

# Young people's reflections on the factors contributing to the normalisation of gambling in Australia

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The emergence of online gambling in Australia and internationally has led to an increase in the promotion of these products via multiple media channels.<sup>1,2</sup> The rapid growth and diversification of online gambling has included an alignment of gambling advertising and promotion, and sponsorship with sporting codes and teams.<sup>3,4</sup> Research demonstrates the breadth and pervasiveness of this marketing across a variety of platforms, including television commercial break advertising, signage within stadiums and on sporting fields, and brand logos on the clothing of sporting teams.<sup>5,6</sup> Marketing on social media has also created a new dimension in the way gambling products are promoted.<sup>7,8</sup> A recent critical and meta-analytic review of gambling advertising suggested there was a positive association between exposure to gambling advertising and gambling-related attitudes, and intentions and behaviours in adults.<sup>9</sup> However, to our knowledge, there has been no such research with young people.

In 2020, the WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission stated that gambling is a "potentially large and unaddressed public health challenge for children" and drew attention to Australian research showing children's awareness of gambling advertising, products, and terminology.<sup>10</sup> Public health academics and practitioners have increasingly focused on how marketing may be one factor, alongside

## Abstract

**Objectives:** To explore young people's perceptions of the factors that may normalise gambling, and their opinions about the messages they see about gambling in their environments.

**Methods:** An analysis of qualitative data from a mixed methods study of n=111 young people aged 11–16 years in Victoria, Australia. Questions investigated: i) the normalisation of gambling in sport; ii) the impact of advertising on young people; and iii) potential strategies to alert young people about the risks associated with gambling. An inductive approach was used to analyse the data.

**Results:** Participants perceived that gambling was a regular and everyday activity and that gambling was becoming normalised in sport. However, some directly challenged this alignment. They were particularly critical that gambling advertising may influence young people's current and future gambling-related attitudes and intentions. Most participants supported public health interventions, including more advertising restrictions.

**Conclusion:** Young people's awareness of gambling and gambling marketing may be increasing their perceptions of the alignment between gambling and sport.

**Implications for public health:** Strategies should be developed to increase young people's awareness of the risks associated with gambling. Young people's voices and views should be considered by policy makers in responding to this new public health issue.

**Key words:** young people, gambling, normalisation, advertising, sport

family, peers and other cultural factors, in normalising gambling for young people.<sup>10-12</sup> Thomas and colleagues<sup>13</sup> defined the normalisation of gambling as:

*The interplay of socio-cultural, environmental, commercial, and political processes which influence how different gambling activities and products are made available and accessible, encourage recent and regular use, and become an accepted part of everyday life for individuals, their families, and communities.*<sup>14(p.6)</sup>

In investigating normalisation, researchers have focused on how young people may develop a range of attitudes towards gambling, particularly as it is aligned with sport.<sup>14-17</sup> Research about tobacco use has shown that young people who are exposed to tobacco marketing tend to hold more positive, normative perceptions about smoking (e.g. that smoking is popular).<sup>18,19</sup> Drawing on this evidence base, researchers have demonstrated that some of the

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Submitted: May 2020; Revision requested: August 2020; Accepted: November 2020

The authors have stated they have no conflict of interest.

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Aust NZ J Public Health. 2021; 45:165-70; doi: 10.1111/1753-6405.13063

promotional activities that shape young people's attitudes towards tobacco products and smoking may have a similar effect in relation to gambling. For example, studies have demonstrated that some groups of young people have high recall of gambling brands,<sup>11,20,21</sup> are aware of specific appeal strategies in gambling advertisements, and can link these appeal strategies with particular brands.<sup>12,20</sup> Researchers have also found that young people perceive that gambling advertising portrays gambling as fun, exciting and entertaining.<sup>10,16</sup> Further, researchers suggest that forms of promotion such as those featuring celebrity endorsement or inducement marketing (such as cash refund offers) may create more trust in gambling products and a perception that gambling is a risk-free activity.<sup>16,20</sup> While there has been limited research specifically examining the link between marketing and youth gambling behaviours, some preliminary findings suggest that marketing may play a role in shaping young people's intentions to gamble when they are older.<sup>12,20</sup>

Researchers have investigated the processes that may contribute to the normalisation of gambling in young people.<sup>11,22</sup> However, few studies have specifically explored young people's own perceptions about the normalisation of gambling, including the processes and strategies that may influence this. For example, few studies have explored whether young people believe gambling is a socially or culturally acceptable activity, how they may critically engage with the public messages they might see about gambling, and the range of strategies they think could be useful in preventing gambling harm.<sup>15,23</sup> Understanding young people's own perspectives are important given that the WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission states that children have "little voice in the shape of their future" and that further emphasis should be placed on amplifying young people's voices for a healthy future.<sup>24(p.607)</sup>

A range of practical measures and/or proposals have aimed to reduce and restrict young people's exposure to gambling marketing aligned with sport.<sup>25</sup> Most significantly, on 1 April 2018, the Australian Government implemented national regulations that prohibited televised gambling advertising within live broadcasts of sport.<sup>26</sup> This means gambling advertising must not appear from five minutes before the start of a game until five minutes after a game up to 8.30 pm Australian Eastern

Standard Time (although children in states and territories outside of this time zone may see advertising earlier in the day).<sup>25</sup> Further restrictions were applied from 28 September 2018 to online content services that stream live sport.<sup>27</sup> However, there are still some significant gaps in the legislation, including exemptions for subscription television channels with a 'low' audience share, online streaming services, commentary in the lead up to the start of live sporting matches, and advertising within sports and current affairs (news) programs such as sports commentary programs.<sup>7</sup> Regulations do not prevent sponsorship or embedded promotions, such as stadium advertising, clothing branding and field logos. However, there have been some government efforts to buy out these types of promotions within some sporting contexts,<sup>28</sup> to encourage community and professional sporting clubs to resist commercial sponsorship arrangements with gambling companies,<sup>29</sup> and some sporting codes have made voluntary decisions to reduce gambling promotions in stadiums.<sup>30</sup> Finally, regulations do not extend to the advertising to which young people may be exposed on social media channels (such as Instagram, Snapchat, or YouTube).<sup>7</sup>

The present study aimed to explore young people's perceptions about the normalisation of gambling in sport, how they critically reflect on the factors that may contribute to the normalisation of gambling, and the strategies they perceive could prevent or address the normalisation of gambling in sport. The analysis presented in the study was guided by four research questions:

1. How do young people describe the relationship between gambling and sport?
2. What factors do they believe to be most influential in shaping the normalisation of gambling in sport?
3. Do young people critically reflect on the normalisation of gambling in sport?
4. Which types of strategies, if any, are needed to alert young people about the risks associated with gambling?

## Methods

### Approach

The qualitative data for this paper were collected as part of a broader mixed methods study that investigated the influence of sports betting advertising on young people's advertising and brand awareness and their

perceptions of marketing messages.<sup>7,20</sup>

The qualitative approach adopted in this study was primarily inductive. The purpose of an inductive approach is to construct observations from the data in order to develop a detailed analysis that focuses on the meanings and interpretations of participants regarding the research issue being investigated.<sup>31,32</sup>

### Sampling and recruitment

The sample for this study consisted of young people aged 11–16 years who were self-reported fans of basketball in Victoria, Australia. This age range was chosen based on research suggesting that it is when young people become aware of brand marketing and are able to understand the persuasive intent of the marketing activities they observe.<sup>33</sup> The study focused on young people who played basketball, providing a useful comparison given that most research in this area to date has focused on children who are fans of the Australian Football League or the National Rugby League in Australia,<sup>11,12</sup> or the English Premier League in the UK.<sup>21</sup> The focus on young people engaged with basketball is also important because of the exemptions that allow gambling advertising during live sporting matches on ESPN (the Australian subscription channel that covers the American National Basketball Association). The sample did not aim to be representative but sought to broaden and build the evidence base related to young people's perceptions of gambling.

The study used a combination of convenience and purposive sampling to recruit young people at three community basketball stadiums between May and July 2018. Convenience sampling involved recruiting those who were available and willing to participate in the study,<sup>34</sup> with purposive sampling used to ensure the distribution of young people according to different age groups and genders.<sup>35,36</sup> Up to five researchers visited each stadium and approached parents/carers and young people to provide information about the study and invite participation. Parent/carer written consent and young people's verbal consent was obtained prior to participation, with the proviso that consent could be withdrawn at any point during the process, but not once data analysis had commenced. Young people were given a non-branded drink bottle as a token of appreciation for their participation.

### Data collection

A ten-minute one-on-one interviewer-assisted survey via Qualtrics was completed individually with each young person. The researcher asked each question and recorded the response on an iPad in a quiet space within the stadium complex. The researchers were instructed to record the responses as close to verbatim as possible. Researchers who administered the survey were trained in how to complete the survey and the expectations for recording answers.

Information was collected about young people's general characteristics, including their age, gender, and socioeconomic status (assessed via the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016 Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas [SEIFA] grouped into low [deciles 1–3], middle [deciles 4–7] and high [deciles 8–10]). Open text questions included whether participants agreed or disagreed that gambling was a normal part of sport, their perceptions about whether gambling marketing in sport might influence the normalisation of gambling in sport, and any potential positive or negative impact of this on young people. Finally, participants were asked about strategies they perceived could be used to alert young people about the risks associated with gambling.

Ethical approval was provided by the University Human Research Ethics Committee (2018-087)

### Data analysis

The data were managed using QSR NVivo 11 and analysis was performed by the first author. Data analysis involved open-coding techniques of selecting, sorting, and labelling the data prior to data interpretation.<sup>37</sup> The data were examined by assigning the content of each response to codes and subsequently developing key concepts or themes.<sup>38</sup> Consistent with an inductive approach, it was important to remain open to any patterns or trends that emerged from the data, in order to construct a detailed analysis about significant features young people described that related to the normalisation of gambling.<sup>31,39</sup> A constant comparative approach was used to examine similarities and differences of concepts between gender and age groups.<sup>37</sup> To enhance the validity of the findings, the study investigators held regular meetings to review the developing themes and to reach a consensus for the final

themes. Relevant data extracts are included to convey theme interpretations and to ensure participants' voices were represented, thereby enhancing the integrity of the data.<sup>40</sup>

## Results

### General characteristics

A total of 111 young people aged 11 to 16 years ( $M = 12.9$ ,  $SD = 1.5$ ) participated in the study. The sample was slightly skewed towards boys ( $n=66$ , 59.5%), although the percentage of girls was similar to that of basketball participation for girls in Victoria of 35%.<sup>41</sup> The age range of young people in the sample was skewed towards those aged between 11 and 12 years ( $n=55$ , 49.5%), while only 15.3% of the sample were aged 15 and 16 years ( $n=17$ ). More than half of the sample resided in areas with middle SEIFA deciles ( $n=64$ , 57.7%), and about one-quarter resided in areas with low ( $n=18$ , 16.2%) or high SEIFA deciles ( $n=28$ , 25.2%), with one not provided ( $n=1$ , 0.9%).

Table One illustrates the overarching themes and associated subthemes that emerged relating to young people's perceptions about the normalisation of gambling in sport and the impact of advertising, and suggested strategies to alert young people about the risks associated with gambling.

### Factors contributing to the normalisation of gambling

Two themes emerged in the responses provided by young people relating to the factors that may contribute to gambling being perceived as being a normal part of sport. First was a perception that gambling (particularly on sport) was a regular activity in which most people engaged – “everybody is betting”, “most people do it”, and “a lot of people gamble”. A few young people saw a specific difference between the gambling behaviours of adults in the general population and sports fans. For example, some perceived that individuals who were “big sports fans” were the ones who gambled the most. Some young people agreed that gambling was a normal part of sport because of a perception that gambling on sport had become socially accepted – “it's becoming a part of the lifestyle” and “people are used to seeing it so they do it” or because they had overheard conversations about gambling on sport. For example, they described hearing individuals trying to make gambling predictions about who would win in relation to gambling on sporting matches – “everybody is betting and saying who they think will win”. Girls in particular perceived that gambling was a regular or ‘normal’ activity for many people in the community. However, these perceptions of normalisation were not necessarily aligned with marketing.

**Table 1: Young people's reflections on the normalisation of gambling in Australia.**

Overarching themes	Subthemes
Factors contributing to the normalisation of gambling	A perception that gambling was a regular activity in which most people engage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frequency of gambling discourse among adults and sports fans.</li> <li>• Social acceptability of gambling in sport.</li> </ul>
	The role of gambling advertising <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volume of gambling advertising in sport.</li> <li>• Content of gambling advertising in shaping perceptions about normality of gambling.</li> </ul>
Critical reflections about gambling advertising aligned with sport	Normalisation of gambling in sport <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Should not engage in gambling to enjoy sport.</li> <li>• Challenging the alignment.</li> </ul>
	The influence of advertising on gambling behaviour <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Curiosity towards gambling.</li> <li>• The shaping of positive gambling attitudes/intentions.</li> </ul>
Strategies to counter the risks associated with gambling for young people	The advertising of gambling products <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The association between gambling products and harm.</li> </ul>
	Educational strategies and media campaigns <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public speaking events and specialised education.</li> <li>• Advertising campaigns to alert young people to the risks of gambling.</li> </ul>
	Restrictions on advertising <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Banning gambling advertising.</li> <li>• Moving advertising to later time slots.</li> <li>• Banning advertising within family friendly entertainment.</li> </ul>

For example, one girl commented that gambling on sport would be more normalised for individuals who had been raised in families where there was a history of gambling on sports:

*If you're brought up with betting and sport you would be used to it.* – 12-year-old girl

The second theme concerned the role of marketing. Some young people, and in particular younger boys, described that they had seen an increase in gambling advertising – “all the ads are spreading so much” – and reflected on how the volume of advertising had changed over the years. One commented on saturation in subscription television:

*A few years ago, you would see one or two ads, and now everywhere you watch there are ads. If you go on ESPN you will see the ads everywhere.* – 13-year-old boy

Some young people mentioned that advertising could create a perception that gambling was a normal part of sport. Part of this was the influence of advertising in changing community attitudes and opinions. For example, some stated that advertising gave the impression that gambling was “really normal” and a “normal part of sport”. The following young person observed that as a consequence of advertising, gambling in sport now had become a ‘mainstream’ activity:

*I agree it's become more mainstream – people care about it a lot more because of all the ads.* – 16-year-old girl

A few young people talked specifically about the content of advertising, and particularly content that created a call to action which encouraged individuals to gamble:

*Sort of, because whenever you watch sport they seem to encourage you to bet on it and make money.* – 11-year-old boy

### Critical reflections about gambling advertising aligned with sport

Participants who disagreed that gambling was a normal part of sport felt it should not be something people engaged in to enjoy sport. One participant commented that people should care more about watching sport and having fun rather than having money involved in the game:

*No, I think because sport is about enjoying the game not about getting money out of it.* – 16-year-old boy

Other participants made statements that directly challenged the normalisation of gambling in sport. Some used moral or

emotive statements such as “it’s wrong”, “sadly, yes”, “I don’t want it to be”, or that it “shouldn’t be”. Others specifically stated that just because gambling was becoming normalised, it did not mean they supported or agreed with it:

*I agree it is normal but that doesn't mean I support that.* – 14-year-old boy

Young people’s views about gambling advertising in sport ranged from being highly critical – “it’s terrible because of the marketing” – to being more measured in their responses. For example, while some thought that it was reasonable to expect gambling advertisements to occur during sport telecasts, they were critical of the number of advertisements:

*[Advertising] during sport makes sense, but there's too many, they need to cut back.* – 13-year-old boy

Some were concerned about the risks associated with gambling for young people. Several raised concerns that gambling advertising might lead people to become more curious about gambling and might influence them to want to try gambling – “it might encourage kids to start betting”. A few provided more definitive statements about advertising influence – “it very clearly impacts kids” and “the ads make kids want to do it more and see how it works”. Others were critical that exposure to gambling advertising at a young age might influence gambling behaviours later in life. Some suggested that advertising could persuade young people to think that gambling and sport were not mutually exclusive and might influence their long-term decision making about gambling – “breed them young, basically”. Others perceived that advertising might influence intentions to gamble in adulthood:

*When kids get to 18, they will want to bet all the time.* – 11-year-old boy

Others commented that it was inappropriate to advertise products to which individuals could become addicted. For example, one young person stated that “people shouldn’t be influenced by it, they could get addicted to gambling”, and another that “[advertising is] pretty bad because gambling can become an addiction”. A few were able to describe in some detail the pathway towards harm for young people due to the influence of gambling advertising:

*It shouldn't really be there, it's just too persuasive and convincing, I don't think it should be there. [It has a] very negative*

*influence. It's something that kids shouldn't be able to experience at a young age. They start young and it's an addiction.* – 14-year-old boy

### Strategies to counter the risks associated with gambling for young people

Participants perceived that education was an important way that young people could be made aware of the risks associated with gambling. They stated that current education strategies and programs about gambling in schools were limited – “more education is needed” and “do more in schools”. Some mentioned the need for awareness-raising, including direct contact with people who had experienced gambling harm, and specialised education about the risks and consequences of gambling-related harm:

*We should notify more kids to tell them what betting and gambling does and the consequences of it. This could be done by having people come into schools and talking to kids.* – 13-year-old girl

A few stated that campaigns could be used to warn young people about the risk associated with gambling – “tell kids how dangerous it is”. Importantly, young people noted that public campaigns should take into account young people’s media habits such as where and how they engage with media, including on social media platforms:

*Have ads on TV to warn kids and on social media like Instagram too.* – 12-year-old girl

Young people also recommended reductions and restrictions in marketing, which they perceived would prevent young people from being exposed to gambling messages. For example, one young person stated:

*I think we just need to get the ads off the telly. It's the only thing that will make a difference.* – 14-year-old boy

Other recommendations included removing gambling from family-friendly channels and restricting the timing of advertising to periods when young people would be less likely to be exposed to these promotions:

*Don't put the gambling ads on until later at night.* – 11-year-old boy

### Discussion

This study aimed to explore young people’s perceptions about the relationship between gambling in sport, how

young people critically reflect on the normalisation of gambling in sport, and their recommendations for strategies to alert young people about the risks posed by gambling. The findings from the study raise four points for discussion based on the research questions.

The study findings suggest that young people are aware of gambling and the marketing of gambling and perceive that there may be an increased social acceptance of gambling. These perceptions appeared to be influenced by a range of factors, including their media exposure to gambling marketing, the alignment of gambling with sport, and discourses they had heard about gambling. The finding is similar to research that has found a range of socialising factors may influence young people's attitudes and perceptions towards gambling products.<sup>17</sup> Pitt and colleagues found young people's perceptions that gambling was a popular activity were in part influenced by what they had seen or heard about gambling during culturally valued sporting events. Young people's perceptions of the popularity of alcohol and tobacco have been shown to influence their future consumption intentions of these harmful products.<sup>42,43</sup> Further research should also investigate how perceptions about the regularity and social acceptability of gambling may influence young people's gambling intentions.

Young people perceived that the volume and content of advertising may have a role in normalising gambling, a view supported by other research studies with young people about gambling marketing.<sup>16,23,44</sup> An important part of the approach used by governments and health authorities to successfully de-normalise smoking in young people was the focus on diminishing acceptance of and tolerance for smoking through measures that significantly reduced tobacco advertising and promotion.<sup>45</sup> However, it is important to note that the present research was conducted soon after the implementation of advertising restrictions on live sport in Australia, and it is unclear whether young people may have recalled gambling marketing that they had been exposed to prior to the advertising restrictions. Given that it has now been more than two years since these restrictions were implemented, it would be timely to revisit young people's perceptions to consider whether there has been any impact on reducing awareness or recollections of

exposure to advertising. Importantly, given that restrictions mostly apply to commercial break advertising, research should seek to specifically understand recall and awareness of other forms of promotions, including sponsorship. This type of research can inform policy considerations, as well as the development and dissemination of independent, evidence-based public education interventions that challenge perceptions of the acceptability of gambling, including in sport.

One consideration that might signify recent efforts to address the impacts of young people's exposure to marketing, and the risks associated with gambling, concerns the findings related to young people's critical reflections about gambling. Some young people did not accept or support gambling becoming normalised, were particularly critical of the role of gambling advertising, and were concerned about the risks associated with gambling. A recent study in the UK also showed that young people held negative attitudes about the influence gambling advertising could have on young people's gambling intentions and risk for experiencing gambling-related harm.<sup>21</sup> Although young people in this study were critical of the normalisation of gambling and the role of advertising, research shows that appeal strategies used in tobacco marketing, such as colour and imagery of cigarette packaging, still elicited favourable attitudes towards tobacco in young people who were critical of smoking.<sup>46,47</sup> Similar views among young people about gambling may not be a barrier against future gambling intentions. However, adolescence is an ideal time to intervene and develop strategies to prevent young people from developing normalised attitudes towards gambling that may increase their risk of gambling-related harm. These strategies must ensure that young people's voices are included in any decisions that underpin their future wellbeing.<sup>24</sup>

Young people recommended possible strategies to address the risks associated with gambling, including educational strategies and restriction of gambling advertising. There is good evidence about the benefits of education from other areas in public health, but with the caveats that it must be: i) part of a comprehensive approach; ii) adequately funded; iii) sustained; iv) research-based; v) independent of influence from commercial interests; and vi) free to engage in forceful counter-advertising if required.<sup>48</sup> However,

education must be approached with caution, in particular to avoid "ineffective individually-targeted information and educational approaches" of the kind typically promoted by harmful industries.<sup>49(p.674)</sup> There are further concerns that some of the gambling harm-minimisation messaging presented as aiming to educate young people may backfire, reinforcing the behaviour it purports to discourage.<sup>50</sup> Appropriately targeted and research-based educational campaigns, using relevant media, that address the normalisation of gambling behaviours and develop young people's critical marketing skills to counter the commercial messages they see, may be one way forward. Future research should also seek to critically examine the effectiveness of existing educational strategies and campaigns.

### Limitations

First, this study was primarily explorative and included a convenience sample of young people in Victoria, therefore the findings are limited in their generalisability beyond the sample. Further research is needed to assess the extent to which these views regarding normalisation are held among other groups of young people, such as young people who are not engaged with sport. Second, while the study was designed to include a diverse range of young people, differences between participants with varying demographic profiles and their perceptions about the normalisation of gambling in sport were not examined in detail excluding gender and age. Third, the study sample was not evenly distributed by age, with those aged 15–16 years being less represented. This is because they often attend sports stadiums without a parent or carer, and thus did not have someone who could consent to their participation in the study. Fourth, it is important to consider the existence of a power relationship between researchers and the young people who were interviewed. This may have led to some social desirability bias in responses and could have created an environment where young people felt they had to be more negative or critical of gambling. This was addressed during data collection by re-assuring young people that there were no right or wrong answers and engaging them in a non-judgemental open exchange.

## Conclusion

The findings from this study provide further evidence that young people's awareness about gambling and gambling marketing are influential factors that may be shaping their perceptions of the normalisation of gambling in sport. While regulatory measures have recently been implemented to restrict gambling advertising across television and online streaming services of live sport, further research is needed to understand whether these measures have had any significant impact. Some young people in this study supported further advertising restrictions, and the development of campaigns to alert young people to the risks associated with gambling. Insights from tobacco, alcohol, and unhealthy food clearly demonstrate that such strategies must be targeted, research-based, and developed independently of industry influence. Future research, including consultations with young people, should seek to build on these findings in order to evaluate and develop strategies designed to prevent risks posed by gambling for young people.

## Acknowledgements

We thank the basketball associations who agreed to let us collect data at the stadiums and local councils for their support of the project. We also thank Simone McCarthy and Dr Amy Bestman for assistance with data collection. Most importantly, we would like to thank the young people who participated in this project.

## Funding

This study was funded via a research support account held by Samantha Thomas. Christian Nyemcsok was supported by a writing scholarship from the Faculty of Health, Deakin University.

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