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Perceptions of gambling marketing among young adults who gamble in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Gambling marketing, which has been reported to influence consumer perceptions and behavior, has attracted growing academic, public and policy interest. There are fewer qualitative studies with young adults however and no research has explored how gambling marketing is viewed by people in Ireland who gamble. One-to-one interviews were conducted with 18–34 year-olds in Ireland, with 8 considered low-risk (those scoring fewer than 3 on the Problem Gambling Severity Index [PGSI]) and 8 high-risk (those scoring 8 or more on the PGSI). Discussions were thematically analyzed. Participants reported high exposure to gambling marketing, most commonly on television and online. They were familiar with myriad gambling-related promotions, including new customer/sign-up offers, free or matched bets/spins, price offers and bonuses, time-limited bets and offers, risk-minimizing offers, jackpots, prizes, and loyalty/rewards schemes. Gambling marketing was thought to influence behavior by prompting participants to place a bet or take advantage of offers and promotions, with participants indicating they had or would bet or deposit more than intended to benefit from an offer or promotion. The findings provide insight into how young adults in Ireland perceive and respond to gambling industry marketing.

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Introduction

Gambling is a popular and for many people benign activity. However, for some it can lead to problems. Those who have issues with gambling can experience a range of negative impacts, including with their mental and physical health, finances, relationships and employment (Allami et al., 2021; Murphy, 2019; Thomas, van Schalkwyk et al., 2023). As a result, the deleterious consequences of gambling affect significant others as well as institutions in the health, welfare and justice systems (Department of Justice and Equality, 2019). There are a wide range of factors that may contribute to gambling-related harms. One may be gambling marketing, which has attracted growing academic, public and policy interest.

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Thomas, van Schalkwyk et al. (2023) define gambling marketing as ‘direct and indirect advertising, promotion, sponsorship, incentives, public relations, lobbying, and donations that are strategically used by the gambling industry to promote its products, gain publicity, attract new customers, shape social and cultural attitudes, and build corporate and product image and support’ (p. 3). There has been a greater focus on attempting to understand gambling marketing and its potential impact on consumers in recent years, particularly on children and young adults, who may be more susceptible to marketing (Djohari et al., 2019; Gordon & Chapman, 2014), and those experiencing harms, who often account for a significant proportion of overall gambling spend (Fiedler et al., 2019; Murphy, 2019).

Gambling companies use a range of strategies within their marketing. A review of gambling advertising between 2015 and 2020 points to content being targeted to specific populations and positively framed, depicting gambling as a desirable and fun activity (Torrance, John et al., 2021). One way gambling companies portray gambling in a favorable light is through the use of humor in marketing, an influential strategy found to particularly appeal to younger audiences (Pitt et al., 2017; Rossi & Nairn, 2022). Winning is a common narrative within gambling marketing, which may erroneously give the impression that gambling is easy (Abarbanel et al., 2017), with the wide range of financial incentives promoted also likely to encourage participation (Torrance, John et al., 2021). There appears to be a move toward the promotion of more complex bets, which may make it more challenging for consumers to understand these or encourage riskier gambling (Torrance, John et al., 2021). Research has found that gambling adverts on platforms popular with young people, such as social media (Rossi & Nairn, 2021), can be difficult to even identify as they often appear innocuous and lacking any indication of the commercial nature of the source (Rossi & Nairn, 2022).

A number of reviews have explored the evidence on gambling marketing and its effects on consumer perceptions and behaviors (e.g. Binde, 2014; Bouguettaya et al., 2020; Newall et al., 2019; Parke et al., 2015). Newall et al. (2019), for instance, overviewed research published between 2014 and 2018 that explored the frequency of gambling marketing, how it was perceived, and any behavioral impact. Gambling marketing was found to be very common around sport, with perceptions of such marketing generally negative, particularly among people who gamble. There was some evidence suggesting that awareness of gambling marketing may be associated with more frequent and riskier gambling behavior (Newall et al., 2019).

Systematic reviews typically include a higher number of quantitative than qualitative studies (Guillou-Landreat et al., 2021; Killick & Griffiths, 2021). While quantitative research has been critical in driving most of our knowledge on the impact of gambling advertising (Wardle, 2019), qualitative research methods are important as they allow in-depth insight into the attitudes and opinions of individuals. Qualitative studies, such as interviews, can provide knowledge about how people experience gambling advertising and mechanisms of impact (Binde, 2007; Hing et al., 2014). There are however fewer qualitative studies on gambling advertising, particularly in Europe. A critical and meta-analytic review of 28 studies on the relationship between exposure to gambling advertising and gambling attitudes, intentions and behavior, for instance, included only a single qualitative study from Europe (Bouguettaya et al., 2020).

It has been argued that more research exploring how gambling advertising affects different gambling subgroups is needed (Hanns et al., 2015). Qualitative research can offer insight into this. For example, interviews with adults who have gambled in the past-year found that females had a greater awareness of marketing for a range of gambling products, with males more focused on, and feeling bombarded and targeted by, sports bet marketing (Thomas et al., 2012). Interviews with those in the general population who gamble has found that while gambling marketing appears to only minimally influence the behavior of those considered at low-risk of experiencing harms related to gambling, some report being prompted to gamble due to promotions (Hing et al., 2015). Including people who are experiencing problems related to gambling within qualitative research is also important as it can provide insight into the impact, if any, that gambling advertising has on their behavior (Binde, 2007). Interviews with those who gamble who are considered high-risk of experiencing harms related to gambling has found that advertising for their preferred forms of gambling appears to present the strongest temptation (Binde, 2009) and that they are particularly influenced by gambling incentives (Thomas et al., 2012).

In Ireland, responsibility for licensing and gambling regulations, including those on gambling marketing, has been shared between various departments and agencies, resulting in an incoherent approach to licensing, compliance, enforcement and consumer protection (Department of Justice and Equality, 2019). At the time of the study the General Commercial Communications Code (2017) of the Broadcast Authority Ireland (BAI) stipulated that gambling adverts must not encourage behavior that: (i) is socially irresponsible; (ii) could result in a players' financial, social, psychological or emotional harm; or (iii) suggest that gambling enhances a person's success. The BAI was replaced in 2023 by Coimisiún na Meán, which now serves as Ireland's new commission for regulating broadcasters and online media. The Advertising Standards Authority of Ireland is a self-regulatory industry body that publishes and monitors compliance with advertising standards, with its code on gambling advertising stating that it must not exploit the susceptibilities, inexperience or lack of knowledge of children, or appeal to children or feature anyone under 25 years old unless part of the team or event of the bet offered (Advertising Standards Authority for Ireland, 2016). Industry operators have also developed their own codes, for example the Irish Bookmakers Association's Safer gambling code includes guidelines on marketing communications (Irish Bookmakers Association, 2021). The current approach to regulating gambling marketing, in the absence of a gambling regulator, is disjointed.

Despite the growing body of evidence on gambling marketing, we only identified a single study in Ireland. Between December 2018 and July 2019, gambling adverts shown during 65 live televised sporting events (football, rugby, gaelic football, hurling) were analyzed (Columb et al., 2020). The study included adverts shown up to 30 minutes before kickoff, half-time, and up to 30 minutes after matches ended. Gambling adverts were shown in 75% of matches, most commonly for football. Gambling adverts were observed in 72% of half-time advert breaks, 66% of pre-game advert breaks, and 45% of post-game advert breaks (Columb et al., 2020).

The literature on gambling marketing is growing, although it is nascent compared with the tobacco and alcohol fields (Bouguettaya et al., 2020; Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2020). Given the need for further research on gambling marketing, the greater focus on quantitative research, and the absence of research exploring perceptions of gambling

marketing in Ireland, we conducted in-depth interviews with young adults in Ireland who gamble to explore their awareness of, and attitudes to, gambling marketing, and the self-reported impact, if any, on their behavior.

Methods

Design and sample

One-to-one interviews were conducted between February and March 2022 with 16 young adults (aged 18–34 years) in Ireland. The sample included eight individuals who gamble and who are considered at low-risk of experiencing harms related to gambling, who scored 0–2 on the nine-item Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI), and eight individuals who gamble and who are considered at high-risk of experiencing harms related to gambling, who scored 8 or more on the PGSI (range 8–25). We focused on those considered low-risk as they account for most individuals who gamble in Ireland (Mongan et al., 2022), and those considered high-risk, about 0.3% of those aged 15 years and older (Mongan et al., 2022), as it is important to understand the impacts of gambling marketing on this population (Binde, 2009). The target sample was young adults as they are of legal age to gamble and therefore will be viewed as a legitimate target market for gambling companies, they are the most likely to experience problems with gambling in Ireland (Department of Health, 2019), and younger people are considered more susceptible to gambling marketing because of higher receptivity, higher impulsivity, more frequent internet use, and limited gambling knowledge, experience, and understanding of potential long-term risks (Guillou-Landreat et al., 2021; Ipsos MORI, 2020; Pechmann et al., 2005; Rossi & Nairn, 2021). The low-risk group was split by gender, with three-quarters (6 of 8) of the high-risk group males. Within the high-risk group, the disproportionate number of males was because males are more likely to experience problems with gambling and seek help for gambling in Ireland (Mongan et al., 2022). Indeed, Condrón et al. (2022) analyzed treatment episodes for those experiencing harms due to gambling in Ireland between 2008 and 2019, finding that almost 95% were male. The sample profile is shown in Table 1.

The sample was recruited by a market research agency in Dublin (GroFieldwork) using active solicitation outside gambling venues, an approach commonly used in gambling research (Williams et al., 2010), and existing panels. Potential participants completed a recruitment questionnaire, with screening questions (including age, gender, questions about gambling behavior, and the PGSI) to determine whether they met the inclusion criteria. The PGSI was used given the sample was sought from the general public, with some support for the PGSI in non-clinical contexts (Holtgraves, 2009). The market research agency did not provide the response rate.

Procedure

Interviews were conducted via Zoom, as the moderator (CM) was based in Scotland and the participants were in Ireland. Zoom had the advantage of allowing interviews to be rescheduled at short notice, where this was required. A semi-structured topic guide, developed by CM, was used to facilitate discussion. The topic guide, about exposure to and perceptions of gambling marketing, was the same for all participants. Participants

Table 1. Sample profile.

Interview	Gender	Age	Social grade	Risk group	PGSI Score
1	Male	22	C1	High-risk	8
2	Female	30	C1	Low-risk	0
3	Male	21	C2	Low-risk	2
4	Female	32	C1	High-risk	17
5	Female	34	C2	Low-risk	1
6	Male	18	D	Low-risk	1
7	Male	22	C2	High-risk	15
8	Male	21	D	Low-risk	0
9	Male	33	B	High-risk	25
10	Male	28	B	Low-risk	0
11	Female	24	C1	Low-risk	2
12	Female	31	C1	Low-risk	0
13	Male	34	C1	High-risk	16
14	Male	28	D	High-risk	17
15	Female	34	C2	High-risk	19
16	Male	23	D	High-risk	19

were first asked where they saw or heard gambling marketing, then about marketing during sports events, followed by marketing on several different channels (social media, post, newspapers, radio, and then e-mail, text and phone), free bets, and lastly their thoughts about gambling marketing (see Supplementary File 1 for questions asked).

To aid discussion, all participants were shown four examples of gambling marketing during the interview. Each was related to the topic being discussed, and shown after participants had been asked about exposure to gambling marketing in certain channels (TV, online, or post) or to specific types of gambling marketing (free bets), see Supplementary File 1. When discussing gambling marketing during sports events, participants were shown a TV advert featuring Jose Mourinho that was intended to be humorous, and asked what they thought about this and any impact of such adverts on how gambling is viewed. When discussing exposure to gambling adverts on social media, participants were shown an online advert for slots and asked about this and whether it was common to see winning in gambling adverts. They were also shown advertising for a postcode lottery when talking about gambling marketing in the post, and a poster offering free bets on a horse race when talking about free bets, and asked their views on each of these (see Supplementary File 2). Interviews lasted, on average, 65 minutes (range 54–76 minutes), and were audio recorded with participant's consent. The study received approval from the General University Ethics Panel at the University of Stirling (GUEP3609).

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed by a transcription agency, with CM checking the transcripts against the audio recording to ensure accuracy. Data were deidentified where necessary, and thematic analysis undertaken using an iterative approach. The analytic process followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase framework for thematic analysis. The steps involved were: (1) dataset familiarization; (2) data coding; (3) generating initial themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) writing the report. CM and AM familiarized themselves with the transcripts and developed preliminary codes, which were refined through reexamination of the data

and discussion. The themes and sub-themes are shown in Table 2. In the Results section, where there are clear gender or gambling group differences these are drawn out in the findings. Quotes are used to provide examples of what participants discussed, using interview (Int) number, gender (M or F) and gambling group (HR or LR).

Results

Exposure to gambling marketing

Participants typically reported high exposure to gambling marketing, often viewed as ubiquitous. Exposure tended to be lower for those considered low-risk and those considered high-risk that do not gamble online.

Everywhere! You see it on football jerseys, all over sports websites, when you're watching football, when you're watching horse racing, the first ad after it all is Skybet or Paddy Power, you, so social media as well. (Int 16, M, HR)

Where do I not see it? Social media, all over the telly, especially the likes if you're watching You Tube, every ad is nearly about a gambling company. (Int 5, F, LR)

Several participants stated that they saw gambling marketing on a daily or near daily basis.

I mean social media, you can almost guarantee to see it daily, like just, even like reading the news, something will be like, 'Ladbrokes, a lot better' or whatever would come up. (Int 11, F, LR)

Participants reported seeing or hearing gambling marketing on multiple channels. Mention of gambling marketing in sports was common, e.g. *'It's definitely like saturated in sports'* (Int 3, M, LR), with most references about televised football broadcasts. Branded gambling adverts and logos were observed through shirt sponsorship, on electronic and static pitch-side advertising, or shown during ad breaks. One participant pointed out that gambling advertising is also visible on pitchside hoardings when he is playing five-a-side football.

They seem to get the sponsorship in anywhere they can, so no matter whether you're looking at the pitch, the player, it's there, there's a logo there no matter where you look. Like if it's not in the ads it's on the pitch in front of you. (Int 5, F, LR)

Marketing was also prominent on social media. Those frequently using social media reported seeing gambling marketing across most platforms, with Facebook and Twitter mentioned most often, leading one high-risk individual to say *'You can't escape it'* (Int 13, M, HR). Participants cited various ways in which gambling marketing was displayed through social media channels, ranging from following gambling brands, suggested posts based on the activity of those they follow (i.e. others who engage with gambling brands or posts), branded adverts between stories and within feeds, promoted adverts, and embedded website banners.

If someone you know follows these other pages they're more than likely to pop up on your page as well so you'd probably see something daily from, you know, Betfair or Paddy Power or one of those. (Int 4, F, HR)

Table 2. Overview of themes and sub-themes.

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Example quote
Exposure to gambling marketing	Ubiquity	Everywhere I can think of I think I've probably seen gambling adverts (Int 3, M, LR) There's ads on the telly for the Lotto or, you know, you walk past a betting shop and the windows are just ads. And like the scratch cards up at the till are just on display. Also social media, like there'd be ads for stuff on that as well so it's kind of everywhere you go really. There's ads as well on like the side of buses and stuff like that, newspapers, everywhere (Int 2, F, LR) If you're watching sports you, it's impossible to miss it, it's nearly a daily basis for myself (Int 16, M, HR) They're obviously posting stuff daily (on social media), you'd probably see something daily from, you know, Betfair or Paddy Power or one of those (Int 4, F, HR)
	Frequency	Almost every other like advertisement around the pitch is something to do with some sort of gambling company (Int 11, F, LR) Tik Tok, Snapchat, You Tube, Instagram, I think every single one I've seen at least one gambling ad (Int 6, M, LR) I would notice that there are a lot of ads if you're flicking through people's stories... it just always manages to pop up and even when you're scrolling through like the feed it would be in there somewhere (Int 5, F, LR) They are emailing you to give you the, you know, extra special offer specific to you. But it's probably gone out to thousands of people (Int 13, M, HR) Boylesports send you one every probably three weeks, Paddy Power, Paddy Power text you when you qualify for a free bet (Int 14, M, HR) Paddy Power would advertise on the radio over here (Int 4, F, HR)
Exposure to gambling marketing	Print, radio, post	
	Specific brands and/or adverts	I have probably mentioned that Mourinho ad to a friend because I thought it was funny and he enjoyed it (Int 13, M, HR) I've mentioned this a few times to my partner, you know saying about you know Paddy Power is being, you know having these really standout ads that, that are very edgy (Int 10, M, LR)
Discussions about gambling marketing	Sharing promotions and offers	Sometimes my friends will say like a bet they've put on or a bet they've won and stuff like that and posted it on social media or sent it to me (Int 6, M, LR) I'd maybe put it in the group chat if we're doing bets or we're talking about the horseracing or whatever like, I'd kind of say 'oh well if you, you know, bet £10 you'll get £30 in Betfair or whatever', and kind of just share the information (Int 2, F, LR) It always usually says new customers, so just sign up with this amount and get this amount free bets (Int 1, M, HR) It's like sign up now you get a tenner free credit (Int 5, F, LR)
	Sign-up/new customers	With the apps I'm already signed up to, you would get like place two bets and you get a third bet free (Int 5, F, LR) Mostly offers, especially the ones with Cheltenham you know, that would be front page stuff, you will have Euro free bet on the Gold Cup, or five Euro every day free bet in the paper... you buy your paper and you cut out the little token and you go in and they scan the QR code on the back and then you get a five Euro free bet (Int 14, M, HR) Definitely at the football matches they do tend to promote the, you know, half-time now put on next goal scorer, you know, to tempt you to kind of log in then place something (Int 4, F, HR) If I'm following a UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship) fighter and there's a fight coming up they'd be like, they'll give you their pitch and they'd be like put on your bets on mybookie.org and sign up now to get X, Y and Z. They'd just be the same like telling you like there's a bonus bet or something on the UFC right now if you bet with us (Int 8, M, LR)
Offers and promotions	Free bets/spins	Say in the rugby section it would be Ireland to beat Italy, you know, first time, even odds or 5/1 to something (Int 7, M, HR) At Cheltenham it would be like, like you don't lose even if it, if a horse comes second you'll win your money back (Int 9, M, HR) They also have like a weekly or like bi-weekly draw, it's like a Sunday draw it's called, where like you buy a ticket and then each week or two weeks they pick a number and then someone wins up to like a grand or something (Int 8, M, LR) Like Paddy Power only give you, they have like a loyalty system kind of thing... if you bet a fiver over seven days of the week, you'd get a fiver free bet. If you bet a tenner everyday over the seven days, you'd get a tenner free bet (Int 15, F, HR)
	Time limited	
	Specific odds/bets	
	Minimising risk offers	
	Jackpots/prizes	
	Loyalty schemes/rewards	

(Continued)



Table 2. (Continued).

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Example quote
Terms of offers and promotions	Minimum/qualifying spend/deposit	You might have to qualify, you might have to place 50 euros that month in bets and then you'll get a certain amount of free spins or free bets back (Int 4, F, HR)
	Withdrawal limits	If you were to bet £10 with your free bet and you won 20 euro, the 20 euro you win you can't withdraw that back into your bank account, you have to, it's only useful as credit (Int 3, M, LR)
Perceptions	Visibility	It didn't tell you how much in the ad but if you read the small print you could see like how much they were charging (Int 8, M, LR)
	Scepticism/distrust	There has to be a catch somewhere (Int 15, F, HR) They're kind of like you think, 'Jeez, that looks good', but there's always a... kind of a snag (Int 9, M, HR)
	Style (humor)	It makes it very light-hearted and just like a bit of fun... some people with actual addictions could really get roped into this on the misconception (Int 11, F, LR)
Behavioural impact	Winning	I personally have never seen an ad where they've shown somebody losing (Int 15, F, HR)
	Gambling marketing as a prompt	Serious gamblers would be saying like 'Well, you know if that person can win, that means I can win' (Int 10, M, LR) It does prompt you if they are promoting something and it looks good and you have money there at the time and you think 'oh I could double or treble this' (Int 4, F, HR)
	Betting more than intended	I think I might have had Boyle Sports for Cheltenham, maybe two years ago I might have downloaded it (the app) because I think it was on the front page of the Irish Independent that they were giving away so much in free bets so I figured I might as well try that (Int 13, M, HR) Exactly what I'm saying there, the half time thing, if they put a special on it and you were going to put a tenner on it, if they put a special on it you are probably going to put twenty, I know I would (Int 14, M, HR)

Participants regularly received direct marketing about rewards, offers and event specific promotions, primarily through e-mail but also by text, push notifications and sponsored advertising banners on tracked websites, e.g. *'Paddy Power would send you an email every week saying about like what rewards you got from last week'* (Int 16, M, HR). It was suggested that the frequency of e-mails vary by company, what someone gambles on, and whether there is a major sporting event, e.g. *'If it's a big event you'll get them every day'* (Int 15, F, HR).

I've gotten texts before, but that's generally once they get your number like you'll continually get their marketing. (Int 11, F, LR)

While less common, participants described seeing gambling marketing in newspapers, primarily within the sports section of British and Irish publications, and on radio, particularly among those who listened to the radio frequently, e.g. *'You hear the ads on the radio every day'* (Int 14, M, HR). There were also some reports of receiving gambling marketing through the post, although such exposure was limited as most had 'no junk mail' signage on their door to prevent unsolicited materials being delivered.

Discussions about gambling marketing

For most participants gambling marketing was, at least sometimes, a topic of discussion. Participants talked about specific gambling brands or adverts, often those seen as memorable, humorous or that involved celebrities.

It's something that you could bring up with your friends, the lads in the pub, oh did you see that ad with your man in it? Yes, yes, yes. And then that brings up that discussion and then people who aren't on it could possibly be like what are you talking about, I never saw that ad. And then it's taken out the phone and showing them and then they look into it. (Int 5, F, LR)

Participants also mentioned discussing or sharing (via social media or messaging platforms) bets, odds, offers or promotions with family members, friends, partners and work colleagues, e.g. *'Some people in work would say about the offers, earlier on they were talking about last year's offer for Cheltenham'* (Int 16, M, HR). Other topics of discussion were related to gambling adverts being annoying, or the volume of gambling marketing.

When I was playing five a side with my friend, we were just saying it's everywhere now, you can't really get away from it. (Int 7, M, HR)

Offers and promotions

Almost all participants were able to recall offers and promotions presented in gambling marketing on television, print, radio, outdoor, online (including social media) or through direct marketing. These included new customer/sign-up offers, free or matched bets or spins, price offers and bonuses, time-limited bets and offers, specific bets or odds, risk-minimizing offers, jackpots, prizes, and loyalty/rewards schemes.

Most of the time it's offers yeah, free 20 Euro bet when you sign up, or give 5 Euro and receive 15 Euro on free bets or something along them lines. Most of the time it's for joining up. (Int 14, M, HR)

There was high awareness of free bets or spins offered online, on apps, and in gambling venues. These types of offers were considered, by some, to encourage people to sign up with multiple companies. Some who were considered high-risk talked about loyalty schemes where the amount of the free bet was influenced by the amount bet during the previous week.

Even just being in store, like you'd be on like one of the machines and someone would come up and give you a card, a member of staff would give you a card with a code on and you scan into the machine and it would give you like a free bet. (Int 1, M, HR)

I know a lot of people do matched playing, I don't do that, you're signing up to every bookmaker and taking advantage of the free bets and stuff. (Int 4, F, HR)

Like Paddy Power only give you, they have like a loyalty system kind of thing . . . if you bet a fiver over seven days of the week, you'd get a fiver free bet. If you bet a tenner everyday over the seven days, you'd get a tenner free bet. (Int 15, F, HR)

Participants discussed time-limited offers and bonuses, for instance good or boosted odds or prices if a bet is placed immediately or on an upcoming event. These were viewed as an enticement to gamble.

The biggest would be kind of giving you the extra odds for a particular game that you've been looking at, you know that would, that would jump out, you know saying the odds are say 2 to 1, they say 'well get 12 to 1 on this bet', you know, if you bet now. (Int 10, M, HR)

Participants were familiar with specific odds and bets, and aware of how to get odds for specific events, e.g. '*You can actually go on to Twitter or whatever, Facebook or whatever you have, and you can say #whatstheoddsaddy and give them a bet you want to place and they will write back with the odds for that bet*' (Int 14, M, HR). Those considered high-risk, in particular, were also aware of different risk-minimizing offers, such as bet insurance or conditions that return the initial stake. There was also mention of loyalty or rewards schemes, which ranged from receiving clothing to special offers, and a small number of participants alluded to jackpots and prizes.

The ones you're already signed up to would just tell you the promotions coming up, like this weekend we have accumulator insurance, if one team out of six teams lose we'll still pay if your team is up 2-0, we'll still pay out for a winning goal, that's a recent Paddy Power one. (Int 4, F, HR)

I've gotten one from Paddy Power and it was a pair of like pants, Paddy Power pants, and it was like thank you for being a loyal customer, or something, 'Welcome to Paddy Rewards Club'. (Int 16, M, HR)

Terms of offers and promotions

Several participants discussed the terms and conditions or requirements of different types of offers and promotions. While new customer offers such as free bets were often seen as appealing, some participants pointed to the conditions attached to these, such as the requirement of a minimum spend or deposit, and the need to gamble a certain amount of money or play a certain number of times to withdraw any winnings.

I think you'd have to deposit like 10 euros or whatever and then you'd have, after you deposited that, then the free bet part would appear on your balance. (Int 1, M, HR)

If it's qualifying, you might have to play a further X amount of times before you can withdraw. (Int 4, F, HR)

Some participants had reservations about the visibility of the terms and conditions associated with offers, often displayed in small faint text or missing entirely. Others were suspicious of offers and promotions, claiming that there had to be a catch or that the outcome was pre-determined.

There is always a catch, don't get me wrong I still look at them and if they are good and they are legit then you know I'm 90% sure I'm going to go for it. . . 99% of the time there is strings attached to it. (Int 14, M, HR)

Perceptions of gambling marketing features

Style

Generally, participants felt that the use of humor within gambling marketing directly impacted on how gambling was viewed. Adverts featuring comical skits or jokes were seen as giving the erroneous impression that gambling was easy, fun and entertaining.

Say if Harry Macguire or someone got booked they'd make a joke out of it and then they would kind of say Harry Macguire to get sent off 10/1. So then you'd be laughing at the joke and you'd be like oh that's easy money in my eyes. (Int 7, M, HR)

I'd say it would kind of take away from the serious nature of gambling, like it adds a more light-hearted view on it. It makes it seem more like a game or more casual than it probably is. (Int 3, M, LR)

Winning

Participants generally considered it common for gambling adverts to depict people winning, e.g. *'It's always people winning'* (Int 14, M, HR). A common view was that advertising made it seem easy to win, e.g. *'In all of the different companies' ads it always lands on the jackpot because that appeals to people'* (Int 3, M, LR). Further, by showing what could be won, the reactions of those who have won, and the lifestyle they could lead if they were to win, this presented an image of an outcome they could identify with and aspire to if they too were to engage with the gambling product being shown.

It probably wouldn't catch your attention so much if you weren't seeing, the actually, what possibly could be won or what somebody is winning at the moment and you automatically think, 'oh that could be me'. (Int 4, F, HR)

However, some participants questioned the winning narrative, especially in adverts showing large sums of money being won through online slots, casino games and spin-to-win formats.

The ads say that all these people win but like you know that they don't win so there's no point really in engaging in it. (Int 7, M, HR)

Everybody's a winner but, until you start putting your money in. (Int 5, F, LR)

Behavioural impact

Gambling marketing as a prompt

Prompts to bet included adverts, direct marketing, information regarding potential prizes, and seeing logos or merchandise for gambling brands. Two individuals considered high-risk mentioned recall of gambling adverts acting not as an immediate prompt but as a cue should they subsequently be near a gamble venue, e.g. *'If I saw an ad and then I was walking past a bookies then I might, I might pop in because it would be in my head'* (Int 7, M, HR).

When we're watching football games in the pub there's like ads all around the football pitch for gambling and then it kind of like jogs my memory to be like, 'oh we should place a bet on this game'. (Int 6, M, LR)

What tends to kind of trigger, get me to go . . . would be radio ads, television ads, you know saying, 'This jackpot for the EuroMillions is 100 million this, this week, you know, guaranteed winner'. (Int 10, M, LR)

Seeing or hearing offers or promotions appeared to be particularly important in prompting betting, with most participants stating that they would take advantage of, or had previously engaged with, offers seen in gambling marketing, e.g. *'I would bet £10 to get £30 just for that short space of time, to place a few bets, so it would entice me'* (Int 12, F, HR). These included signing up with different or multiple brands, or downloading apps, as a consequence of new customer offers, free bets or spins, enhanced odds or price boosts for in-play betting, and special bonuses.

If I'm already a member and they would have specials, you know, higher odds than other bookmakers and stuff, I have availed of those. (Int 4, F, HR)

It does actually prompt me to bet. When it's like a special offer, if they're offering you something then yes, but if it's just a normal advert where there's actually like, you know, it's not a special offer then that wouldn't prompt me to bet. (Int 2, F, LR)

Betting more than intended

Several participants said there was a greater likelihood that they would bet or deposit more than intended if they were to benefit from an offer or promotion that enabled further opportunities to gamble, an increased chance of winning, or a greater return on a single stake. These offers included free bets, different odds, price boosts, specials and extra lotto draws (e.g. at Christmas).

Possibly because it (the ad) could be saying about like, I said, a boost on the price or whatever you know and you think, Jesus that's a great price I'll put on more than I anticipated because I'll win more. (Int 16, M, HR)

If it's kind of bet 20 and get whatever, how many bets free, whereas usually I'd just do a fiver bet or two fiver bets, you know, something like that. But if I'm getting free bets for that little bit more then it would, yes, persuade me to spend more. (Int 2, F, LR)

Discussion

In this study, we explored awareness of, and attitudes toward, gambling marketing in Ireland among young adults who gamble, and any impact on their behavior. The sample reported high and frequent (often daily) exposure to gambling marketing. Research in the UK with young adults who gamble similarly found that they reported their day-to-day experiences to be ‘saturated’ with gambling adverts (Torrance, Roderique-Davies et al., 2021). While exposed to gambling marketing in multiple channels, we found that this was most commonly reported for television and social media. Just as Killick and Griffiths (2022) found that sports betting ads on social media were seen as ‘intrusive’, we found that for some participants gambling marketing, which was considered common across multiple social media platforms, was viewed as inescapable. Such routine exposure, in different environments and while engaging in day-to-day activities, is thought to help normalize gambling (Hing et al., 2014; Nyemcsok et al., 2021; Pitt et al., 2016; Thomas, McCarthy, et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2018).

Gambling marketing can shape how gambling is perceived. Gambling companies often use humor in advertising, with a systematic review of 15 studies from Australia, Spain and the UK finding humor to be one of the most commonly identified narratives (Killick & Griffiths, 2023). Paddy Power has been criticized in Ireland for the use of humor in gambling marketing (Kerr et al., 2021), with it suggested that lighthearted advertising may generate interest, create positive brand attitudes, normalize and encourage gambling, and downplay potential risks (Killick & Griffiths, 2023). We found that participants viewed humorous adverts as giving the impression that gambling was fun, easy and entertaining, with these types of ads also prompting discussion with others. We also found that gambling advertising showing winning was considered the norm, echoing past research from Australia, Canada, Spain and the UK (Deans et al., 2016; Derevensky et al., 2010; Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2018; McMullan & Miller, 2009). While some participants considered this as lacking credibility, as it does not reflect reality, in general exposure to adverts showing what could be won, the reactions of winners, and the lifestyle winning could offer, presented an image they could aspire to if they too were to engage with the gambling product shown.

Almost all participants recalled a range of gambling-related offers and promotions, comprising new customer/sign-up offers, free or matched bets or spins, price offers and bonuses, time-limited bets and offers, specific bets or odds, risk-minimizing offers, jackpots, prizes, and loyalty/rewards schemes. Previous research in Norway has similarly found a range of inducements in gambling advertising, such as free or bonus bets, matched deposits, rewards points, improved odds, and money back offers (Rawat et al., 2020), and there are likely others we did not identify given that research in Australia found 15 categories of gambling-related financial inducements (Hing et al., 2017). Participants in our study commented that some of these offers and promotions may encourage people to sign up with multiple companies (e.g. new customer offers), bet more or more frequently (e.g. loyalty schemes where the size of the free bet is influenced by the number of times that a person has bet, and the amount they have bet, in the preceding week), or are an enticement to gamble (e.g. time-limited offers). Several participants were skeptical of offers and promotions or questioned the salience of the terms and conditions, described as being shown in small text or missing entirely.

A content analysis of gambling adverts in the UK found that with respect to terms and conditions, at least where these were present, most appeared in small fonts and outside the main advert frame (Critchlow et al., 2020). The complexity of these terms and conditions, if visible, has also been raised as a concern (Hing et al., 2017).

The amount spent on gambling in Ireland per capita is reportedly higher than in all but one European Union country (Wilcox, 2019). Several participants said that they felt prompted to place a bet as a response to seeing or hearing gambling marketing, that they would or had taken advantage of offers and promotions, and that they would bet or deposit more than intended if they were to benefit from an offer or promotion. Two participants considered high-risk mentioned adverts being a delayed prompt to gamble, for instance if they had seen an advert or adverts and were subsequently near to a gambling venue. This type of cueing effect has been previously reported (Torrance, Roderique-Davies et al., 2021). The findings are consistent with the broader literature, which suggests that exposure to gambling advertising may encourage more frequent or riskier gambling (Browne et al., 2019; Killick & Griffiths, 2021; Newall et al., 2019). For instance, a meta-analysis of 28 studies, almost all from Australia, North America and Western or Northern Europe, found that, despite limitations in the included research, exposure to gambling advertising is likely associated with increases in gambling and harmful gambling behavior (Bouguettaya et al., 2020). Two subsequent online surveys with 16–24 year-olds and regular adult sports bettors in the UK, found that almost a third of people who currently gamble (31% and 29% respectively), and 87% of those experiencing gambling harms, reported marketing as prompting unplanned gambling (Wardle et al., 2022).

Currently, there is no coherent legislation that specifically addresses gambling sponsorship, advertising and promotion, outside the Codes of the Advertising Standards Authority and the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (Department of Justice and Equality, 2019). In 2021, the Department of Justice's Action Plan set out plans for establishing a Gambling Regulator, a body with the power to license and regulate the industry, including with respect to marketing (Department of Justice, 2021). In 2022, the Gambling Regulation Bill allowed for the establishment of a Gambling Regulatory Authority of Ireland (GRAI), a statutory body responsible for the licensing and regulation of gambling services, including the power to impose obligations relating to advertising, promotion and sponsorship for the purposes of safeguarding persons participating in gambling (Department of Justice, 2022). The 2023 Justice Plan aims to move the Gambling Regulation Bill through the Oireachtas (O'Hagan, 2023). The GRAI, when established, will be in a position to offer consumers greater protection from gambling marketing.

Our sample is limited to a small number of young adults who gamble, which limits generalizability. The harmful effects of gambling advertising have been found to extend to children (McGrane et al., 2023), another a key population (Rossi & Nairn, 2022) not included. It is also possible that the findings were influenced by socially desirable responding. Additionally, the marketing materials shown during the interviews to aid discussion may have influenced or shaped participants' responses. The findings should be considered in light of these limitations. In terms of future research, given the absence of longitudinal studies on gambling marketing, in contrast to other potentially harmful products such as

alcohol and tobacco (Bouguettaya et al., 2020), such research would be of significant value. However, given the dearth of research exploring gambling marketing in Ireland, there are also other more practical avenues. For instance, it would be of value to include people with lived experience of gambling harm who are in recovery in future qualitative research as they are a population with high rates of relapse (Raylu & Oei, 2016), and one that has been largely neglected with respect to gambling marketing.

Knowledge of the extent of gambling harms in Ireland and the factors associated with these harms is limited (Fulton, 2015). Given the paucity of research the role of gambling marketing in contributing to these harms is unclear. This sample of young adults who gamble reported frequent exposure to gambling marketing through a number of channels. The high awareness of gambling adverts, offers and promotions, and the fact that gambling marketing was a topic of discussion for most participants, suggests it has become a regular part of people's lives. Indeed, for some it was considered difficult to avoid. Gambling marketing appeared to influence perceptions, giving the impression that gambling was fun and winning the norm, and behaviors, prompting people to gamble or gamble more often, primarily as a result of offers and promotions. When the Gambling Regulatory Authority of Ireland is finally established, having been discussed for over a decade, a key task will be to consider what controls on gambling advertising, promotion and sponsorship are required to better protect consumers.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author [Crawford Moodie] from May 2025.

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