



# STATE OF THE ART

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## **GAMSPON**

**The relationship between gambling sponsorship and the normalization and prevalence of gambling**

Promotor(s)

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## [Introduction]

By 2026, the global gambling market is expected to reach almost \$900 billion in revenue (Cisison, 2021). This increase in gambling activity contributes to a growing number of people showing at risk of gambling behaviour, which can cause – among other harms – relationship problems, financial debt and psychological problems (Ferland et al., 2008). Not only on a micro level, but also on a macro level, gambling might causes a lot of harm. For instance, a problem gambler affects six others on average (Goodwin et al., 2017). The marketing of gambling (e.g., sponsored posts on social media, sports sponsorships and TV commercials) is considered a major contextual factor that contributes to gambling participation, the normalization of gambling in society, and gambling harm (McGrane et al., 2023). One of the most prevalent gambling marketing forms nowadays is (digital) sponsorship, which entails “an investment, in cash or in kind, in an activity, in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that activity” (Guillou-Landreat et al., 2021; Meenaghan, 1991, p. 36). However, concerns about the negative impact of these gambling sponsorships are rising, and several countries have recently taken measures to limit or ban these gambling sponsorships. Furthermore, the widespread use of gambling sponsorships raises ethical concerns regarding different sectors' reliance and dependence on the gambling industry. This project – called GAMSPON – therefore aims to examine whether gambling sponsorships impact gambling prevalence, and if so, how and to what extent.

## [State of the art]

### Key research questions

The current project has four key research questions:

- To what extent is the Belgian population exposed to gambling sponsorships, and how is this exposure related to gambling behaviours?
- What are the causal relations between exposure to gambling sponsorships (sports, media and programming sponsorship) and Belgian adults' gambling-related attitudes, and behaviours? What are the underlying mechanisms (persuasion knowledge, social norms and image transfer) that can explain these effects?
- How are youngsters affected by gambling sponsorships? What is their awareness of and attitudes towards gambling sponsorships, and how are these related to the normalization of gambling and gambling myths?
- What is the perceived need and willingness of relevant stakeholders from policy, practice and lived experience to adapt policy guidelines according to the existing evidence base?

### Main findings of past research and existing gaps of past research

#### *The prevalence of gambling sponsorships*

Sports sponsorship is by far the most studied form of sponsorship by gambling companies in extant research. Jones et al. (2020) identified numerous methods through which sports sponsorships are utilized by gambling brands (e.g., through the presence of their logos on players' shirts, club merchandise, and on billboards located close to the field). Nonetheless, gambling companies utilize various other types of sponsorship as well. For example, Hörnle et al. (2019) distinguished three types of sponsorship from social media users who promote gambling brands: influencers, brand ambassadors and affiliates. Influencers and brand ambassadors are relying on their celebrity (online or offline, such as professional athletes or poker players, social media influencers) to promote gambling brands. However, there are no studies on the prevalence of such sponsorships on social media.

Multiple empirical research studies, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data, have examined the scope and variety of sports sponsorships carried out by gambling firms. These studies aim to investigate the frequency of consumers' exposure to such sponsorships during various sports (events), such as the Australian Football League (AFL), Formula 1, boxing, rugby, etc. For instance, Sartori et al. (2018) found that each AFL club had at least one alleged unhealthy sponsorship, like a junk food, alcohol or gambling company. Nuss et al. (2019) also focussed on the AFL, and their study showed that viewers were exposed to gambling marketing every 2 minutes and 13 seconds during the AFL Grand Final. These results are in line with the study by Purves et al. (2020). During broadcasted British football there were 2.75 gambling references per minute. Sharman et al. (2020) speaks about a saturation of involvement by the gambling industry in British football.

Previous research has shown that also vulnerable groups, such as minors, are often exposed to gambling sponsorships. Minors can be exposed to gambling promotions in many different ways, such as via televised sporting events, influencers on social media, merchandising and sports sponsorships (Djohari et al., 2021; Maher et al., 2006). Different studies have shown that gambling sponsorships are common in sports contexts (Djohari et al., 2019; Hinet et al., 2013; Sharman, 2022). Such an exposure to gambling sponsorships may undermine the benefits of doing sports and can develop gambling-related problems later in life (Macniven et al., 2015). More efforts are needed to reduce minors' exposure to gambling sponsorships and to promote healthy sponsorships in these contexts (Martino et al., 2021).

### ***Impact and perceptions towards gambling sponsorships***

Several empirical studies have been conducted on the persuasiveness of gambling sponsorships among consumers. With regard to sponsor awareness, Bestman et al. (2015) found that 77% of the children correctly identified at least one shirt sponsor. These children associate gambling and alcohol brands more with the most popular sporting leagues. These results are in line with Djohari et al. (2019). They found that 63% of young people and 62% of adults correctly linked at least one gambling shirt sponsor to a corresponding soccer team. The majority of participants (both youth and adults) believed that betting has become a normal part of sports (Djohari et al., 2019).

Prior research also performed some survey studies on the impact of exposure to gambling sponsorships in televised sport. Hing et al. (2013, 2014, 2017) found that exposure to gambling sponsorships is associated with more positive attitudes towards the sponsor, as well as more positive attitudes towards gambling. Next to this, these sport watchers are also having higher intentions to gamble. However, the frequency of gambling sponsorship exposure did not predict problem gambling severity (Hing et al., 2017).

Furthermore, several studies were already conducted on consumers' perceptions towards gambling sponsorship. Johnston and Bourgeois (2015) found that people perceive children and other adults to be more vulnerable to the influence of gambling sponsorship than themselves, indicating possible third-person biases. In addition, using focus groups, Boelsen-Robinson et al. (2022) found that participants perceived children to be particularly susceptible to sports sponsorships of unhealthy commodities and were mostly concerned about their children's exposure to these sponsorships. Moreover, the participants felt that the government and sports leagues have to take their responsibility to reduce sponsorship for unhealthy products. However, according to the study of Vinberg et al. (2021), male athletes, coaches and sports managers believe that sponsorship of gambling companies is necessary and useful. However, athletes were concerned about the pervasive influence of gambling companies on the athletes.

### ***Ethical concerns and regulatory initiatives***

Concerns that arise about gambling sponsorships mostly relate to the fact that these sponsorships contribute to the normalization of gambling (Jones et al., 2020; Sharman, 2022). Gambling sponsorships may transfer positive associations from the sponsored entity to the gambling brand (Jones et al., 2020; Sharman, 2022). This can lead to gambling being seen as a less harmful activity. Sports sponsorship also raises concerns because of the "health halo effect", because the image of sports as a healthy activity might be associated with and transferred to gambling brands, and the possibility of sport-related fraud and match fixing (Maher et al. 2006; Sharman, 2022). Furthermore, gambling sponsorships may contribute to decreased risk perceptions and a heightened illusion of control (Jones et al., 2020).

Furthermore, Ginesta (2013) talks about a new "digital media paradigm". People increasingly consume sports through digital means. Sports sponsorships allow digital companies to reach their consumers anytime and anywhere. In line with this, Lopez-Gonzalez and Tulloch (2015) uncovered a new "ecology for online soccer betting" meaning that a (new) generation of sports fans increasingly needs to be able to bet on sports in order to appreciate and watch different kinds of sports.

Chambers and Sassi (2019) encourage a ban on unhealthy sponsorships, including those of alcohol, gambling, soft drink, and fast-food companies, due to the harm they cause on children and athletes. However, there are concerns that such bans may interfere with people's freedom. Other concerns focus on the difficulty to detect all this advertising, e.g., on social media or by illegal operators (Hörnle et al., 2019). The gambling industry claims to be responsible and advocates for self-regulation, but self-regulation has proven ineffective in preventing gambling harm (Chambers & Sassi, 2019; Marko et al., 2022). Several countries in Europe, as well as Australia, have taken various legal steps to restrict or ban gambling advertising (Regan et al., 2022). In countries where policy makers are planning or considering to implement stricter regulations, the gambling industry is lobbying to delay restrictions. However, some British football clubs have already cancelled contracts with gambling brands or support gambling addiction charities (Sharman, 2022). This could however cause a shift from gambling companies as sponsors to financial trading apps and cryptocurrency companies (Davies & Ferris, 2022; Delfabbro et al., 2021; Lopez-Gonzalez & Griffiths, 2018a; Newall & Xiao, 2021). These businesses have similar characteristics as the gambling industry.

### ***Research gaps***

Current research on gambling sponsorship has mainly focused on sports sponsorship by gambling companies, particularly in the context of association football (soccer). However, very limited research has been conducted on other types of gambling sponsorships, such as influencers, tipsters, and goal-related marketing. No research has been done to investigate the effectiveness of these other forms of sponsorship and their impact on gambling behaviour.

In addition, research is needed to measure the impact on various vulnerable groups, such as minors and problem gamblers. It is important to understand the exposure, impact, and consequences of gambling sponsorship for these various vulnerable groups.

Finally, as gambling sponsorship bans are being introduced or prepared in several countries, there is a need for research to examine the impact of such bans. Longitudinal studies are also required to compare and analyse the gambling behaviour and attitudes before and after the implementation of such restrictions.

## **New research contributions**

Currently, there is a lack of insights and empirical data on Belgian consumers' exposure to different forms of gambling sponsorships, and how this is related to their gambling behaviours. We will therefore provide insights into the prevalence of gambling in Belgium (among minors and adults) and the exposure to gambling sponsorships. As the last update by Sciensano on gambling prevalence dates back from 2018 (Sciensano, 2018), no recent figures are available, although it can be argued that gambling behaviours intensified due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related lockdowns (Brodeur et al., 2021).

To the best of our knowledge, almost no research has been conducted on the impact of (gambling) influencers sponsored by gambling brands. Limited studies did investigate the role of so-called tipsters or affiliates, which are individuals or organizations that share gambling information and tips (on social media) in exchange for money (González-Vallés et al., 2021; Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2021). Therefore, the current project will investigate causal relations between exposure to gambling sponsorship (sports, media and programming) and Belgian adults' gambling-related attitudes, beliefs and behaviours.

The focus on both adults and minors is considered a contribution of the current project. Although age restrictions are in place to prevent minors from gambling, a survey among Belgian secondary school students suggested that 29% already played with scratch tickets, 18% played the lottery, 6% played poker for money, and 13% already placed a sports bet once (Rosiers, 2023). Research on how minors are affected by gambling sponsorships is therefore pressing and urgent; therefore, the current project will investigate youngsters' (16 to 21 years) awareness of and attitudes towards gambling sponsorships and how this is related to the normalization of gambling and gambling fallacies.

## **What is expected in terms of recommendations for policy and practice**

Based on the empirical studies, this project will assess whether the current regulatory framework is fit to sufficiently protect youngsters and adults in light of gambling sponsorships. Based on the GAMPSON results, policy recommendations will be formulated. In particular, we will examine the need and willingness to implement an evidence-informed regulation for gambling advertising and sponsorship and as such possibly adapt existing policy guidelines. Based on focus groups with stakeholders from policy makers, practice and people with lived experiences, the current project will foster knowledge that might lead to implementing evidence-informed policy guidelines, adapting existing policy guidelines.

In addition, as current insights on the impact of gambling advertising are scarce and experimental research in the domain is close to non-existent, the project will provide organizations that are offering help to gamblers with the necessary knowledge on the domain. Hence, the current project will formulate recommendations to societal and nonprofit organizations on which measures (and how) could be implemented to make youngsters and adults less susceptible to problematic gambling behaviours, and the accompanying financial depths and mental health issues.

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