

Sports betting: How in-play betting features could be leading to harmful gambling

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

With the rapid convergence of the gambling and technology spheres over recent years, sports betting has become more accessible, more customizable and more complex. Gone are the days where punters were limited to betting on the winner or loser of a match, and could only do so before the match started.

The rise of in-play [sports](#) betting now provides the public with countless betting opportunities based on the "micro-events" that occur throughout a sporting event. Such opportunities or "micro-bets" could include wagering who gets the next yellow card in a football match, or who wins the first set in a tennis match.

The websites and apps that offer in-play bets are equipped with a [vast array of features](#) that [are marketed](#) as being advantageous, informative and convenient to bettors. These include statistics boards that display real-time match and player information, an embedded live stream of the sporting event, and the ability to swiftly deposit funds into your betting account.

Despite being marketed positively, [recent research](#) indicates that these in-play betting features are comparable to those of highly addictive fixed-odds betting terminals—electronic slots or gaming machines, often referred to as "pokies."

The most harmful features of fixed-odds betting terminals include fast outcome frequency (the short time interval between bets) and the ability to multiply bets. Similarly, in-play betting offers a fast outcome frequency through the almost infinite amount of micro-bets that can be placed, while bets can be multiplied through "accumulators."

So when coupled with the [stress and emotional investment](#) that we know sports bettors experience, these [product features](#) could well lead to harmful [gambling](#).

Our [latest research](#) aimed to assess the effects of in-play betting features upon bettors' levels of frustration, impulsivity, emotional outbursts and aggression while gambling. These behaviors are encompassed by the term "[tilting](#)" in the gambling world.

What we did

A sample of 225 sports bettors from the UK took part in our study. They were assessed using an online questionnaire that measured tilting episodes, awareness of tilting, gambling harm and in-play betting feature preferences.

We found that a small minority of sports bettors are aware of their tilting and the harm that is associated with it. But the results also indicated that there is a much larger group of sports bettors who are not aware of how much they actually "tilt" when gambling. Overall, higher instances of the behaviors we characterize as tilting were associated with higher rates of gambling harm.



Credit: cottonbro studio from Pexels

Those who displayed the highest levels of frustration and emotional outbursts when gambling (tilting) used the instant cash deposit feature the most and deemed it the most important feature during their gambling sessions.

Previous research has shown that the ability to instantly deposit funds can be [a catalyst](#) for harmful gambling behaviors. Theoretically, when sports bettors begin to become frustrated and emotional in response to losing money, this feature allows them to instantly replenish their lost money to place more reckless, desperate and impulse-driven bets.

Other features that were used often and favored by participants who reported the most frustration and emotional outbursts were information-based features. These include the statistics board, embedded livestream, and other live updates that are hosted on in-play betting websites and apps.

Previous [research](#) has suggested that information-based product features may facilitate illusions of control by leading sports bettors to overestimate the advantage these features offer.

Generally speaking, most tasks and activities will be carried out in a more harmful manner when someone is aggravated or stressed. For example, road rage can lead to [poorer quality driving](#). Shopping while upset may lead to higher rates of [impulse buying](#).

Likewise, our research indicates that gambling while emotionally frustrated is associated with more harmful gambling—and these in-play betting features appear to be exacerbating the problem.

So what can we do?

Sports bettors would likely benefit from being able to identify their own tilting behaviors to more safely disengage. But the [cyclic nature](#) of in-play betting product features makes this particularly difficult. Industry slogans like "just stepping away" or "stop when the fun stops" are often deemed to be [misguided and tokenistic](#).

Rather than focusing on interventions that put the responsibility on the consumer, more academic and regulatory attention should be paid to the responsible design of sports betting product features. This issue often transcends the personal control of the bettor. In other words, if a product is [designed in a way](#) that makes it inherently harmful, it is practically impossible for consumers to engage with it "responsibly."

To reduce gambling-related harm within sports betting, we need to see regulatory reform around product design from a public health perspective. The product features associated with sports betting are not immutable and can be easily modified by the industry. This might mean limiting how quickly bettors can replenish their lost funds, or limiting the amount of money they can deposit following consecutive losses.

With the review of the [2005 Gambling Act](#) approaching, it's vital that tighter controls are placed upon the emergent product features associated with sports betting. If left unchecked, these features will continue to transform sports betting into a [more harmful](#) form of gambling.

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