

Gamblification, Professional Complicity and Regulatory Failures in Mediated Live Sport on the island of Ireland

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The boundaries between digital games, gambling and sport are increasingly blurred, especially as digital games have adopted some of the monetisation strategies of gambling, and gambling has become more prominent in Western markets as a sponsor of some live sports, especially those with large television audiences.

The term 'gamblification' emerged from gambling studies (McMullen and Miller, 2008; Hing, 2023) to capture the 'colonisation of sport' by gambling advertising, promotion and marketing, and the industry has proved adept at adjusting its strategies to take advantage of emerging media platforms and practices. Macey and Hamari (2024) distinguish between affective and effective gamblification, with the former

focusing on cultural values and signifiers of gambling, and the latter on gambling mechanics, activities, and games.

Exposure to gambling marketing is listed as one of the key factors in the increased normalisation and rise in gambling-related harms in some societies (Hilbrecht et al., 2020). However, we need to move beyond exposure to understand contemporary gambification. Formal explicit advertising is only one small part of contemporary marketing. In a multi-screen networked media culture, exposure must be understood in the context of platform infrastructures designed to track user attention and drive reach and engagement.

The gambification of sport is most obvious in transnational mediatised sports, where specific sports, such as men's association football (i.e. soccer), have seen increasing levels of explicit and implicit marketing of gambling services across television and online platforms (Columb et al., 2023; Crawford et al., 2024). With the increasing platformisation of television and the entry of over-the-top television streaming services, competition for live sports rights has intensified, bringing new production logics, datafication, and policy implications (Hutchins et al., 2019). Recent studies have found that gambling marketing pursues a cross/multi-media strategy with emerging social media strategies including the use of celebrities and user targeting by gender (Lyons et al., 2023; Pitt et al., 2024; Petrovskaya et al., 2026).

This paper reports on part of a two-year project on gambling marketing, sport and young people (YouGaMSI). We examine the gambification of a sample of live sporting events across broadcast, streaming and social media channels in two different countries. We focus on Ireland, both North and South of the border (Ireland and Northern Ireland from here on). These jurisdictions provide distinct media and gambling regulatory domains but have a shared sporting and media culture. They also share a history of legalised sports betting.

Our selection of sports was informed by findings from focus groups with young people which explored their media sports consumption (Kitchin et al., 2024). We then sampled programmes from several relevant sporting competitions, and we conducted a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of gambling marketing strategies in 22.5 hours of live sports programmes across 4 public service and 4 commercial broadcast and streaming television services in both jurisdictions. We also examined 114 posts and 79 reels on the Instagram accounts of seven major gambling brands during these sporting events. The content was gathered in 2023/24.

Gambling marketing was most prevalent in international men's darts, football and horse racing programmes suggesting a gendered strategy and that some media and sporting organisations are more open to these brand relationships. We found that some broadcast and streaming sports programmes displayed a **very wide range, high volume and frequency of direct** gambling marketing **at all times of day, across a variety of channels** (see Table 1). Professional journalists and both commercial and public service media channels were complicit in the visual and textual promotion of gambling services, and the reuse of clips in other programmes. Responsible gambling messaging was either absent or difficult to read, and these messages reinforced gambling as an individual consumer choice and risk.

Table 1: Frequencies of Direct Gambling References across Different Formats

Format	Count
Static Pitchside	1,021

Players Shirt	395
Prerecorded Video Segments (including match highlights)	218
Integrated On-Screen Graphics	120
Other	81
Stadium Crowd	80
Electronic Pitchside Full	57
Commercial Adverts (ad breaks)	31
Interview or Press Arena	29
Verbal References (including commentator references)	28
Stadium or Arena Structure	26
TV Studio	23
Sponsorship Lead-in	19
Electronic Pitchside Part	3
Grand Total	2,131

Industry Instagram accounts reinforced the television sports strategy by focusing on a narrow range of men's sports and circulating highlight clips from the televised programmes. Some accounts also produced significant indirect informational and entertainment content, including quizzes and interviews (see Table 2). These accounts provide a longer tail of affective and platformed engagement and use Instagram 'native' strategies to build brand familiarity with gamblers and non-gamblers alike (Kerr et al., 2024). Across our data sample, we identified affective strategies aimed at socialising gambling brands, normalising gambling in sport and cross-promoting gambling games.

Table 2: Frequencies of content types across industry Instagram accounts, 2024.

Brand	Responsible Gambling	Informative Content	Entertainment Content	Promotional Content	SUM
Betfair	1	6	3	10	20
SkyBet	1	10	0	11	22
Bet365	7	2	4	22	35
Ladbrokes	13	2	8	0	23
Paddy Power	3	0	18	13	34
Betway	1	20	0	3	24
BoyleSports	4	14	15	5	38
SUM	30	54	48	64	196

Sports and animal betting are amongst the most popular forms of gambling for men in Ireland and increasingly take place online (Ó Ceallaigh et al. 2023). At-risk and disordered gambling prevalence rates in Ireland reflect levels across Great Britain, but levels are higher in Northern Ireland (Department for Communities, 2025). Both Ireland and Northern Ireland have low betting duties, and neither, at the time of the research, had a public health policy for treating gambling-related harms. Ireland established a gambling regulator in March 2025, and gambling advertising restrictions are being introduced for licensees, but ‘incidental’ advertising is not restricted (GRAI, 2026). Professional journalism practices are not discussed. Gambling regulation in Northern Ireland is a devolved matter for the Stormont Executive but regulation remains outdated. Current regulations will not reduce exposure to incidental gambling marketing in international football or darts programmes received by consumers on the island, or indirect and affective/emotive forms of gambification across social media platforms.

The gambification of mediated live sport provides insights into gambification strategies in digital games. Regulatory changes in Europe have focused on effective gambification mechanisms, mandatory disclosures and increasing the age rating of games with random rewards to 16 years. These are important since random rewards are a core monetisation strategy in digital sports games played by many young people, especially boys. However, digital games are also cultural practices, and affective gambification strategies are equally important to understand. Affective gambification strategies are often indirect, produced by a range of companies and influencers, and they circulate both within and around games. National and regional gambling and digital games regulations need to better understand these affective tactics and the international network of producers who are complicit in their production.

ENDNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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BIO

Dr. Aphra Kerr is Professor of Digital Media and Communication Studies at University College Dublin, Ireland. She is co-PI at Rinn AI: Centre for Research in Data Science and AI (2026-2034) and the ADAPT Research Ireland Centre for AI and Digital Content Technology (2021-2026), and was previously co-PI on the YouGaMSI project (2022-2024). She is the author of two monographs on digital games, including *Global Games: Production, Circulation and Policy* (Routledge, 2017). She holds a PhD in Communication Studies (DCU, 2000).

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Prof. Aphra Kerr received funding from the Gambling Awareness Trust (Ireland) in 2019 and the Department of Justice of the Government of Ireland in 2021. She has been an unpaid member of the expert advisory board for the Pan European Game Information (PEGI) system since 2016. Dr Paul Kitchin has received Rapid Evidence Review funding from the UKRI Gambling Research Programme in 2025 and a minor research grant from the Academic Forum for the Study of Gambling in 2026. Dr Erin McEvoy has received funding for a minor research grant from the Academic Forum for the Study of Gambling in 2026. She has no other conflicts of interest to declare.

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