

# Young people and gambling in sub-Saharan Africa: towards a critical research agenda

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*Abstract:* Recent decades have seen gambling become a highly lucrative industry across sub-Saharan Africa. Fuelled by the democratisation of access to digital finance and internet technologies, this gambling boom has been concentrated in Africa's urban economies, where expanding youth populations are increasingly connected to global circuits of sport, popular culture and speculative forms of consumption. This has engendered growing interest in gambling as a distinct and emerging field of academic enquiry across sub-Saharan Africa. To date, psychiatric, epidemiological and behavioural sciences have provided the dominant frame for measuring the extent of 'problem gambling' and addiction, but there remains the need to expand and diversify the field to encompass more critical and interdisciplinary approaches that recognise gambling as a densely significant social and cultural phenomenon. This article aims to provide a point of departure for a critical research agenda on the differentiated impacts of gambling on young people and their communities across the continent.

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## Introduction

Recent decades have seen gambling become a multi-billion-dollar industry across sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (iGB 2020).<sup>1</sup> Fuelled by the democratisation of access to digital finance and internet technologies, this gambling boom has been concentrated in SSA's urban economies, where expanding youth populations are increasingly connected to global circuits of sport, popular culture and speculative forms of consumption. To date, legislation has largely failed to keep pace with this unprecedented market expansion and diversification, with many governments torn between the need for containment and the benefits of revenue generation (Sichali *et al.* 2022).

We use the term 'gambling' in a specific sense here. Gambling essentially involves wagering something of value (usually money) on an uncertain outcome for a potential prize or profit. This activity has a long history and takes a number of forms, ranging from children's penny games of pitch and toss to stock market speculation as well as loot box gaming (Reith 1999). However, our focus in this article is the specific type of commercial gambling that is produced by a global industry and promoted as a form of leisure and consumption. The products of this industry range from sports betting and lotteries to electronic gaming machines, casinos, bingo and – most recently – the migration of all of these games onto internet platforms, handheld devices and apps. Since the 1980s, the industry has grown in size and scope, boosted by political-economic neoliberal ideologies of market deregulation and economic competition, to become an increasingly powerful and global force. At a time when countries throughout North America, Australasia and Europe encouraged the proliferation of gambling as a source of wealth generation and tax revenue, the industry itself mobilised cutting-edge technological and financial systems to promote ever more profitable products and market them across a range of platforms.

More recently, with a number of countries across Europe and North America introducing tighter regulations around gambling, industry players have attempted to establish new markets. They have begun to refine their products to 'fit' national gambling habits and to colonise what they regard as emergent markets. The countries of Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe and particularly sub-Saharan Africa, which they

<sup>1</sup> The geographical category of 'sub-Saharan Africa' has been the subject of contention in recent years. Some have suggested that the category is loaded with racial and racist assumptions and it is undoubtedly true that it has been used in this way (Ekwe-Ekwe 2020). Like all geographical categories, such as North and South America, 'sub-Saharan Africa' is inherently reductionist, subsuming a complex and varied set of cultural and social realities that exceed the boundaries of states. However, such categories can be useful when exploring regional trends (Economist 2019). In this review, we have deployed the term 'sub-Saharan Africa' with the intent of describing regional trends in gambling practices among young people. While delineating our literature review in this way, we draw attention to specific subregions and countries where the studies we draw on do so.

regard as an ‘untapped market for gambling’ (Ligero 2020), have been a key focus of industry efforts.

In this distinctly neoliberal African context, gambling has also become a focal point for wider political-economic and cultural concerns, with politicians and policymakers alike cautioning against the detrimental consequences associated with gambling harms. Many have raised concerns about the destabilising and extractive effects of commercial gambling on local economies, where relations of work are often precarious and informalised, and where many struggle to navigate opportunities for wealth, livelihood and social mobility, with significant consequences for development (Amutabi 2018).

The risks to youth demographics have been highlighted as a particular area of concern (Yunus 2022). It is known from the international evidence that children and young people are more vulnerable to the harms of gambling than older adults and that these harms can be particularly enduring (Messerlian *et al.* 2005). The experience of gambling problems at an early age can negatively affect young people’s development in myriad ways by, for example, interrupting education or training opportunities, curtailing the growth of interpersonal relationships, and creating debt. The cumulative effects of such harms have an ongoing and detrimental impact on future life chances.

All these trends – the proliferation of commercial gambling throughout the region, as well as increasing concern about its impacts – have engendered growing interest in gambling as a distinct and emerging field of academic enquiry across SSA. Reflecting the traditions of Euro-American academic enquiry, the dominant framing of gambling and its associated problems within African scholarship has come from the psychological and behavioural sciences. The knowledge that has been produced through this perspective relates mainly to the prevalence and epidemiology of gambling, and to the risk factors that shape gambling practices (Bitanirwe & Ssewanyana 2021). While vital in establishing a robust research agenda, there is a need to expand and diversify the field to encompass more critical and interdisciplinary approaches that recognise gambling as a significant cultural phenomenon laden with meaning, imaginaries and complex entanglements of biology and culture, history and economics, morality, religion and class (Reith 1999). Such an expansive project requires a commitment to ‘scaling up’ our analytic frame to appraise the diverse social realities that shape the changing significance and allure of gambling across the continent.

This scholarly challenge opens up a new and interesting set of questions about what we can learn about the varied territories and cultures of SSA from gambling and how, theoretically and methodologically, we might go about learning it. What, for example, does the uptake of particular gambling practices, including those powered by digital technologies, tell us about the ways in which young people understand, imagine and navigate their aspirations for the future? And, in turn, how are youth futures

(re)shaped and transformed by the changing salience of gambling at this ‘human–material nexus’ (Pickles 2014: 215)? To ask such questions is also to confront the analytic blind spots of the emerging field, extending its critical parameters to interrogate the genealogies of gambling practices in the region, the political economy, promotional culture and regulatory regimes that shape gambling as an expansionist global industry.

This article aims to offer fruitful provocation and a point of departure towards such a critical research agenda. It begins by establishing what we know about the status quo in the field, summarising extant knowledge on the prevalence and categorisation of gambling practices among youth demographics. There then follows a turn to explore the rich potential of interdisciplinary approaches to the critical analyses of gambling in SSA, before tracing some of the notable contributions underpinning these developments and exploring where lessons can be learned from the wider field of gambling studies. These insights will lead us to consider the differentiated impacts of gambling on young people and their communities across the continent, signposting emerging issues and areas of neglect and generating a critical agenda for the future of research in the field.

### **Dominant constructions of gambling: pathology, epidemiology, and demographic and behavioural associations**

The emerging literature on gambling among young people in SSA is dominated by psychiatric, epidemiological and psychological framings. That is to say, scholarship to date has tended to focus on the prevalence and incidence of ‘problem gambling’ or ‘addiction’ and has sought to identify demographic and behavioural drivers of gambling. Many of the assumptions and methodological approaches that frame gambling research in North America, Europe and Australasia have been exported to the countries of SSA, often without consideration of their applicability in different cultures and contexts. So, for example, the same conceptualisations of gambling – that it is an individual psychological problem – and the same methodological tools – clinical screens and questionnaire items – have been used on different population groups, in different social settings to the ones for which they were originally designed.

Despite this, a body of African scholarship has nonetheless made essential contributions to our understanding of contemporary gambling practices among the young people of diverse SSA countries. It has outlined the extent of gambling throughout the region, particularly its perceived relation to income generation, as well as its interconnections with other risky behaviours such as alcohol and drug use.

For example, survey-based approaches have suggested that gambling is widespread among underage populations and is more popular among youth than older

adults (Abdi *et al.* 2013; Ahaibwe *et al.* 2016; Aguocho *et al.* 2019). In addition, a systematic review of gambling patterns and ‘problem gambling’ among young people in SSA noted that, despite heterogeneous approaches to measurement, the prevalence of ‘pathological gambling’ among young people ranged from 2–3 per cent in Southern Africa to approximately 10 per cent in Eastern Africa (Bitanihirwe & Ssewanyana 2021).

Other studies have quantified the scale of everyday gambling practices. In Uganda, for example, one survey documented that the majority of young people aged 18–30 placed bets daily (30.2 per cent), weekly (34.7 per cent) or bi-weekly (20.1 per cent), although we note that the denominator is not reported in this article (Ahaibwe *et al.* 2016). Such intensive betting practices have also been documented among young people in Nigeria (Uzochukwu & Ekene 2021), Kenya (Gathuru 2021) and Ghana (Glozah *et al.* 2019).

A number of studies have also sought to quantify demographic and behavioural factors which influence gambling practices. A common finding reported by cross-sectional surveys is that gambling is more common among young men than young women. Studies in Ethiopia (Abdi *et al.* 2013), Ghana (Glozah *et al.* 2019), Kenya (Gathuru 2021), Nigeria (Mustapha & Enilolobo 2019; Temitope *et al.* 2019; Ayandele *et al.* 2020) and Uganda (Kiwujja & Mugisha 2019) all reported higher rates of gambling or more positive attitudes towards gambling among young men than young women. However, not all studies reported such stark differences, with one in rural Ghana reporting similar levels of problem gambling in both males and females (Odame *et al.* 2021).

As well as identifying young men as being most engaged in gambling and at risk of harms, survey-based literature has also presented a range of behavioural and motivational associations. Some studies have suggested that there are links between multiple risk-taking behaviours, such as alcohol and drug consumption, engaging in crime, unprotected sex and physical fighting (Muchimba *et al.* 2013).

The motivations of young gamblers have also been subject to scrutiny, with a number of studies pointing to the importance of the idea of gambling as a source of wealth. In Nigeria, surveys have consistently identified financial motivations, such as the need to earn extra income, unemployment, financial strain and the pursuit of ‘quick money’, as drivers of gambling participation among young people (Mustapha & Enilolobo 2019; Temitope *et al.* 2019; Olaore *et al.* 2020; Ayandele *et al.* 2021; Uzochukwu & Ekene 2021). In Kenya, one study observed that the pursuit of additional income was a significant motivator for young (predominantly male) sports bettors and that sports betting was strongly associated with some form of employment, the income from which stakes were derived (Gathuru 2021). Other research has pointed to the role of gambling as a source of social acceptance among peers (Aguocho *et al.* 2019).

The literature reviewed here has been valuable in establishing the scale and nature of gambling participation, as well as estimates of its harmful manifestations among youth. These approaches have also highlighted how gambling practices are often entangled with other risk-taking behaviours and driven by attempts to increase income. While extremely valuable, psychiatric, epidemiological and behavioural approaches are unable to address the broader genealogies in which youth gambling in SSA is enmeshed, the political-economic dimensions of the phenomenon, and the lived experiences of gambling among young people who gamble. We turn to these now.

### **Before the ‘problem’ of gambling: historical approaches to folk gambling in SSA**

While the recent influx of digitally mediated commercial forms of gambling in SSA has undoubtedly produced a dramatic shift in the region’s gambling landscape, gambling itself is by no means ‘new’. Indeed, the SSA region is home to a rich variety of folk forms of gambling, of complex historical and cultural significance. Limited, but rich, scholarship has documented and traced the trajectories of some of these folk gambling practices, noting their intersections with pre-colonial social formations, the slave trade and colonial rule (Reefe 1987). One such game is *abbia*, a ‘pitch-and-toss’ game in which a collection of nuts or wooden chips, carved on one side, are thrown into the air, with players betting on how their chip will fall in a complex array of potential combinations (Quinn 1971). *Abbia* is usually positioned as a West African game and historical accounts have linked it to complex forms of social exchange. Reefe (1987) describes how *abbia* was woven into forms of male domination, with women staked in games, enabling frequent winners to accumulate wives and use them to secure loyalty from other men by ‘loaning’ wives to them. Reefe (1987) also notes that enslaved humans were frequently used as stakes on the Guinea Coast during the slave trade, as well as in pre-colonial communities situated between southern Nigeria and the East African Lakes.

Among the conclusions of Reefe’s unique historical survey of gambling in Africa is that:

Gambling has been the unexamined exchange system of Africa. In some societies, it ranked just behind bridewealth as a nonmarket mechanism for transferring goods, services and rights in people. Food, salt, iron tools and weapons, beads and cowries were commonly staked. Cattle were redistributed ... Land was bet. (1987: 64–5)

Since Reefe’s survey, historians have made few advances in documenting the history of folk gambling practices in the SSA region and the networks of social and material

exchange they produce remain underexamined. A notable exception is [Stephen Louw's \(2018\)](#) study of the South African game of *fahfee*, a form of informal lottery operated by people of Chinese origin since at least the start of the 20th century. Louw describes how *fahfee* is enmeshed in a complex set of relations of exchange, with Chinese operators seeking to extract wealth to enable social mobility for their children, 'runners' employed from within the communities providing cultural mediation and players viewing it as offering a realistic chance of acquiring lump sums of money to facilitate purchases that are ordinarily out of reach.

As well as drawing our attention to the complex social and material exchanges which folk gambling practices enable, [Reefe and Louw](#) also highlight the metaphysical dimensions attributed to these practices by players. For example, [Reefe \(1987\)](#) notes that *abbia* players commonly sought fortification from a range of folk medicines, special meals and pre-game rituals intended to provide insight into the winning chip combinations that would manifest the following day. [Louw \(2018\)](#) describes how *fahfee* players often invoke dreams, bodily movements (e.g. a twitching eye) or ancestral forces in their explanations of what guides their number choice.

Through these accounts, both [Reefe and Louw](#) expand our understanding of folk gambling in the region, positioning it as spanning social, material and metaphysical domains. In doing so, they prompt us to ask how these folk framings might influence young people's contemporary gambling practices, configuring responses to the new commercial offerings with understandings that are culturally distinctive and have been passed down through the generations.

### **Gambling in colonial and post-colonial perspective**

Historical accounts of folk gambling practices not only reveal potential frames which contribute to the construction of contemporary practices but also offer insight into the displacements and impositions of the colonial and post-colonial periods. As [Reefe \(1987\)](#) notes, colonial powers often prohibited folk gambling practices, contributing to the wider repressive cultural and material violence that characterised the colonial regimes established in SSA ([Fanon 1963](#)). Such prohibitions provided the space in which new forms of gambling could be, and were, introduced.

In Zimbabwe, for example, a state lottery, horse racing and, latterly, football pools were all introduced, at various points, by the British colonisers ([Roberts 2007](#)). African access to gambling was, however, prohibited by racist legislation from 1914 until 1959, when Africans were first permitted to purchase state lottery tickets. Following the amendment of discriminatory laws, the country underwent a significant liberalisation of its gambling landscape with the formal legalisation of football pools. The example

of Zimbabwe provides us with insight into how precursors to popular contemporary forms of gambling were bound up in the discriminatory logics and practices of colonial violence. As with scholarship on folk gambling practices in the SSA region, however, the literature on colonial-era gambling practices is limited, leaving substantial questions unanswered.

Gambling during the immediate post-colonial period is also under-documented. One area that *has* received some attention is state lotteries (Brenner & Servet 1995; van Wyk 2012, 2013, 2021). These contributions illuminate the ways in which post-colonial state lotteries across SSA became vehicles for raising what van Wyk characterises as ‘soft’ revenue, in contexts where building tax bases was politically painful. Such lotteries, van Wyk contends, also speak to the themes of dignity and citizenship. Following the racist nature of gambling legislation in colonised countries such as Zimbabwe, the launch of state lotteries offered citizens of newly independent African states the opportunity to participate in an activity that had previously demarcated the discriminatory intersecting boundaries of race, class and status.

While scholarship on colonial and post-colonial gambling in the SSA region is underdeveloped, what there is speaks powerfully to the contemporary contexts in which young people across the region are situated. As with approaches to folk practices set out by Reefe and Louw, colonial and post-colonial perspectives prompt us to consider how the legacy of racist discrimination and the subsequent pursuit of state building have shaped the regulatory, economic and socio-cultural environments in which contemporary gambling practices are enacted.

## **Political economies of gambling in contemporary SSA**

Contemporary forms of gambling have made significant departures from the lotteries, football pools, horse racing and folk games which characterised gambling in SSA in the pre-digital era. With rapidly increasing access to internet technologies and mobile money (Statista 2022), SSA has been targeted by gambling corporations seeking to expand their markets into new territories. Encouraged by positive market assessments from consultancy firms (KPMG 2016), these corporations have introduced an array of sports betting, lottery and electronic gaming products into a region where legislation commonly pre-dated the digital era (Sichali *et al.* 2021).

As gambling corporations have been met with increasing criticism and stricter regulatory regimes in a number of countries across Europe and North America, they have looked to new ‘untapped’ markets as potential sources of profit. Their expansion into SSA has drawn comparisons to the strategy of the tobacco industry when it became subject to more stringent forms of control and shifted its attention to Africa,

China and South America (Reith *et al.* 2019). This movement can be seen as a form of neo-colonisation: the drive that David Harvey (2006) spoke of when he described the tendency of capitalism to seek out new sources of profit through geographical expansion (Reith 2018).

A comparative policy analysis on regulation of gambling was conducted on forty-nine countries to understand how SSA states currently legislate for and regulate gambling (Sichali *et al.* 2021). The study reported that gambling is regulated in forty-one of the forty-nine SSA countries, with explicit provision for lotteries (95.1 per cent, 39/41), casinos (95.1 per cent, 39/41) and sports betting (80.5 per cent, 33/42) common in these countries. However, the study noted that across the region, there is limited explicit legislative provision for online products (36.6 per cent, 15/41), electronic gaming machines (31.7 per cent, 13/41), slot machines (22 per cent, 9/41) and advertising (43.9 per cent, 18/41). The study also suggests that 87.8 per cent (36/41) of the countries do not publicly publish regulator reports.

With limited legislative provision for contemporary gambling technologies and formats, corporations have established significant markets for their products across the SSA region, collecting billions of dollars of revenue each year (iGB 2020). Research in Malawi has analysed how the leading provider of sports betting products, and the licensee for the country's National Lottery, established its market (Bunn *et al.* 2020, 2022). In the first of these studies, the authors noted that after receiving its license, this provider used seven key strategies to build a customer base: it adopted a mobile network franchise model built on mobile data technologies and vending approaches familiar to Malawians; used media coverage to draw attention to winners and its business; purchased high-visibility advertising near areas of high footfall; sponsored local events and teams; built a strong association with (European) football through its name and its marketing; appealed to aspects of hegemonic masculinity, using the tropes of masculine competition; and constructed narratives of individual and collective benefit that the business was bringing to Malawi (Bunn *et al.* 2020). A standout finding of this study is that representatives of the provider studied were quoted in newspaper reports framing gambling as a way to 'get money', that is, generate income.

The second study extended this analysis, via interviews with regular sports bettors aged 18–35, to identify how the provider used a network of street-level agents in urban Malawi to pursue customers, in a manner comparable to the indirect rule strategies often deployed by colonial interests. It also describes how the sports betting provider has extended into legally grey territory by cross-selling a range of casino-style electronic gaming products through its sports betting outlets (Bunn *et al.* 2022). Conclusions of these two studies suggest that the industry is operating in an extractive manner, co-opting Malawians in the process of extraction, and that it presents its products as a means to earn money and escape poverty.

It is clear that the legislative environments in which gambling corporations operate across SSA have significant limitations that provide commercial interests with few regulatory barriers and considerable freedoms when constructing business models. As research from Malawi has illustrated, this enables dubious claims about products to be published by newspapers, indirect rule-style forms of wealth extraction and cross-selling of casino-style products in an ambiguous legal space.

### **The meanings and futures of youth gambling**

A significant body of scholarship has explored how young people make sense of and construct their betting practices across SSA contexts. This literature is largely made up of interview studies but includes some important contributions from ethnographers. Common themes in the literature include connecting gambling to European football fandoms, to work and skill, to income and routes out of poverty, to sociality and friendship, to danger and ‘addiction’, and to religious values.

A substantial body of literature has argued that contemporary gambling practices in SSA are intimately connected to European football. Researchers in Nigeria and Zimbabwe have offered nuanced accounts of the entanglement of European football fandom and betting practices (Akanle & Fageyinbo 2019; Chiweshe 2020). Multiple studies have argued that the popularity of European football and the associated ‘trans-local stadia’ (Akindes 2011) are drivers of contemporary sports betting among young people in SSA (Akanle & Fageyinbo 2019; Glozah *et al.* 2019; Schmidt 2019; Bunn *et al.* 2020; Chiweshe 2020; Olaore *et al.* 2020; Owonikoko 2020; Adebisi *et al.* 2021; Chinyama 2021; Gathuru 2021; Nabifo *et al.* 2021). While some of the research suggests that young people place bets to demonstrate allegiance to the European teams that they support (Chiweshe 2020), others have documented critical reflection on this practice, with interviewees describing how they attempt to place bets dispassionately (Bunn *et al.* 2022). Whether bets are placed with allegiance or calculation, it is clear that the commodification and globalisation of European football is a motor driving contemporary youth gambling practices in SSA.

An important dimension of the connection between European football fandoms in SSA and contemporary betting practices is the framing of sports betting as a form of skilful work. Industry representatives have publicly positioned sports betting as a game of skill, in which knowledge is a determining factor (Bunn *et al.* 2020). A study in Uganda describes how young people have conceptualised ‘work’ to include gambling because they consider it to be ‘working smart’ and they believe that sports betting is full-time employment (Namuggala 2017). For example, one of the youths in Namuggala’s study asserted:

‘Sports betting is a full-time job. It is not easy I’m telling you. You have to keep informed in sports. We listen to radio, read newspapers in order to bet right. You have to know how teams are performing in the season, which team is likely to win or lose ... otherwise you make losses.’ (2017: 74)

While this ‘work’ does not fall within conventional approaches to formal employment, it is clear that the social practice described by this interviewee is indeed a form of ‘work’, in that considerable time and effort is invested in the pursuit of sports betting.

Positioning of sports betting as a form of work is closely related to youth narratives which frame gambling practices as forms of income and routes out of poverty. In Malawi, one participant in an interview study explained that vendors suggested that sports betting offered a route to ‘easy money’, while another began gambling in an attempt to earn funds to rebuild his family’s storm-damaged house (Bunn *et al.* 2022). Studies in Nigeria and Kenya have also observed that young people perceive the pursuit of sports betting as offering the chance of a better economic future (Schmidt 2019; Olaore *et al.* 2020).

Youth approaches to gambling in SSA are not just economic and instrumental; they are also deeply rooted in social connection and friendship. In Nigeria, Adebisi and colleagues (2021) describe how youth gambling practices are entwined with concerns for social connection, belonging and community. Research in Malawi has also offered this perspective, suggesting that youth sports betting practices are entwined with friendships and communities built on a shared interest in European football (Bunn *et al.* 2022).

Alongside these ‘positive’ narratives relating to youth gambling, research has also documented a range of narratives which present the lived concerns of young people in SSA. For example, some young people from the region presented gambling as a ‘bittersweet’ practice, as it has the potential of giving both pleasure and pain, while others felt that gambling is a time bomb, as it has the ability to destroy one’s life in a flash (Adebisi *et al.* 2021). Other studies suggest that young people have come to understand gambling as a form of ‘addiction’ which dominates their lives and waking thoughts (Bunn *et al.* 2022).

Islamic perspectives have also been presented in research on youth gambling. Although gambling is not permitted by Islam and is perceived as a sin against God, the number of Islamic youths participating in gambling has increased substantially in recent years (Sule & Adam 2018). Islamic teachings deter gambling participation because they believe it turns people away from the values required of followers of Allah, destroys families and causes loss of wealth (Sule & Adam 2018). Accordingly, scholars informed by Islamic teachings suggest that gambling must be declared illegal and that gamblers should be arrested and punished by the government in Nigeria (Sule & Adam 2018).

## Reframing gambling: youth harms and futures

Researchers in Australia, New Zealand, North America and Great Britain have increasingly called for gambling to be viewed and responded to using a public health lens (Shaffer & Korn 2002; Reith *et al.* 2019; Wardle *et al.* 2019). Specifically, some researchers have argued for a move away from the ‘responsible gambling’ discourse, which presents gambling problems as stemming from individual loss of control and avoids discussion of structural drivers of what is re-framed as ‘gambling harms’ (Francis & Livingstone 2021). In contrast to the ‘responsibilisation’ (Rose 1996) strategy that the gambling industry has used to individualise gambling problems, the concept of ‘gambling harms’ shifts the focus away from pathologised individuals towards a multi-level perspective which highlights the role played by the industry and the state in producing, promoting and making available products that cause harms to individuals as well as their families, social networks and wider communities (Wardle *et al.* 2019).

This broader, harms-based perspective offers a fruitful inspiration for the research agenda in SSA. The literature to date has identified a range of issues which illustrate how gambling harms are manifesting across the region. In a study that sought to assess the effects of gambling on the welfare of 415 youths aged 18–35 years, it was found that about 12.5 per cent experienced negative consequences from gambling, including redirecting money meant for household expenditure, domestic violence and selling household assets (Mustapha & Enilolobo 2019). Further research in the SSA region has documented negative impacts on bettors’ household diets, hygiene, education, relationships, moods and cognitive resources (Amutabi 2018; Bitanihirwe & Ssewanyana 2021; Bunn *et al.* 2022). At the most serious end of the harms spectrum, researchers have also reported a range of gambling-related suicides across the region (Kaggwa *et al.* 2022), including among minors (Sichali *et al.* 2021), as well as a significant burden of harmful play in underage adolescent populations (Abdi *et al.* 2013; Ahaibwe *et al.* 2016; Aguocho *et al.* 2019; Sichali *et al.* 2021).

While these gambling harms are problematic in their own right and need to be addressed, they are experienced in a context of intersecting risks, precarities and inequalities. A study of thirty SSA countries estimates that 67 per cent of children are growing up in situations of multiple deprivation (de Milliano & Plavgo 2018). A central aspect of this deprivation is often undernutrition, which remains a significant problem in the region, with an average of 41 per cent of children experiencing stunting (Quamme & Iversen 2022). Young people across SSA also remain the most educationally disadvantaged, with UNESCO estimating that just 81 per cent of primary-aged children enrol in primary education and only 63 per cent complete

primary education (UNESCO 2019). Establishing stable income is a further challenge faced by young people across the region, who remain heavily reliant on the informal sector and struggle to find long-term formal employment (Fox *et al.* 2016). Navigating transition to sexual activity also presents a significant challenge to young people in SSA, with young people experiencing a higher incidence of sexually transmitted infections than their peers in high-income regions (Zheng *et al.* 2022). High levels of gender-based violence (Wado *et al.* 2021) and child marriage (Yaya *et al.* 2019) deepen the challenges faced by young people during their formative years.

### **Towards a critical interdisciplinary research agenda**

In this review, we have set out the range of scholarship and perspectives that address the rapidly shifting terrain of youth gambling in SSA. In this concluding section, we draw together the critical observations we have made to suggest multiple directions for future research.

It is clear from the psychiatric, epidemiological and behavioural literature that contemporary youth gambling is widespread, often intensive and associated with a range of other risk-taking behaviours. Yet this literature is underpinned using questionnaires or ‘measures’ that have not been developed for or tested in the multiple socio-cultural contexts that make up the SSA region. Our first recommendation for future interdisciplinary research is therefore:

#### *1. To study historical and contemporary folk gambling traditions across the SSA region.*

Scholarship on folk gambling practices, both historical and contemporary, is an important yet understudied domain of gambling research in SSA in general and as it relates to young people specifically. The rich survey of historical folk gambling traditions offered by Reeve points to significant socio-historical phenomena. However, his account of games and practices draws the majority of its evidence, as is often the case, from colonial observers and white scholars. Therefore, we recommend deeper exploration of historical and folk gambling traditions across the SSA region.

Addressing this important area of enquiry will deepen our understanding of the rich multiplicity of SSA gambling traditions. This is an important research agenda in its own right that would document a vital aspect of the social and cultural formations of both past and contemporary SSA societies, providing a novel lens through which to view life in these communities. Beyond this, such research is likely to provide insight into how folk knowledge systems might shape the reception of contemporary commercial gambling products.

Accounts of how colonial and post-colonial social arrangements positioned gambling practices are, as with folk practices, understudied. As we have highlighted through the example of Zimbabwe, colonial regimes produced a range of racist legislation that discriminated against Africans. Such colonial-era prohibitions, as van Wyk has argued, have shaped how post-colonial independent states and their populations have responded to gambling, notably through state lotteries. However, the way in which gambling intersects with the colonial and post-colonial remains understudied, and therefore we suggest future research seeks:

2. *To study gambling's colonial and post-colonial formations and trajectories.*

As with our previous recommendation, this agenda would enable researchers to address an important research gap that is of interest as a novel area of socio-historical enquiry. In addition to this, studying the ways in which gambling is positioned in colonial and post-colonial formations will further enhance the genealogies of contemporary gambling practices across the region, offering insights into the complex relations of power through which these practices are produced.

The political economy of gambling in the SSA region is another area in which limited research has been done. Policy research to date has identified a range of limitations in the legislative environments of the SSA region. A notable issue is that the digital revolution has enabled rapid growth of online and internet-mediated markets which legislation has, in the majority of SSA countries, yet to explicitly address. This, along with other regulatory challenges, has created a political-economic environment in which gambling corporations have achieved rapid growth with limited oversight. We therefore encourage researchers:

3. *To study how contemporary gambling corporations exploit the intersection of political and economic systems across SSA.*

Pursuing such research would enhance our understanding of the diverse political and economic formations across the region, and the gambling industry's relationship to them. It would also help policymakers and public health practitioners identify potential approaches to limiting harm through legislation and regulation.

Research on the ways in which young people in SSA make sense of and practise gambling has produced some important insights. The centrality of European football for many young bettors has been well documented, as has the complex relationship between gambling and informal income generation. The social and peer networks in which gambling is situated have also been explored thoroughly. The next step for this body of scholarship, we suggest, is to utilise alternative methods of enquiry that go beyond semi-structured interviews, which have been so central to its development. Research should therefore aim:

4. *To study how young people make meaning with and practise gambling using a full range of qualitative methods.*

Such research would ideally include more ethnographic work in settings beyond sports betting halls, including research on the spaces in which young women gamble. The use of participatory methods, including arts- and folk-media-based approaches, would also enrich this body of research, going beyond its logocentric nature. Finally, researchers should consider exploring how gambling practices change over time using longitudinal designs, such as those that underpinned the concept of ‘gambling careers’, which highlighted the shifting nature of these practices and their embeddedness in particular socio-cultural contexts (Reith & Dobbie 2013).

As part of this work, researchers should be attentive to the potential importation of culturally specific research tools and assumptions from Anglo-American-based gambling scholarship and critically assess to what extent – if at all – it ‘fits’ the specific context of an SSA gambling research agenda. Existing gambling scholarship relies heavily on the use of screening tools and questionnaire-based approaches that privilege quantitative forms of knowledge. Part of the challenge for future research would involve, for example, exploring the applicability of these epistemological tools and approaches (which, as we have noted, were developed in specific settings, with specific population groups in mind) to the varieties of gambling behaviour and experience across diverse SSA settings.

The emerging ‘gambling harms’ paradigm, informed by critical sociological and public health approaches, has begun to highlight the ways in which negative impacts of gambling can exceed the individual. As such, it encourages us to think beyond pathologised individuals that are ‘responsibilised’ by industry to detract from critical appraisal of their products and how they are regulated. However, the harms paradigm is still developing, both in relation to SSA and globally. We therefore argue that researchers need:

5. *To develop culturally specific approaches and methods for understanding gambling among different social groups and across contexts throughout the SSA region.*

Pursuing this agenda will require at least two strands of work. Exploring and documenting the range and experiences of gambling harms in different communities and across different social groups might be one productive way to engage with this exercise. Within it, we urge researchers to focus on the range and extent of gambling harms experienced by young people in particular, as well as on the ways they evolve over time. This would involve longitudinal approaches that followed young people through (at least some of) the lifecourse and that also paid attention to the impacts of gambling on their social networks and wider communities. Moreover, given the well documented extent and nature of adolescent participation and the growing evidence

of harm, greater priority needs to be given to *responding* to these harms in ways that prevent and reduce them.

### Concluding points

This article has outlined how the introduction and proliferation of commercial forms of gambling across SSA has intersected with a range of features, including precarity, poverty and inequality, that place people, and particularly young people, at increased risk of being harmed by gambling. In economic contexts of unemployment and lack of opportunities for many, gambling products have been positioned by the gambling industry, and consumed by hopeful young people, as potential future-makers that can provide material wealth and security. In doing so, the industry has skilfully aligned its offerings with the aspirations of young people in the region.

The irony of this, as we have noted, is that gambling harms can be particularly enduring for young people, who are at a significant and potentially vulnerable stage of the life cycle. Such harms can impact their life chances in terms of loss of education and training opportunities, undermining the development of interpersonal relationships, and by exacerbating their already precarious financial position. Loss of money, opportunities and relationships can be particularly damaging during a young person's formative years.

We suggest that the expansion of the gambling industry into countries which are already impoverished and experience multiple levels of disadvantage represents a form of neoliberal neo-colonisation. Just as powerful global gambling companies dominate the region economically, so hegemonic ideas about individual psychology and responsibility come to dominate the ways people think about its impacts.

We finally suggest that the development of a critical, SSA-specific research agenda that is sensitive to the cultural and social contexts of gambling across the region is crucial for understanding the harms of gambling in the lives of young people and is also a first step towards reducing, and so resisting, them.

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