all Australian states. Studies have found that sports betting is prevalent among adolescents and young adults in most countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Asia, and the Middle East [12].

Sports betting is more common in youths than in other age groups because of impulsivity and increased likelihood of participating in risky activities [13,14]. Access to and utilisation of online services have also increased participation in sports betting and the likelihood of adverse impacts [15]. The development of problem gambling among youths has raised serious concerns and sparked debates for legislation, as it affects the most productive demographic [7]. In the United States, the rate of weekly betting surged during the pandemic, whereas sports betting remains legally restricted in Iceland [10,16]. While young people in various countries have different attitudes towards sports betting, they share a common vulnerability to its risks, including financial losses, distraction from work or school, and medical and psychosocial issues, as well as gambling disorders [4–9]. The surge of online sports betting and its promotion has sparked public concern, as the relationship between gambling exposure and participation raises implications for sports, health, well-being, and social policy [11].

Research trends are now shining light on the adverse effects that may be associated with sports betting, as negative sports betting behaviour could progress into a clinical disorder. Gambling disorder is persistent and problematic gambling behaviour leading to impairment or distress, classified under the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders V (DSM-V) as a substance and addictive behaviour [17]. It has implications for the individual, family, and society [1,3,7]. This study aims to explore existing literature and develop thematic areas relating to sports betting among youths globally, compare trends regarding prevalence and patterns, summarise the contributory factors, and review the reported effects. Another goal is to identify research gaps and suggest future directions to address potential harms associated with sports betting.

Methodology

A comprehensive literature review was conducted on sports betting using electronic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, Google Scholar, and gambling regulatory repositories. Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) indexing terms such as ‘sports betting’ in relation to ‘prevalence’, ‘patterns’, ‘motivational factors’, ‘reasons for betting’, ‘implications’, ‘effects’, and their variations were utilised. Only peer-reviewed papers or gambling regulatory documents written in English and published between January 2003 and January 2024 were included. Unrelated or duplicate articles were excluded. A total of 115 potential articles were identified, and after excluding ineligible materials, 38 papers were reviewed. A data extraction form was used to collect relevant information from selected studies by three authors (F.M.D, B.M.U, and V.E.E). The three authors read the entire manuscript and decided on the main

takeaway. Thematic areas were deduced based on the conclusions of the original authors. The extracted data were then analysed and discussed using a narrative synthesis approach. The findings from the selected studies were categorised based on our specific objectives. Result patterns were then summarised to provide an exhaustive review of the prevalence, patterns, factors associated with sports betting, and their reported effects.

Results

The review revealed rates of youth sports betting varied considerably between countries, ranging from 5% to over 76% among those aged 12 to 35 years [36]. Across multiple regions, including Africa [4,6,7,9,11,15,26,35,40,47,49], Australia [27,54,55,56], North America [39,57,59], Europe [34,36,46], and Asia [8,22,41,42], studies reported a significant proportion of adolescents and young adults participating in various forms of sports wagering. Notably, the proliferation of online betting platforms and the normalisation of sports betting in certain cultures have contributed to the accessibility and appeal of this activity among youth populations. The analysis of existing literature identified several significant public health implications associated with youth sports betting. Firstly, there is a well-established link between early gambling involvement and the development of problem gambling behaviours later in life, which can have detrimental impacts on mental health, financial stability, and interpersonal relationships [10]. Additionally, studies have highlighted the co-occurrence of youth sports betting with other risky behaviours, such as substance abuse, delinquency, and academic underperformance, suggesting a potential clustering of harmful activities [11,28,29].

Regulation and Growth

The legalisation of sports betting has led to its mainstream popularity and reduced stigma, but it remains subject to scrutiny and increasing regulation [10]. Different countries have regulatory frameworks for sports betting. In Australia, online betting is regulated by the National government, while respective states regulate land-based betting under the 2001 Interactive Gambling Act [10]. In Canada, territorial and provincial governments regulate both forms of sports betting through the 2021 Safe and Regulated Sports Betting Act [10]. Whereas, in the United Kingdom, it is regulated by the Gambling Commission under the Gambling Act of 2005 [10,19]. Similarly, in Nigeria, the National Lottery Regulation Commission (NLRC) regulates gambling under the 2005 National Lottery Act [18]. Sports betting is legal for individuals aged 18 years and above in Nigeria [19]. Acquisition of licenses by sports betting operators from the NLRC has risen in the past decade. As of June 2024, NLRC has licensed 69 betting companies to operate nationwide, contributing to Government revenue through licensing fees and Value Added Tax since 2007 [20].

Relevance of the Youth population to Sports betting

Young people are more likely to be interested in sports than older adults [13,14]. This is due to factors such as the influence of peers and family, the availability of sports programming, and the increased participation of young people in sports [21,22]. With this increased interest and fewer responsibilities, they will likely have more disposable income for betting. The reverse is the case for the older population [23]. The youths have significant impulsivity, optimism, and lack of experience; they are influenced by what their peers do [6,24,25]. These characteristics tend to make them engage in more risky behaviours even when there is an impending financial loss [11]. Youths have a propensity to bet more as they take advantage of their technological proficiency over older adults and, thus, can access online sports betting platforms easily [15]. Additionally, there is more engagement online compared with in-person betting, which increases the likelihood of betting more. Although middle-aged and older adults may also engage in sports betting, they are less likely to do so, as they have less disposable.

income for risky activities and may not be as technologically advanced as the youths [11,15,25,26]. Youths are the primary participants in sports betting, mainly because of their growing interest in sports and the sports industry [23,27]. The global surge in virtual games and sports betting has led to many young people taking up sports betting for several reasons [28,29]. This often includes social and emotional attachment implications, which may explain the widespread involvement of youths in sports betting [11].

Prevalence of Gambling

While many studies on gambling in Nigeria have focused on the general adult population, comprehensive studies in high-income countries have assessed the participation and consequences of gambling among youths [30,31]. Young adults worldwide have high rates of involvement in risky behaviours, including gambling [32]. In European countries like Iceland and Sweden, the rate of gambling among young people aged 18 to 24 is thrice that of the general population, the majority of whom are undergraduates [33,34]. Regional surveys in Europe and Nigeria indicate that being below 25 years old is a significant risk factor for lifetime gambling [5,33–35]. A 2017 Geopoll survey in sub-Saharan Africa found that 54% of Nigerian youths aged 17-35 had engaged in gambling [36]. Among the countries surveyed, Kenya had the highest prevalence of youth gambling (76%), followed by Uganda (56%), while Ghana had the lowest prevalence (42%) [36]. This highlights the need for targeted interventions, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, home to the world's largest youth population [7].

Prevalence of Sports Betting

Sports betting has been documented as a common form of gambling among various populations [37]. It has seen significant growth, particularly in developed countries like Europe and the Americas, where it is deeply ingrained in the entertainment culture [38,39]. A study in Thailand reported sports betting (26.8%) to be the second most common gambling activity among youths after card games (62.4%) [8]. Another study in Uganda found that sports betting (20%) was the most prevalent gambling activity [4].

The popularity of sports betting among young people can be attributed to several factors. The opportunity to earn money from their passion for sports is a major incentive for Nigerian youths [5,35]. Factors such as increased media coverage, greater participation in gambling activities, and a general interest in sporting events have contributed to the growing popularity of sports betting in Nigeria, American and European countries [5,9,35,40]. It is worth noting that undergraduates in various countries have also been found to have a high prevalence of sports betting [32,35,39]. This can be attributed to their sport-conscious nature, increased access to technology, and a weak regulatory environment in some parts of the world [6,31,32].

Patterns of Sports Betting

When examining the patterns and characteristics of gambling, including sports betting, factors such as the types of games or sports bet on, the device or platform used to place bets, and the frequency of gambling is essential. The preferred sports for betting vary across different countries and are often influenced by popular sporting events. In India, cricket is the preferred sport for betting, followed by football [41]. Similarly, football is the preferred sport for bettors in Hong Kong [42], China [22], and Spain [43]. Football is widely followed in Nigeria, and there is a keen interest in foreign leagues [40]. The Nigerian Premier Football League has less followership than European competitions, with the latter having better management and television coverage [40]. Furthermore, a strong interest in international football tournaments across various age and gender categories is reflected in the betting preferences of youths in Southwest Nigeria [35,40].

The use of online sports betting platforms has consistently increased, although some sports bettors still prefer land-based venues [27,32]. In Spain, 83.4% of respondents chose online betting, while almost half placed bets on mobile phones [28]. Convenience, privacy, dis-inhibition, escape, simulation, multilingual service, ability to multitask, faster booking, and perceived better payouts were identified as reasons for this preference [44,45]. However, a study in Ibadan, Nigeria, found that respondents preferred land-based betting venues due to limited internet access [40]. The frequency of betting is a crucial indicator of the development of disordered gambling. In Spain, most respondents reported betting at least three times a month [46]. Meanwhile, studies done in Edo and Lagos states, Nigeria, revealed that most youths (70%) bet daily on sports [11,47]. Similarly, another study reported a significant proportion of youths betting daily (50.7%) or weekly (42.9%), suggesting a higher risk of chronic betting and potential addiction development [48].

Discussion

Our result showed common themes and factors like age, gender, and marketing campaigns increasing the possibility of sports betting. Younger individuals, typically between 15 and 30 years, are more inclined towards sports betting. The 2010 British Gambling Prevalence Survey (BGPS) has shown a higher rate of participation in sports betting among respondents aged 16-34 compared to other age groups [23]. In Iceland, Olason et al. reported a high rate of gambling among individuals aged 13-18, with 56.6% reporting gambling within the past 12 months [33]. Similarly, in Spain, Labrador et al. found a 42.6% prevalence of sports betting among respondents aged 18-25 [46]. Studies in Kampala, Uganda, showed that persons aged 18 to 30 years were twice as likely to gamble than those over 30 years [4]. Several factors have been associated with the predominant betting behavior among youths. A major reason for gambling is the need to make extra money [15,26]. Other reasons include peer pressure and ego, “recreation and relaxation, resource accumulation, therapeutic purposes, such as showing adherence to group norms to avoid sanction or demonstrating addiction” [49].

Gender also plays a role, with several studies showing a higher proportion of male gamblers compared to females [11,23,46]. According to the BGPS, 75% of respondents who reported gambling in the past year were male [23]. In Spain, Labrador et al. also found that more males (81%) than females participated in sports betting [46]. These findings align with studies conducted in Nigeria reporting a higher male participation in sports betting [11].

Income-level determining socioeconomic classes varies by country and has been identified as a factor influencing betting activity. In Kenya, individuals with lower incomes were found to be more likely to engage in gambling [21]. Contrastingly, the BGPS revealed a positive correlation between personal income level and the prevalence of sports betting, indicating that higher earners were more inclined to bet [23]. However, Ahaibwe et al. found that individuals from both high and low socioeconomic status were more likely to gamble [4]. In Nigeria, studies have shown that a majority of youth bettors engage in gambling to earn extra income [11,14]. Bankole also found that financial strain was a positive predictor of general gambling behaviour among youths in Nigeria [5].

Marketing has emerged as a significant factor influencing the decision to gamble. Advertisements play a role in shaping attitudes towards sports betting, either by normalising it or presenting it as an essential component of enjoying sporting events [50–52]. This influence has become more intrusive as sports betting companies secure advertisement slots during televised sporting events and promote their services within sporting venues [28,50]. Betting companies use multimedia platforms to advertise new ways to gamble, launch new features, and offer substantial sign-up bonuses as incentives for new accounts [53]. Such marketing strategies can lead to increased participation in gambling activities [27,53]. Similar findings in Nigeria showed that the prospects of winning big or receiving substantial bonuses encouraged betting participation [14].

Motivational Factors for Sports Betting Participation

Wardle et al. [23] grouped motivational reasons for sports betting into monetary, recreational, enhancement, coping, and social (Table 1). The desire to make money is a major driving factor for sports betting. The BGPS found that 82% of gamblers aged 16-34 participated in gambling to win a substantial amount of money, while 64% did so to make money, irrespective of the sum [23]. An Australian study also reported that 52% of respondents engaged in betting for the chance to win significant sums of money [54]. Similarly, a study in Kenya showed that 70% of surveyed students reported that money was their primary motivating factor for participating in betting [6]. Enhancement as a motivating factor comprises betting as a mental challenge, learning about sports as a form of competition, for a sense of accomplishment, and for the thrill or excitement it brings. The BGPS found that reasons for gambling among bettors aged 16-34 were to compete with others (13%), as a mental challenge (27%), as excitement (65%), and as a sense of achievement (50%) [23]. Enjoyment was cited as a reason for gambling among university students in a Kenyan study [6]. In addition, a study in Nigeria found that 64.8% of respondents bet on sports to learn more about the sport [11].

Coping is another motivation for betting, and it is used to deal with stress or negative emotions [24]. Some individuals may also engage in betting to seek external validation from others or to impress peers [24]. The BGPS found that 1-in-14 gamblers used betting as a way to relieve tension, and approximately 8% of gamblers reported that they engaged in betting to impress others [23]

Recreational motives play a significant role in betting activities, as it offers a way to engage in a hobby, have fun, or relax [23]. The BGPS found that 78% of past-year gamblers participated in gambling because they found it fun [23]. Similarly, an Australian study showed that 62% of past-year gamblers cited fun as their motivation for betting [54]. In a study on sports betting in Kenya, about 10% of respondents indicated that they bet for recreation or to relieve boredom [6]. Additionally, a study conducted in Nigeria found that 44.5% of betting participants were motivated by the quest for fun [11]. Betting can also be a social activity, allowing individuals to spend time with family or friends [23]. Peer groups and families have a strong influence on people, including their attitudes towards gambling [23]. According to the BGPS, 42% of bettors in Britain stated that they bet to socialise with friends, while 52% did so to engage in social activities with their family [23]. Similarly, Francis et al. found that 40% of past-year gamblers reported betting as a social activity [54]. This is consistent with a Nigerian study reporting that 68.7% of sports bettors engaged in gambling as a means of participating in social activities [11].

Effects of Sports Betting

While gambling can be a satisfying form of recreation, excessive gambling can have serious negative consequences (Table 1) [6]. Studies have shown that gambling is a controlled and enjoyable leisure activity for most participants [23,54]. However, a minority may develop an uncontrolled and desperate desire to chase losses [9].

Disordered gambling can have far-reaching detrimental effects on individuals, families, and society [4,7]. This includes financial impacts such as debts and reckless spending, as well as psychosocial consequences like damaged relationships, loss of career, substance misuse, suicidal ideation, and crime [4,7]. Disordered gambling can also lead to psychiatric conditions like anxiety, depression, insomnia, and behavioral problems [7]. The two common variations of disordered gambling are problem gambling and gambling addiction [39,55,56]. Problem gambling affects not just the individual but their social network and community, while gambling addiction (pathological gambling) is specific to the individual [39,55,56]. College students and young adults have been identified as a high-risk group for developing problem gambling [39,55,56]. When compared to older adults, youths have a three-times higher

pathological gambling rate, with online betting implicated in their development of disordered gambling as it leads to greater impulsiveness and an illusion of control [29,46,57–59]. Studies have found significant prevalence rates of moderate-risk and problem gambling in the youth population [22]. Likewise, the BGPS found the highest prevalence of at-risk and problem gambling in youths aged 16-24 years [23]. It is crucial to address the issue of sports betting among college students and young adults, as it can negatively impact their future endeavours [31]. Gambling has been reported to have adverse effects on academics, including loss of study time and diversion of tuition fees to gambling-related activities [6]. Education and support are essential in addressing this issue and minimising its impact on this population [7].

Research Gaps and Future Directions

Sports betting is a popular form of gambling that has gained significant attention in recent years. However, it is also associated with several negative impacts, including addiction, financial loss, and mental health problems. As such, it is crucial to mitigate such negative impacts by addressing research gaps, evaluating regulatory frameworks, and promoting responsible gambling. Research gaps must be addressed to understand the impact of sports betting. This includes investigating economic and societal effects, which are also essential to promote responsible gambling and minimise harm.

One of the critical areas that require attention is understanding the impact of sports betting on demographics. While sports betting is popular among young adults, its impact on youths is not well understood. Therefore, more longitudinal research is needed to identify factors contributing to problem gambling among youths. This will enable the development of effective prevention and intervention programs to address the issue. Another important area is exploring psychological and social factors that drive sports betting behavior. This includes understanding the role of peer pressure, social norms, and emotional states in driving excessive sports betting. Such knowledge will enable the development of programs that target these factors to reduce the risk of addiction and other negative impacts.

Additionally, technological advancements have changed the landscape of sports betting, making it more accessible and convenient than ever before. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the impact of modern technologies and trends on sports betting behavior among youths by exploring the use of mobile apps or social media platforms in driving excessive sports betting. Furthermore, evaluating regulatory frameworks is essential in promoting responsible gambling and minimising harm. This includes assessing the effectiveness of existing regulations, identifying gaps, and developing new policies and regulations. For instance, implementing age verification measures, setting betting limits, and prohibiting advertisements that target young people can reduce the risk of excessive sports betting and minimise harm.

Lastly, promoting responsible gambling requires parental education and support programs. While such programs have been suggested as effective control measures, more rigorous research is needed to evaluate their long-term effectiveness. Additionally, more research is needed to establish causality between sports betting and negative outcomes. Current research on adverse effects is correlational, meaning that establishing causality requires building on the level of evidence.

Recommendations and Conclusion

To address the harmful effects of sports betting, it is essential to engage the public, implement stricter regulations, and encourage collaborative efforts among industry stakeholders. This can be achieved through regulatory, educational, and supportive interventions that promote responsible gambling practices and minimise negative impacts, particularly among vulnerable populations. National and international measures should be put in place and strengthened to mitigate the effects of problem gambling. Legislation should be enacted to control the proliferation of online sports betting centers,

especially in underdeveloped countries with high rates of youth unemployment. Advertising of sports betting during live sporting events and television shows should be regulated by appropriate marketing bodies to maintain the integrity of sports and sporting events. Public awareness campaigns targeting youths, parents, and educators are crucial, emphasising responsible gambling practices and the potential risks of sports betting. Policies restricting the location of betting companies near schools can minimise exposure to sports betting advertising among young individuals. Finally, betting companies should invest in public education and effective management of problem gambling to promote responsible gambling practices.

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