



Sports Betting And Gambling Problems Among University Student-Athletes

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ABSTRACT

The burgeoning sports betting industry, fueled by advancements in blockchain technology, has raised concerns about the prevalence of gambling problems among university student-athletes, prompting this study to investigate the extent and nature of sports betting problems within this demographic. The study aims to to investigate sports betting problems among university student-athletes. Data were collected from 118 student-athletes in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, aged between 16 and 40 years old, using the problem gambling severity index. Descriptive statistics of frequency counts and percentages were used to analyse demographic data and to answer research questions. The results of this study, among others, revealed that 55 student-athletes (46.6%) are non-problem sports bettors, while 15 student-athletes (12.7%) are problem sports bettors. Furthermore, 55.1% of the participants were males, while 44.9% of them were females. Also, more than one-third, 42.4% of the respondents were in 3rd and 4th year of study. Based on the findings, the researchers concluded that student-athletes experience sports betting problems, which comes with adverse consequences, therefore, it was recommended that the university management through its entrepreneur unit should create an appropriate enterprise to empower students financially.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sports betting has become a major component of the gambling industry, with university students becoming addicted with corresponding negative impacts on their mental, social and physical health and their academic performance. Etuk et al. [1] noted that the sports betting market profit has increased globally. The sports betting industry has experienced rapid expansion, reaching a global market value exceeding \$200 billion (United States Dollars) in 2023. While, in Great Britain, sports betting revenue from soccer is over 1.58 billion GBP [2]. Meanwhile, Business Day [3] reported that Nigerians invested roughly \$5.5 million daily in sports betting, totalling \$2 billion annually. These reports place Nigerian sports bettors as the second largest online gambling market in Africa, after South Africa.

The internet and mobile technology innovation advancement has contributed to the rapid growth of sports betting worldwide among young adults. Hence, online sports betting has

become the preferred means of placing bets among young adults, students inclusive. It was reported that since the advent of mobile application-based betting mediums, most students' sports betting has been influenced positively [4]. While elsewhere it was stated that the internet and social media platforms have made sports betting prevalent and socially acceptable among students [5].

Sports betting operators in Nigeria have increased tremendously in the past few years. As of January 2025, the National Lottery Regulatory Commission (NLRC) has licensed 72 sports betting companies to operate across the country, contributing to Government revenue through licensing fees and value-added tax [6]. It was reported by Nwaokolo [7] that roughly 60 million Nigerians engage in gambling daily as revealed by the Director General of the Cross River State, Nigeria Lottery and Gaming Agency.

Sports betting has become a regular activity among university students. Daniel et al. [8] observed that sports betting has gained significant traction among young people, with university

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students being particularly drawn to this activity. The alarming rate of student sports betting addiction is unprecedented. It was concluded by Eboh and Babatunde [9] that 67.5% of the students of Federal University Oye, Nigeria, engage in gambling. In his study, Koross [10] found out that 50% of Kenyan university students engage in sports betting at least once a week. Labrador et al. [11] reported that a significant proportion of Spanish students (42.6%) engaged in sports betting. Similarly, Njemanze et al. [12] revealed that a high proportion of young individuals in Ibadan, Nigeria, bet daily (50.7%) or weekly (42.9%). While, Daniel et al. [13] reported that out of the sample of 406 undergraduate students, 36.7% had participated in sports betting. Similarly, Afolayan et al. [14] revealed that a significant number of students at Osun State University, Nigeria, engage in sports betting. Daniel et al. [8] concluded in their global and Nigeria context study that youth between the ages of 15 and 30 years old are more disposed towards sports betting, and university students are within this age bracket.

University students are vulnerable to the attractiveness of sports betting due to their age, curiosity, and desire for financial gain. Di Censo et al. [15] stated that youth vulnerability towards sports betting makes them become risky bettors. It was revealed that a considerable number of students bet on sports, and most do so with their monthly income and some with their school fees [14, 16, 17]. Students/ youths are motivated to engage in sports betting due to various reasons. It has been identified that most sports bettors are motivated by money rewards, nevertheless, they believe that this is not something that could lead to addiction [18]. Similarly, [17] concluded that the history of winning money from sports betting was 78.7% among tertiary institution students. In Nigeria, it is contended that the primary drivers of gambling are financial gains motivated by greed, as well as socioeconomic factors such as unemployment, economic hardship, and poverty, which can potentially lead to criminal behaviour. Additionally, other lesser factors contributing to gambling include the desire for entertainment, passion for sports, and influence from peer groups [19]. It was observed that youth whose parents gamble will have a positive attitude towards gambling [20]. The approval of sports betting as depicted in the media, including television adverts, has lured many Nigerian students to engage in sports betting [14]. Knowledge of the sports was a key motivation for student-athletes sports betting engagement [21], and this could be an important factor because, as athletes, they will have extensive

knowledge of sports and the teams playing, which they believe may improve their potential for winning.

The university stage of life is an imperative part of the formation of an individual, which is marked by a significant increase in independence and leisure opportunities, which may be accompanied by problematic behaviours such as sports betting addiction. It has been noted that sports bettors are at high risk of developing problem gambling [22, 23]. In a reviewed report conducted on 72 studies carried out between 1987 and 2016 surveying 41,989 college students globally, it was discovered that 6.13% of the students were probable pathological gamblers while 10.23% were problem gamblers [24]. Gambling among students begins as a recreational pastime activity but later leads to problem gambling because of its economic activity such as monetary gain [25, 26]. University students have been reported to have risky and problematic behaviour towards sports betting [27, 28]. Similarly, it was revealed that excessive gambling results in economic and social problems among students [5]. Ssewanyana and Bitanihirwe [29] declared that problem gambling among youths is alarming and calls for concern, as it affects the most productive age bracket of the country.

Sports betting addiction among students can lead to gambling problems, which come with adverse consequences. It was asserted that university students worldwide are becoming problematic gamblers [24]. A report from Nigeria noted that many students of the University of Agriculture Umudike, Abia State and the University of Benin, Edo State, were unable to register for the 2023/2024 academic session because they spent their school fees on sports betting and lost out [30, 31]. It was noted that individuals with gambling problems have always been linked to suicidal intention and suicide [32]. A report from India narrated how a 21-year-old engineering student committed suicide by hanging himself after losing Rs 30,000 to sports betting [33]. Furthermore, it was affirmed that a 22-year-old student from the Catholic University of East Africa, Nairobi, Kenya, committed suicide after losing Ksh. 15,000 school fees on sports betting [34]. Similarly, it was reported that a final-year student of a Federal University in Nigeria committed suicide after losing money on sports betting [35]. Elsewhere, it was also reported that a 200-level student of Electrical Electronics in Ogun State, Nigeria, committed suicide after losing school fees to sports betting [36].

Previous studies have also reported that sports betting addictions come with corresponding negative consequences such as poor academic performance, absenteeism from school, school dropout, debt, mental issues such as depression, guilt, social withdrawal and impulse behaviour, suicidal intention, suicide, anxiety, stress, anger, fear and emotional worries [37-48, 4, 8, 13,14, 17]. Although few studies explore sports bettings impact on students from various perspectives, but to the best of the authors' knowledge, no study has comprehensively explored sports betting and gambling problems among university student-athletes in Nigeria. Despite the alarming negative consequence of sports betting on university student-athletes. This study seeks to explore sports betting and gambling problems among university student-athletes in Nigeria, providing a foundation for a follow-up study that will design and develop evidence-based preventive strategies tailored to the specific needs of this population, ultimately aiming to foster a culture of responsible sports betting and minimize the risks of associated harms.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Study Design and Setting

A cross-sectional study was carried out among student-athletes of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria.

2.2. Participants

The population for the study comprised 216 student-athletes that represented the University of Nigeria at the Nigeria Universities Games 2022 in Lagos, Nigeria. 55.1% of participants were male, while 44.9% of them were female. More than half (52.5%) of the participants were within the age range of 20-23 years. Also, more than one-third, 42.4% of the participants were in 300/400 level. Furthermore, more than two-thirds (69.5%) of the participants were living off campus.

2.3. Sampling

The researchers intended to use the total population (216); however, among the 216 students we approached to participate in the study, 118 (54.6%) accepted to be involved. We can suggest that the students who have decided not to participate in the study might be suffering from principles of the Declaration of Helsinki, prioritizing participant's rights and well-being in design, procedures, and confidentiality measures.

pathological gambling or having the fear of stigmatization, or even the confidence to face the topic may have caused their declined from participating in the study.

2.4. Study Instrument

The researchers adapted the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) to determine the student-athletes' prevalence of problem gambling [49]. The instrument was re-framed, and "gambling" and "bet" were changed with the words "sports betting" and "sports bet." The scale consists of nine items; four of the items measure difficulties in controlling gambling behaviours, while the other five items are connected with the negative impacts of gambling. The scale provides four response options, ranging from never (0) to almost always (3). It has a score range of 0–27 and classifies participants into four groups such as non-problem gamblers (score of 0), low-risk gamblers (score of 1–2), moderate-risk gamblers (score of 3–7), and problem gamblers (score of 8 or higher). This scale has been used by other researchers in Nigeria [50, 13, 51]. The scale validity and reliability have been ensured, with a Cronbach α of .91 [51].

2.5. Data Collection Procedure

The researchers met the student-athletes at the Sports council of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Following a briefing on the study's objectives, assurance of confidentiality, and obtaining informed consent, the research team personally distributed questionnaires to participants in Nsukka. Participants were instructed to provide honest answers, complete the questionnaire individually, and return it immediately to ensure a high response rate. However, out of the 216 student-athletes we approached to participate in the study, only 118 were willing to participate in the study, therefore, we collected 118 filled questionnaires. This study adhered to ethical guidelines and was granted permission by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria, and was deemed acceptable with a specific identification number: REC/FE/2024/00036. Participant provided informed consent, with the volunteer form covering research details, risks, benefits, confidentiality, and participant rights. The research strictly correspond to the ethical

2.6. Data Analysis

Statistical analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics software, version 23.0. Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to analyse the data.

3. RESULTS

Table 1 shows the result of the descriptive analysis of the demographic data of respondents. The table reveals that 55.1% of the respondents were males while 44.9% of them were females. Also,

Table 1. Demographic data of respondents

S/N	Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage %
1.	Gender		
	Male	65	55.1
	Female	53	44.9
	Total	118	100.0
2.	Age Range		
	16 - 19 years old	15	12.7
	20 - 23 years old	62	52.5
	24 - 27 years old	34	28.8
	28 - 31 years old	3	2.5
	32 - 35 years old	3	2.5
	36 - 40 years old	1	0.8
3.	Total	118	100.0
	Year of Study		
	100 Level	18	15.3
	200 Level	31	26.3
	300 Level, 400 Level	50	42.4
	500 Level, 600 Level	19	16.1
4.	Total	118	100.0
	Residence		
	School Hostel	36	30.5
	Off Campus	82	69.5
	Total	113	100.0

more than half (52.5%) of the respondents were within the age range of 20-23 years. It also revealed that more than one-third 42.4% of the respondents were in 300/400 level. Furthermore, the table revealed that more than two-third (69.5%) respondents were living off campus.

3.1 Problem Sport Betting

In analyzing the data obtained on problem sports betting, the total score, ranging from 0 to 27, was calculated by summing the 9 items, utilizing a 4-point Likert scale where 0 denoted "never" and 3 represented "almost always". The resulting scores were then categorized into four distinct levels: non-problem sports betting (score of 0), low-level sports betting (scores 1-2, indicating minimal negative consequences), moderate-level sports betting (scores 3-7, signifying some negative consequences), and problem sports betting (scores 8 and above, characterized by negative consequences and a potential loss of control).

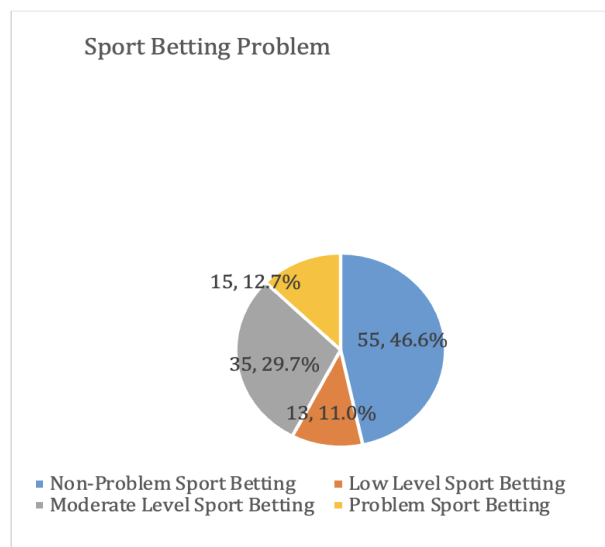


Fig. 1. Sport betting problem

Fig. 1 shows that of all the respondents, a total of 55 (46.6%) were non-problem sports bettors, while 13 (11.0%) were low level sports bettors. Furthermore, 35 (29.7%) were moderate sports bettors and lastly 15 (12.7%) were problem sports bettors.

4. DISCUSSION

This study explored sports betting problems among university student-athletes. The rate of university student sports betting addiction is alarming with many considered to be problem sport bettors. Consequently, affecting their physical, mental and social health, and academic performance. To the best of the authors' knowledge, the current study is the first to comprehensively examine sports betting problems among university student-athletes in Nigeria.

The findings of the study revealed that more than half of the respondents were male (55.1%), while 44.9% of them were female. These findings agree with previous studies among university students from the Czech Republic, Kenya, Ghana and Nigeria, respectively, whose respondents were more male than female [52, 53, 17, 54- 56]. Also, 52.5% of the respondents were within the age range of 20-23 years. These findings correspond with previous studies among college students in different parts of the world [17, 38, 57]. This findings maybe associated with cultural and socioeconomic factors.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that more than one-third, 42.4% of the respondents were in the 300/400 level. This finding is in line with previous studies from different jurisdictions among students in higher institutions of learning [58, 57], however, the findings were not congruent with the studies of Abdille and Wakhungu [17], whose majority of the respondents are in 100 and 200 level. Also, the majority of the respondents in Akinlotan [55] study are from the 200 and 300 level. The findings also discovered that more than two-thirds (69.5%) of respondents were living off campus. This finding is supported by the study of Kapukotuwa et al. [25], who revealed that 92.61% of the students sampled lived off campus, while 7.39% lived on campus.

The rate of problem gambling among young adults has raised serious alarm and pale debates for legislation, as it affects the most fruitful populace of every society [29, 59]. It was reported that sports betting participants seem to be higher risk individuals for developing gambling problems [23, 22]. While Mubarak and Blanksby [60] and Moore et al. [61] affirmed that college students have been identified as a high-risk population for developing

gambling problems. The present study's findings also show that 46% of the student-athletes are non-problem sports bettors, while 11.0% were low-level sports bettors. Furthermore, 29.7% were moderate sports bettors, and lastly, 12.7% were problem sports bettors.

The findings of the present study are similar to previous studies in different jurisdictions of the world. The study of Adu-Akoh et al. [54] among Ghanaian university students shows that non-problem gamblers are 53.8%. While low-risk gamblers record 2.8%, moderate-risk gamblers have 14.5%, and problem gamblers record 28.8%. Another study among university students in the US discovered that 4.3% of the students are suffering from problematic gambling [25]. Similarly, the problem gambling rate among sampled university students in Nigeria was 14.3% [13], 23% [62] and 51.3% [63]. The difference in these studies may be a reflection of different locations and cultural factors affecting the prevalence of problem gambling in Nigeria. Furthermore, the study of Kam et al. [64] found a prevalence rate of moderate-risk and problem gambling in the sampled young adult population. Another study from Italy shows that 8.7% of the sample students are suffering from problem gambling [47]. It was reported that the global problem gambling rate among university students is 10.23% [24]. It was noted that individuals with problem gambling problems have always been linked to suicidal intention and suicide [32].

The outcomes from this study can be used for designing problem gambling prevention/intervention programmes for university student-athletes to assist them in quitting betting or engaging responsibly. The study also underscores the importance of regulations and support services to deal with the adverse consequences of sports betting among university student-athletes. This study, like every other study is not without limitations. First, the sample size of the study and the use of one University for the study may affect the generalization of the results. Secondly, the use of cross-sectional study design was also a limitation in this study.

5. Conclusion

It has been proven that sports betting addiction negatively affects students physically, mentally, socially and academically. This study's findings show that the percentage of student-athletes with sports betting problems is more than the world percentage of university students with problem gambling. It also revealed that almost half of the student-athletes are non-problem sports bettors. Therefore, it was recommended that the

guidance and counselling units should carry out an informative campaign to reduce the degree to which students overestimate sports betting as a means to generate income and to organize problem-gambling prevention/intervention programmes for university students. Furthermore, the university management, through its entrepreneur unit, should create an appropriate enterprise to empower students financially. Also, concrete policy should be ensued, such as regulation of sports betting advertisement by gambling regulatory body in Nigeria.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. Furthermore, no financial assistance was received.

Ethics Committee

This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria. (protocol code REC/FE/2024/00036, approved on January 26, 2024).

Author contributions

Study Design, KIJ and OJA.; Data Collection, KIJ and OJA.; Statistical Analysis, OJA and KIJ.; Data Interpretation, KIJ and OJA.; Manuscript preparation, KIJ, TOI, MGA, and HAE.; Literature Review, TOI, MGA and HAE. All authors appraise the content of this study and agreed to published the final version.

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