

**FOOTBALL BETTING AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN ABAKALIKI, 1996-2020**

**Molokwu, Ubaka Cosmas**

Department of History and International Studies,  
University of Nigeria, Nsukka.  
cosmas.molokwu@unn.edu.ng

&

**Chukwuka Nwose**

Department of History and International Studies,  
Paul University, Awka.  
Chukwuka\_nwose@yahoo.com

&

**Anthonia Uju Alozie**

Department of History and International Relations,  
Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Ebonyi State.  
toniaalozie@gmail.com

**Abstract**

The business of gambling is as old as mankind. However, in the recent past decades the gambling industry has experienced an unprecedented rise and sophistication. In Nigeria, for example, the industry has evidently grown substantially in the last two decades. Though frowned upon, considered anti-social, and discouraged by the society in the past, it has, nonetheless, become popular culture, particularly, amongst the Nigerian youth today. There are corpora of studies on football betting in Nigeria. Most of them focused on the consequences, prevalence, pattern, and determinants among the different sub-population. The findings of the majority of these studies are biased, theoretical, and sentimental. This paper, therefore, examines the economic impact of football betting on the youths in Abakaliki, the Ebonyi State. To achieve the purpose of this study, primary and secondary sources were put to use while the historical analytical method was employed in the analysis of the data. The paper found that football betting, despite the danger associated with it, has contributed significantly to the economic engagement and empowerment of youths in Abakaliki. To this end, we recommend strict regulations and enforcement so as to mitigate the seemingly negative consequences associated with sports betting.

**Keywords:** Gambling, football betting, Youth, Abakaliki, Economic Engagement

**Introduction**

In recent times, football has become a major source of entertainment the world over. Audience data on major football tournaments such as the World Cup, UEFA European Championship, UEFA Nations League, Africa Cup of Nations, and Olympics, among others, support the supposition above. With the increased access to football matches via the internet and digital satellite television, football viewership and football betting has grown substantially the world over.

Gambling, particularly, football betting in the past two decades and a half, has gained the attention of youths and adults the world over. Studies revealed that gambling prevalence ranges from 78% in Finland, 76.9% in the USA, 73% in Britain, and 62% in Hong Kong.<sup>1</sup> In Nigeria, cyber football betting is a year-2000 phenomenon. Other forms of gambling, however, have existed from time immemorial, particularly polls and lottery. Most of those that participated in it were elderly persons and retirees. These categories of persons were treated with disdain because society viewed gambling as an anti-social activity. Consequently, it was discouraged,

particularly, by religious organizations (church) which warned members against the quest for quick wealth.<sup>2</sup> The narrative has, however, changed with the modernization and rebranding of gambling. It has become more attractive and captivating to adolescents, youths, and even the adults irrespective of educational status, religious creed, or sex.

The advent and penetration of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in Nigeria have prompted gambling activities to move from the old trend of physical or landed gambling to cyberspace gambling.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the gambling industry in Nigeria has grown substantially. Saidi and Oluwafemi note that every household in Nigeria has at least one member who gambles.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, football betting has become the most popular form of gambling in Nigeria today, particularly, amongst the youth.<sup>5</sup> It is estimated that over sixty million Nigerians between the age of 18 and 40 years spend one billion, eight hundred million naira daily on betting.<sup>6</sup> This translates to seven hundred and thirty billion naira annually. The exponential growth in the number of bettors is attributed to increased access to digital telephones, internet penetration, increased access to internet-enabled devices, among others.<sup>7</sup> It is imperative to note that football betting in Nigeria is organized around major European Leagues, examples of which are the English Premiership, Italian Serie A, Spanish La Liga, and German Bundesliga, among others.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, Nigeria has a huge fan base for these European Leagues. Olanyika and Fageyinbo note that as European Leagues continue to thrive in Nigeria, football betting will also continue to thrive, particularly, among the youth.<sup>9</sup>

It is worthy of note that gambling and football betting, in particular, has attracted the attention of scholars. Consequently, there are corpora of studies on sports and football betting in Nigeria. An attempt shall be made to review the relevant ones here. J. A. Lavojo, et al., examine sports gambling among youths in Taraba State with a view to identifying the various types of sports betting, factors that predispose youth to gamble as well as the consequences of gambling. This study revealed that peer pressure, poverty, and get-rich-quick-syndrome account as the major reason for youth involvement in gambling in their area of study. They also noted that youth's involvement in sports gambling has resulted in an increase in criminal activities in Taraba State.<sup>10</sup> The authors; however, fail to provide data to back their assertion of increased criminal activities resulting from gambling. On the contrary, the excruciating and deplorable socio-economic living conditions in the country account for the major reason youth engage in crime and not gambling as claimed by the authors.

C. T. Lungu, on the other hand, examines the concept, theories, types, dynamics, and consequences of gambling on students in Nigeria's educational institutions. The finding of this study is mixed; on the one hand, he notes that gambling provides employment for the youth and increases the social capital of those in the gambling business. On the other hand, he finds that gambling has led to an increase in crime and other delinquent behaviour among the youth.<sup>11</sup> The paper supports the thesis that football gambling provides a platform for youth to be economically engaged and empowered. One major shortcoming of this work, however, is the absence of evidence to back the assumption that gambling has a direct impact on the increased crime rate in the area of study.

In their contribution to the discourse, Saidi and Oluwafemi examine youth participation in gambling in Lagos State. Their findings revealed that unemployment is the major contributory factor to youth engagement in gambling. The income they earn from gambling, they noted, has contributed to enabling them to meet their spending needs as well as reduce their engagement in crime.<sup>12</sup> The authors highlight the contribution of gambling to youth economic empowerment, and debunks the assertion that participation in gambling leads to an increase in

crime rate. The author, however, did not examine in a comprehensive manner the way gambling contributes to the economic empowerment of the Nigerian youths.

Akinlosotu, et al., assess the reasons for betting, the various sports betting, the perception of betting, and the socio-economic contributions of sports betting in Edo State, Nigeria. The study revealed that the high rate of unemployment, the high tendency of taking a risk, and increased passion for sports, among others, as reasons for youth engagement in betting. They also note that the youth do not perceive gambling in a negative light; hence their increased participation of in gambling.<sup>13</sup> The paper affirms the narrative that gambling is becoming a popular culture among youth. One major limitation of this work is that it did not discuss the socioeconomic implications of youth engagement in gambling.

On their part, Chinwe & Ohiri examine the patterns, motivation, and effects of online football betting among youth in Southeast Nigeria. The study revealed that unemployment, peers, and family members influence the youth into football betting. They noted also that youth engaged more in football betting; and that economic reasons propel people into football betting.<sup>14</sup> This work is insightful as it revealed the prevalence, dynamics, and factors that propel people into betting. It, however, fails to discuss the economic impact of football betting among youths in the area of study.

Omanchi and Okpamem, on the other hand, examined the changing pattern of gambling, the emerging role of Information Communication Technology (ICT), and the implication of gambling among people in Benue State. They note that ICT application in gambling has created an avenue for gambling agents to be employed as well as increased the social capital of those in the business. They conclude that gambling is associated with crime and delinquent behaviour.<sup>15</sup> The authors, failed to provide data to support their assumption on the role of gambling in the prevalence of crime in the study area.

In “Patterns and Prevalence of Gambling Behaviour among Youth in South-West Nigeria: A Case Study of Oyo and Ekiti State,” Temitope investigated the pattern and prevalence of gambling behaviour among youths in Ekiti and Oyo State, Nigeria. The study reveals that football betting is the most popular form of gambling among the youth. He also found out that there is a relationship between financial strain and gambling behaviour. He notes that there is a significant relationship between depression and gambling.<sup>16</sup> It is sad to note that while economic hardship was noted as the major motivating factor for youth involvement in gambling, gambling instead of economic hardship was said to have contributed to an increase in crime in the area of study.

From the foregoing, it is observable that most of the studies above, however, focused on the prevalence, patterns and determinants of gambling in Nigeria, particularly among the youth, no study reviewed thus far has satisfactorily assessed how football betting has transformed itself into a major source of revenue to the government at all tiers, and a major source of economic engagement and empowerment for the millions of the unemployed and underemployed Nigerian youths in Nigeria and Abakaliki in particular. This gap is what this paper intends to fill.

### **History of Cyber Football Betting in Nigeria: An Overview**

Gambling has a long history in Nigeria. And has existed in diverse forms. Nigerian society viewed and considered gambling as an anti-social activity in the past, thus, it was discouraged, and gamblers were looked at with contempt and disdain. This narrative has changed. In fact,

gambling has become a popular culture in the last two or three decades, particularly, among the youth.

The gambling industry, over the years, in Nigeria, particularly, football betting, has grown significantly and has continued to witness growth in geometric proportion owing to the harsh socio-economic condition in the country engendered by massive corruption and mismanagement of public funds, increased internet penetration, increased access to internet-enabled devices, rebranding and modernization of gambling, among others. Football betting has become the new normal, and the most popular form of gambling in Nigeria today,<sup>17</sup> with over sixty million bettors that leveraged Nigeria's popular football culture.<sup>18</sup>

The origin of cyber football betting in Nigeria is linked to the establishment of Nairabet by Akin Alabi in 2009. Before then, betting pools, however, existed. The enactment of the National Lottery Act of 2005, the Lagos State Lotteries Law of 2004, the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), and the Taxes and Levies Act (1998) changed the gambling landscape in Nigeria. One major effect of these laws was that they paved way for the privatization of certain gambling sectors in the country. It should be noted, however, that prior to the enactment of these laws, certain laws existed that regulated gambling activities in the country; examples of such laws include: The Casino Taxation Act of 1965, and The Gaming Machines (Prohibition) Act of 1977, among others.<sup>19</sup>

Following the enactment of the National Lottery Act (2005) and the Lagos Lottery Act (2004), Akin Alabin, in 2009, established Nairabet.<sup>20</sup> Nairabet was the first football betting platform to operate a fully functional betting site; a site where bettors can deposit money, place a bet and make a withdrawal. In 2010, Dotun Ajagbile founded 1960bet. He introduced two innovative strategies into the Nigeria football betting space namely: the establishment of a “company shop spread” and a partnership portfolio. Consequently, its client base grew significantly.<sup>21</sup>

Following the successes recorded by Nairabet and 1960bet; Bet9ja was launched in 2012. The company leverages the 1960bet strategies. In addition, the company also introduced virtual betting into the Nigeria football betting landscape.<sup>22</sup> Today, there are over fifty indigenous and foreign football betting companies operating in Nigeria. The popular football betting platform patronized in Nigeria in no specific order include Parknbet, Plusbet, Skybetnaija, Surebet 247, Bet 365 Naija, Bet Colony, Loving Bet, Golden Bet, Supabets, Visabet, Merry Bet, Stakers Den, Bet 360, Bet 365, 1XBet, 368 Bet, 24H Bet, Apollo Bet, Bet at Home, 9jadollarbet, BetKing, Green Lotto, Nairastake, Sportybet, and Winnersgoldenbet, among others. While the major online betting site mostly visited in Nigeria include [www.9japredict.com](http://www.9japredict.com), [www.mybet9ja.com](http://www.mybet9ja.com), [www.winnersgoldenbet.com](http://www.winnersgoldenbet.com), [www.betcolonyafrika.com](http://www.betcolonyafrika.com), [www.parknbet.net](http://www.parknbet.net), [www.stakersden.com](http://www.stakersden.com), [www.kickoffbet.com](http://www.kickoffbet.com), [www.nairastake.com](http://www.nairastake.com), and [www.sportsbet.com](http://www.sportsbet.com), among others.<sup>23</sup> These football betting platforms are accessed online, on mobile phones, and in bet shops.

### **Football Betting and Youth Economic Engagement in Abakaliki, 1996-2020**

The area of the study, Abakaliki, is the capital of Ebonyi State. It is also the biggest city in the state. Ebonyi State is one of the six states created in 1996 by the General Abacha regime. The state shares a boundary with Benue State to the northwest, Cross River State to the east, Abia State to the southeast, and Enugu State to the northwest.<sup>24</sup> The state, according to the 2006 population census, has a total population of 2,176,947 while Abakaliki has a total population of 149, 683.<sup>24</sup> Abakaliki metropolis is delineated into six zones namely: Abakpa Market Area,

Kpiri Kpiri Area, Rice Mill Area, Hausa Quarters Area, Timber Shed Area, and New Layout Area.<sup>26</sup>

In spite of the huge human and natural resources potentials of the state, poverty, hunger, unemployment, malnutrition, illiteracy, disease, and lack of basic social amenities are prevalent and widespread. The state is the poorest state in the southeast geo-political, and the 4th poorest state in Nigeria with a poverty headcount of 79.76%,<sup>27</sup> with about 47.5% of urban households in Abakaliki being food insecure.<sup>28</sup> The unemployment rate in the state is also massive. Of the 1, 337, 032 labour force of the state, 40.3% are unemployed while 25.7% are underemployed.<sup>29</sup> This appalling socio-economic reality has propelled youths in Abakaliki into gambling and football betting in particular.

It is pertinent to note that football betting is a multi-million dollar industry and contributes to national development. A study revealed, in 2015, that the Italian football betting industry contributed \$35.273 million to the economy; Spain \$34. 882 million, France \$40.082 million.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the football betting industry in the United State of America is expected to sustain \$4 billion in direct employment revenue in terms of salaries, wages, benefits, and tips as well as provide \$7 billion indirect employment.<sup>31</sup> In Nigeria, the football betting industry is surging. The News Agency of Nigeria revealed that over 60 million youth aged between 18 and 34 years spend about 1.8 billion Naira daily on sports betting.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, the PWC noted that the gross gambling revenue in Nigeria, in 2018, was \$58 million, thus making Nigeria the second biggest gambling market in Africa after South Africa.<sup>33</sup> The Federal Government of Nigeria notes that the gambling industry is worth almost 2 trillion Naira, consequently, she targets 100 billion Naira yearly from the gaming and gambling industry, thus, she planned to acquire a Central Monitoring System for the industry in order to maximize regulations and plug financial leakages.<sup>34</sup>

It is instructive to note that the football betting industry contributes greatly to the Nigerian economy. With the country's recent hike in Value Added Tax (VAT) from 5.5% to 7.5%, it follows that for every 100 Naira bettor's stake, they will pay a VAT of 7.5 Naira to the Federal Government. With over 60 million youths placing bets daily, there is no doubt that their activity contributes greatly to the revenue generated by the government via VAT.

There are over fifty football betting companies currently operating in Nigeria. The increasing number of football betting firms means more direct and indirect job opportunities for Nigerians. Currently, there is an increasing need, and employment of youths with skills in digital marketing, programming, designing, hardware, and computer networking, among others in the betting industry. Apart from the revenue and job opportunities created by these footballs betting firms, their activities and operations greatly impact other sectors of the economy, particularly, the banking and telecommunication sector positively. These football betting firms partner with banks, payment gateway providers, and telecommunication companies. This partnership greatly boosts the activities of these sectors, thus, resulting in an increase in the profits margin accruable from the charges imposed on the betting companies.

Apart from job opportunities and income these football betting companies generate in Nigeria, some of them have had to partner with the government and organizations in order to aid the development of the country. For example, Bet9ja, in 2019, was the title sponsor of the Nigerian National League. The company also had a sponsorship deal with a popular reality programme - Big Brother Naija. 1XBet had a partnership with the Nigerian Football Federation and League Management Company.<sup>35</sup> Football betting, from the foregoing, has enormously contributed to



the country's development. Magnus Ekechukwu, the Deputy Director of Public Affairs, National Lottery Regulatory Commission affirmed this position, he notes:

The revenue obtained through sports betting that reaches government is returned to the society so that everyone benefits, whether they play lottery or not. We bring good projects to schools; we take to hospitals; we take to communities and so on. Therefore, the benefits cannot be easily quantified.<sup>36</sup>

In Abakaliki, our area of study, it is undoubtedly that football betting companies provide a platform for youth to be economically engaged. As noted earlier, unemployment, hunger, poverty, malnutrition, and food insecurity, among others, are prevalent and widespread in Abakaliki. With the dawn of democratic rule in Nigeria in 1999, the successive governments of the state have fashioned and implemented policies intended to address the appalling socio-economic situation of the state. It appears, however, that efforts from the government in addressing the excruciating and dehumanizing socio-economic living conditions of the *ndi* Ebonyi have not yielded the desired result. This is because government developmental policies have not been done in a consistent, comprehensive, and sustainable manner. Consequently, youths have taken to football betting as a panacea to their socio-economic woes.

There is no doubt that with the increasing number of football betting companies operating in Nigeria, with outlets in different states of the federation, Abakaliki, the Ebonyi State inclusive, numerous direct and indirect jobs opportunities have been created for the youths, consequently, reducing the number of unemployed persons in the metropolis. Apart from these Nigerian and Abakaliki youths that work directly with these football betting firms, the football betting companies also creates millions of jobs by inviting people to become their agents and own a betting shopping outlet. These outlets dot the nooks and crannies of streets in the Abakaliki metropolis. Undoubtedly, this provides a source of income and employment opportunities to shop owners. Most of these shop owners, interestingly, employ other people who man these shops for them, thus, creating more jobs for youth in Abakaliki. It should be noted that numerous youths are also engaged in support services to the betting shops outlet; they include those who fixed soft and hardware issues, those who service generators, fans, computers, and televisions, among others, used to power the betting shops. Similarly, in most of the betting shops visited, it was observed that the operators sell snacks, soft drinks, alcoholic beverages, sachet water, and cigarette of assorted brands, among others. This also provides them with additional income.

Many of the betting shop's outlet operators also operate football viewing centres. In the Abakaliki metropolis, there are numerous viewing centres operated by bet shop owners. These viewing centres are mostly patronized by youths. The majority of them are youths who monitor their bets. The operators of viewing centres charge fees which range from 50 to 100 Naira per match depending on the location and standard of the viewing centre. Miracle Nweze notes that during a peak period, he generates over 10,000 Naira per day from his viewing centres.<sup>37</sup> undoubtedly, these football viewing centre not only serves as a centre for entertainment but also a source of economic engagement and empowerment to their operators, most of whom are youths.

Football betting has also financially empowered numerous youth in Abakaliki. Evidence from fieldwork suggests that bettors win various amounts daily. An agent notes that bettors have won 2 million and 6 million Naira respectively from his bet shop.<sup>38</sup> The life of this impoverished young man who won 6 million Naira, will be significantly transformed if he

judiciously utilizes the money. The income generated through betting, undoubtedly, contributes to ameliorating their excruciating living condition. It is instructive to note that football betting not only provides a source of livelihood and income to the teeming unemployed youths in Abakaliki but to the underemployed and employed. These underemployed and employed youth uses the income from betting to augment the low salary and wages paid to them. Sadly, the salary paid to employees of the public and private sector in Ebonyi state is among the lowest in the southeast region and probably among the lowest in the country.

Many scholars, however, have criticized football betting on the ground that it is risky; and that many bettors have lost money through betting. Many also noted that it has created psychological problems for bettors, increased idleness, crime, and criminal activities among youths.<sup>39</sup> As a result, many have called for stringent measures while others called for a total ban on football betting.

As cogent and germane as this argument and the concern expressed are, it is important to note that everything in life is risky and a gamble. The risk in football betting is, however, a calculated risk; and mitigated by the bettor's decision often based on sound knowledge of football and research. MC Gowan (2014) and Hunt (2016) cited by Chinwe and Ohiri note that bettors are the best judge of their welfare, and that evidence indicates that people who gamble do so willingly and rationally. Thus, it will be unfair to ban gambling because of a few that cross the line in sports betting.<sup>40</sup> We also believe that the appalling and harsh living conditions youths are subjected to in Nigeria, should be responsible for youth engagement in crime and criminal activities, and not betting.

Similarly, the dehumanizing living condition of the youth occasioned by poverty, hunger, unemployment, and malnutrition, among others, should be seen as the major factors responsible for the psychological problems youth face and not betting. These factors that drove youths in their millions into betting should be addressed. This should be followed by strategic policies to ensure that the country benefits from the global billion dollars sports betting industry as football betting has come to stay in Nigeria. Magnus Ekechukwu, Deputy Director, Public Affairs of the Nigeria Lottery Regulatory Commission reaffirmed this notion; he notes:

Lottery and gaming companies are here to stay. No country is an island, so it cannot isolate Nigeria (sic) from what is happening in other parts of the world. Sports betting have come to stay, it's a global phenomenon, it is happening all over the world and people are participating in it. And countries also benefit income from it to help themselves in their development projects.<sup>41</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The paper examined how football betting contributes to youth's economic engagement and empowerment in Abakaliki. The paper reveals that gambling, which hitherto, was considered anti-social activities, engaged mostly by adults and retirees has become main stream (popular) culture in Nigeria today, particularly, among the youth irrespective of educational status, gender, and religious creed. The paper submits that football betting has significantly contributed to the revenue of the government via tax and VAT imposed on betting companies and bettors. The operations of these companies also affect sectors like banking and telecommunication positively too. This is in addition to the numerous direct and indirect jobs created by these football betting companies.

We note that football betting companies and football betting, in the face of massive and widespread hunger, poverty, unemployment, and underemployment, have provided numerous direct and indirect employment opportunities for youth in Abakaliki, the Ebonyi State capital. It is imperative to note that football betting companies not only provide jobs for the hopeless teeming unemployed youth, but they also provide an avenue for many youths to escape poverty by stalking and winning a bet. We note that there may be challenges associated with betting. We, however, recommend strict regulations and their enforcement so as to mitigate the seemingly negative consequences associated with football betting.

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