BETTING, BULLYING, AND BURNOUT: EXAMINING ONLINE HARASSMENT FROM SPORT WAGERING AND ITS IMPACT ON STUDENT-ATHLETES' WELL-BEING AND COPING

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Key Findings

- Gambling-related online harassment occurred primarily through Instagram direct messages and was most commonly reported following competition.
- Messages ranged from criticism of athletic performance and blame for gambling losses to threats of physical harm.
- Student-athletes varied in how they interpreted these experiences, with some viewing harassment as expected or relatively harmless and others describing negative effects on their well-being and ability to focus.
- Student-athletes primarily relied on individual coping strategies and trusted family members, friends, and teammates rather than coaches or formal institutional resources.
- Participants identified opportunities for athletic departments to improve reporting mechanisms and provide practical, targeted education about gambling-related harassment.

Background

Mental health and psychological well-being have received increasing attention and within intercollegiate athletics, as student-athletes continue to report substantial mental health concerns (Edwards et al., 2023; Sudano & Miles, 2017). The well-being of student-athletes is shaped by a range of internal factors—such as personality traits, mindfulness, and locus of control (Denny & Steiner, 2009)—as well as external factors, including coach-athlete relationships (Ni & Feng, 2023), academic and athletic demands (Denny & Steiner, 2009), and the level of social support available (Simmons & Bird, 2022). Moreover, the proliferation of social media has complicated this landscape. While social media offers student-athletes enhanced visibility and opportunities for self-promotion, it also exposes them to potential risks, including becoming frequent targets of online abuse and harassment (Kavanagh et al., 2023). Such forms of online harassment have been found to create additional pressure on student-athletes and negatively impact their self-esteem, life satisfaction, and overall mental health, thereby contributing to increased levels of depression and loneliness (Barry et al., 2022).

While the majority of the current literature has focused on various forms of social media abuse experienced by athletes, there is a lack of studies examining how athletes and sport organizations respond to such abuse. The present study aims to investigate student-athletes' perceptions and experiences of betting-related online harassment, particularly its impact on their mental health and well-being. In addition, the study explores the strategies and support systems student-athletes use to cope with these emerging challenges. By doing so, the study seeks to generate deeper insight into the challenges student-athletes face related to sports

wagering and to identify student-athletes' support needs and opportunities for athletic departments to strengthen institutional responses.

Methods

To gain a comprehensive understanding of student-athletes' experiences with online harassment related to sports betting, qualitative, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with student-athletes competing in the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC). To capture a diverse range of perspectives, participants were recruited from multiple sports and included both male and female student-athletes. In total, 16 ACC student-athletes participated in the study (9 men and 7 women), representing football, basketball, tennis, track and field, soccer, swimming, wrestling, rowing, and lacrosse. Participants were recruited through athletic departments, institutional contacts, and direct outreach to student-athletes.

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six phases: (1) familiarizing ourselves with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) constructing candidate themes; (4) reviewing and developing themes through a debriefing process among the research team; (5) defining and naming the themes; and (6) producing the report, supported by illustrative data extracts.

Findings

RQ1: What are the characteristics of the gambling-related online harassment that student-athletes have experienced?

The first research question examined the characteristics of gambling-related online harassment that student-athletes have experienced in terms of social media platforms, the timing of messages, and the forms and types of messages. Nearly all participants identified Instagram's Direct Message (DM) function as the primary platform for delivering abusive content. X (formerly Twitter) was also identified as an outlet through which student-athletes received gambling-related messages. Regarding timing, participants reported receiving abusive messages both during and after competition, with most arriving after the game had ended.

Types of messages. College athletes described three primary types of gambling-related messages, ranging from criticism of athletic performance to gambling-related accusations to death threats. The most common form of abuse involved criticism of an athlete's performance. In some cases, athletes received very short messages such as "You suck," "How could you lose?" or "You shouldn't be on the team. You don't have a place here. You're a failure."

A second category consisted of messages in which bettors' financial losses were the primary grievance. In these cases, bettors blamed college athletes for costing them money. As one participant explained, "Someone messed up in a game. They just got, like, text after text saying how much they sucked, and 'You lost me this much money.' Stuff like that." Athletes were also frequently blamed for causing bettors to lose parlays, with individual performances framed as directly responsible for financial losses.

The most severe category involved explicit threats of death and physical harm. Some bettors sent messages such as "I'm going to kill you and your parents" or "I know your address, and I will find you" to threaten student-athletes on social media.

RQ2: How do student-athletes perceive these gambling-related online harassment experiences?

Participants' perceptions of gambling-related online harassment fell into two core themes: *benign appraisal* and *threat appraisal*.

Benign appraisal. Not all participants viewed online harassment as particularly harmful. A substantial number of athletes described gambling-related online abuse as something they had come to expect and therefore found unsurprising. One participant described these messages as "just a bunch of insults and really nothing that had any weight," often coming from "a random person who is probably just really mad that they lost money."

Threat appraisal. Some participants in this study felt that these gambling-related online harassment experiences were harmful and negatively influenced their mental health and well-being. For instance, one participant said:

> "If you don't have a good game, you're gonna hear about it. Even with a good match, you're gonna hear about it no matter what, and you're already going to beat yourself up about that. And now you've got this external voice being forced at you that you can't really avoid. … If you're sitting in class and you get a notification on your phone that someone's saying something horrible, that's going to distract you."

RQ3: What coping strategies do student-athletes use to handle gambling-related online harassment?

Participants described three categories of coping resources: individual coping strategies, interpersonal support, and institutional support.

Individual Coping Strategies

Managing social media exposure. The most commonly reported strategies included managing exposure to abusive content directly: ignoring comments, blocking users, reporting users, and limiting social media use. Participants described these strategies as follows:

- "If I see any negative comments on one of my teammates' posts, we normally just don't say anything. Just be the bigger person, you know."
- "It depends on the message. Usually I don't bother because they could just create another account anyway."
- "I'm a very aggressive user of the block button. … Blocking people, especially when it comes to one person, is generally going to slow it down. It's pretty difficult to make an Instagram account now, so someone might second-guess if they should. Being aggressive with the block button is pretty effective, at least in the short term."
- "I wouldn't necessarily go through reporting a DM through Instagram. I would take it to a gambling reporting site, maybe, just so that person does get investigated and can no longer sports bet."
- "I never check my phone during games."

Interpersonal Support

Participants turned first to people they already trusted.

Family support. Family was a common starting point and was described as preferable to formal services. As one participant said: "If I'm going through something with basketball, I'll talk

to my sisters first before I make an appointment with a professional, because I trust that person rather than talking to someone completely new."

Peer and teammate support. Teammates and friends served a similar function, with disclosure following existing closeness rather than formal channels: "I've been talked to by one or two people about it. But I'd say they mainly talk to people that they're closer to. … If it happened to me, I'd probably talk about it with my friends first."

Reluctance to disclose to coaches. The vast majority of participants indicated that student-athletes generally would not share these experiences with their coaches because they did not consider the issue serious enough to warrant the coaches' attention.

> "I don't think they would tell their coaches. My coaches have way more important things to deal with than what my Instagram DMs say. I wouldn't even think to bother them about that."

Institutional Support

Athletic administrators as points of contact. Participants who considered formal reporting identified athletic administrators as the appropriate point of contact:

> "I would probably go through our AD, our assistant athletic director, one of those, just because it is such an issue and it needs to be taken seriously. … It would honestly end up with them anyway."

Education and existing resources. Several participants described education sessions provided by their athletic departments at the start of the season, which outlined available support resources. For some, awareness of those resources was sufficient:

> "I know the NCAA now requires these meetings, and they talk about the side effects of sports gambling and who you can contact if you have any issues. Besides that, I don't really think there's much more we need to do, as long as you understand where these resources are."

***Perceived limitations of existing programming*.** However, athletes differed in how useful they perceived these institutional resources to be. Some were skeptical of their effectiveness, as the following comments illustrate:

- "Personally, I don't think they're useful at all. I think they're pretty pointless, but if you think they work, then it's a great option. Some people need it, some people don't. The point is the resources are there."
- "A lot of athletes get annoyed with all of the courses and modules that we have to take that don't end up applying to us."

Recommendations for Athletic Departments

Based on the findings, athletic departments should consider developing clear and accessible procedures for responding to gambling-related online harassment. First, institutions should provide student-athletes with a low-barrier mechanism for reporting abusive or threatening messages, including an anonymous or confidential reporting option when feasible. Second, departments should identify a clear point of contact so that student-athletes know where to turn when an incident occurs. Third, athletic departments should incorporate gambling-related harassment education into existing student-athlete programming and

emphasize practical strategies, including blocking and reporting accounts, preserving evidence, adjusting social media settings, and identifying when messages should be escalated. Finally, athletic departments should establish clear procedures for responding to threats involving physical safety, family members, personal information, or an athlete's location. Rather than adding more mandatory programming, departments should keep these efforts concise, practical, and clearly connected to situations student-athletes may encounter.

Strengthening Individual and Interpersonal Coping Resources

Athletic departments should also strengthen the coping strategies that student-athletes already use. At the individual level, athletes could receive practical guidance on managing social media exposure, including blocking abusive users, limiting notifications, adjusting privacy settings, and temporarily disengaging from social media following competition. At the interpersonal level, departments should recognize that student-athletes often turn first to family members, friends, and teammates rather than coaches or formal institutional resources. Accordingly, departments could encourage peer-based support by helping student-athletes recognize signs that a teammate may be struggling, respond supportively when harassment is disclosed, and know when to refer an incident to appropriate institutional personnel. These efforts could complement, rather than replace, formal reporting and mental health resources.