

Effects of sports betting applications on youth developmental plans in Africa

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of mobile technology and internet accessibility across Africa has significantly transformed youth engagement with digital platforms. Among the most influential developments is the proliferation of sports betting applications, including Betway, SportPesa, Bet365, 1xBet, BetKing, Premier Bet, Melbet, Odibets, Hollywoodbets, and Betika. While these platforms are often marketed as sources of entertainment and economic opportunity, their widespread adoption among African youth has raised serious concerns regarding long-term developmental planning. This study examines the effects of sports betting applications on youths' educational aspirations, career planning, financial behavior, and psychosocial development. Drawing on existing literature, socio-economic observations, and behavioral trends, the research reveals that excessive engagement with betting apps undermines goal-oriented planning, promotes risky financial behaviors, and distorts perceptions of work, success, and delayed gratification. The findings suggest that without effective regulation, digital literacy, and youth-centered interventions, sports betting applications may significantly compromise sustainable youth development in Africa.

Keywords: Sports Betting; Youth Development; Mobile Applications; Digital Gambling; Africa; Education Planning; Financial Behavior

1. Introduction

Africa is experiencing a demographic youth bulge alongside rapid digital transformation driven by mobile phone penetration, affordable internet access, and the growth of mobile money ecosystems. This convergence has created fertile ground for digital services, including social media, online commerce, and mobile gambling platforms. Sports betting applications such as Betway, SportPesa, Bet365, 1xBet, BetKing, Premier Bet, Melbet, Odibets, Hollywoodbets, and Betika have become deeply embedded in the daily lives of many young Africans, particularly males aged between 15 and 30 years (Anyanwu et al., 2023; Bitanihirwe et al., 2022; Simon, 2024).

The appeal of sports betting apps among youth is fueled by aggressive advertising, celebrity endorsements, sports sponsorships, and the promise of quick financial rewards. In contexts marked by high youth unemployment, underemployment, and economic uncertainty, betting platforms are often perceived as alternative income-generating avenues rather than recreational activities (Ezema, Oparaugo, and Onyebuchi, 2025). This perception fundamentally alters how young people conceptualize work, effort, risk, and long-term planning.

Youth developmental plans typically encompass educational attainment, skills acquisition, career progression, financial stability, and social responsibility. These plans require discipline, delayed gratification, and consistent effort. However, the instant gratification model promoted by betting applications conflicts with these developmental principles. This paper explores how the normalization of sports betting apps affects youth developmental planning in Africa, with particular attention to education, career orientation, financial habits, and psychosocial well-being.

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2. Literature Review

2.1. Growth of Sports Betting Applications in Africa

The expansion of sports betting applications in Africa has been driven by several structural and technological factors. The widespread adoption of smartphones and mobile money services has lowered entry barriers, enabling users to place bets anytime and anywhere. Betting companies have localized their platforms by supporting local languages, domestic sports leagues, and mobile payment systems, further accelerating uptake among youth (Ezema et al., 2025).

Regulatory environments in many African countries remain weak or fragmented, allowing betting companies to operate with limited oversight. Promotional strategies frequently target young audiences through social media campaigns, bonus incentives, and free-bet offers. Live betting features and instant notifications encourage continuous engagement, reinforcing habitual betting behaviors (Sichali et al., 2023).

The cultural centrality of sports, particularly football, also plays a crucial role. European leagues enjoy massive followings across Africa, and betting apps leverage this enthusiasm by integrating real-time odds, statistics, and interactive features. For many youths, betting becomes intertwined with sports fandom, blurring the line between entertainment and gambling (Kalou, 2025).

2.2. Effects on Educational and Career Planning

One of the most significant impacts of sports betting applications is their influence on educational priorities and career aspirations. Time spent analyzing odds, watching matches, and placing bets often competes with academic activities, reducing study time and concentration. For students, especially those in secondary schools and universities, betting-related distractions can lead to declining academic performance and disengagement from learning (Avenyo, Kwashie, and Demuyakor, 2024).

More critically, betting apps promote the illusion of financial success without formal education or professional skill development. Repeated exposure to stories of betting wins fosters unrealistic expectations about income generation, weakening motivation to pursue long-term educational goals. Some youths begin to view education as unnecessary or slow compared to the perceived immediacy of betting returns (Frimpong and Acheampong, 2024).

Career planning is similarly affected. Instead of pursuing structured career pathways, internships, or entrepreneurship grounded in skill acquisition, some young people adopt speculative mindsets characterized by short-term gains and high-risk decision-making. This undermines workforce preparedness and contributes to a cycle of instability and underachievement.

2.3. Financial Behavior and Economic Implications

Sports betting applications significantly shape youth financial behavior. The integration of mobile money systems allows for seamless deposits and withdrawals, often masking the real value of money spent. Small, frequent bets accumulate into substantial financial losses, particularly for unemployed or low-income youths.

Problematic betting behavior can lead to debt, borrowing, and misuse of essential funds intended for education, family support, or basic needs. The pursuit of losses, commonly known as “chasing,” exacerbates financial instability and reinforces poor budgeting habits. Rather than learning saving, investing, or responsible financial planning, youths are socialized into high-risk consumption patterns (Frimpong and Acheampong, 2024; Mihret and Eskezia, 2024; Suleiman and Aduke, 2025).

At a broader level, widespread youth engagement in betting contributes little to productive economic activity. Resources that could be invested in education, entrepreneurship, or community development are redirected into betting ecosystems, often benefiting multinational corporations rather than local economies (Kartawinata, Syarifuddin, Kuswanto, and Wardhana, 2025; Mihret and Eskezia, 2024).

2.4. Psychosocial and Behavioral Effects

Beyond economic consequences, sports betting apps have notable psychosocial impacts. Continuous betting is associated with stress, anxiety, mood swings, and reduced self-esteem, particularly when losses occur. For young people still forming their identities and coping mechanisms, these effects can be especially damaging (Mihret and Eskezia, 2024).

The normalization of betting also reshapes social interactions. Peer pressure and social comparison, amplified through social media and betting communities, encourage continued participation even when individuals recognize negative outcomes. In some cases, betting becomes a central aspect of social identity, overshadowing constructive social activities.

Furthermore, exposure to gambling at an early age increases the risk of long-term addictive behaviors. This not only affects individual life trajectories but also places additional burdens on families, educational institutions, and social support systems (Pérez, 2024).

2.5. Implications for Youth Developmental Planning

Youth developmental planning relies on stable expectations, realistic goal-setting, and supportive environments. Sports betting applications disrupt these foundations by promoting uncertainty, risk normalization, and short-termism. The constant anticipation of wins conditions youths to prioritize chance over effort and persistence (Pérez, 2024).

This shift undermines key developmental competencies such as self-regulation, resilience, and strategic planning. As a result, young people may struggle to commit to long-term projects, whether academic, professional, or personal. The cumulative effect is a generation facing delayed transitions into stable adulthood and reduced capacity for sustainable development.

2.6. Policy and Intervention Strategies

Addressing the impact of sports betting apps on youth development requires a multi-dimensional approach. Governments should strengthen regulatory frameworks, including age verification, advertising restrictions, and limits on betting incentives targeting young users (Sherry, Schulenkorf, Phillips, and Rowe, 2024). Transparent enforcement mechanisms are essential to curb exploitative practices.

Educational institutions should integrate financial literacy and digital citizenship programs that address gambling risks, probability misconceptions, and responsible technology use. Community-based initiatives and youth mentorship programs can provide alternative pathways for income generation and personal development.

Parents, educators, and civil society organizations also play a critical role in fostering open discussions about betting and its consequences. By promoting positive role models and emphasizing effort-based success, stakeholders can counterbalance the narratives promoted by betting platforms (Blythe, 2024).

3. Theoretical Framework

Theoretical frameworks provide important lenses through which complex social and behavioral phenomena can be understood and interpreted. In the context of sports betting applications and youth developmental planning in Africa, theoretical perspectives help explain how digital technologies influence youth behavior, shape financial and social choices, and affect long-term developmental outcomes. The rapid growth of mobile betting applications cannot be understood solely through economic or technological explanations. Instead, their popularity and developmental implications emerge from the interaction between technological innovation, social influence, behavioral decision-making, and broader youth risk environments. This study therefore draws on Technological Determinism Theory, Social Learning Theory, Behavioral Economics Theory, Innovation Diffusion Theory, and Problem Behavior Theory to provide a multidimensional understanding of the effects of sports betting applications on African youth.

3.1. Technological Determinism Theory

Technological Determinism Theory argues that technological innovation plays a central role in shaping social structures, human behavior, and patterns of interaction (Bijker, Hughes and Pinch, 1987). According to this perspective, technology is not merely a passive tool but an active force capable of transforming social practices and influencing how people organize their daily lives.

In the context of sports betting applications, technological determinism helps explain how smartphones, mobile internet, and mobile money systems have transformed gambling from a location-bound activity into an easily accessible digital practice. Sports betting applications allow users to place wagers instantly, monitor games in real time, and transfer money seamlessly regardless of geographical location. This technological convenience has altered youth engagement with gambling by making participation continuous, personalized, and socially embedded.

The theory is particularly relevant to African contexts where rapid digitalization and expanding mobile connectivity have significantly increased youth exposure to betting platforms. Betting technologies therefore influence not only recreational choices but also perceptions of work, wealth creation, and financial opportunity. As sports betting applications become increasingly integrated into everyday digital life, they shape how young people interpret success, risk, and economic mobility.

3.2. Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory, developed by Bandura (1977), proposes that human behavior is learned through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. Individuals acquire attitudes and behavioral patterns by observing others within their social environments, particularly peers, family members, celebrities, and media figures.

This theory provides an important framework for understanding sports betting participation among youth. Betting behavior is often reinforced through social interactions and media exposure. Young people are frequently exposed to betting advertisements, celebrity endorsements, social media influencers, and peer discussions that portray gambling as exciting, profitable, and socially acceptable. Such repeated exposure contributes to the normalization of betting behavior and encourages imitation.

In many African settings, betting discussions occur within friendship groups, sports viewing spaces, and online communities. Stories of successful wagers and jackpot wins are widely circulated, while losses and negative experiences are often minimized. Through these processes, youths may learn to associate betting with social belonging, prestige, or economic success. Social Learning Theory therefore explains how betting behavior spreads not only through personal choice but also through social reinforcement and observational learning.

3.3. Behavioral Economics Theory

Behavioral Economics Theory examines how psychological factors and cognitive biases influence economic decision-making (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979; Becker and Murphy, 1988). Unlike traditional economic models that assume individuals make fully rational choices, behavioral economics recognizes that people frequently make decisions shaped by emotions, limited information, and distorted perceptions of risk and reward.

This perspective is highly relevant to sports betting applications. Betting platforms are designed around immediate rewards, excitement, and uncertainty, conditions that can encourage impulsive decision-making. Youths may overestimate the likelihood of winning while underestimating potential financial losses. The availability of near-miss outcomes, bonus incentives, and instant betting options further strengthens expectations of future success.

Behavioral Economics Theory also explains why some young bettors continue gambling despite repeated losses. Cognitive biases such as optimism bias and the tendency to “chase losses” may encourage continued participation in hopes of recovering lost money. Consequently, sports betting may undermine financial discipline and encourage risk-oriented economic behavior that conflicts with long-term developmental planning.

3.4. Innovation Diffusion Theory

Innovation Diffusion Theory, developed by Rogers (2003), explains how new ideas and technologies spread through societies and social systems. The theory identifies factors such as accessibility, perceived usefulness, communication channels, and social influence as important determinants of technology adoption.

The rapid spread of sports betting applications across Africa reflects this diffusion process. Betting platforms have expanded through aggressive marketing campaigns, mobile accessibility, and integration with popular sports culture. Their convenience and affordability have made them attractive to technologically connected youth populations.

Innovation Diffusion Theory helps explain why sports betting applications have achieved rapid adoption despite concerns regarding gambling-related harms. The visibility of betting behavior within peer networks and digital communities accelerates acceptance and participation. As more youths adopt betting applications, participation becomes increasingly normalized, creating social pressure and reinforcing continued diffusion.

3.5. Problem Behavior Theory

Problem Behavior Theory, proposed by Jessor (1991), explains risky and socially problematic behaviors as products of interacting psychological, social, and environmental influences. The theory argues that behaviors such as gambling, substance use, and delinquency often emerge within broader patterns of youth risk-taking.

This framework is particularly useful in understanding problematic sports betting behavior. Gambling participation among youth may not occur in isolation but as part of wider behavioral tendencies involving sensation-seeking, peer influence, and limited self-regulation. Exposure to betting opportunities, combined with social acceptance and economic pressures, may increase vulnerability to harmful gambling practices.

Problem Behavior Theory further highlights how environmental conditions such as unemployment, weak regulation, and social inequality can contribute to betting participation. In many African countries where economic opportunities remain limited, sports betting may appear attractive as a perceived pathway toward financial improvement. However, when participation becomes excessive, it may contribute to psychosocial distress, educational disruption, and delayed developmental progress.

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how sports betting applications influence youth developmental planning in Africa. By integrating technological, behavioral, and social explanations, the study is better positioned to interpret existing literature and explain the complex relationship between digital gambling and youth development.

4. Methodology

The research utilized a comprehensive review of existing literature to examine the effects of sports betting applications on youth developmental plans in Africa. The study relied on secondary data drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, scholarly publications, and documented socio-economic studies focusing on digital gambling, youth behavior, financial practices, education, and psychosocial development. The review approach enabled the identification and evaluation of existing knowledge regarding the relationship between sports betting applications and youth developmental outcomes across African contexts.

4.1. The Research Procedure

The study proposes a multi-dimensional approach to addressing the growing influence of sports betting applications on youth developmental planning in Africa. The following steps are recommended to ensure the applicability and effectiveness of the proposed solutions:

The study approach involved the following steps: –

Literature Identification and Review:

- A systematic search and review of existing academic literature, policy documents, and relevant studies on sports betting, mobile gambling applications, youth development, and digital behavior in Africa was undertaken. Particular attention was given to studies examining educational, economic, psychosocial, and behavioral effects of sports betting among youth populations.

Analysis of Sports Betting Application Usage:

- The study examined how mobile betting applications have expanded across Africa through smartphone penetration, internet accessibility, and mobile money systems.
- Attention was given to platform accessibility, advertising strategies, bonus incentives, and digital engagement features that encourage frequent betting participation among young users.

Assessment of Educational and Career Implications:

- Existing studies were reviewed to evaluate the influence of betting applications on educational attainment, study habits, career aspirations, and youth motivation toward long-term professional development.
- The analysis considered how betting-related expectations may alter perceptions of education, employment, and income generation.

Evaluation of Financial and Psychosocial Effects:

- The research assessed literature discussing financial behavior associated with betting applications, including spending patterns, debt accumulation, financial dependency, and poor budgeting practices.
- Psychosocial outcomes such as stress, anxiety, addiction risks, peer influence, and identity formation associated with betting participation were also examined.

Policy and Intervention Analysis:

- The study reviewed existing regulatory frameworks, youth protection policies, and intervention strategies aimed at mitigating gambling-related harms.
- Recommendations emphasizing digital literacy, financial education, parental guidance, and stronger gambling regulations were considered as part of the proposed response framework.

Excellence in Research Review and Analysis:

- The study employed critical analysis and thematic synthesis to compare findings across different studies and national contexts within Africa.
- Emphasis was placed on ensuring objectivity, reliability, and consistency in interpreting evidence and drawing conclusions regarding the developmental implications of sports betting applications.

4.2. Expected Outcomes

- The study aims to provide a clearer understanding of how sports betting applications influence youth developmental planning in Africa, particularly regarding education, employment, and financial behavior.
- The research is expected to demonstrate how excessive engagement with sports betting applications contributes to risky financial practices, weakened educational commitment, and unstable career planning among youth.
- The study anticipates highlighting the psychosocial consequences associated with sports betting participation, including stress, addiction risks, and negative peer-driven behaviors.
- The findings are expected to support stronger policy formulation and regulatory interventions aimed at protecting young people from exploitative gambling practices and harmful digital environments.
- The study seeks to contribute to scholarly and policy discussions on sustainable youth development by emphasizing the importance of aligning technological innovation with responsible social and economic development goals in Africa.

5. Discussion: Sports Betting Applications and Youth Developmental Planning in Africa

The findings of this review demonstrate that sports betting applications occupy an increasingly influential position in the social and economic lives of African youth. While these platforms are frequently promoted as recreational and income-generating opportunities, their developmental implications are considerably more complex. The discussion reveals that sports betting applications simultaneously create perceived opportunities for digital participation while reinforcing behaviors and attitudes that may undermine long-term developmental planning.

5.1. Sports Betting Applications and Technological Transformation

The growth of sports betting applications reflects broader technological transformations occurring across Africa. Increased smartphone penetration, internet accessibility, and mobile money systems have created conditions that facilitate widespread betting participation among youth. From the perspective of Technological Determinism Theory, digital technologies do not merely provide new entertainment options but actively shape social behavior and lifestyle patterns (Bijker, Hughes and Pinch, 1987). Betting applications have therefore become embedded within everyday youth experiences, influencing how financial opportunities, leisure, and personal success are understood.

The rapid adoption of betting applications further aligns with Innovation Diffusion Theory, which explains how technological innovations spread through social systems (Rogers, 2003). The convenience, affordability, and social visibility of betting platforms have accelerated their diffusion across African communities, particularly among technologically connected youth populations.

5.2. Educational and Career Development Implications

One of the most significant concerns emerging from the reviewed literature relates to the influence of sports betting applications on educational and career trajectories. Betting participation competes with academic obligations by consuming time, attention, and emotional investment that might otherwise be directed toward learning and skill acquisition (Avenyo, Kwashie and Demuyakor, 2024).

Social Learning Theory provides additional insight into this phenomenon. Young people are influenced by peer networks, celebrity endorsements, and social media narratives that portray betting success as desirable and achievable

(Bandura, 1977). Repeated exposure to stories of gambling winnings may create unrealistic expectations regarding wealth creation and weaken commitment to educational and professional development. Consequently, some youths begin to perceive betting as a quicker route to economic advancement than formal education or employment.

5.3. Financial and Psychosocial Consequences

The review indicates that sports betting applications significantly influence youth financial behavior. The seamless integration of betting platforms with mobile money systems encourages frequent wagering and may obscure the cumulative financial consequences of repeated betting activity (Frimpong and Acheampong, 2024; Mihret and Eskezia, 2024).

Behavioral Economics Theory helps explain these patterns. Individuals often make decisions influenced by cognitive biases, instant gratification, and distorted perceptions of risk and reward (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979; Becker and Murphy, 1988). In the context of sports betting, youths may overestimate winning probabilities while underestimating financial losses. Such tendencies contribute to impulsive gambling, debt accumulation, and poor financial planning.

The psychosocial implications are similarly concerning. Continuous betting participation has been associated with stress, emotional instability, anxiety, and gambling dependency (Mihret and Eskezia, 2024). Problem Behavior Theory further suggests that gambling may form part of broader risk-taking tendencies among adolescents and young adults (Jessor, 1991). When betting becomes normalized within peer networks and online communities, it may reinforce behaviors that negatively affect self-regulation, identity formation, and psychological wellbeing.

5.4. Balancing Opportunities and Developmental Risks

Despite the risks identified, it is important to acknowledge that sports betting applications are not perceived solely as harmful by young users. Many youths view these platforms as accessible sources of entertainment, social engagement, and potential income, particularly within contexts characterized by unemployment and economic uncertainty (Simon, 2024; Ezema, Oparaugo and Onyebuchi, 2025). These perceptions partly explain the sustained popularity of betting platforms across Africa.

However, the review suggests that the perceived benefits remain largely short-term and uncertain, while the developmental risks are more substantial and enduring. Educational disruption, financial instability, addiction vulnerability, and distorted attitudes toward work and achievement collectively undermine sustainable youth development. The challenge therefore lies not simply in condemning sports betting but in understanding how digital innovation can be regulated and socially managed to minimize harm.

5.5. Policy and Development Implications

The findings underscore the importance of coordinated regulatory and educational interventions. Governments, educational institutions, families, and civil society organizations share responsibility for mitigating gambling-related harms among youth. Stronger age-verification systems, restrictions on youth-targeted advertising, digital literacy programs, and financial education initiatives are necessary to counter harmful gambling narratives and encourage responsible technology use.

Ultimately, sports betting applications represent a broader development challenge concerning how African societies manage emerging digital technologies. Without effective regulation and youth-centered interventions, these platforms may continue to weaken long-term developmental planning and compromise the social and economic potential of Africa's young population.

6. Conclusion

The rapid expansion of sports betting applications across Africa reflects broader patterns of technological advancement, mobile connectivity, and digital financial integration. While these platforms have increased entertainment opportunities and digital engagement among youth, the evidence reviewed in this study demonstrates that their developmental consequences are largely negative when participation becomes excessive or poorly regulated. Sports betting applications influence educational commitment, career planning, financial decision-making, and psychosocial wellbeing, often promoting short-term gratification and risk-oriented behaviors that conflict with long-term developmental goals.

The study further demonstrates that the widespread accessibility of betting platforms, combined with aggressive marketing strategies, peer influence, and weak regulatory systems, has contributed to the normalization of gambling among young people. Through the lenses of Technological Determinism Theory, Social Learning Theory, Behavioral Economics Theory, Innovation Diffusion Theory, and Problem Behavior Theory, the findings illustrate how technological environments and social influences shape youth betting behavior and developmental choices.

The article contributes to existing scholarship by synthesizing multidisciplinary evidence on the relationship between sports betting applications and youth developmental planning in Africa. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive policy interventions, including stronger gambling regulation, age-verification systems, advertising controls, financial literacy education, and digital citizenship programs aimed at protecting vulnerable youth populations.

Future research should move beyond literature-based analysis to include empirical investigations examining country-specific betting behaviors, gender differences, and the long-term socio-economic consequences of sports betting participation among African youth. Ultimately, sustainable youth development in Africa depends on ensuring that technological innovation and digital economic opportunities are guided by principles of responsibility, wellbeing, and long-term social progress.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author(s) declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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