



Experiences of youths involved in sports betting during the COVID-19 pandemic: Insights from Rujeko, Masvingo Urban.

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Abstract

The meteoric rise and exponential growth of sports betting all over the world in contemporary years is undeniable. Its popularity has spread like wildfire and ultimately pervaded people from all walks of life. Ultimately, sports betting practice which was initially frowned upon and thought to be a moral vice in the past is now taking the world by storm. This study sought to qualitatively explore the experiences of youths involved in sports betting during the Covid-19 pandemic. The research was prompted by the shift in patterns of gambling activities during this Covid-19 pandemic lockdown in Zimbabwe. The research sought to establish how sports betting influenced the experiences of young adults during the pandemic era and proffer solutions to problems associated with gambling. The corpus of the paper was a phenomenological research design. A total of nine (9) youths involved in sports betting, ranging from 18 – 40 years were purposively selected to attend to in-depth interviews. Qualitative data was thematically sifted and the following themes were generated: 1. Gambling for socio-economic benefits, 2. Sports betting is directly linked to financial quandary, 3. Punters fell prey to scammers on online betting, and 4. Young adults wallowing in sports betting were susceptible to a pathological gambling disorder. The study recommended that the government must decree strict legislative measures in order to short circuit compulsive gambling disorders.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, youth, sports-betting, problem gambling, scammers.

1. Introduction

Gambling is ordinarily conceptualized in terms of betting money on an outcome of uncertain results to win huge prize. In the process, all forms of gambling, even those classically well-thought-out to be more skill-based, for instance poker and sports betting are associated with an element of luck (Pontes and Williams, 2021). Globally, gambling is a prevalent leisure time phenomenon in quite a number of countries (Starosta and Izydorczyk, 2020). Statistically, a majority of adults participate in gambling and betting events at least once in their life and this is estimated between 40% and 80% involvement in some kind of gambling per annum (Latvala et al., 2019). At one point, many individuals view gambling as a way of entertainment (Francis & Livingstone, 2021), while at the other point some largely are compelled by the dream of immediate gratification to get a fortune instantly (Kang et al.,



2019). Some individuals get involved into gambling initiatives as a cathartic intervention strategy to evade dominant accounts that weighed heavily on their cognitive domain, and is common among problem gamblers (Barrault et al., 2019). Gambling-related destruction can plague various faculties that prompt the functioning of our life, that is, financial and economic quandaries, health ailments, psychosocial distress and impaired socio-cultural interactions (Browne, 2019). Upon reflection however, sports betting has been linked to a dichotomy of economic benefits and undesirable social outcomes (Ssewanyana and Bitanihirwe, 2018). Toward this end, research has conceptually and empirically demonstrated an intricate symbiotic relationship reigning between sports betting involvement and individual characteristics including age, socio-economic status and literacy level (Ayandele et al., 2020). In synch with the above, other studies demonstrated that the chief underlying drive for sport betting participation and involvement were financial benefit, entertainment, and peer pressure (Acheampong, 2022). Therefore, it seems logical to claim that precipitating factors behind gambling and sports wagering involvement are precisely socio-economic gains.

On a more practical level, sports betting organizations are well known for lucrative business in developing and third-world countries characterized by youth participation and involvement. Stomping feet in unison with other African countries, Zimbabwe witnessed progressive participation and involvement in sports betting as from 2013 as evidenced by the quantum of registered companies to offer sports betting services (Chiweshe, 2019). Of note, rampant unemployment coupled with lenient gambling laws in Zimbabwe serendipitously initiated youths to engage in sport betting behaviors (Reitano and Shaw, 2021). At the level of perception, in Zimbabwe and the greater region of Africa, sports betting has culminated not only into a recreational engagement, but also a socio-economic activity grounded on an irresistible appeal across classes, genders, ethnicity, sexuality and other social categorization with uninterruptedly enormous probability for growth (Chiweshe, 2020). Ideally, the greater portion of football fans in Zimbabwe run with European premier leagues as demonstrated by the screening of these foreign club games and a robust insight and compliance to kick-off times at betting openings (Chiweshe, 2020). Football betting in Zimbabwe is largely entrenched in major European leagues. These are mostly in order of popularity, which is, the Barclays English Premier League (EPL), Spanish La Liga, Italian Series A and German Bundesliga with the English Premier League Clubs gaining the greatest number of fans (Jaworska, 2020). Intimately, fans have begun to explore the real possibility of not only watching football matches but also making money from these games played thousands of miles away (Turcu et al., 2020). In a similar vein, watching football as a leisurely pastime serendipitously presented an opening too good to resist for making money (Majumdar and Naha, 2020). Typically, fans are used to hosting heated discussions on the monstrous weekly wages of their favourite footballers but sports betting has turned that conversation off its head (Tussey, 2022). Sports betting fans now discuss their earnings from a bet as the sport has become a viable source of income (Chiweshe 2020). Anchored on the view that sports betting allows for fast and easy cash does not acquit the notion that youths engaged in the game are budding serial gamblers living out of hope and luck (Rockloff et al., 2020). Remarkably, gambling is used as an algorithm to evade poverty and commonly a natural expression for problem gamblers (Barrault et al., 2019).



Pursuant to the above, the COVID-19 pandemic wrought a number of potential challenges which changed gambling behavioral standards in an unforeseen fashion. Beyond the financial quandary and ambiguity about the economic future, the pandemic led to histrionic alterations in the quality of time spent at home and online (King et al., 2020). Ideally, problem bettors testified that viewing betting advertisements suffered them from resisting sports betting (Newall, et al., 2021). In response the foregoing status quo, the pandemic initiated several governments to put measures that limit gambling advertisements and sometimes decree a ban (Håkansson, 2020). Zimbabwe was not spared the scourge but was heavily plagued by scammers who exploited the window generated by Covid-19 adjustments (Kindt, 2021). The closure of betting halls led to the emergence of online betting initiatives (Lubogo, 2022). Less vigilant punters fell prey to scammers like BetMargin50 in Zimbabwe (Håkansson, 2020). In spite of being duped by scammers, youth sports betting skyrocketed significantly in contemporary years owing to the concurrent growth in online gambling technologies availability and rigorous marketing and promotional mechanisms (Armstrong, Thomas, & Abbott, 2018)

Sports betting's perception has intriguingly evolved over the years in Africa especially in Zimbabwe into being the difference between destitution and affluence or colloquially speaking "crossing the poverty datum line" (Bogdan et al., 2022). Worryingly, the protracted strengthening of this narrative due to a myriad of extenuating circumstances which include unemployment has also trickled down to the emerging youths who are projected to be the future of Zimbabwe. The common thread that seems to tie the participation of youths in sports betting is hope for a brighter tomorrow which has just been reduced to a "golden ticket." This so-called golden ticket has been translated into being a lifeline for the novice punters involved who wind up being lured into the vicious cycle of gambling. This study intends to interrogate the experiences of youths involved in sports betting during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Objectives

- To establish the sports betting motivation among young adults.
- To assess the influence of the Covid-19 lockdown on betting activities.
- To suggest possible solutions to curb problem betting

2. Materials and methods

This study was based on the interpretivism research philosophy. Interpretivists arose as a result of the perceived insufficiency of positivism to suit the needs of social scientists (Nickerson, 2022). It is concerned with the assessment of the intricacies of social phenomena based on attaining an in-depth understanding of the worldview of research participants grounded on results from a fairly minor sample size (Ikram and Kenayathulla, 2022). To this end, it is safe to claim that the interpretive philosophy was in synch with the quest to understand the experiences of youths who were wallowing in sports betting during Covid-19.

Research Approach



In accordance with the interpretive research philosophy, this study was anchored on qualitative and inductive research methodology. This indicates that the research is exploratory and aims for depth over breadth, based on rich and subjective findings (Mason et al., 2022). On a more practical level, interpretivism is a mechanism of study grounded on induction that permits the generation of themes from raw data with the aim of establishing relationships and patterns (Bleiker et al., 2019). In contrast to quantitative research, which is the prevalent method within positivism study philosophy, qualitative study permits a flexible data gathering procedure (Hayre et al., 2023). For instance, data would be gathered in phases and not all at once, and the scholar may modify the process as required. Upon reflection however, the preferred paradigm ensured an appreciation to the experiences of youths involved in sports betting during Covid-19 in Rujeko high density suburb, Masvingo.

Research Design

The researchers exploited a phenomenological research design. Ideally, in phenomenological study the researcher describes the experiences from the first-person point of view (Larsen and Adu, 2021). In this study, the mandate was to interpret the facts under consideration with accuracy, relegating all possible pre-conceived notions, without prejudice but revolving around truth and facts. Ideally, phenomenologists' greatest desire is to understand the social psychological realm as individuals experience it (Zaheer et al., 2021). The prime objective of this research, at the preliminary focus, was gathering of data on the views of young adults in relation to their experiences regarding betting during Covid-19.

Population

Population refers to total number of objects or elements where the sample is derived (Pandey and Pandey, 2021). The study focused on young adults ranging from 18 to 40 years residing in Rujeko high suburb, Masvingo urban.

Sample and sampling procedure

Purposive sampling is the most central form of non-probability sampling, to assemble key respondents for the study (Latifa, 2018). Grounded on a purposive sampling strategy, a small consistent set of respondents was established for scrutiny and analysis. It is important to note that purposive is employed when the desired goal of the study is to appreciate and describe a chosen population thoroughly. The selection of the sample was based on the researchers' judgement and the aim of the study (Singh et al, 2021). The study sample comprised of nine (9) participants, that is, six (7) males and three (2) females.

Data collection procedure

The data collection tool was informed by in-depth interviewing. In-depth interviews are conceptualised in terms of a qualitative study process which encompasses the running of comprehensive individual consultations on a minor figure of participants to submit their views on an explicit idea, program, or position (Mataruse, 2021). The utility of in-depth interviews was unquestionable in that they facilitated the establishment of rapport with participants which in turn enhanced generation of insightful responses especially regarding sensitive topics (Deterding and Waters, 2021). Interviewers were also favoured because they provide an opening to ask follow-up questions and



probe for additional responses. In a similar vein, in-depth interviews were in synch with a higher-quality sampling procedure, in that, researchers needed few participants to gain useful and relevant insights.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was harnessed to sift data owing to its applicability to analyze data for qualitative academics. Of notice, thematic analysis is a strategy that yields significant results in evaluating and reporting recurring patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Thematic analysis is also a method of processing related data, and the generation of themes. Precisely, the deductive approach was used to understand the experiences of youths involved in sports gambling during the Covid-19 pandemic.

3 Results

Below is a table showing distribution of respondents.

Participant No.	Age	Gender	Employment Status
P1	29	Male	Formally Employed
P2	24	Male	Unemployment
P3	33	Male	Self Employed
P4	24	Male	Unemployed
P5	30	Male	Unemployed
P6	25	Female	Self Employed
P7	29	Male	Unemployed
P8	32	Female	Self Employed
P9	22	Male	Self Employed

Table 1. Showing participant characteristics (N = 9)

The findings above illustrate that both sexes are represented in the research with 7 males and 2 females. Thereby, denoting that the higher proportion of participants engaged were males (77.8%) in comparison to females (22.2%) as depicted by the table. According to the results, 4 participants were unemployed, 4 self-employed and 1 formally employed. This is indicative of the inclusive nature of employed and unemployed participants which is plausibly representative of the entire population.



Findings are presented as themes using section titles for thematic analysis to meet the research objectives down below:

Sports betting motivation among young adults

Sports betting motivation is a multi-layered phenomenon. The study revealed that socio-economic imperatives propel the gambling industry. Several themes emerged that explain why young adults engage in sport gambling. One of the most prominent themes that emerged was sports betting is linked to financial benefits. The high unemployment rate forced the youth to sustain daily cares with betting proceeds. One respondent remarked;

"...This is not a game by any means. I am not here for the entertainment or the company of others. I've come to this place in the hopes of winning some cash for my loved ones. Because the money I get from retailing is just hardly enough to get by, I need to do other hustles to complement it. Even though I have a degree from a reputable university, there is no employment for me to do..."

The study revealed that the rationale behind betting is due to the hopes of a big pay day. One participant opines that;

"...there is no any possibility I can think of where I would stop practising betting maybe pandoita mbinga (when I become filthy rich) and win big, say a million dollars but until that day comes, I don't think there is any possibility of me stopping betting..."

The paper also revealed that some punters engage in sports betting because they have a high internal locus of control. One participant noted;

"...Football betting allows me to use the soccer knowledge I have. I gamble because I believe winning is sure. I always play safe and I know the most dominant football teams across Europe, teams like Bayern, Real Madrid and PSG (Paris Saint Germain) therefore, it is much easy to win because I bet on the best. Easy money..."

The study also revealed that young adults exhibit betting behaviours as a coping mechanism. Youths testified that sports betting was an escape avenue from life pressures and stressors. One respondent posited that;

"...Wangu sports betting kuwana kwekutandara. Hapana chimwe chekuita mughetto. Kumba hakugarike kana usina kana bhegi rauri kuunza paden. Kana ukawana dollar womboedzawo luck Totongotrya luck pamurungu (I bet to break the monotony of staying home all the time without any means to bring food on the table. There is nothing to do in the ghetto so we try our chances at Sports betting) ..."



It was also revealed socialization was a major motivator emanating from the sense of community imbued in the social network realm. Another noted;

"...For me, it's not about monetary gains but also having a good social circle and meeting new people whom you have the same mutual interests with (sports betting). We are basically a family and have a WhatsApp group chat where we send each other tips on which odds to bet. Apart from that we also engage in sports discussions, particularly football, and also share with each other valuable information such as job vacancies, etc..."

The study also crystallized that entertainment was a major theme at the centre of perceived benefits in sports betting. Sports bettors view sports betting as an activity that makes them happy. One respondent opined that;

"...Betting is pleasurable for me because it is entertaining. Winning is not my priority but my happiness. This is the primary reason why bet..."

The influence of the Covid-19 lockdown on betting activities.

The influence of the Covid-19 pandemic on sports betting activities was significant. The study revealed that the Covid-19 pandemic created a new normal. The use of smartphones was the most common way young adults placed wagers during the lockdown. Results demonstrated that the youth was now able to use gambling applications anytime and anywhere without any restrictions. Mostly sports betting was done at home and at work. One participant remarked;

"...I started engaging in online betting through the MWOS betting app since most betting halls were closed. During weekends I would spend better part of the day following live scores on my phone. On one occasion we went out for a family dinner with a running bet and they inquired 'how come you are always on your phone and I was like the game's on..."

It was established that there was also a continuous stream of sports gambling prospects online owing to covid-19 restrictions and lockdowns. Young adults quickly switched over to online sports betting mode. One respondent revealed that;

"...Due to Covid most sporting activities were closed including Football leagues which I knew quite well. Therefore, I had to improvise so I started gambling on new sports like virtual football and eSports which I was not quite well versed in..."



The research highlighted that due to the growing prevalence of online gambling behavior which was catalyzed by the Covid-19 pandemic, there was also the emergence of scammers who looked to take advantage of unsuspecting gamblers. Respondents opined;

"...It was a bit tough initially during the first phase of betting as most betting halls were closed, most people resorted to online gambling and it was a bit complicated as there were individuals who claimed to offer betting services through WhatsApp and it eventually became a trend in every WhatsApp group of individuals spamming adverts of these EcoCash betting services. With time people quickly realized that these were scammers but a lot of people lost most of their earnings to these scammers..."

"...I found betting during the Covid-19 pandemic difficult because I was scammed by a betting company known as Bet Margin. I wanted to try new avenues of betting by participating in online betting and I fell into the trap of being scammed..."

The study revealed that while the majority of participants praised the benefits of betting on a mobile app, several characteristics of mobile betting appeared to favour problematic gambling behaviour. Online sports betting deals with the social context in which people with gambling issues may lose friends or family involvement, which may result in recurrent losses and significant expenditures. One respondent remarked;

"...When I'm in the company of my friends, I naturally do lower bets than I would ordinarily do in solitude. There are moments self-instruction informs me to do a big bet with no one to water down my intent..."

It was also revealed that sports betting started off as a social activity that culminated in compulsive behaviour, linked to secrecy. Mobile gambling initiated young adults to engage privately. One participant remarked;

"...being glued on my phone at home during the presence of my family weakened the family social interactions. Seated on the same culch, my core business was betting on my phone so much that my partner was not aware of what I was doing. Secrecy was the window to fun gambling..."

The research demonstrated that mobile gambling facilitates a lonely setting and seemingly initiates hazardous gambling in comparison to physical betting. Participants aptly posited that;

"...the convenience of being able to bet from anywhere and anytime sounded like music in the air. This latitude might have been a springboard to problem gambling..."

"... You know, it was very convenient in the comfort of my car, I could do it in the car, at the shopping mall, in my office, but no one would notice what was going on ..."



"... Anywhere indeed, anywhere that I could get an opening to operate my phone, as long as no one would see what I was up to ..."

The study revealed that in contemporary online sports betting, no matter how much you lose, there is always a motivation that sustains gambling behavior. The hope is that one would quickly redeem the losses. One respondent submitted that;

"...I've been gambling on games that I have no in-depth on. Nonetheless, the emergence of online betting unlocked my risky attitude in me. After losing a match, I would quickly switch over to another one. In some cases, I would lose more money and not disclose it to anyone. This was the beginning of my problems in sports betting ..."

Possible solutions to curb problem betting

It was revealed that young adults were perturbed by the impact of gambling adverts. Some were reconciled to the idea that gambling operatives had a responsibility to suffer children's participation and involvement. One respondent noted;

"...I think only experienced gamblers know their limits. They know how much they should gamble and know they need to wager sensibly. But for kids learning the ropes, gambling online, may not have the capacity to disregard tempting betting adverts. In my own view, not much is done to protect minors from problem gambling..."

Doubts were raised in relation to the value of the cautions in ill-timed adverts. The youth voiced that they did not perceive gambling warning messages that appear at the end of ads to be an effective technique for averting problem gambling behaviour. One participant alluded that;

"...Important counsels are put only at the end the adverts, running for not more than two seconds, if I were to beg you, please gamble responsibly..."

The study revealed that youths were worried by the influx of betting syndicates in Africa and suggested stricter laws that regulate betting companies to short circuit problem betting. Another respondent opined;

"...I think most of the problems we have in Africa concerning betting are as a result of too many betting companies in Africa taking advantage of the situations in Africa that is unemployment. I think these countries should formulate policies that make it a bit difficult for these companies to exploit us..."

4. Discussion of Findings



The study highlighted financial reasons that motivate young adults to engage in sport betting activities. Results demonstrated that sports betting was associated with the expenditure of both time and money. Sports betting can be an addiction for individuals who in turn invest significant amount of time and money in order to acquire more money. Gambling is kind of rewarding behaviour, where in the individual gets conditioned to it in a repetitive cycle. In this view, gambling conditions the sport bettor to anticipate similar outcomes from comparable occurrences. This was in synch with Habibu's (2019) who opined that individuals gamble for monetary incentives. The majority of youth engage in sports betting expecting to get a big reward instantly. This corroborated with Kang et al (2019) who remarked that some largely are compelled by the dream of immediate gratification to get a fortune instantly. To the contrary, this was in controversial to Ssewanyana and Bitanihirwe (2018) who aptly posited that sports betting has been linked to a dichotomy of economic benefits and undesirable social outcomes.

The study revealed that fulfilment of psychosocial desires compelled individuals to engage in betting behaviour. Findings demonstrated that youth gamblers participate in sports betting as a way to escape daily tribulations triggered by the harsh economic climate. This was in line with Barrault et al (2019) who claimed that some individuals get involved into gambling initiatives as a cathartic intervention strategy to evade dominant accounts that weighed heavily on their cognitive domain, and is common among problem gamblers. Upon reflection however, this was controversial to Browne (2019) who noted that gambling-related destruction can plague various faculties that prompt the functioning of our life, that is, financial and economic quandaries, health ailments, psychosocial distress and impaired socio-cultural interactions. Be that as it may, some youths submitted that their participation and involvement in sports betting was informed by the need to get connected to their peers. To them, socialization was profitable in the similar way they gained financial benefits. This was consistent to Acheampong (2022) who noted that the chief underlying drive for sport betting participation and involvement was financial benefit, entertainment, and peer pressure.

The youths were persuaded by the media advertisements on sports betting which initiated them to exhibit gambling behaviors in quest for banging huge money instantly. This was in contradiction with Håkansson (2020) who laid bare that the pandemic initiated several governments to put measures that limit gambling advertisements and sometimes decree a ban.

The research also revealed that the Covid-19 pandemic altered the manner in which gambling activities were conducted by intensifying online gambling initiatives and causing a significant shift away from the traditional method of betting. The gambling industry's technological advances and innovation have resulted in the continuous availability of up-to-the-minute mobile gambling services. These developments have enabled the evolution of numerous gambling options, including live-in-play betting. This was consistent with Lubogo (2022) who noted that the closure of betting halls led to the emergence of online betting initiatives. The majority of participants noted that this bolstered their betting propensities, as it enabled them to bet from anywhere via online platforms, a luxury that was not available in the past; consequently, online gambling was intensified. This was in line with King et al (2020) who opined that the pandemic led to histrionic alterations in the quality of time spent at home and



online. The paper also highlighted that the intrusiveness of virtual wagering ads, such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook during the Covid-19, lured them to bet. All through the lockdown period, popular bookmakers intensified their advertising efforts through social media advertising and spamming SMS messages, which tempted a number of youths to wager. This trend corroborated with Newall et al., (2021) who remarked that problem bettors testified that viewing betting advertisements suffered them from resisting sports betting. Toward this end, it seems safe to suggest that promotions presented peculiar fetters that restricted problem gamblers to attain liberation from sports betting.

The Covid-19 pandemic brewed a meteoric market rise in online gambling wherein punters were vulnerably exposed to summers as attractive targets. Technological advancement ushered a dispensation of fraudulent exploits. Youths were swindled out of their hard-earned money through online betting by shady gambling organizations. This is in line with Håkansson (2020) who alluded that less vigilant punters fell prey to scammers like BetMargin50 in Zimbabwe. To that effect, a strict government policy could address justice to problem gambling during pandemics.

5. Conclusions

Popularity persists in sports wagering among young adults through local bookmakers, in casinos, via the internet and mobile devices. Optimization efforts are being made by betting operators and top flight sport leagues to seize the gambling market. Chiefly, unemployment was the determinant factor the participation and involvement of youths in sports betting. The research findings demonstrated that effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on gambling were experienced in dialectical conclusions. Some young adults were heavily plagued by vicious cycles of the gambling pathology and subsequently left in financial quandary. Others ended up wallowing in psychological distress related issues. The slack in gambling laws of the country accessorized an influx of betting companies which took the young generation by storm. Moreover, the ambiguity of online gambling regulations presented a loophole which was exploited by scammers to dupe the young adults during sports betting. A long-term ramification of the generic gambling phenomenon and the rise in vulnerable groups is hanging in the balance and shall be interrogated meticulously in follow-up studies. However, in the short term, a number of individuals with recurrent gambling problems may be diagnosed with a pathological gambling disorder.

6. Recommendations

The study therefore recommended that:

- The government should assist the youth generation primarily by availing funding, loans, and sponsorship schemes to enable them to kick start small-to-medium so as to short circuit the gambling conditioning.
- The government must decree regulatory measures that prohibit the advertisement realm to lure the young adults into all forms of gambling.



- Special attention must be paid to sports wagering by educating the youth on how addictive behaviours lead to binge gambling.
- The young generation must be given insight on the wisdom of financial intelligence so that they may use their money appropriately.
- Registered sports betting operators are compelled by a sense of duty to uphold by-laws and operating procedures in order to reduce problem gambling.

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