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“They say ‘easy money’, telling you to predict the games”: an interview study with sports bettors in Lilongwe, Malawi

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Introduction

“Soccer betting is for the poor. When the rich want to gamble they use casinos like James Bond”

Zimbabwean sport bettor (Chiweshe, 2020)

Over the course of the twenty-first century, commercialised forms of sports betting have spread rapidly across Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Early forms involved local entrepreneurs using a combination of satellite broadcasts of European football, an internet enabled computer and a series of accounts with global online sports bookmakers to act as proxies for those wishing to place bets (Akanle & Fageyinbo, 2016; Vokes, 2010). Since then, a staggering array of mobile internet-mediated sports bookmakers (Reith, Wardle & Gilmour, 2019), that tap into the aspirations of the poor and, have a close association with popular European football leagues, have established themselves across the African continent, bringing sophisticated marketing models, widespread coverage and promises of enrichment (Bunn, Mtema, Songo, & Udedi, 2020). African scholars, as well as those in the Global North, have expressed concern at these developments and called for public health approaches that seek to prevent gambling related harms (Bitanirwe & Ssewanyana, 2021; Wardle, Reith, Langham, & Rogers, 2019).

Across SSA, as in the Global North, participation in new forms of commodified sports betting tends to be gendered, with men substantially more likely to participate than women (Chiweshe, 2020; Connolly et al., 2017). In SSA, a burgeoning literature is documenting the connection between the large communities of fans of European football and the growth in sports betting (Adebisi, Alabi, Arisukwu, & Asamu, 2021; Akanle & Fageyinbo, 2015; Akanle & Fageyinbo, 2016; Bunn et al., 2020; Chiweshe, 2020; Glozah, Tolchard, & Pevalin, 2019; Nabifo, Izudi, & Bajunirwe, 2021; Olaore, Adejare, & Udofia, 2020; Owonikoko, 2020; Schmidt, 2019). This body of scholarship also emphasises the interconnections of sports betting with youth unemployment (Olaore et al., 2020), alcohol consumption (Nabifo et al., 2021) and social interaction and belonging (Adebisi et al., 2021).

The focus of this chapter is on Malawi, which first issued a licence to a commercial sports betting firm in 2015 (MGB, 2017). This firm was Premier Bet, which was launched by Editec, a European company with offices currently in the UK, France, Romania, Malta and Sweden. As seen in Figure 1, the Malawi Gaming Board (MGB, 2017; MGB, 2019), Gross Gambling Revenue (GGR) from commercialised sports betting grew rapidly after its introduction.¹ In previous work, using newspaper articles and photographic evidence, we described a range of strategies through which Premier Bet, whose revenues account for ~99% of the GGR reported in Figure 1, sought to build a market for their products in Malawi (Bunn et al., 2020). Our paper identified seven strategies through which this company established their market: adopting a mobile network franchise model; using media coverage; purchasing high-visibility advertising; sponsoring locally; building association with (European) football;

¹ Sadly, no annual reports have been published beyond the financial year of 2017-18.

appealing to aspects of hegemonic masculinity; and constructing narratives of individual and collective benefit.

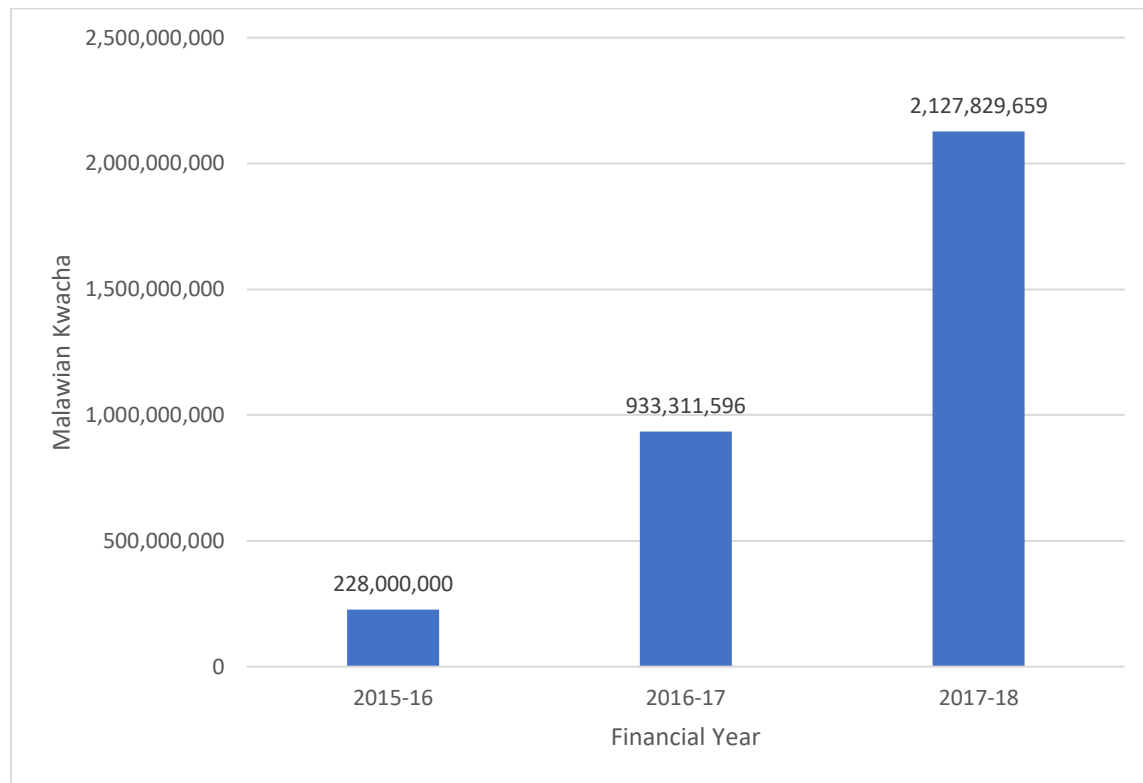


Figure 1 - Gross Gambling Revenue from Sports Betting in Malawi 2015-2018. Data source: Malawi Gaming Board

In this chapter, we build on our previous work, which focussed on structural features of the emerging sports betting field in Malawi by exploring it from the point of view of a sample of young men (18-35) living in Lilongwe who bet at least weekly. Our aim in doing so is to better understand the sports betting practices of these men, as well as their effects in their lives and on the lives of their families and communities. Our approach is informed by Reith and Dobbie's (2013) concept of 'gambling careers'. This concept positions participation in gambling as fluid and malleable, with bettors' gambling practices changing in response to myriad social and psychological factors.

Methods

Our study recruited 10 men between the ages of 18 and 35 who self-reported betting on sports at least once a week and agreed to participate in a semi-structured interview. Recruitment took place in a peri-urban community in which the researchers routinely work and in which strong established relationships exist with local authorities. Researchers approached participants through these community channels, by asking block leaders and village heads to identify young men that fitted the inclusion criteria and then seeking their consent for to be contacted about the research. Upon receiving consent to contact these potential participants, researchers arranged to discuss the study, using a structured

information sheet written in Chichewa. Where potential participants remained interested, the researcher conducted an informed consent procedure.

Interviews were conducted in Chichewa, following a topic guide designed to explore: how the participant became interested in gambling; their gambling practices; their motivations for gambling; and how family and friends react to their gambling. The interviews were audio recorded, translated, and transcribed into English. Analysis followed an inductive thematic approach and was conducted using Nvivo 12 (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Cross tabs and matrices were generated in NVivo to enable systematic comparisons across the sample, aiding interpretation. The study was reviewed and approved by two ethics committees: National Committee on Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities in Malawi (ref: P.05/19/381); and College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee, University of Glasgow (ref: 400180266).

Initiations and ‘Gambling Careers’

While commercialised sports betting might be a relatively new phenomenon in Malawi, placing wagers on sports or gambling in games of chance is not. Indeed, these are established practices in Malawian communities and some of our participants gave accounts of these. For example:

- I: Did you ever bet when you were a child?
 P: Aaah, it wasn't like sports betting as such, but these local betting which are done in the community as a way of socialising as youths. [...]
 I: Do you remember the kind of betting that you used to do?
 P: The betting that we used to do in the past when I was still young was that of playing cards. This is what we used to do sometimes back. [IDI 6]

As well as gambling through card games as this interviewee describes, several others described another form of ‘community’ betting focused on the outcome of local football matches. In some instances, interviewees participated in these games, clubbing together with team mates to provide a prize for the winner of the game.

While these ‘community’ forms of betting persist, the arrival of wide-spread commercialised sports betting in 2015 changed the nature of gambling and gambling careers in these communities. One driver of this change was the mass visibility that companies purchased via television:

- P: I was motivated after watching Premier Bet show. One time they show us a certain person who won 16,000,000 kwacha [about £16,000] after betting 150, so I was inspired by that person for me to start betting frequently with hope that one day I will win... It was on TV.
 I: It just came?
 P: No, Premier Bet has a program which they show on Thursday and they do as an advert, advertising their business. [IDI 3]

Routine exposure to Premier Bet's products via their television programme, coupled with the 'inspiration' of learning that someone had turned a very modest amount of money into a life-changing sum, engendered frequent, hope-driven betting in this man. The influence that highly publicised 'big wins' had on their initial and continued engagements with sports betting was a common narrative across the sample.

The framing of routine betting in terms of 'hope', both explicitly and implicitly in relation to the pursuit of the 'big win', links to the broader socio-economic situations in which those we spoke to are situated: that of varying degrees of poverty. As one interviewee explained, his relationship with sports betting began as a reaction to the destruction of his parents' village home by a storm:

I started in 2019 and it was poverty which introduced me to this, I just sat and thought maybe I should try this at least I can find something to help my family with.
[IDI 10]

In this extract, this young man saw no other option through which to support his parents, and this drove his engagement with sports betting. This decision was taken in a context in which, as we have shown elsewhere, sports betting has been framed by employees of the leading sports betting provider in Malawi as an opportunity to earn (Bunn et al., 2020). This was a narrative which was repeated by our participants who described how vendors enticed customers, for example: 'They say "easy money", telling you to predict the games which you think they might win, and they produce list of games and you choose from the list'. [IDI2]

Yet this conceptualisation of sports betting as 'easy money' was subject to critical reflection by our interviewees. As one man put it, 'if you are lucky you become so rich but if you are not lucky you end up being poor and poorer.' [IDI 4] Another man described how he stopped gambling for a time:

It's because I wasn't winning. When I bet like today, tomorrow, the next day after tomorrow, I wasn't winning. When someone invests in something, he expects to get the desired results or it should bear fruits, but if the intended results don't come out, you become frustrated or disappointed. So as time goes, you start contemplating that I don't win when I bet, so I shouldn't take betting seriously as I am doing. During that time, when I wake up in the morning and I don't have anything to do, I used to go for betting, but as of now it's once in a while. I even stay for one or two weeks without betting. [IDI 6]

In this nuanced account, we see this young man describing how his repeated failure to win led him to eventually limit his activity and engage in extended breaks. He also explicitly links his sports betting career to boredom, noting that he does not 'have anything to do', suggesting that a lack of economic or employment opportunities played a significant role in his former routine of daily betting.

In contrast to this, some of our participants positioned their routine gambling practices in the terms of 'addiction':

- P: I think my life is misled in many things and at present I find it difficult to save money and at present I usually think of betting.
- I: Okay. So what is pulling you back to quit from betting?
- P: I think it's like I am addicted and wherever I am, I have to keep a ticket in my pocket and this moment I have it.
- I: How many times do you bet in a day?
- P: In a day, I get at least 15 tickets.
- I: Everyday?
- P: Yes, everyday [...] What happened was; I just get used to betting and I couldn't miss having a ticket in a day. When I don't have a ticket on a particular day, I have sleepless nights and it's really impossible for me to sleep until I get a ticket, two or four tickets. [IDI 3]

For this young man, gambling has, arguably, taken over his life: causing preoccupation, compulsion and sleeplessness. He estimated spending about MK5,000 per day, which is over half the weekly minimum wage in Malawi (Phiri, 2020). The frequency of his sports betting consumption is also significant: 15 tickets daily.

Experiences of frequent losses were often linked in participants' accounts to stopping betting or to the desire to stop.

- I: Have you ever wanted to stop betting?
- P: Yes, I stopped betting during a certain time.
- I: You stopped betting?
- P: Yes, I stopped betting, I stayed for some months. I was just losing money every time I bet, so I decided to stop. When my friend won, he started encouraging me to resume betting. So, I started betting energetically so that I can maybe win, but winning is just by chance. [IDI 9]

For this participant, repetitive loss led him to stop betting for 'some months' before a friend's success rejuvenated his sports betting, with the hope of winning. Such gambling career patterns were common across our data with one man describing his return to betting after a break as:

... the heart was just pressurizing and saying maybe something misfortunate just happened, but today let me go, maybe I will win. And if you win two or three times you think you are back to normal, so it's difficult to stop. [IDI 4]

Among our participants' gambling careers, withdrawals from sports betting activities are often followed by returns which are motivated by witnessing someone close to them winning or by thoughts that better fortune will befall them.

Cross-selling digital and virtual products

Across the interviews we conducted, participants offered a range of reflective accounts of the new commercialised form of sports betting. Many described how while betting on

football matches had been an initial attraction, they had found other forms of gambling within commercial outlets:

I enter Premier Bet shops and there are different types of betting systems... three or four types of betting; the spinning one, the other one we use, on a big screen where there are different colours as well, green, black and red; the other one there are dogs running around; and there are horses; while another one is purple, orange and blue in colour, so you choose which colour stands for a team that you are betting on and it spins by itself. [IDI 10]

In this account, the participant describes how Premier Bet outlets contain a range of virtual or digital products, offered alongside sports betting. These forms, as one man noted, offer instant outcomes, compared to 'a football game which you have to wait for ninety minutes to end.' [IDI 2]

These digital and virtual offerings, with their instant outcomes, were seen as an attraction by multiple participants. For example, one described how while he continues to bet on football matches, his attention has shifted to these other products:

- I: So, on this current betting, what kind of games do you bet?
 P: I like betting on spin.
 I: Spin? [...]
 P: But for me it's rare to win on football games but mostly I win when I bet on spinning. [IDI 1]

The participant here is referring to a form of digital roulette, and he sees this as his most likely source of winning. When asked to elaborate on how he came to form a preference for 'spin', the participant went onto to refer to advertising:

- P: They talk about the benefits of betting or, I can say, how to bet wisely because there is betting which is done by guessing such as spin. There are sectors like A, B, C, D, E, F, so if you just select F, it may fall into B, and this means you didn't think wisely but if you look properly you win, so they explain all these things. They explain that you need to think wisely before betting. [IDI1]

In this account, the participant presents two views of 'spinning': one as a game of 'guessing'; another as a game of skill that requires wisdom and 'looking properly'. Such instant forms of digital gambling, housed in sports bookmakers, have attracted significant concern in the global north for their propensity to become habit-forming and to enable losses to accumulate rapidly (Woodhouse, 2019).

Not all sports bettors we spoke to were attracted by these digital offerings, however. Indeed, some offered explicit criticism of them:

I like betting for live football games because what a person predicts remains the same without anybody tampering with it. While for spin games, it's a thing which is

already programmed or set and we just choose numbers or colours[...] Betting or gambling is a game of chances and they are there to make profits. The people who predict those games stand chances of winning, but the company is generally there to make profits. Most of their profits are generated from games like spin, you see. So, games like spin don't make people advance. [IDI 5]

In this extract, this man presents an understanding of algorithm-based digital and virtual products as being designed to ensure the company makes money. He contrasts this to football betting, which he sees as remaining 'untampered' with and therefore more likely to help him 'advance'.

Socialites of Sports Betting

The growth of sports betting in Malawi and the range of effects it has had in communities can be explored through what could be described, from a sociological perspective, as its various socialities i.e. the connections and relationships it establishes and intersects with. Firstly, it is grounded in passion for football and, specifically, in the widespread following of European leagues (Akanle & Fageyinbo, 2015). As many studies of sports betting and football fandom in Africa have observed, communities of fans have been built around European clubs, mediated by satellite television in viewing houses or bars (Vokes, 2010), what Akindes calls 'trans-local stadiums' (Akindes, 2011). Our participants' accounts fit this scholarship and frequently included statements such as:

'I bet for teams in Italy, Spain and England despite some of those teams disappointing, but I never leave them aside; I still bet for them because I love them.' [IDI 10]

Here, the link between supporting a team and backing them with a bet is made explicit and framed as an expression of the participant's 'love' for these teams. Yet, not all participants' connections to European teams operated in this way, with others taking a more cautious approach: 'I bet for my team in England when it is doing well but if it's not doing well, I leave it and bet for other teams which I think can help me to win money.' [IDI 2]

The powerful social connections that participants felt towards European football also formed part of interactions between friends and peers who engage in sports betting. Participants often described how:

We sometimes help each other with ideas because many people watch international football. I sometimes ask my friends how they think a certain game can end, so they give their views. After those discussions we come up with a conclusion on how we should bet on those games. [IDI 6]

This form of collaboration sometimes involves pooling money to buy a group ticket or for groups to work to 'hedge' their wagers by collectively backing a range of outcomes. Some described how this process was mediated by WhatsApp, while others met at roadside

betting kiosks. Through such processes, participants described the formation of sports betting communities within the area we studied.

From our participants' accounts, it is clear that the marketing and business practices of sports betting vendors operate with an awareness of these sports betting communities. One participant described how his local vendor spent time moving around his local community distributing lists of matches and odds available to bet on that day:

- P: There are papers which they distribute to us.
 I: Who distributes them to you?
 P: Premier Bet people bring to us.
 [...]
 I: Where exactly do they deliver or where do you find them here in [Location]?
 [...]
 P: Yes, and even at my shop they come and deliver them to me.

In this account, the participant makes it clear that his local vendors know the membership of local sports betting communities and where to find them, using this information to encourage routine betting. The participant also frames this practice as targeting a group he belongs to, using the word 'us'. This man offers an insight into how vendors are effectively positioned by corporations to infiltrate communities on their behalf, in exchange for commission (Bunn et al., 2020); a social formation which resonates with indirect rule approaches to wealth extraction favoured by colonisers (Jua, 1995).

Socialites of sports betting are not limited to fans of European football, communities of sports betters and the relationships between sports betting vendors and these communities; they also have significant implications for family life. The participant who described his tendency to buy 15 tickets a day went on to reflect that his sports betting:

Disturbs your behaviour even at home. Things don't go well at home because sometimes you don't succeed in life and even thinking capacity is affected, your diet is also affected and almost everything is affected... Sometimes I stop the plan of buying food and buy another ticket... Sometimes... someone tells me she needs money to buy soap, that moment I don't answer them politely. [IDI 3]

This account, while at the extreme end of the accounts elicited from participants, was not unique and exemplifies the material and emotional impacts that participants reported sports betting having on their families. Household food supplies are disrupted, soap is not bought, relations become strained and mental capacities are diminished.

While not all participants revealed such extreme situations, in the accounts we gathered, it was common for young men to hide sports betting from their families. For example:

- I: Does your family know that you bet?
 P: No, they don't know. Even when I win, I have never told them that this is money I have won from betting.
 I: Why do you hide from your wife?

- P: I feel like it's a gambling game, so I just decided not to tell her.
 I: Why do you think it's not good to tell your family about gambling?
 P: Because it's something you can get addicted to, so if my children learn about it, they might interpret it as a good thing and they can start gambling, so I don't want that to happen. [IDI 7]

This young man offers two reasons for hiding his sports betting. Firstly, because it has been positioned alongside more established, stigmatised forms of gambling. It is clear that, to some degree, he accepts these negative social appraisals, because his second reason for hiding his betting activity is that he does not want his children to become involved in it. Awareness of such stigma was shown by other respondents, who sought to hide their activities from family members, both living in Lilongwe and those living in their rural home villages.

While hiding, or attempting to hide sports betting, was common, some of our participants' families were aware of their activities. One young man described how his parents had discouraged him from gambling, but since he married and established an independent household, he had been open about his betting with his wife:

When I am leaving home, I have already budgeted for the household expenses but the remaining money which I used to spend on beer before I stopped, now I take that money for betting. And when I am coming back, she wonders why I am coming with extra money instead of the little cash I took away, and I explain to her how I got the money that I have won. [IDI1]

While this account is one in which the participant positions his sports betting as budgeted for and part of an open dialogue with his wife, he later went on to explain that 'so if I lose... I don't take it as a thing to tell my wife.' [IDI 1]

A final social aspect of sports betting reflected on by our participants relates to the futures they imagine for it in Malawian society. Some expressed concern that more efforts to prevent minors from betting needed to be made:

... I personally feel that they [sports betting companies] aim at making profits, so sometimes they just allow children who are growing tall to bet because they want to make money. So there should be a way of verifying their ages. [IDI 8]

Others observed that, while in a few instances sports betting has led to significant wins for Malawians, it has a negative effect on life:

I see more disadvantages than the advantages; the disadvantage is you spend more money than what you win. You don't feel pain because it goes little by little, but if you count the money according to the days you spent the money and add them together, it's bigger amount, so if things are in this way then you are making yourself poor. If I say betting is easy money but when we look at it from another angle, it's a disadvantage on its own because this element [...] encourages laziness. Instead of

focusing on things which can provide you money, which is fixed, you are diverted to focus on betting. [IDI 4]

Here this man expresses concern about both the gradual loss of money that sports betting can cause, as well as its tendency to 'encourage laziness' and 'divert' attention from the pursuit of sustainable business.

Discussion and Conclusion

The interviews which we have analysed and presented here give, to the best of our knowledge, the first research-based account of the practices and perceptions of regular male sports bettors in Malawi. While gambling is not a new phenomenon in Malawi and community-based forms of betting are long-established, the commercial form of sports betting that emerged from 2015 onwards has been a radical departure for the country. It has produced new communities of sports bettors, which gather around their passions for European football, and an industry which seeks them out and cross-sells digital and virtual forms of gambling. As we have argued elsewhere, the wealth extraction that ensues is likely to be causing significant gambling-related harm (Bunn et al., 2020) and as we show here, it closely resembles colonial techniques of indirect rule (Jua, 1995). This observation is further compounded by Premier Bet's European origins.

Our data suggests that attraction to sports betting was frequently generated via hearing stories of large wins, echoing findings in Zimbabwe (Chiweshe, 2020), either through friends or through content sponsored by sports betting companies (Bunn et al., 2020). Poverty was also a motivation and sports betting was often positioned as offering hope for a better future for those lacking economic opportunity, as well as providing 'something to do' as observed in Nigeria and Kenya (Olaore et al., 2020; Schmidt, 2019). The 'gambling careers' of those we spoke to varied, with some participants moving in and out of intense patterns of betting, while others became stuck in harmful patterns (Reith & Dobbie, 2013). The more harmful patterns had negative consequences for bettors' household diets, hygiene, relationships and cognitive resources, findings which support the suggestion that commercialised forms of gambling are a threat to development (Amutabi, 2018). Secrecy was often a feature of our participants' practices, with some taking care to hide their sports betting from their families and some concerned to hide losses, which are often considered signs of problematic gambling (Downs & Woolrych, 2010).

The communities of sports bettors that have formed in Malawi gather around European football leagues and often use mobile technologies like WhatsApp to discuss betting strategies. Having contributed to forming these sports betting communities, companies exploit them by cross-selling digital and virtual products which are not related to football; a pattern which has also been observed in Nigeria (Adebisi et al., 2021). While Malawi regulates gambling through the Malawi Gaming Board and Lotteries Authority, underpinned by specific legislation, there is no specific 'sports betting' licence category mentioned in this legislation (MGB, 2019). Accordingly, such cross-selling strategies exist in what appears to be a legally 'grey area'. Given the attraction to the 'instant' nature of these products, such

as ‘spinning’, as reported by some participants, it is hard not to draw comparisons with the literature from the Global North which has identified the particularly harmful nature of ‘fixed odds betting terminals’, which possess similar ‘instant’ properties and have been described as ‘the crack cocaine of gambling’ (Woodhouse, 2019). Noting the radical evolution of its gambling landscape, Malawian authorities should consider updating its regulatory approach to take account of the dramatic rise of sports betting and the tendency for vendors to cross-sell products which are potentially the source of most harm.

A final observation that we wish to make is that, as with much literature in the Global North, there is an emerging tendency in SSA literature to pathologise harmful patterns of gambling, rendering them the problems of individuals and framing them as ‘addictions’ (Bitanirwe & Ssewanyana, 2021). Participants in this study also spoke in these terms at times, both in relation to themselves and to others. We urge caution in taking this route, and instead encourage a more holistic view that sets gambling and the bettor within their social and economic contexts (Reith, 2018; Shaffer & Korn, 2002). Such an approach should also take into consideration the commercial determinants of health (Kickbusch, Allen, & Franz, 2016) to appreciate that the contexts in which our participants are betting has been shaped by corporate interests that seek to subjugate them as consumers in ways that extract their wealth. Accordingly, while those Malawians that are stuck in harmful patterns of gambling need help, and some useful help may come in the form of medically grounded practices, what they most definitely need is a better regulatory approach from the designated authorities which protects them from the exploitative structures that have been constructed around them.

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