THE GAMBLIFICATION OF SPORT
A critical review of narratives, evidence and research gaps

Marcelo Moriconi
Iscte — University Institute of Lisbon, Centre of International Studies (CEI-Iscte), Lisboa, Portugal

César de Cima
Iscte — University Institute of Lisbon, Centre of International Studies (CEI-Iscte), Lisboa, Portugal

Abstract The gamblification of sport — the integration of gambling into sports ecosystems — has changed how sport is consumed and managed. While sport and political institutions have supported the phenomenon, the literature frames it as a social problem, emphasizing the normalization of gambling, the risks to sporting integrity, and the potential social harms. Based on a critical literature review, this article identifies four spheres of influence: the normalization of gambling, challenges to sporting integrity, transformations in sport consumption, and the financing and promotion of sport. Empirical gaps and conceptual tensions between risk-based approaches and market-driven justifications are highlighted.

Keywords: gamblification of sport, gambling normalisation, social harms and risks, sports consumption, sport integrity, public policy.

A gamblificação do desporto: uma análise crítica das narrativas, evidências e lacunas de investigação

Resumo A gamblificação do desporto — integração do *gambling* nos ecossistemas desportivos — alterou a forma como o desporto é consumido e gerido. Embora o desporto e as instituições políticas tenham apoiado o fenómeno, a literatura enquadra-o como um problema social, enfatizando a normalização das apostas, os riscos para a integridade desportiva e os potenciais danos sociais. Com base numa revisão crítica da literatura, este artigo identifica quatro esferas de influência: a normalização do jogo, os desafios à integridade desportiva, as transformações no consumo do desporto e o financiamento e a promoção do desporto. Destacam-se lacunas empíricas e tensões conceptuais entre as abordagens baseadas no risco e as justificações orientadas pelo mercado.

Palavras-chave: gamblificação do desporto, normalização das apostas, riscos e problemas sociais, consumo desportivo, integridade desportiva, políticas públicas.

La gamblification du sport: une révision critique des récits, des données et des lacunes de la recherche

Résumé La gamblification du sport — l'intégration des jeux d'argent dans les écosystèmes sportifs — a transformé la manière dont le sport est consommé et géré. Si les institutions sportives et politiques ont soutenu ce phénomène, la littérature le considère comme un problème social, soulignant la normalisation des paris sportifs, les risques pour l'intégrité sportive et les préjudices sociaux potentiels. À partir d'une analyse critique de la littérature, cet article identifie quatre sphères d'influence: la normalisation des jeux d'argent, les menaces à l'intégrité sportive, les transformations de la consommation sportive et le financement et la promotion du sport. Les lacunes empiriques et les tensions conceptuelles entre les approches fondées sur les risques et les justifications axées sur le marché sont mises en évidence.

Mots-clés: gamblification du sport, normalisation des paris sportifs, méfaits et risques sociaux, consommation du sport, intégrité du sport, politiques publiques.

La gamblificación del deporte: una revisión crítica de narrativas, evidencias y lagunas en la investigación

Resumen La gamblificación del deporte — la integración de las apuestas en los ecosistemas deportivos — ha transformado la forma en que el deporte se consume y gestiona. Si bien las instituciones deportivas y políticas han apoyado este fenómeno, la literatura lo enmarca como un problema social, haciendo hincapié en la normalización de las apuestas, los riesgos para la integridad deportiva y los posibles perjuicios sociales. A partir de una revisión crítica de la literatura, este artículo identifica cuatro ámbitos de influencia: la normalización de las apuestas, los desafíos a la integridad deportiva, las transformaciones en el consumo deportivo y la financiación y promoción del deporte. Se destacan las lagunas empíricas y las tensiones conceptuales entre los enfoques basados en el riesgo y las justificaciones impulsadas por el mercado.

Palabras-clave: gamblificación del deporte, normalización de las apuestas, daños y riesgos sociales, consumo deportivo, integridad deportiva, políticas públicas.

Introduction

The gambling industry has become increasingly influential in sports. Bookmakers dominate sports sponsorships, governments rely more on gambling tax revenue, and sports betting ads are more common on TV and radio (Browne *et al.*, 2019). Today, in many countries, it is very difficult to play or watch sports without receiving incentives to bet. This phenomenon has been described as the "gamblification of sport" (Hing, Rockloff and Browne, 2023).

Although it has caused social changes and polarisation, the gamblification of sport remains under-theorised. Current studies present a partial view, emphasising negative aspects, namely the normalisation of gambling and related social harms, especially for vulnerable people (Hing, Rockloff and Browne, 2023). They also warn that the growing presence of visual elements associated with sports betting in sports is harmful to the social image of this sector. Other authors extend the negative consequences of the gamblification of sport to the "hyper-commodification of sport" (Walsh and Giulianotti, 2006). For them, the close relationship between sport and betting can promote habits and instrumental motivation in sports consumption, in which sport loses its intrinsic value and becomes a means for generating profit through sports betting (Lis-Clarke and Walsh, 2024).

Despite its analytical relevance, this literature is fragmented and does not provide a holistic understanding of the phenomenon. Firstly, because much of this literature considers betting as inherently negative, generally presenting it as a social risk. Secondly, while many of the social harms that the normalisation of betting can generate are described in depth, the empirical data supporting some premises remain inconclusive or mixed. Finally, because the dialogue with the discursive premises upon which both the world of sport and politics have based their justifications for legalising gambling and promoting the current ecosystem needs to be improved and deepened.

We understand that the gamblification of sport is not a neutral process. It is a political consequence determined by power struggles and conflicting interests among different stakeholders (McNamee and Moriconi, 2026). Like any social process, this generates risks and benefits. Therefore, the phenomenon cannot be fully

understood, and a coherent and realistic policy agenda cannot be developed without simultaneously discussing the premises and incentives used by (political and sporting) advocates of the gamblification of sport to promote, defend, and consolidate the phenomenon. This, of course, does not mean defending gamblification, but rather the possibility of evaluating and analysing its consequences from broader perspectives that allow for more efficient evidence-based policy actions.

Given this context, and drawing on a critical literature review, this article (a) analyses what is discussed (and what is not discussed) when addressing the gamblification of sport, (b) identifies four areas of social influence of the phenomenon, (c) describes the strengths and weaknesses of the studies on the areas of influence, taking into account current empirical gaps, and (d) establishes a series of topic and premises that require more research to allow a comprehensive approach to the problem and the establishment of coherent and realistic public policies (both in the political and sporting spheres).

The concept and development of gamblification

The concept of gamblification refers to the expansion of gambling and related content in non-gambling contexts to achieve specific outcomes (Macey and Hamari, 2024). Regarding the gamblification of sport, it involves a process of dissemination and incorporation of features, practices, images, and marketing language of sports betting into sports (Hing, Rockloff and Browne, 2023; Lopez-Gonzalez and Griffiths, 2018a). While betting and sports have been linked throughout history (Huggins, 2018; Chappelet and Verschuuren, 2019), the current situation is unprecedented due to the technological, political, and commercial changes that underpin the new ecosystem.

The widespread use of the internet, smartphones, and electronic money transfers created technological conditions for the emergence and consolidation of a permanent, global online sports betting market. The creation of various types of bets and micro-bets was also permitted, both before and during events (Lopez-Gonzalez and Griffiths, 2018b; McGee, 2020).

Consequently, the size and characteristics of today's global online market are incomparable to the local or national markets of the past (McNamee and Moriconi, 2026). Traditionally, lotteries were primarily nation-state monopolies, which were responsible for taking the necessary precautions to protect consumers and prevent social problems. In the last two decades, the sports betting market has expanded extensively due to the legalisation, deregulation, and liberalisation of online platforms and easier access to betting via mobile or laptop applications (Hing, Rockloff and Browne, 2023). Currently, the global online market is dominated by private companies whose ultimate goal is to generate profits.

The relation between sport and betting also changed. Until the beginning of the 21st century, the link was controversial, and the sports world did not hide the dangers that betting could pose to the integrity of competitions and public health (Tak, 2022). As a result, sports betting suffered long periods of disrepute and even

prohibitions due to the threats it posed to social order. Nowadays, sports federations, leagues, and clubs are co-opted by the gambling industry (Macey and Hamari, 2024). This is due to the growing dependence on revenue from sports betting on the financial sustainability of federations, leagues, and sports clubs (Hing, Rockloff and Browne, 2023); and it manifests through various channels such as naming rights (Thomas *et al.*, 2012) or advertisements during live events on television or social media (Thomas *et al.*, 2018; Cassidy and Ovenden, 2017). At this level, sponsorships represent one of the most evident indicators of the close-knit relationship between the gambling industry and the sports ecosystem (Lopez-Gonzalez and Griffiths, 2018a). According to MacInnes, Buzzoni and Matthews (2025), 66% of the clubs from the 31 football top divisions in Europe had signed at least one sponsorship deal with betting companies during the 2024-2025 season, and in 14 of these leagues the main sponsor was a betting company.

While the sports industry benefits from money derived directly (*e.g.*, sponsorships) or indirectly (*e.g.*, gambling taxes; betting banners placed on sports clubs' websites) from sports betting; sports betting industry links its offerings to culturally embedded symbols in sports — fan rituals and behaviours, winning, social status, or thrill and risk — that positively shape its social meaning (Lopez-Gonzalez and Griffiths, 2018b). Aligning with the positive attributes of sport has helped to reduce the negative stigma associated with gambling (Hing, Rockloff and Browne, 2023) and increase its social acceptance (Lopez-Gonzalez *et al.*, 2018b).

Regarding political processes, one of the main arguments used to justify the legalisation of online gambling has been the need to generate tax revenue without increasing traditional taxation (Humphreys, 2021; Taylor, McCarthy and Wilbur, 2025). In Greece and Portugal, the legalisation of gambling coincided with the period when these countries were under the intervention of the International Monetary Fund (Pokerfuse, 2014; Slotegrator, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic was also a critical moment for sports and created a need to introduce new sources of funding. Another argument revolved around the impossibility of stopping the expansion of online gambling, which, without legalisation and regulation, would grow without being subject to tax obligations (McSwain, 2018) and would leave the way clear for illegal markets.

Betting also emerged in the field of sports management as a tool to attract and/or consolidate audiences, at a time when new generations would have lost interest in consuming sports, and other activities, such as eSports, were emerging as direct competitors (McNamee and Moriconi, 2026).

States have not only institutionalised the proliferation of gambling by regulating online and land-based gambling but have also expanded opportunities for the social construction of narratives that promote gambling as a social activity. Political changes also enabled and influenced the expansion of sports betting marketing, which became a constant feature of sporting events (Deans *et al.*, 2017b; Killick and Griffiths, 2022; Thomas *et al.*, 2012).

Although the new ecosystem has emerged from institutional decisions based on clear incentives and interests, the concept of gamblification has appeared in scientific literature with a pejorative connotation, focused on describing negative

consequences and social harm. Given the dangers and risk areas that have arisen, it is important to be critical. However, for an effective evidence-based policy-making process, further research on the social consequences of gamblification and the financial benefits of the phenomenon is still needed. In current literature, as we will show, significant empirical gaps remain, and several premises still need to be empirically tested.

Methodology

This work is the first delivery of the G-Risk[1] project, which seeks to understand the social impacts of gamblification of sport on young people. The first challenge of the project was to understand, through a critical literature review, what has and has not been discussed regarding the gamblification of sport, and identify gaps that can be later filled with new empirical research. A critical review (Grant and Booth, 2009) comprises an in-depth evaluation and synthesis of existing research on a specific topic, involving a critical assessment of strengths, weaknesses, and gaps in order to challenge underlying assumptions.

The bibliographic research was conducted between April 2025 and June 2025 and focused firstly on articles, books, and book chapters (Scopus, Web of Science) that referred (in the title or the text) to "gamblification" AND "sports". As this is a recent concept, only 35 works were found useful for the analysis. The studies arise from the field of health and gambling studies, sport management, sociology, social psychology, and sport ethics and philosophy.

Since the aim of this review is to deepen and broaden the existing knowledge on the gamblification of sport, Grounded Theory premises were employed (Wolfswinkel, Furtmueller and Wilderom, 2013). Grounded Theory allows key categories to emerge (in the constructivist sense of the term) during the analytical process, rather than being deductively defined *a priori*. In this case, the method comprised different stages, which are presented below.

An initial analysis identified three spheres of influence (with own dimensions and empirical premises): normalisation of betting, risks to sporting integrity, and changes in sports consumption habits. This initial analysis revealed that the gamblification of sport is portrayed as negative, carrying social risks (in all three identified areas), and even as something that should end (Hing, Rockloff and Browne, 2023).

Given that the authors have a long track record of research in sports integrity, and that they have participated in various multi-stakeholder forums, it was verified that the analysed literature (a) performs fragmented analyses on specific points of the phenomenon and not holistic approaches, and (b) does not fully engage with other narratives from the political, sporting, and betting spheres, which

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have developed their own justifications to promote, legitimise, and consolidate the gamblification of sport. In this sense, and to provide a broad understanding, the academic premises in the areas of influence were critically compared with narratives that have defended positive aspects of the new link between sport and the betting market and have been discussed in the previous section of this article. This step helps to identify a fourth area of influence of the phenomenon: sports financing and promotion.

Finally, each of the areas was evaluated autonomously, pointing out discursive conflict between the narratives in favour and against gamblification and establishing cognitive and empirical gaps that must be overcome to improve the process of creating public policies.

Gamblification of sport: social implications and current empirical and cognitive limitations

Findings indicate that the gamblification of sport influences four dimensions, generating social risks, threats, and/or opportunities: (a) the normalisation of sports betting; (b) challenges to sports integrity; (c) the financing and promotion of sport; and (d) the modification of sport consumption habits.

However, much academic literature uses the concept to criticise the current ecosystem of betting and sports interaction, and to warn of the associated social risks. Some authors directly suggest that the gamblification of sport is a process that must be stopped because it "increases the risk of experiencing gambling addiction and other harms from gambling, including to one's finances, relationships and mental health" (Hing, Rockloff and Browne, 2023: 789).

Next, we analyse each of the pillars, examining their foundations, premises, and empirical shortcomings.

The normalisation of sports betting

The prevalence of sports betting and related social problems is the main concern of current studies on gamblification of sports. The starting point is the idea that betting is becoming increasingly common and that the stigma previously associated with gambling has diminished (Constandt *et al.*, 2022; Deans *et al.*, 2017b; Killick and Griffiths, 2021; Lopez-Gonzalez *et al.*, 2018a). Betting has reportedly become normalised among different social groups, and as a result, the number of gamblers worldwide has grown exponentially and is projected to reach 274.4 million by 2030, including vulnerable groups and even minors. Social acceptance among women has also increased (McCarthy *et al.*, 2020), and betting is a common and regular activity among athletes (Moriconi and de Cima, 2020). According to critics, this new social context fosters gambling addiction and related pathologies.

Marketing is being questioned as the primary driver of these social changes. Bouguettaya *et al.* (2020) argue that exposure to gambling marketing is positively correlated with attitudes, intentions, and behaviours related to gambling. McGrane

et al. (2023) argue that the greater the exposure to gambling marketing, the more people gamble and the greater the harm they suffer.

The perversity of marketing

One of the main criticisms concerns the aggressive and misleading marketing used by the competitive betting market (García-Pérez, Krotter and Aonso-Diego, 2024). On the one hand, the volume of advertisements and their omnipresence in sporting events has made it very difficult, if not impossible, to practise or consume sports without simultaneously receiving incentives to gamble (Thomas *et al.*, 2012; Killick and Griffiths, 2022). Advertisements aim to reduce perceived risks (Deans *et al.*, 2017b; Killick and Griffiths, 2022; Lopez-Gonzalez, Guerrero-Solé and Griffiths, 2018) and create the perception that betting is an opportunity to win money that depends more on fans' knowledge than on luck (Lopez-Gonzalez, Guerrero-Solé and Griffiths, 2018).

Strategies to attract new gamblers include the use of influencers and celebrities (Nyemcsok *et al.*, 2019; Pitt *et al.*, 2024), offering welcome bonuses or bet refunds that, in some cases, conceal deceptive strategies, and targeting various vulnerable groups, such as young people (Nyemcsok *et al.*, 2021).

In their narrative review on the social consequences of gamblification, Hing, Rockloff and Browne (2023: 799) warn that:

> The current generation of young people is the first to be exposed from childhood to numerous normalising influences around sports betting, including from advertising, parents and peers. […] Young people growing up in households that follow sport are more likely than other adolescents to be negatively influenced by the gamblification and normalisation of sports betting.

The general assumption is that gambling is a harmful practice. In this context, insufficient regulation of gambling advertising increases exposure to marketing campaigns that, according to the literature, increase the risk of gambling addiction among vulnerable groups (Browne *et al.*, 2019; Lopez-Gonzalez *et al.*, 2024). Consequently, several authors argue that this type of marketing contributes to the rise in gambling addiction (Deans *et al.*, 2017b; Di Censo *et al.*, 2024; Lopez-Gonzalez *et al.*, 2025).

In response, one of the main policy strategies to curb gamblification of sport has been to restrict gambling advertising — both targeted (e-mail, websites, influencers) and non-targeted (shirt sponsorships, media programming) — to protect vulnerable populations (Constandt *et al.*, 2022; Ipsos and University of Bristol, 2024; Sama and Hiilamo, 2024). However, operators have often circumvented these regulations, reducing the effectiveness of measures designed to limit predatory marketing (Jacobs *et al.*, 2025; Perelló-Oliver, Muela-Molina and Romero-Rodríguez 2020). Although unlicensed operators are banned from promoting their services, enforcement remains weak due to legal loopholes, particularly the inability to control broadcasts of foreign sporting events (Sama and Hiilamo, 2024).

A further obstacle is the lack of international harmonisation in licensing processes. Combined with tax and advertising restrictions that favour state monopolies, this has prevented several online operators licensed in one jurisdiction from expanding into others. As a result, governments struggle to control grey and dark markets, increasing access to gambling, especially among young people, and heightening addiction risks (Montiel *et al.*, 2021; Dittman *et al.*, 2025).

Normalisation or legitimisation?

Another question that needs to be tested with more and with better empirical studies is whether sport betting is truly becoming normalised or if it is going through a process of legitimisation. According to Michel Foucault (1993 [1975]), normalisation implies that practices, discourses, or behaviours initially perceived as exceptional, problematic, or marginal become socially institutionalised and accepted. In other words, the practice ceases to be questioned on a massive scale. On the other hand, legitimisation involves an institutional process that justifies a practice, but without preventing it from being questioned. What the literature shows is that there are many detractors and opponents of the gamblification of sport and, particularly, of sport betting.

The extent to which gambling is becoming normalised remains empirically unclear, and more research is needed to measure its true impact on gambling addiction. Despite the extensive literature, estimates of gambling prevalence and problematic gambling at a global level continue to show significant variations between countries and social groups (Tran *et al.*, 2024; Etuk *et al.*, 2022; Winters and Derevensky, 2019).

Challenges to sports integrity

The gamblification ecosystem increases the threats to sport integrity in its multiple dimensions: individual integrity (of all actors that make up the sports ecosystem), competition integrity (the way competitions are organised), and institutional integrity (how the sports industry, the betting industry, and the relationship between the two are governed) (McNamee and Moriconi, 2025). At all levels, new risks and incentives for breaches of integrity are emerging, particularly in relation to betting-related match-fixing, considered one of the biggest threats to sport. While match-fixing has been a long-standing practice (Huggins, 2018), the new betting market has radically changed its nature. In the past, it largely meant losing a match; today, it is possible to manipulate only a small incident during a game (a yellow card, in football, or a game in tennis) to win a bet and defraud the betting market.

Individual integrity

At the individual level, the betting market creates opportunities to make money illegally. Athletes are aware that people are betting on their work and that their performance, whether positive or negative, and can determine huge profits (Tak,

2018). The literature warns of the interest of professional betting groups or organised criminals in infiltrating the world of sport to bribe athletes and defraud the betting market (Moriconi, 2024).

The normalisation of betting among sports actors (Constandt *et al.*, 2022; Vinberg, Durbeej and Rosendahl, 2020; Vinberg, Wetterborg and Enebrink, 2021) increases risks. Betting is a historically widespread cultural practice in changing rooms. Despite codes of conduct and restrictions imposed, some players bet on their competitions and even on their own matches (Moriconi and de Cima 2020, Vinberg, Durbeej and Rosendahl, 2020).

On the other hand, literature has also shown that athletes (Derevensky *et al.*, 2019; Turk *et al.*, 2023), coaches, and even sports managers (Vinberg, Wetterborg and Enebrink, 2021) are among the social groups most prone to developing addictions or pathological gambling. This situation may increase vulnerability to accepting fixing proposals (O'Shea *et al.*, 2021).

Competition integrity

More sports and championships are becoming the target of betting worldwide, including competitions with high levels of precariousness. Vulnerability or precariousness is the main driver of engagement in manipulation (de Cima, 2025; Van der Hoeven *et al.*, 2023).

On the other hand, the way competitions are structured is also a crucial area that can encourage manipulation. The number of dead rubber or meaningless matches (Hill *et al.*, 2020) has been identified as a point of vulnerability. Competitions in which there are significant differences in budget or technology between participants also increase the risk of manipulation (McNamee and Moriconi, 2025). Competitions in which the worst teams are favoured the following year with better draft picks can encourage tanking. These situations have prompted the need to restructure competitions. For example, to maintain competitiveness and interest throughout the year, the NBA included an alternative competition in the middle of the regular season and extended the number of teams reaching the postseason from 8 to 10. In this sense, gamblification also encourages reforms that can improve tournaments as a "product" by generating more competitive and entertaining championships. It can also generate incentives to impose salary controls, financial fair play, and promote regulations to combat the precariousness of competition. In tennis, one of the sports with the most problems of manipulation, and where levels of precariousness are high, the ATP launched the Baseline Programme that guarantees minimum earnings for Top 250 players (ATP, 2024).

Institutional integrity

Institutional integrity refers to the quality of governance in the sports world and the betting market (McNamee and Moriconi, 2025). The gamblification of sports and the associated financial interests generate various potential conflicts of interest. For example, a league or the betting companies might not be interested in

acknowledging high levels of match-fixing if they existed. On the one hand, the league in question would not want to lose its place in the betting market. On the other hand, the betting market would not want to lose customers.

Threats to integrity have led to various changes at the political, criminal, and institutional levels. Match-fixing has been criminalised in some countries, integrity departments have been created within sports organisations, and new bodies for co-operation and joint action have emerged, bringing together politicians, the sports world, betting regulators, and law enforcement agencies (McNamee and Moriconi, 2026). In this regard, it has been argued that the new regulatory and institutional frameworks promote a biased approach to combating manipulation, prioritising betting-related manipulations and neglecting historical manipulations related to sporting objectives and organisational failures (Constandt and Manoli, 2022; McNamee and Moriconi, 2025) that create incentives for criminal groups to infiltrate sports. Therefore, more studies are needed to discuss whether we are facing a fight for betting integrity, sport integrity, or both (McNamee and Moriconi, 2026).

At the same time, the threats to sporting integrity generated by the gamblification of sport have created a lucrative "integrity industry" (Gardiner, Parry and Robinson, 2017), involving public and private actors, often without being audited or held accountable. Among the industry's members are sports analytics companies that can simultaneously monitor competitions, sell data to betting companies, and sell integrity services to the sports world. Several journalistic investigations have highlighted the conflicts of interest this creates (see, for instance, Kerr *et al.*, 2023; Auclair, 2025).

In this regard, studies are needed to delve deeper into the analysis of the sports integrity industry ecosystem, evaluating the true institutional commitment of all actors to seriously combat the manipulation of competitions and protect the interests of both the betting market and the world of sport. At the same time, sports organisations must discuss which types of betting are beneficial and which pose too many risks to sport integrity, sustainability, and social reputation. Currently, this is not happening (McNamee and Moriconi, 2026), nor are there any indications that it will.

The funding and promotion of sports

Sports and politics have publicly acknowledged that the money flowing from the betting market to sport and public finances constitutes one of the main reasons for supporting and promoting the gamblification of sport. Sports betting plays an increasingly important role in sport, not only in terms of financial benefits, but also in the institutional support and promotion of less popular disciplines. However, the close relationship between the sports sector and the gambling industry also raises concerns.

The gambling industry invests in sports environments in exchange for visibility in a market where its target audience (sports consumers) is concentrated. Currently, betting companies are one of the main sponsors of sport. A report by Grand View Research estimated the value of the global betting market at 100,910.9

million dollars in 2024, projecting a gradual increase to 187,392.2 million dollars by 2030 (Grand View Research, 2025).

This partnership also generates financial benefits for sport. Sport directly benefits fromrevenues generated frombetting activities, such as sponsorships of federations, leagues, or clubs (*e.g.*, logos in sports shirts; naming rights for competitions or stadiums), and other commercial agreements (*e.g.*, sale of data and statistics; content licensing; organisation of sports events; partnership commissions) (Hing, Rockloff and Browne, 2023). Betting sponsorships have had significant weight in the finances of football. This is the sport that generates the largest flow in the betting market. This type of revenue has been determinant for sports organisations to maintain and expand their operations in a sector particularly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic crisis (Sharman, 2020).

Clubs and sports organisations can also derive indirect benefits frombetting, such as greater revenues fromticket sales and/or broadcasting rights, considering the potential of betting to stimulate interest in the consumption of sports (Humphreys, Paul and Weinbach, 2013;), namely in matches between teams to which fans have no emotional attachment.

Furthermore, in some countries, gambling tax represents a significant part of the funding for public policies in key areas, such as health, education, and specifically sport. Depending on each country's legislation, national federations may receive significant revenue fromthe state's gambling tax collection (Hing, Rockloff and Browne, 2023). In Portugal, for example, in 2023, sports federations received € 67 million from the betting market, almost double the public money distributed by the Portuguese Institute of Sport and Youth (€ 35 million) (Lusa, 2024). Despite this example, there is no systematic data on the flow of money from betting to each sports federation at a global level, and in many countries, data opacity is rife. Nor are there any concrete studies on whether a comparable flow of funding could come, or be replaced, from other types of sponsors.

On the other hand, there are doubts about who is the effective beneficiary of this money. In tennis, for example, questions have been raised about why the large sums of money that have increased the coffers of the sport's governing bodies have not served (or been used) to end the precarious situation of most players (Bantekas, 2024). This situation happens in a context where tennis has become one of the sports with the highest volume of betting, one of the most sanctioned and with more match-fixing scandals, and where tennis players have denounced massive online abuse by gamblers disappointed with the results.

Betting revenue can be used for fund awareness programmes for athletes (*e.g.*, the dangers associated with sports betting, such as problemgam bling, match-fixing, and online abuse) (NFL, 2025), invest in grassroots sports, infrastructure and salaries (Humphreys, Paul and Weinbach, 2013), or promote physical activities and healthy lifestyles. At this level, many less popular sports modalities can benefit fromthe revenues fromsports betting taxes and be able to promote themselves better, gain visibility, audiences, and even fans. For instance, in Portugal, the Federation of Winter Sports, a federation that only have 1000 licensed athletes (Lusa, 2025), received 1.1 million euros from the betting market in 2023 (Lusa,

2024). However, beyond assumptions, there is a lack of studies assessing, in comparative way, what federations do with the money they receive and measuring positive and negative financial aspects of the gamblification of sport.

Dangers to reputation

Notwithstanding the benefits derived, the closer relationship between the gambling and the sports industries also entails social risks (Forrest, McHale and McAuley, 2008). In this regard, some authors (Lis-Clarke and Walsh, 2024; Hing, Rockloff and Browne, 2023) and civil organisations (see Ipsos and University of Bristol, 2024; WHO, 2024) have argued that sports entities (sports clubs, leagues, federations) should avoid establishing partnerships with sports betting companies due to the social risks that gambling entails. This argument is based on the premise that the use of sport as a platform for advertising and promoting sports betting contributes to an increase in the prevalence of problem gambling. In addition, the very reputation of sports organisations can be negatively affected. From the perspective of these authors, sport not only acts as a vehicle for promoting problem gambling, but also becomes a beneficiary of this, in the sense that a significant amount of the money that enters the sports system through betting comes from problem gamblers (Lis-Clarke and Walsh, 2024). There is no question that pathological gambling is a serious problem, and that the enormous flow of gambling advertising, namely the advertising messages that misleadingly persuade potential consumers, should be controlled. Nevertheless, high variance in rates across international studies that measure the proportion of revenue from problem gambling (explained by different methodological criteria) make it difficult to draw definitive conclusions on this matter (see GREO, 2019). While it is true that, due to the growth of the market and the number of gamblers, there may be more cases of addiction and pathology, there is still no conclusive evidence to confirm that the addicts have increased proportionally in relation to the number of existing gamblers.

Changes in the engagement in and consumption of sports

Another debate present in the literature concerns the influence of betting on sports consumption. According to Lis-Clarke and Walsh (2024: 210), both coming from the field of philosophy, sports betting "is of considerable moral concern insofar as it undermines the ideals of sport by transforming the manner and modes in which spectators engage with and value sports". For the authors, sport betting reconfigures the logic of sports consumption, transforming it into a means to achieve something (money) rather than an end. The authors sustain this argument in three theoretical possibilities.

Changes in fans' consumption experiences

According to Lis-Clarke and Walsh (2024), sports betting can generate distraction due to the events available for (live) betting and their respective odds and/or selective attention to those events in which a gambler places bets, particularly side bets.

Although this may happen, the way people consume sport is not static over time. Sports consumers are exposed to the reconfiguration of a set of internal and external factors that, in an interconnected and complex way, shape their preferences (see Wang, Zhou and Fan, 2024).

On the other hand, many fans consume sports selectively, regardless of betting, focusing on the performance of their idols or celebrities. For example, a fan might be paying close attention to their favourite Formula 1 driver without focusing too much on the overall race. The same applies to the performance of celebrities like Messi or Cristiano Ronaldo in football. In fact, this selective attention exists in sports broadcasts, where certain athletes are constantly followed by a special camera. Also, in the era of big data, sports broadcasts constantly offer comparisons of certain players' statistics. Ultimately, one might question whether the "pure" form of consuming sport (without distractions and without selective attention) to which the authors refer is realistic or whether it is an idealised view. More empirical research is needed.

New technologies offer ways to consume sport in a fragmented manner (fast-forwarding, rewinding, etc.) or simply by watching highlights. These forms of consumption are common among new generations, who might not consume entire matches (Varela and Scher, 2017). Facing these trends, sports betting may act as an incentive for people to watch sporting events from start to finish. More empirical research is needed to prove this assumption.

Another concern raised by Lis-Clarke and Walsh (2024) is that sports betting can also shift the focus of sports consumers towards results (betting profits) rather than performance (*e.g.*, athletes' skills, tactics). Once again, empirical research is needed to evaluate this premise and determine whether gambling alone is the vehicle that leads to this choice. In fact, a simple analysis of fandom behaviour could indicate that result-oriented preferences are largely the norm, and not the exception. Even without placing bets, many fans want their teams to win no matter what, even if they don't deserve it.

Betting as a driver of immoral preferences

Lis-Clarke and Walsh (2024) also argue that sports betting can motivate immoral preferences such as celebrating a tragic event — for example, an athlete's injury — that could make it easier to win a bet. However, even though such immoral preferences may be fuelled by sports betting, they are not entirely its responsibility. The fanaticism of various supporters leads to behaviour of this kind and violent rivalries that have no connection with sports betting. Consider, for instance, what happened in the NFL: some Cleveland Browns' fans celebrated the gruesome injury of their own team's quarterback, Deshaun Watson, because, given his high salary, they were allegedly dissatisfied with Watson's performance and the sexual harassment allegations against him.[2]

2 Dennis (2024), "The response to Cleveland Browns quarterback Deshaun Watson's injury is a reminder of who enabled him", *Andscape*: https://andscape.com/features/deshaun-watson-injury-a-reminder-of-who-enabled-him/.

Beyond these issues, there are indeed sports in which, due to betting, fan violence on social media has increased. Several tennis players, for example, have received insults and even threats (including death threats) from bettors dissatisfied with the results (see Grez, 2021). The high levels of violent content on social media led tennis governing bodies to launch a proactive monitoring service to combat online abuse (ITF, 2023). However, considering that the increase in violence on social media has been a widespread issue in other areas (see Bekiari and Pachi, 2017), and that there have even been cases in sport unrelated to betting,[3] what is lacking is empirical research to verify the reasons for this increase in violence and measure different drivers, including frustration at losing sports bets.

Impact on sports consumption

Finally, Lis-Clarke and Walsh (2024) argue that sports betting may discourage sports consumers from watching sporting events on which they do not place bets. According to McGee (2018), "a new generation of sports fans view gambling as vital to their enjoyment of sport". However, the authors do not refer to the complex current ecosystem, which suggests that audiences and the practice of sports are declining. A Nielsen Fan Insights study (2019) revealed that people between the ages of 16 and 24 prefer shorter, easy-to-consume or small-dose content and, as a result, as mentioned earlier in this article, are less interested in consuming entire matches. On the other hand, studies reveal that the number of people who identify as sports fans is decreasing among new generations (Silverman, 2020). Moreover, American leagues, including the NFL and MLB, have warned that if they do not find ways to encourage young people to consume their competitions, the sustainability of the leagues will be in jeopardy (Drape and Belson, 2022).

In this sense, some authors have claimed that sports betting can make sporting events more exciting for spectators (Dwyer, Shapiro and Drayer, 2024; Xu *et al.*, 2021). This increased excitement can lead to greater audience engagement with sport. A study by PwC (2019) concluded that 75% of consumers surveyed were more likely to watch an NFL game if they had bet on it. In consequence, sport betting could be generating audiences and supporters that the sport itself was unable to create and retain. To date, the few studies conducted in areas such as marketing have yielded conflicting conclusions. For example, while some studies (Dwyer, Shapiro and Drayer, 2024; PwC, 2019) consider that bettors are more likely to watch events if they bet on them, other authors claim the opposite (King, 2020; Blank, Loveland and Houghton, 2021). More empirical research is needed to determine whether betting promotes sports to larger and more engaged audiences.

3 Consider, for instance, the cases of fans of Formula 1 drivers Franco Colapinto and Lewis Hamilton. In both cases, following accidents that injured each of these drivers, their fans attacked and insulted drivers Yuki Tsunoda (see Whitfield, 2025) and Nicholas Latifi (White, 2021), even making death threats.

Discussion and research gaps

The paper highlights empirical limitations in current studies on gamblification of sport and demonstrates the need to deepen research. Although the phenomenon poses risks for sport's reputation, it might also generate funding for both sporting development and public finances, and might stimulate new forms of consumption among social groups that are losing interest in both practising and watching sport.

To date, the limited number of studies on the subject have mainly focused on identifying social threats, often starting from negative assumptions about the proliferation of betting. In some cases, critiques rest on premises that available data cannot conclusively confirm. Hing, Rockloff and Browne (2023: 803), for instance, argue that sports organisations obtain revenues "from wagering operators that are, in large part, derived from harmful gambling by sports fans". That revenues come from bettors is not disputable; however, claiming that these revenues come from harmful gambling might be an excessive statement. Indeed, Farias and Coelho Antunes (2024), in their study about online gambling activities among young Portuguese people, have shown that the vast majority gamble responsibly. Beyond the empirical evidence, it is no secret that the profit of the betting market comes from the losses of the bettors. This opens another possible window of research into the ethics of the current betting market and the responsibility of sport in promoting this type of activity.

Considering the various shortcomings in gambling advertising regulations, current literature warns about potential social problems. The greater accessibility and diversification of both legal and illegal gambling have increased betting consumption, the number of bettors, as well as problem gambling and its societal consequences (Torrance *et al.*, 2023). Specifically, Killick and Griffiths (2021) identified a positive relationship between marketing and attitudes, intentions, and behaviours related to sports betting, with this relationship being stronger among high-risk problem gamblers. However, this conclusion does not support a causal link between the intensification of sports betting marketing strategies and the emergence of problem gambling behaviours in the population in relative terms (Lopez-Gonzalez and Griffiths, 2018a). In most cases, empirical data are preliminary. Nelson *et al.* (2023), for example, report that while 23% of studies identify a positive relationship between being an athlete and experiencing gambling problems, 69% find no significant relationship. This underlines the need for more robust empirical research — longitudinal, comparative, and qualitative — that can provide a deeper understanding of the social and cultural dynamics of sports betting.

Naturally, as the number of bettors grows, the number of problem gamblers is also likely to increase. In this sense, further studies are needed to understand the extent to which the normalisation of sports betting has led to a relative increase in at-risk or pathological gamblers. More data is also needed to assess the impact of public policies and local restrictions on individuals' gambling behaviour (Deans *et al.*, 2017a). Considering that the market is global, even if advertising is banned at the national level, it is unlikely that people will be able to avoid indirect exposure by watching competitions held in other places where such restrictions do not exist.

Similarly, the impact of restrictions on sports betting advertising for sports clubs is also questionable. First, it must be empirically confirmed that this revenue can be replaced by other revenue of equivalent financial impact. Secondly, the divergence of national policies might place sports clubs in countries that adopt such restrictions at a disadvantage compared to those that do not. To date, all these premises also lack conclusive empirical confirmation.

The sports sector must therefore acknowledge its responsibility and establish prevention, awareness, and support programs. Criminalising sports betting may prove ineffective, as prohibition does not eliminate the practice but instead might drive it into illegal markets, weakening both regulation and tax collection. This is, at least, one of the most popular justifications used by the gambling lobby to defend itself against social groups that oppose betting legalisation and expansion. It is also important to note that, beyond the usefulness of this premise, the potential flight of gamblers to the illegal market if gambling were banned is a claim that has not been validated by data. In other words, it is also an assumption without empirical verification.

Beyond this, the predatory nature of the contemporary legal gambling industry (McNamee and Moriconi, 2026) calls for stricter control over aggressive marketing strategies and misleading commercial practices, where excessive advertising and a lack of transparency among operators have been widely criticised.

While governments and the sports industry may have arguments in favour of betting, they must not become instruments of market greed or legitimising forces for consumer deception. Particular attention must be paid to vulnerable groups — youth, individuals with a history of addiction, and low-income sectors — while continuously monitoring the transparency and regulatory compliance of betting operators.

On the other hand, the gamblification of sport has also reconfigured old practices such as match-fixing. For the moment, most of the literature analysed the phenomenon of how competitions are played (individually) and governed (structurally). Social scientists have focused on the contexts, pressures, and incentives that increase the vulnerability of sports actors to match-fixing practices, as well as on the opportunity structures created by the sports betting model or the inadequacy and incapacity of the regulatory system to meet its demands. On the contrary, only investigative journalism has sought to expose the "dark side" of the betting market and the conflicts of interest that arise within the lucrative "integrity industry" (Kerr *et al.*, 2023).

At the same time, the literature on sports integrity has not yet delved into the incentives and needs that gamblification generates for sports organisations to finally resolve internal governance failures (including high levels of corruption, precarious competitions, abuse of power, etc.) and improve the quality, competitiveness, and fairness of (some) sports and tournaments (target of betting).

Regarding sports funding, it is necessary to promote studies to understand who the actual beneficiaries of revenues from the sports betting market are and to assess how and for what purposes this money is used. Considering that the financial argument has been the most repeated by politicians and sports entities in

defending the marriage between sport and betting, transparency regarding the dynamics and use of these financial flows is essential. Does the financial benefit outweigh the social risks or the loss of sport's reputation as a promoter of healthy lifestyles? Is it possible to generate the same revenue through partnerships with other activities or markets? Are there sports federations whose finances have substantially improved due to the influx of money from the betting market? Why do high levels of precarity still exist in some sports and/or tournaments that are the target of betting? Given that sports federations aim to promote and develop their sports, have better conditions been achieved for athletes, has the number of athletes and practitioners increased, and has the number of people engaging in physical activity also risen? Ultimately, and in practical terms, what has sport gained besides more money (and the perception that it is "doing something")?

The transformation of sport consumption and practice among younger generations — already considered a threat to the sustainability of major leagues — cannot be overlooked. While gamblification may, as Lis-Clarke and Walsh (2024: 210) warn, "undermine the social conditions required to express appropriate modes of valuation towards sport", it is also true that sport already faces structural challenges: declining participation in physical activity, competition from eSports, and fragmented, instrumental patterns of sport consumption among youth. It is therefore crucial to investigate whether betting is acting as a vehicle to re-engage certain audiences, how those audiences would respond in the absence of betting, and how sports management can revalorise sport beyond extrinsic incentives.

More studies are needed on the relationship between betting and sports consumption. Lis-Clarke and Walsh narrow their analysis to the negative elements of this connection, but the arguments put forward by these authors reflect "conceptual possibilities rather than empirical realities" (2024: 216). In this sense, it is important to identify, for example, what levels of audience are generated by online betting sites that broadcast live sporting events. If bettors did not watch events on these platforms, would they watch them elsewhere or not at all? How many young people who cannot afford the high prices of sports broadcasting channels create accounts on betting sites (to bet responsibly or not bet) simply to gain access to "free" sports broadcasts?

Finally, gamblification must be understood within the broader process of the hyper-commodification of professional sport, a trend largely driven by the sporting field itself, where even athletes have come to adopt instrumental views of sport to achieve money and fame (Walsh and Giulianotti, 2006). In this context, Michael Sandel's (2012) warning is particularly relevant: extending market logic to social domains that should be governed by other values entails significant ethical and cultural risks. Only with a global and holistic understanding of the phenomenon will it be possible to design public policies that balance fiscal revenues with consumer protection and contribute to preserving the social and cultural legitimacy of sport.

Only with a global and holistic understanding of the phenomenon, and avoiding biases for or against betting, will it be possible to design public policies that balance the interests of stakeholders, enhance the positive aspects of the new

ecosystem, reduce or avoid the negative ones, protect all consumers, and contribute to preserving the social and cultural legitimacy of sport.

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Marcelo Moriconi (corresponding author). Researcher and professor at Iscte — University Institute of Lisbon and researcher at Centre of International Studies (CEI-Iscte), Lisbon, Portugal.
E-mail: marcelo.moriconi@iscte.pt
ORCID: 0000-0002-9220-7062
Contributions to the paper: Funding acquisition, investigation, original writing, review and editing.

César de Cima. Researcher at Centre of International Studies (CEI-Iscte), Iscte — Lisbon University Institute of, Lisbon, Porugal.
E-mail: cesardecima@outlook.pt
ORCID: 0000-0003-0960-4874
Contributions to the paper: Funding acquisition, investigation, original writing, review and editing.

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