

THE CONVERSATION

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How bookies play with your emotions to make you place unlikely bets

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Don't trust your emotions. Play Among Friends Paf, CC BY

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I first became aware of football “in-play” TV betting adverts around three years ago. In the first campaign of its type, Ray Winstone urges viewers to “bet in-play now” on the website Bet 365, by offering the odds on specific bets during high-profile football matches.

Bet 365 are the innovators of in-play betting, which lets you bet on football matches in real-time – a high frequency and potentially dangerous form of gambling. But traditional high street bookmakers are also in on the act, advertising similar bets in their shop windows and online.

Having transitioned out of a career as a professional online poker player (and back into academia), I resolved to learn everything I could about sports betting from observing the patterns in bookies’ advertising.

The smartest players

In poker it’s imperative to observe the best players in action and learn everything you can from them. Otherwise you risk becoming extinct – the predatory nature of the game is so fierce. In sports betting, however, the bookies are the smartest players in town; their long-run profitability is testament to that.

I set out to investigate the patterns in bookies' advertising over the 2014 World Cup. The results, published in the journal *Judgment and Decision Making*, show clear and consistent patterns in bookies' advertising. Whether they were advertised on TV or in their shop windows, a pattern of advertising that encourages you to make risky bets (in terms of their probability) that sound plausible (to your emotions) was evident across all bookmakers – online and on the high street.

For a single match, the average loss a punter will make will vary from a low of 3% to a high of 30%, depending on what type of bet they put on. With accumulator bets, which combine bets across separate matches, average losses are even higher. Of course, it is in the bookies' interest to get you to make more risky bets – they have higher odds, but your chances of winning are much lower.

Betting 'in-play'

Bets on the match result (whether there'll be a home win, an away win, or a draw) are competitively priced between bookies and have low average losses. But more complicated bets on various match events such as the first goalscorer, the correct scoreline, or "scorecasters" – a bet on the first goalscorer and the correct scoreline – have much higher average losses.

These complicated bet types dominated advertising during the World Cup. And it's worth noting that betting companies spend around £150m a year on television commercials, with gambling now accounting for 4.1% of all TV advertising – and this figure increases significantly during football matches.

"Give your opponent the chance to make mistakes" is a basic piece of advice given to poker players. But bookies' advertising showed a much deeper level of sophistication than that. Bookies appear to strategically target specific bets that people will like better than they should.

Many years of research in behavioural science has shown that people greatly overestimate the probabilities of "representative" complex events. This means that complex events can seem more probable than they really are if they trigger feelings or emotions of likelihood – that these events are representative of an average occurrence.

For example, when flipping a fair coin, the specific five throw sequence of H-T-H-T-T seems more likely than the sequence of H-H-H-H-H, but they are exactly as likely. The first sequence seems representative of an average set of throws, while the latter sequence seems more likely from a coin biased towards heads. But these two sequences have equal probabilities of happening.

Advertising campaigns

My study of bookmakers during the World Cup found that their advertising was similarly geared towards representative events. Bets would tend to offer the odds on likely goalscorers scoring the first goal, favourite teams winning by high scorelines, or both. By offering bets such as "Thomas Müller to score first and Germany to win 3-1", bookies advertised bets that offered odds of up to 100-to-1, seemed likely to happen, but which actually offer poor value to gamblers.

The same pattern held across the industry, and is consistent with bookies advertising in a way that exploits this bias in our probability judgement. These patterns have held up in my observations over the 2014-2015 football season too (though I've not done an academic study of them) – the frequency of TV in-play betting adverts has dramatically increased, with almost all the major bookies now in on the game.

Gambling is a part of our culture, and I would be the last person to suggest taking that freedom away. But the professional poker community at least maintains a certain ethical code, and while bookies pay lip-service to promoting responsible gambling, their actions speak louder than words.

You can't watch a football match these days without being bombarded by betting adverts, and you can bet that if bookies are making such large investments in advertising, then they must be profiting handsomely.



Gambling **Football** **Betting** **Sports betting** **behavioural science**