

Title

**ASSESSING THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC EFFECTS OF GAMBLING ON
YOUTH IN MTANDILE COMMUNITY, LILONGWE**

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ABSTRACT

This study assessed the socio-economic effects of gambling on youth in Mtandile, a densely populated low-income township in Lilongwe, Malawi. Employing a sequential mixed-methods design, data were collected from 50 participants 30 via structured questionnaires and 20 through key-informant interviews. Findings revealed that 76% of Mtandile youth engage in gambling, predominantly through sports betting (63%) and online platforms such as Aviator (39%). Socially, gambling was associated with family conflict (67%), mental health deterioration (73%), and peer-pressure-driven participation (74%). Economically, 56% of participants accumulated debt and 70% reported sacrificing essentials such as school fees and food. The Malawi Gaming and Lotteries Authority (MAGLA) was known to only 60% of respondents, and age-restriction enforcement was perceived as weak by half of all participants. The study recommends enhanced regulatory enforcement, school-based awareness campaigns, spending caps for youth, and accessible vocational training as economic alternatives to gambling.

KEYWORDS: gambling, youth, socio-economic effects, Malawi, MAGLA, sports betting, Mtandile

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Gambling has emerged as a significant social and economic issue globally, with profound implications for youth populations (*Delfabbro & King, 2020*). In Malawi, the proliferation of gambling activities sports betting, casino gaming, and informal gambling has drawn increasing numbers of young people, particularly in urban areas like Mtandile, Lilongwe. This trend is driven by factors such as high youth unemployment, widespread poverty, and the accessibility of online betting platforms including Premier Bet, Betway, BetPawa, World Star Betting, and Betika (*Bunn et al., 2020; Bitzer et al., 2021*).

The Malawi Gaming and Lotteries Authority (MAGLA), established under the Malawi Gaming and Lotteries Act, regulates gambling and lottery activities in Malawi (*MAGLA, 2022*). Despite generating approximately MWK 1 billion monthly, MAGLA faces challenges including illegal gambling, underage participation, and addiction, which disproportionately affect vulnerable youth (*Chikoko, 2023*). The National Statistical Office of Malawi reported national unemployment at approximately 5.04% in 2023, masking significant underemployment among youth, many of whom turn to gambling as a perceived financial solution (*NSO, 2023; Bunn et al., 2020*).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The increasing prevalence of gambling among youth in Mtandile has raised serious concerns about its social and economic consequences, yet there is a lack of research examining these

impacts in the Malawian context (*Bunn et al., 2020*). Young people, driven by economic hardship and the desire for quick financial gains, engage in gambling often unaware of associated risks including addiction, significant financial losses, mental health challenges, and social problems such as crime and family breakdowns (*Wardle et al., 2019*). This study addresses this knowledge gap by investigating the social and economic effects of gambling on youth in Mtandile.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this study was to assess the social and economic effects of gambling on youth in the Mtandile community, Lilongwe. Specific objectives were: (1) to assess the social effects of gambling on youth behaviour, relationships, and community dynamics; (2) to evaluate the economic impact of gambling on youth livelihoods, including income, savings, and debt; (3) to assess the role of MAGLA in promoting responsible gambling among youth; and (4) to identify potential interventions to mitigate the negative consequences of youth gambling.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter reviews existing literature on the social and economic effects of gambling, particularly among young people, drawing on global, African, and Malawian perspectives. It examines theoretical frameworks including Social Learning Theory (*Bandura,*

1977) and the Behavioural Intention Model (*Ajzen, 1991*) to explain youth gambling behaviour, and reviews the regulatory role of MAGLA.

Social Effects of Gambling on Youth

Gambling Addiction and Behavioural Consequences

Research by *Derevensky and Gupta (2004)* reveals that excessive gambling among youth significantly increases the risk of developing a gambling addiction, characterised by an inability to control gambling behaviour despite negative consequences. This compulsive behaviour leads to academic underperformance, social isolation, and psychological distress (*Hardoon et al., 2004*). Studies consistently demonstrate a strong correlation between compulsive gambling and anxiety, depression, and, in severe cases, suicidal ideation (*WHO, 2021*).

Family Conflict and Peer Influence

Financial strain from gambling losses often exacerbates family conflicts, as young individuals may resort to hiding activities, borrowing money, or stealing to sustain their addiction (*Wardle et al., 2019*). *Dickson et al. (2008)* found that peer influence is a significant driver of youth gambling, with friends normalising betting and amplifying perceived profitability. In economically deprived areas like Mtandile, these dynamics are intensified by inadequate regulatory oversight (*Masiye & Kaonga, 2020*).

Economic Impact of Gambling

Financial Losses and Household Disruption

The *National Bureau of Economic Research (2020)* documents the impact of problem gambling on low-income households, noting that youth frequently spend earnings or school fees on gambling, deepening poverty (Calado & Griffiths, 2016; Reith, 2006). Delfabbro et al. (2016) highlight that gambling disrupts household economies through depleted savings, debt accumulation, and diverted resources from critical expenses. Impaired academic performance further reduces long-term earning potential, creating cycles of dependency (Splevins et al., 2010).

Lost Productivity and Employment

Williams et al. (2011) note that addicted gamblers may drop out of school or lose employment, making stable work increasingly difficult. The rise of online betting in Malawi, facilitated by improved internet access, intensifies these economic harms. While MAGLA reports significant national revenue from gambling, individual youth rarely benefit and frequently face economic harm (Brenda Kayo, *Times 360 Malawi*).

MAGLA's Role in Promoting Responsible Gambling

MAGLA promotes responsible gambling through public awareness campaigns, support services including a toll-free helpline (4252), and regulatory enforcement. MAGLA Director General Rachel Mijiga has emphasised that gambling should be viewed as entertainment rather than

income (Zodiak Online, 2024). However, advocacy groups such as Gamble Watch Malawi have criticised the lack of effective enforcement, noting that betting companies operate without adequate restrictions and deliberately target young people in marketing campaigns (Gamble Watch Malawi, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the Social Learning Perspective (Bandura, 1977), which posits that youth learn gambling behaviours through observation and reinforcement within social environments, and the Behavioural Intention Model (Ajzen, 1991), which highlights the role of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control in shaping gambling intentions. Together, these frameworks explain why youth in Mtandile perceive gambling as a socially acceptable and financially viable activity despite associated risks.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative data were collected and analysed first to quantify gambling prevalence and impacts, followed by qualitative data to contextualise and explain findings. This design is appropriate for addressing the study's objectives and is consistent with approaches recommended in the

gambling literature (*Dickson et al., 2008; Masiye & Kaonga, 2020*).

Research Setting and Population

The study was conducted in Mtandile, an urban low-income community in Lilongwe characterised by high poverty, limited recreational facilities, and widespread access to gambling venues (*NSO, 2022*). The target population comprised youth aged 10–35 years, as defined by *Malawi's National Youth Policy (2013)*, as well as key informants including parents, community leaders, and MAGLA representatives.

Sampling

Stratified random sampling was used to select 30 youth for questionnaire administration, divided across three age groups: 10–17, 18–25, and 26–35 years. Purposive sampling was used to select 20 key informants, comprising 10 youth with gambling experience, 5 parents or guardians, 3 community leaders, and 2 MAGLA representatives (*Patton, 2015*). A pilot study was conducted with 20 additional youth and 5 key informants to test instrument reliability (target Cronbach's alpha ≥ 0.70) and cultural appropriateness (*Pallant, 2020*).

Data Collection and Analysis

A structured questionnaire adapted from the South Oaks Gambling Screen (*SOGS; Lesieur & Blume, 1987*) was administered face-to-face to 30 youth participants over two months. Semi-structured interviews were conducted

with 20 key informants in Chichewa or English, audio-recorded with consent, and supplemented by field notes. Secondary data were drawn from MAGLA reports, NSO publications, and social media sources.

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 26, with descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) and inferential analyses (chi-square tests, logistic regression) (*Field, 2018*). Qualitative data were analysed using *Braun and Clarke's (2006)* six-step thematic analysis, with NVivo software supporting coding. Triangulation integrated both datasets for a holistic understanding.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Response Rate and Demographics

All 50 participants completed the study, yielding a 100% response rate (30 questionnaires, 20 interviews). The majority of questionnaire respondents (84%) were aged 18–25 years; 64% were male. Most participants were unemployed (56%) or in casual employment (44%), and 70% had secondary education or below a profile consistent with Mtandile's socioeconomic context.

Gambling Participation and Types

Findings revealed that 76% of youth in Mtandile participated in gambling, ranging from daily to occasional betting. Sports betting was the most prevalent form (63%), followed by online games such as Aviator (39%),

informal betting (32%), and lotteries (26%). Most participants (74%) reported peer influence as a primary motivation, with social media amplifying perceptions of gambling profitability by sharing wins while losses went unreported.

Social Effects of Gambling

Gambling produced significant social harms among participants. Family conflicts were reported by 67% of respondents (40% describing these as frequent), while 73% experienced mental health challenges, including anxiety and depression, with 33% describing severe impacts. Academic and occupational responsibilities were neglected by 67% of respondents, and 37% reported social isolation. In 20% of cases, gambling was associated with risky behaviours including theft consistent with documented links between addiction and criminal behaviour (Wardle et al., 2019).

Economic Effects of Gambling

Economic harms were pervasive. Debt was accumulated by 56% of participants, with 23% owing over MWK 50,000. Essential expenditure including school fees and food was sacrificed by 70% of gamblers. Employment was adversely affected for 30% of respondents. Despite perceiving gambling as a route out of poverty, the vast majority reported net financial losses, confirming the economic harm documented by Calado and Griffiths (2016).

MAGLA Awareness and Regulatory Effectiveness

While 60% of participants were aware of MAGLA, knowledge was limited and typically encountered only at betting shop premises. Only 33% had participated in any MAGLA awareness campaign. Perceptions of regulatory effectiveness were mixed: just 36% viewed MAGLA positively, and half of all participants reported that shops did not consistently enforce age restrictions, allowing minors to gamble without identity verification. These findings align with concerns raised by *Gamble Watch Malawi (2024)* regarding inadequate regulatory oversight.

Proposed Interventions

Participants endorsed a range of interventions to reduce gambling harm. Awareness campaigns in schools and communities received the highest endorsement (80%), followed by stricter age verification (64%) and prohibitions on aggressive gambling advertising (60%). Entrepreneurship and vocational training programs were supported by 70% of respondents as viable economic alternatives, with open-ended responses highlighting community resource centres, financial literacy groups, and stronger local bylaws as complementary strategies.

CONCLUSION

Youth gambling in Mtandile constitutes a serious socio-economic crisis, normalised through football culture, peer networks, and mobile platform accessibility. The study documents

cascading social harms family conflict, mental health deterioration, educational disruption, and risky behaviour alongside economic harms including debt accumulation, essential expenditure sacrifice, and employment disruption. These findings confirm that gambling perpetuates, rather than alleviates, poverty among youth in low-income urban settings.

MAGLA's moderate public awareness (60%) is undermined by weak community outreach, inadequate enforcement of age restrictions, and scepticism regarding regulatory effectiveness. This study concludes that gambling is a structural community problem exacerbated by unemployment and limited economic alternatives, requiring coordinated responses from government, regulators, civil society, and communities.

Recommendations include: enhanced MAGLA visibility and mandatory community engagement; rigorous biometric age verification in physical and online betting venues; spending caps for under-25s with real-time loss alerts; integration of gambling risk education into secondary curricula; launch of accessible vocational and entrepreneurship programs targeting the 70% of youth who expressed interest; establishment of youth resource centres; and deployment of mobile mental health counselling units. Future research should include longitudinal cohort studies, comparative urban-rural analyses, independent audits of MAGLA programs, and experimental trials of digital intervention tools.

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