

Random Variables

- The outcome of an experiment need not be a number, for example, the outcome when a coin is tossed can be ‘heads’ or ‘tails’.
- However, we often want to represent outcomes as numbers.
- A ***random variable*** is a function that associates a unique numerical value with every outcome of an experiment.
- The value of the random variable will vary from trial to trial as the experiment is repeated.
- Numeric values can be assigned to outcomes that are not usually considered numeric.
- For example, we could assign a ‘head’ a value of 0, and a ‘tail’ a value of 1, or vice versa.

Random Variables

There are two types of random variable - discrete and continuous. The distinction between both types will be important later on in the course.

Examples

- A coin is tossed ten times. The random variable X is the number of tails that are noted. X can only take the values $\{0, 1, \dots, 10\}$, so X is a discrete random variable.
- A light bulb is burned until it burns out. The random variable Y is its lifetime in hours. Y can take any positive real value, so Y is a continuous random variable.

Discrete Random Variable

- A discrete random variable is one which may take on only a countable number of distinct values such as $\{0, 1, 2, 3, 4, \dots\}$.
- Discrete random variables are usually (but not necessarily) counts.
- If a random variable can take only a finite number of distinct values, then it must be discrete.
- Examples of discrete random variables include the number of children in a family, the Friday night attendance at a cinema, the number of patients in a doctor's surgery, the number of defective light bulbs in a box of ten.

Continuous Random Variable

- A continuous random variable is one which takes an infinite number of possible values.
- Continuous random variables are usually measurements.
- Examples include height, weight, the amount of sugar in an orange, the time required to run a computer simulation.