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## Knowledge of Play: A Precursor for Rethinking Sports Gambling Among Young Africans

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**Abstract:** The degree of involvement in sports gambling activities differs among individuals, in terms of knowledge of the sport they gamble on, and betting dynamics. These sorts of differences have created distinct classes of bettors within the youth gambling population, where the lower strata consult members of the highest stratum to maximise gambling success. This article suggests that, within what is known as a youth gambling population, a community of gamblers exists. This demonstrates the necessity to avoid or mitigate the tendency to treat the youth gambling population as a unified whole. The article also articulates important dynamics of sports gambling culture among young people and explains how the activity is perceived and encouraged among/within a gambling community.

**Keywords:** youth, sports gambling, punters, social networking sites, Nigeria

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### Introduction

Involvement in online sports gambling in Africa is rapidly increasing (Bitanihirwe et al., 2022), however the 'level of involvement' in the activity differs among individuals who gamble. Previous studies have categorised different types of gamblers based on their gambling routine or behaviour, focusing on the frequency of participation as one of the important indicators (Bitanihirwe & Ssewanyana, 2021; Holtgraves, 2009a; Holtgraves, 2009b; Ricijaš et al., 2016; Tabri et al., 2022; Welte et al., 2004). As such, the 'high' frequency of gambling has led to the labeling of regular gamblers as 'problem gamblers', which as a concept has received enormous criticism for its limited scope (Manitowabi & Nicoll, 2021). Indeed, individuals who engage in sports gambling activities differ not just in the frequency of play, but also in their 'autonomy of play' which is indicative of their preference of play, style of play, routine of play, expectation from play, and strategies adopted in play for instance (Adebisi et al., 2021a; Adebisi & Bunn, 2023). In what follows, I offer a classification of sports gamblers, based on gamblers' 'knowledge of play', defined as the level of knowledge of the sport they gamble on, as well as an adequate understanding of sports betting dynamics. This classification attempts to mitigate the tendency to treat youth gamblers as a unified whole, as well as recognising that, within what is known as the youth gambling population, a 'community of gamblers'

exists. Interestingly, within such a community, each category of gamblers could be socially constructed, such that one category is considered higher than the other.

Like many social networking activities, communities of gamblers primarily exist in online spaces, and the classification of bettors based on their knowledge of play is distinctly recognised in such spaces. Young people's involvement with Social Networking Sites (SNSs) is increasing and is expected to continue and thus will have consequences for how they engage with gambling (Adebisi et al., 2023; Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020)

### Discussion

Mirroring the 'social class structure', an elite category of sports gambling customers exists at the top of the stratum, who not only predict sporting outcomes to win money but also avail their predictions to other gambling customers (Savolainen et al., 2022). Such sports predictions are either commercialised or made available for free to members of their community, usually online (Sirola et al., 2021). The motivation for their gambling is unclear; however, it is hypothesised that such individuals, more often than not, gamble for social status, mirroring Maslow's top three needs: love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 2013). Using their perceived intellectual capital to become 'entrepreneurs of self' (Foucault, 2004), this category of individuals demonstrates a superior level of

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knowledge in the sports they gamble on, as well as an adequate understanding of betting nuances. They may conduct a fundamental analysis of the teams involved in their proposed bet, such as checking and analysing team 'stats' and head-to-head. They may likewise possess other relevant skill sets, including mathematical strategy (Arbitrage), and positive EV (Expected Value) sports betting, for instance. An entire enterprise is now being built around the commercialisation of sports betting predictions or forecasts, which has been operationalised as 'betting assistance' (Houghton et al., 2019), where the actors within this stratum are not only considered the most influential within a sports gambling community (González-Vallés et al., 2021) but also the most affluent.

In the Nigerian gambling scene, this category of bettors is notably referred to as 'punters' (Oladehinde, 2022). The concept has been socially reconstructed from its literal meaning to categorise the highest stratum of the youth sports gambling community in the country. While the title has been casually or intentionally used by gambling operators to describe their customers, as well as by researchers (Akpanung & Oko, 2021; Olweny, 2022), in Nigeria reaching the status of a 'punter' is the dream of many regular gamblers (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2021). Virtually all research conducted on the African gambling populations, and elsewhere, excludes the 'punter' category. Rather, the focus is mainly on the popular category of gambling customers who could be considered as the 'middle class'. Importantly, the use of elite, middle, or lower class, does not necessarily reflect gamblers' social class or economic power to gamble. The classification is rather based on young people's degree of involvement in sports betting, which is predicated on their level of understanding of the sports they gamble on, as well as a 'good' knowledge of sports betting dynamics, including markets, odds, and platforms.

Members of the 'middle class' are the most common; they are regular gamblers who may gamble for both physiological and safety needs (Aguocha & George, 2021; Binde, 2013). This category is the most susceptible to insidious gambling marketing (Carah & Brodmerkel, 2021; Deans et al., 2017; Griffiths et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2023), both from gambling brands and 'punters' (Houghton et al., 2019; Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2021), due to their expectations and recognition of gambling as a pathway to navigate economic hardship characterised by poverty, unemployment or underemployment. This category may possess a relatively limited ability to analyse the sports teams involved in a bet. It is, therefore, common for this stratum to seek betting

assistance from the 'elites' in their gambling community (Forrest & Simmons, 2000; González-Vallés et al., 2021; Houghton et al., 2019).

The 'lower class' within the Nigerian youth gambling scene may be referred to as 'proxy gamblers'; not in the sense of a gambling space or platform, but of their very limited knowledge of the sport they gamble on, and/or betting dynamics. It is important to note that not all football gamblers spectate football. Such individuals may have limited or no understanding of the sport and/or how to bet on a football match. They will often gamble by proxy by relying on the betting codes or tickets of others to place their bet, or simply ask a regular gambler to help them select a series of football games to bet on or patronise the services of online 'punters' offering betting assistance. Although their motivation is unclear, it is hypothesised that such individuals lack substantial agency to keep them away from such an activity they do not understand. Their gambling activities may as well be motivated by susceptibility to structural influences such as the commercialisation of sports gambling, particularly gambling marketing (Deans et al., 2017; Griffiths et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2023).

The activities of 'punters' in online spaces are increasing the engagement with sports gambling among young people. This may increase the susceptibility of 'proxy gamblers' to participate while encouraging the 'regular gamblers' to keep their hope alive (Owonikoko, 2020). 'Punters' leverage the opportunities presented by SNSs like Telegram and X (formally Twitter) to form online communities. X is popular in Nigeria. It is utilised for several purposes including: disseminating news, information seeking, and expressing personal opinions (Adebisi et al., 2021b; Boon-Itt & Skunkan, 2020). The country's active users is estimated at 4.95 million in early 2023 (Kemp, 2023), and the most followed 'punter' on Twitter has more than 1 million users in his community.

#### **Case Study of a Punter: Mr Bayo's status within the online sports gambling community.**

Bayo Adetona Ahmed, famously known as 'Mr Bayo' is arguably the most revered 'punter' in the Nigerian online football gambling space. He owns a website; [mrbayo.com.ng](http://mrbayo.com.ng) where bettors can access his football betting tips at a subscription fee. He also has an X presence; [@mrbayoa1](https://twitter.com/mrbayoa1), where he has built a community of bettors for himself. He joined the microblogging site in 2020 and has grown his X community to nothing short of a million followership in just three years; that is more than 20% of the active X users in the country. His 'Bio' reads "Gaming Lifestyle, Sports lover and a serial winner

in Football Betting. Don't play games you don't understand" The last statement in his 'Bio' is a call to responsibility, which admonishes bettors to do their due diligence when selecting games for a potential bet or to "follow who know road<sup>1</sup>", a phrase he has used himself.

Mr Bayo has thousands of tweets and most of them centre on football gambling tips, betting codes, and winning proofs. This aligns with studies (Deans et al., 2017; Wen et al., 2016) where online users normalise the sharing of betting options and positive outcomes with their online followers. Mr Bayo's pinned post, dated April 5, 2021, includes screenshots of his past winnings which he captioned "My recent big bags!! Be inspired 💰💰" (see Table 1).

Table 1 is not only indicative of how "good" Mr Bayo is with sports (especially football) betting, predictions, or

forecasts, but it also shows how affluent he has become as a result of his betting prediction skills. His pinned post alone shows a total of 89,753,602.38 Naira in winnings; that is \$116,155.80, with only \$588.80 (455,000 Naira) spent on the total stakes.

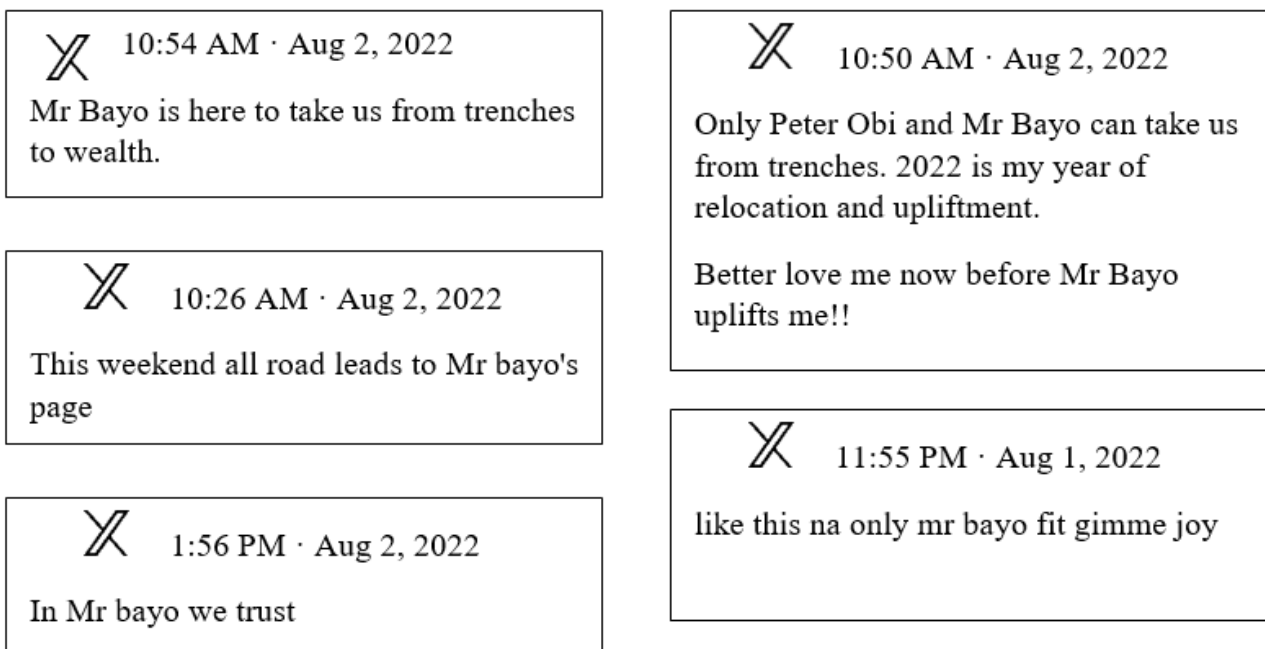
Mr Bayo is also popular for his philanthropic activities where he empowers young people with relevant skills acquisition schemes and cash gifts. He has trended on X – Nigeria several times. However, he began trending on the SNS in the opening week of the start of the 2022/2033 European football season, where many of his followers anticipated his forecasts and expressed hope in his ability to help them navigate harsh economic conditions. A few of the tweets are presented below (Figure 1).

**Table 1:** Mr. Bayo's pinned tweet

S/N	Betting Brand	Betting Code	Amount Staked in Naira (772.7/\$)	Betting Odds	Winnings in Naira (772.7/\$)
1	Bet9ja	B9Q5039147419KA-1018057	15,000	1731.48	31,166,720.39
2	Bet9ja	B9Q630712212YZ-1018057	50,000	399.30	24,956,311.00
3	Bet9ja	B9QH130414906HJ-1018057	20,000	641.19	15,388,625.75
4	SportyBet	818486	30,000	141.45	5,305,229.93
5	SportyBet	809808	60,000	78.85	6,625,046.29
6	SportyBet	130998	130,000	22.10	3,303,883.76
7	SportyBet	714045	150,000	15.42	3,007,785.26

Bonus on each bet not included

**Figure 1:** A few Tweets mentioning Mr Bayo during the opening week of the 2022-23 European League football season



<sup>1</sup> In order to follow who know road, one thing is needful; have your ears on the mouth of those who have achieved that milestone you are fighting so hard to achieve

## Conclusion

In this commentary, I have contributed a new conceptual framework to the existing gambling research literature. I have investigated the role of gambling knowledge in hierarchical online sports betting communities in Nigeria. Using the case study of an 'affluent' sports gambler with a large community following on X, I have illuminated different relationships to sports gambling embodied in the 'punter' and the 'proxy'. The extent and content of the tweets reveal important dynamics of online sports gambling culture among young people and how football gambling is perceived and encouraged among and within the youth gambling population. It is important to note that the prevalence of this gambling culture is void of betting brand (direct) marketing. This is to say that the youth gambling population markets gambling within itself. This is an important dynamic to consider when regulations are advanced around gambling marketing in Africa and elsewhere. Likewise, it is important to consider the different categories of gamblers based on the 'knowledge of play' in future youth gambling investigations, particularly in Africa where the activities of 'punters' seemingly have a relatively greater influence on other categories of bettors than that of the betting brands in terms of gambling marketing. Conclusively, while it has been established that regular gamblers gamble as a result of poverty, the pursuit of pleasure, the management of boredom, and proximity to online gambling spaces (Bitanihirwe et al., 2022), the drivers and motivations of 'punters' and 'proxy' gamblers should also be investigated and established.

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Tunde Adebisi is a PhD researcher at Ulster University. He is interested in Youth Culture and the key pathways, innovations, or strategies young people in Africa are developing or adopting to mitigate many challenges besieging their society. Probing the self-help activities of African youths may reveal important dynamics of youth culture in Africa. He has explored different aspects of youth culture in Africa. Amongst his research interests, football gambling is prime. He is currently focused on understanding the role and significance of football gambling in the lives of young Africans. He is the producer of a documentary series on 'Gambling Realities in Nigeria', as well as a co-conveyor at Gambling Realities Africa.