

The visibility of gambling sponsorship in football related products marketed directly to children.

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Abstract

UK law prohibits direct marketing of gambling to children. However, our data, gathered between 2018 and 2020, demonstrate that gambling logos occur frequently in football related products and media consumed by children. This is a pressing issue for policy makers because research suggests that although children engage with football as spectators, they engage more often through readily available material culture. Discussions in the media about sponsorship of football teams by gambling companies have focused on the exposure of children to advertisements during live broadcasts. Analysing visible gambling sponsorship in children's media, this paper shows how a single gambling logo on a player's shirt is refracted many times through collectable cards, football magazines, and the mediatized 'play' of a child fan's world. It concludes that discussions around gambling advertising and its impact on children should be informed by an awareness of how children, as opposed to adults, engage with football.

Key words

Football; gambling; short sponsorship; children; young people.

Introduction

In the 2019-20 season, half of the 20 teams in the English Premier League (EPL) wore shirts bearing the logos of betting brands, generating a projected £349.1m income for their clubs.¹ In the English Championship, the league below the EPL, 17 out of 24 shirts displayed a betting logo.² As well as shirts, gambling companies also sponsor competitions, stadia and leagues.³ There are a few notable exceptions to the increasingly close relationship between football and gambling. In 2017, the Football Association (FA) ended its sponsorship by Ladbrokes. In 2018, Luton Town refused £500,000 from gambling companies. As their chief executive, Gary Sweet, explained to the BBC, ‘We don’t want to promote excessive gambling behaviour through our support base and our players’.⁴

Concerned by the volume of gambling adverts on television, UK politicians from across the major parties have called for an end to shirt sponsorship in football, a call supported in 2019 by a few large bookmakers, including Ladbrokes-owner GVC. Eventually, in December 2018, under pressure from the print media, and the Daily Mail in particular, the UK’s largest gambling companies (including William Hill, Betfred and Bet365) agreed to a voluntary ban on advertising during live sports broadcasts.⁵

The logos of gambling sponsors were removed from club merchandise marketed to children (including team football shirts) in 2007. But as Bunn et al pointed out, the removal of gambling logos from children’s shirts may have limited impact because children continue to view players in adult shirts.⁶ Taking Bunn et al’s observation as a starting point, our research sought to explore children’s engagement with football and to quantify the visibility of gambling sponsorship in a selection of merchandise designed for, and marketed to, children. For the purposes of this study we have defined children as all those under 16. Although there is no upper age limit on collecting stickers or trading cards, the football magazines analysed are marketed from ages 3 to 14.

Given the global reach of the Premier League, concerns have been raised about gambling companies exploiting fans of English football in countries such as Uganda and Kenya, and to access markets such as China where a ban on direct gambling advertising exists.⁷ Although our study considers merchandise designed for children in the UK, our findings have implications for not only premiership merchandise marketed to children abroad, but all countries where gambling sponsorship remains a visible part of football and football related products are marketed uncensored to children.

Children’s football fandom - the relationship of children to football

There is limited research on children’s football fan engagement, but what does exist demonstrates that children’s relationship to football is very different to adults. The most immediate difference is that children tend to support a portfolio of teams and individual players. The reasons given by children for their preferences are complex, and reflect family histories and relationships, and peer associations - although geography appeared to influence choice of ‘favourite team’ less than for adults.⁸ Skelton’s study of football in primary schools also found that knowledge of football teams and players can be important in the development and expression of friendship bonds among boys, again explaining why children support multiple teams or individual players regardless of the team they play for, in contrast to what is typical for adult football fans.⁹

The most significant difference, however, is that children's engagement with football is mediated by material culture far more than among adults. Material culture refers to the social significance of objects—how they become relevant to the way people interact and organise their lives, express their identities and forge relationships. Rather than football being one activity among others that split children's interest and engagement, Thompson and Williams found that football was a predominant feature of the everyday lives of many child fans.¹⁰ Child fans had their teams emblazoned on their bed sheets, pyjamas, bedroom walls, and lunchboxes. Football was also the topic of conversation with friends at school, and a key feature of their recreation not just as football players but also in computer games and trading cards.¹¹ Among the most popular items were Match Attax football trading cards, which were swapped and turned into a game; magazines (including *Match of the Day*, *Kick* and *Match*); and football shirts (with many children owning more than one - not necessarily from the same team). Children viewed merchandise consumption far more positively than adult fans, and saw it as 'a tool for authenticating their fandom'.¹² In research on adult football fans, regular attendance of matches is commonly used as an indicator for strength of connection. With more modest budgets and dependent on adults for transport and access to matches, children instead consume media (including magazines, television programs and online content) in order to connect with their favourite teams and players, and to gather information about the latest trends and gossip.¹³

Johansen's study of Danish children found similarly widespread engagement with this breadth of football related media and merchandising.¹⁴ He proposes that in contemporary culture children's 'play' happens within, through and inspired by media. Football is consequently a 'remix' culture where children 'playing football' describes a broad engagement with mediatized manifestations, such as playing trading cards or computer games, or reading magazines, that are reinterpreted and ascribed fluid meanings as they are socially reproduced in children's spaces.¹⁵

Research suggests that children, to a greater extent than adults, use material and visual culture in order to cultivate their status as football fans. Therefore, in order to better understand the ways in which children experience gambling sponsorship and advertising, we must engage with this material perspective, and attempt to 'see' football as it is encountered and embodied by children as clothes to wear, magazines to read and objects to be played with and traded.

Methodology

To investigate the visibility of football gambling sponsorship in children's lives, we decided to focus on three of the most common forms of child engagement with football outside of watching or playing football: 1. sticker albums; 2. trading cards; and 3. football magazines.¹⁶ Our research was split into two parts, carried out over 3 consecutive years, and focused on the EPL.

Part 1: Sticker album and trading cards

The first part of the project focused on sticker albums and trading cards. Initial research was carried out in June and July 2018 as part of a larger project investigating children's recall of football gambling sponsors.¹⁷ This covered the 2017/18 season, during which 9 of the 20 teams in the EPL had shirts sponsored by gambling companies.¹⁸ In this first stage we quantified how visible gambling sponsorship was in:

1. The Official Topps Merlin 2018 Premier League Sticker album;
2. The Official Match Attax Trading/collector cards 2017/18.

The 2018 Official Premier League sticker album consisted of 48 pages with 324 stickers to collect, covering individual players, team photos, home and away kits, and football club logos. There were also 16 'Game changer' and six 'Legend' stickers to complete the album. We calculated how many stickers contained images of gambling logos based on the designated sticker pages in the album (all team pages show players face forward in full kit). All special categories such as 'game changer' were checked against completed sticker pages online and on YouTube. The number of stickers featuring a gambling logo, rather than the amount of times a logo appeared on a sticker were recorded. We also only counted stickers where over 75% of the logo was visible and the logo could be easily recognized. We were conservative in our count, choosing to discount, following team discussion, any logos where the level of visibility could be in doubt. This same approach was repeated for the trading cards.

The official Premiership Match Attax Trading/Collector Cards 2017/18 consisted of 607 cards¹⁹ to collect covering the EPL players as well as special category cards such as 'Game changers', 'Man of the match', and 'International stars'. We viewed a collectors list published on a trading website (Corinthian seller) which shows an image of every card. Cards from each team list were viewed first then cross checked with cards listed under the special categories. We found a few additional cards appeared in the special category that did not appear on the team lists. The data from the trading cards was cross-checked by a second researcher who viewed a 20% sample (122 cards) taken from 4 special categories. There were no differences in the counts.

The same process, for sticker album and trading cards was repeated in March-April 2020 for the 2019/20 season. In the 2019/20 season there were 10 teams with gambling shirt sponsors, and three teams with gambling sleeve sponsors. For the 2019/20 season Panini was the official producer of both the 2020 Official Premiership Sticker Album and the official Premiership trading cards (Official Adrenalyn XL Premier League 2019/20).

In order to collect data from the Panini sticker album, we viewed a completed album posted on YouTube, that allowed us to view each individual sticker page. The disruption to the season by covid-19 meant the 48 'transfer window' set of stickers were not yet released. We have consequently only calculated statistics for the stickers publicly available for the 2020 season giving an album consisting of 95 sticker pages, with 636 stickers to collect. For the Adrenalyn XL Premier League trading cards, we used the Corinthian seller site as before to view the 498 cards available. A 21% sample (106 cards) taken from 4 special categories revealed no differences. All data was compiled into an excel spreadsheet and counts and percentages were calculated.

Part 2: Football magazines

The second part of the research focused on football magazines available to children in England and was carried out in March and May 2019, covering the 2018/19 season, and Jan 2020 for the 2019/20 season. Different sampling months allowed us to reflect on whether time of season had any impact on the types of images found in the magazines.

In March 2019 we purchased the four main football magazines available to children: *Footy*; *Match*; *Kick!*; and *Match of the Day*. The same magazines were purchased again in May 2019 with the exception of *Kick!* where we purchased their 5 weekly version *Kick! Extra* that was available at the time. For 2020 all 5 magazines were available and purchased. A full list of the issue numbers and dates can be found in the endnotes.²⁰

According to their publishers, *Kick!* is a 52-page four weekly magazine, targeting girls and boys aged seven to 12, with a readership of 72,000. *Kick! Extra* is 36-page magazine produced every five weeks, for boys seven to 12, and with 28,000 readers. *Footy*, is a six weekly, 32-page preschool magazine, targeting boys aged between three and nine, with a readership of 22,000. *Match* magazine is a weekly, 64-page magazine for teens and pre-teens. In 2016 it had a circulation of just over 18,803 but we were unable to access more recent figures. *BBC Match of the Day* magazine is a weekly, 68-page magazine for children aged between six and 14, with a circulation of 38,000, and readership of 380,000.²¹

Two researchers separately analysed the magazines, counting all visible gambling logos and the number of different brands seen. Gambling logos were recorded in eight categories based on size and visibility: fully visible logos included small (0.4-2cm); medium (2-4cm); large (4-6cm); and extra-large (more than 6cm); and partially visible small (0.4-2cm); medium (2-4cm); large (4-6cm); and extra-large (more than 6cm). Partially visible logos were only included where approximately 75% or more of the logo was visible and the logo was clearly recognisable. We did not count logos that were too small to read or blurred. Sizes were measured across the widest part of the logo, usually reading left to right in line with the text. Where logos were narrow, we measured top to bottom if this was greater. Results were compared between the two researchers. There were only 4 differences, relating to partial visibility cases, which were easily identified in the recount of the relevant issues. Because of the potential for ambiguity we decided not to count these. All data was compiled in Excel and a 'per-page' ratio was calculated to allow comparisons between magazines, alongside general counts and percentages.

Findings

1. Sticker albums and trading cards

For the Topps Merlin 2018 Official Premiership Sticker Album we found **133 stickers (41%)** of the 324 stickers to collect featured a visible gambling logo. For the Panini 2020 Official Premier League sticker album, **270 stickers (42.45%)** out of 636 contained a gambling logo.

Of the 607 official trading cards available for the Match Attax Premiership 2017/18 season, **220 cards (36.24%)** featured a visible gambling logo. For the Panini Adrenalyn XL Premiership 2019/20 season, **212 cards (42.57%)** out of 498 contained gambling logos.

In all cases, gambling logos were found on the fronts of player shirts. Logos on shirt sleeves were too small to be clearly visible on either stickers or trading cards. Top teams, whose players tend to perform well, often have more cards to collect because they have more special categories attributed to them such as 'Goal Machine' or '100 Club'.²² This partially explains why the percentage of cards/stickers with logos does not correlate exactly to the percentage of teams sponsored by gambling. We also did not count cards where shirt sponsors were not visible because players were presented while engaged in a shirt obscuring action such as a side shot.

2. Football magazines

Gambling logos were visible across all magazines, with the January 2020 issue of *Kick! Extra* featuring the most logos (**n=59**), equal to **1.64 images on every page**. This was partially a consequence of the magazine containing a poster for five EPL teams, each of them showing four players in full kit. Some of these posters were also repeated as smaller images on the front and back covers. This case demonstrates how quickly gambling logos can multiply in an edition which includes features about specific teams which happen to be gambling sponsored. In the majority of cases gambling logos were found on team shirts. We also found the numbers of logos across the May issues increased with coverage of the SkyBet Championship Cup winners where the Skybet logo was reproduced multiple times, for example in the ribbons on the cup held by players.

Table 1: Total count of gambling logos visible in children's magazines

Magazine	March 2019			May 2019			Jan 2020		
	No. of visible gambling logos	No. of different brands visible	Gambling logos per page	No. of visible gambling logos	No. of different brands visible	Gambling logos per page	No. of visible gambling logos	No. of different brands visible	Gambling logos per page
Footy	1	1	0.03	4	4	0.13	3	0.09	1
Kick!	18	9	0.35	n/a	n/a	n/a	26	8	0.5
Kick! Extra	n/a	n/a	n/a	5	5	0.14	59	7	1.64
Match	11	7	0.17	44	9	0.69	35	12	0.55
Match of the Day	37	12	0.54	52	12	0.76	38	10	0.56

For the March 2019 and May 2019, the most gambling logos were found in *Match of the Day* magazine, with **0.54 (n=37)** and **0.76 (n=52)** images per page.

Only the 32-page *Footy* magazine appeared to have few visible gambling sponsors, the most visible being four found in the May 2019 issue. This is partly explained by the magazine featuring more coverage of international and national team images that tend not to be visibly sponsored by gambling, but the magazine also had more text boxes and images placed so they partly obscured the logos appearing on team shirts. It is not clear if this is a deliberate policy: the magazine is targeted to the youngest audience of the magazines that we investigated and is described as a 'preschool' magazine.

Across all the magazines, the majority of fully visible logos fell into the small category between 0.4 and 2cm (151 logos out of a total of 209 fully visible logos), with 45 falling in the medium 2-4cm size, and 12 in large 4-6cm and 1, in extra-large 6+cm categories.

Across the magazines covering 2019 we found logos for 20 different gambling brands: Betway, 32Red, SportsPesa, M88/Mansion, OPE, TLC Bet, 888 Sport, LaBa360, Bet Victor, Fun88, W88, ManBetX, Dafabet, LeoVegas, SkyBet, Party Casino, Bet365, Betdaq and Granada Bingo (shirt sponsors at the time of Coventry City's FA Cup win in 1987). This number is accounted for by gambling sponsors appearing on images of prize cups, old team photos and some lower division players. By 2020, two new team sponsors, LoveBet and Sportsbet.io, were found in addition to those previously listed.

Discussion

Legislation and self-regulation in the UK are intended to reduce the exposure of children and young people to gambling advertising.²³ Recent guidelines from the Advertising Standards Agency, for example, highlight that it is the responsibility of marketers to ensure children are not exposed to gambling advertising. The guidelines state that:

‘This guidance is intended to help marketers and agencies interpret CAP and BCAP’s gambling rules as they relate to the protection of children (aged 0-15) and young people (16 and 17). It applies to marketing communications appearing in all media, including online channels such as social media. Underage participation in gambling is illegal and presents a significant risk of harm. The Codes limit children’s exposure to gambling advertising and ensure that, where they see ads directed at adults, marketing communications are not likely to influence them detrimentally. They require that marketers take all reasonable steps to:

- ensure that advertising is not targeted at under-18s, either through the selection of media or the ad’s content; and
- prevent advertising being directed at adult audiences posing a risk to under-18s.’
(ASA 2019)

However, images are mobile, they circulate within a visual economy, that invests them with meaning and significance beyond the original intention of the photographer.²⁴ The player emblazoned with a gambling logo, for example, intended to sell products to adult consumers, is refracted multiple times from football matches and their TV coverage, matchday programmes and the cards, stickers and magazines explored here and throughout the football-related worlds of child fans.²⁵ It is not obvious how these visual cues are interpreted or given meaning by children, nor is it easy to establish their impact on behaviour.²⁶

Because children support multiple teams and are also happy to change allegiance, the reach of just a few gambling sponsored teams can be wider among children than adults (who tend to stick to one team throughout their careers as fans). More importantly, children’s ‘football play’ is tied into a rich web of familial and social meaning with strong emotional resonance. Gambling logos become part of these complex worlds, and children do not necessarily have the experience or critical faculties to understand their commercial significance, or to be wary of the appeal of products that have addictive qualities. We found evidence of brand loyalty by association with football among very young children in our survey conducted in 2019.²⁷ For example, one child told us ‘Because if they love football, it (betting) is part of wanting their team to win’ (8-year-old male), clearly interpreting gambling branding through the prism of loyalty. Another told us ‘It’s normal for under 18’s to bet with friends. I put £2 on Man U with other young people.’ (13-year-old male).²⁸

Children are independent actors, who make their own meanings from encounters with brands. Cook argues that ‘consumption and meaning, and thus culture, cannot be separated from each other but arise together through social contexts and processes or parenting and socializing with others’.²⁹ This is also true in the case of football. It is therefore essential that researchers and policy makers take time to listen to children, ask them to explain to us how they understand football, and what it means to love a team or a player, as well as what they imagine gambling to be, and why they think their heroes wear shirts that look a certain way.³⁰ The clear profusion of gambling logos into media that are predominantly aimed at children demonstrates that the manner in which these images are reproduced and disseminated into children’s spaces needs further scrutiny.

Limitations

The magazine element of the study is based on samples taken at varying times of year. We would expect during a World or European Cup year, or if samples were taken after the end of the Premiership season, there might be more coverage of national or international teams where gambling logos are less prominent. As our study was focused on logo visibility, we also did not look for in-text references to gambling brands. Future studies could improve on our method by adopting sized window grids to make categorizing logo size consistent and quicker. Given the obscuring of many logos in the preschool magazine *Footy*, further investigation might want to consider the extent to which publishers are aware of and deliberately cover gambling logs.

Conclusion

A number of international studies have shown that children and young people associate gambling with sport.³¹ The authors of these studies often argue for tighter restrictions on how, where and when gambling is advertised, particularly in association with sports that are popular with children. In this paper, we have argued that in order to understand the impact of gambling advertising on children it is also important to explore and understand the distinctive ways in which they enact their status as fans. Secondly, we have attempted to quantify the volume of gambling logos in products that are explicitly designed for and marketed to children.

Our findings show that the exposure of children to gambling logos in sticker albums, trading cards and magazines is an important, if unintended, consequence of the sponsorship of football shirts by gambling companies. Legislation and self-regulation intended to reduce the exposure of children to gambling advertisements and branding should also consider the nature of children’s engagement with football as well as the presence of gambling logos in products that are marketed to, and consumed by, children. Children consume more, and more varied, football related media than adults through their play. When creating policies about gambling advertising and evaluating the potential harm of gambling shirt sponsorship, we need to take this deeper immersion into account.

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Notes

- ¹ Davies, 'Half of Premier League Clubs to Have Gambling Sponsors for 2019-20 Season', *The Guardian*, July 19.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Jones, 'Gambling Sponsorship and Advertising in British Football: A Critical Account.'
- ⁴ BBC News, 'Luton Town 'not Comfortable' with Gambling Sponsorship, Says Chief Executive' *BBC Sport*, November 22.
- ⁵ Financial Times, 'GVC Urges End to Broadcast Gambling Ads and Football Shirt Sponsorship', April 25.
- ⁶ Bunn et al, 'Shirt Sponsorship by Gambling Companies in the English and Scottish Premier Leagues: Global Reach and Public Health Concerns', 8.
- ⁷ Davies, 'How the betting industry have become Inextricably linked to football', *The Guardian*, Jan 2020.
- ⁸ Thomson & Williams, 'Children as Football Fans: An Exploratory Study of Team and Player Connections'.
- ⁹ Skelton, 'A Passion for Football': Dominant Masculinities and Primary Schooling'.
- ¹⁰ Thomson & Williams, 'Children as Football Fans: An Exploratory Study of Team and Player Connections'.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 338.
- ¹² Ibid., 336.
- ¹³ Ibid., 338.
- ¹⁴ Johansen, 'Being a Football Kid. Football as a Mediatized Play Practice'.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Thomson and Williams 'Children as Football Fans: An Exploratory Study of Team and Player Connections', 2014; Johansen, 'Being a Football Kid. Football as a Mediatized Play Practice'.
- ¹⁷ Djohari et al. 'Recall and Awareness of Gambling Advertising and Sponsorship in Sport in the UK: A Study of Young People and Adults'.
- ¹⁸ AFC Bournemouth - M88, Burnley - Dafabet, Crystal Palace – ManBetx, Everton – SportPesa, Huddersfield Town – OPE Sports, Newcastle United – Fun88, Stoke City Bet365, Swansea City – Letou, West Ham United – Betway.
- ¹⁹ This is taken from the Corinthian seller list and excludes any duplicate holographic cards.
- ²⁰ *Footy*: Issue 14, March 2019; Issue 15, May 2019; Issue 21, January 2020. *Match*: Issue 2016, March 19-25 2019; Issue 2023, May 14-20 2019; Issue 2056, January 21-27 2020. *Kick!*: Issue 165, March 2019; Issue 176, January 2020, *Kick extra*: Issue 42, May 2019; Issue 49, January 2020. *Match of the Day*: Issue 546, March 2019; Issue 554, May 2019; Issue 587, January 2020.
- ²¹ Immediate, 'Brands Pages'.
- ²² Players that are rated 100 for one of the key card statistics such as skill.
- ²³ Hörnle and Carran, 'A Sieve That Does Hold a Little Water – Gambling Advertising and Protection of the Vulnerable in the UK'.
- ²⁴ Kleinman and Kleinman, 'The Appeal of Experience; The Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times'; Poole, *Vision, Race, and Modernity: A Visual Economy of the Andean Image World*.
- ²⁵ Cassidy and Ovenden, 'Frequency, Duration and Medium of Advertisements for Gambling and Other Risky Products in Commercial and Public Service Broadcasts of English Premier League Football', 2017; Sharman, et al, 'Exposure to Gambling and Alcohol Marketing in Soccer Matchday Programmes'.
- ²⁶ Pitt et al, 'Factors that influence children's gambling attitudes and consumption intentions: lessons for gambling harm prevention research, policies and advocacy strategies'.
- ²⁷ Djohari et al, 'Recall and Awareness of Gambling Advertising and Sponsorship in Sport in the UK: A Study of Young People and Adults', 7.

²⁸ Ibid., 8.

²⁹ Cook, 'Commercial Enculturation: Moving Beyond Consumer Socialization', 70.

³⁰ Bestman et al, 'Children's Implicit Recall of Junk Food, Alcohol and Gambling Sponsorship in Australian Sport'.

³¹ Djohari et al, 'Recall and Awareness of Gambling Advertising and Sponsorship in Sport in the UK: A Study of Young People and Adults'; Nyemcsok et al 'Young People's Recall and Perceptions of Gambling Advertising and Intentions to Gamble on Sport'; Bestman et al, 'Children's Implicit Recall of Junk Food, Alcohol and Gambling Sponsorship in Australian Sport'.

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