

From fun to financial ruin: Exploring the criminological aspects of online gambling

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Abstract: This study investigates the lived experiences and criminological dimensions of online gambling among Filipino individuals in Zamboanga del Sur. Guided by a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research explored four key areas: (1) the participants' experiences with online gambling, (2) its effects on their quality of life, (3) how they coped with its consequences, and (4) the policies that may be proposed to mitigate its impact. Informants were purposively selected from police reports, barangay referrals, and school guidance offices, ensuring that only individuals with verified gambling-related issues were included. Thematic analysis of interviews revealed fifteen emergent themes. Online gambling typically began through social and digital influences, with Facebook ads, vloggers, and peer recommendations as key exposure points. Initial emotional highs and perceived rewards sustained their engagement, eventually evolving into habitual and unstructured gambling routines. As financial losses accumulated, awareness of addiction increased, but many remained trapped due to platform accessibility, false hope, and mental strain. Participants experienced emotional instability, relationship conflicts, and disruption of work or school performance. Financial instability forced some to pawn personal items, borrow excessively, or neglect basic needs. While recovery efforts were often self-initiated, professional help was rarely sought. Coping strategies included deleting apps, shifting to new routines, reconnecting with family, and relying on faith. The study's findings were anchored in Routine Activity Theory, General Strain Theory, and Social Learning Theory, highlighting how environmental exposure, emotional strain, and peer influence contribute to gambling behavior. It is recommended that interventions include digital platform regulation, financial literacy programs, school-based prevention efforts, and community-based counseling services that are accessible and affordable. Ultimately, this study points out that it takes a multi-sectoral response to address the rising harm of online gambling and safeguard vulnerable individuals.

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Introduction

In recent years, online gambling has rapidly grown into a global phenomenon, attracting millions of users through its accessibility, anonymity, and promise of instant rewards. Marketed as an entertaining and potentially profitable pastime, online gambling has become particularly appealing to younger, tech-savvy individuals. However, what begins as recreational fun can often spiral into a compulsive behavior with serious consequences. The ease with which people can place bets anytime, anywhere has transformed gambling into a high-risk activity that can have profound impacts on mental health, personal relationships, and financial stability (Harris 2021).

While much of the existing literature has emphasized the psychological drivers of gambling addiction, such as compulsive tendencies, thrill-seeking behavior, and escapism, there is an urgent need to explore how addiction to online betting can lead individuals toward criminal behavior. As people fall deeper into addiction, they may exhaust their resources, prompting them to engage in unlawful acts such as fraud, theft, or cybercrime to sustain their gambling habits (Sirola et al. 2021). The role of online betting platforms in enabling, facilitating, or even promoting such behaviors is a critical area of concern. Current regulations in the Philippines are relatively lax, particularly when compared to stricter legal environments in other countries (Lamoste 2020), allowing many foreign-based gambling platforms to operate with minimal oversight (Ko et al. 2024). The PNP arrested 1,245 e-sabong suspects in 2023, and as of February 2024, 789 operations had been reported. This demonstrates the proportionate rise in online gambling activity.

Despite growing awareness of the harmful effects of online gambling, there remains a significant gap in criminological research, particularly in localized and rural contexts. Most studies tend to focus on urban populations or general psychological profiles of addicted gamblers, neglecting the unique socio-economic conditions and cultural factors that influence addiction in less-studied areas. In provinces such as Zamboanga del Sur, the lack of empirical, experience-based data limits the development of effective, region-specific interventions. This absence of context-aware research leaves local communities vulnerable, with limited resources to address the growing problem (Sirola et al. 2021).

This study sought to address the gap in understanding the consequences of online gambling addiction by employing a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of individuals suffering from this addiction in Zamboanga del Sur. By conducting in-depth interviews with participants, the research would examine the multifaceted impacts of online gambling, including emotional, financial, and criminological consequences. The study aimed to reveal the complex ways in which online gambling environments contribute to harmful behaviors, such as financial ruin, emotional distress, and criminal activities. By capturing the voices of those directly affected, the research aims to provide policymakers, mental health professionals, law enforcement, and community organizations with valuable insights, urging the development of targeted intervention strategies to address the growing problem. In doing so, the study not only enhances our understanding of the intersection between digital addiction and crime but also sheds light on how the unique socio-economic conditions of rural areas, such as Zamboanga del Sur, influence these issues. This research thus contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges posed by digital addiction, with implications for both local and national policy.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the coping strategies and lived experiences of Filipino online gamblers in Zamboanga del Sur. Phenomenology was deemed appropriate as it seeks to capture the essence of lived experiences and the meanings individuals ascribe to them, thereby allowing the researcher to understand how participants navigate the challenges associated with online gambling. As emphasized by Alipoyo (2022) and Bacroya and Aranjuez (2025), phenomenology values the perspectives of individuals as they make sense of their realities. Through this approach, the research aimed to reveal the emotional, economic, and social struggles that stem from online gambling addiction while also uncovering the resilience, coping mechanisms, and adjustments made by the participants. The phenomenological framework ensured that the study moved beyond surface-level descriptions, providing a deeper understanding of the criminological and human dimensions of online gambling in the local context.

The research was conducted in Zamboanga del Sur, a province identified with increasing incidents of online gambling, making it an appropriate setting to study the phenomenon. Ten (10) participants were purposively selected, all of whom had experienced adverse consequences of online gambling and were identified through referrals from the police, barangay, and school guidance offices. The participants were considered information-rich cases capable of offering detailed insights into the consequences of online gambling. Data were gathered using a semi-structured interview guide, which was validated by experts in criminology and qualitative research to ensure clarity, relevance, and sensitivity to the topic. The guide was divided into three major sections focusing on participants' experiences with online gambling, its impact on their quality of life, and their coping strategies. Interviews were conducted safely and confidentially, with consent obtained beforehand, and were supported by field notes and audio recordings to ensure accuracy and richness of data.

For data analysis, the study employed Thematic Analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-step framework, as cited in Alipoyo (2022). This involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, identifying and refining themes, and constructing a narrative report supported by direct participant quotations. Themes were systematically drawn to highlight patterns in participants' experiences, coping mechanisms, and perceptions of online gambling addiction. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the research process. Participants were provided with informed consent forms, confidentiality was ensured through anonymization and secure data storage, and individuals retained the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. To uphold data privacy, digital files were permanently deleted after transcription, and hard copies were destroyed following the completion of the study. These measures guaranteed both methodological rigor and the ethical integrity of the research.

Results and discussion

This section presents the analysis of the data gathered through in-depth interviews with those addicted to online gambling who served as informants of the study. The data analysis utilized in the study was the thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke, as cited in the study of Alipoyo (2022). The presentation is sequenced based on the statement of the problem, with the essence and implications presented at the end.

In this descriptive phenomenological study, the data were analyzed using thematic analysis that emphasizes the participants lived experiences. The researcher carefully engaged in the process of horizontalization, where every statement shared by the informants during the in-depth interviews was treated with equal value. All relevant data were then recorded and transcribed verbatim from the audio recordings to ensure accuracy and authenticity. Through this approach, a thorough record of the informants' words and actions was preserved, reflecting the depth and essence of their experiences.

The next phase involved identifying significant statements from the transcriptions that directly related to the phenomenon of those addicted to online gambling. These statements were meticulously reviewed to ensure they captured the essence of the participants' experiences. Each statement was then clustered into meaningful units, grouped according to shared themes and ideas. By maintaining a focus on the participants' unique perspectives, the researcher constructed a detailed depiction of the phenomenon while discarding redundant or irrelevant information.

Through imaginative variation, the researcher sought to uncover the underlying meanings and essences of the experiences shared by the participants. This process involved examining the data from multiple perspectives, exploring different contexts, and considering varying dimensions of the phenomenon. Themes and patterns that emerged were integrated into a composite description, encapsulating the essence of the experience of online gambling addiction.

These fifteen emergent themes are formulated as answers to the sub-problems and are summarized as follows.

Experiences of informants in online gambling

The responses to the interview established the lived experiences of informants in online gambling. Five emerging themes were discovered in the study, such as social and digital influences spark gambling initiation, perceived rewards and emotional highs sustain gambling, online gambling becomes a habitual, unstructured routine, awareness grows when losses exceed perceived control, and platform choice is driven by profitability and accessibility. The following terms were covered comprehensively below:

Social and digital influences spark gambling initiation

This theme explores how the online gambling journey often begins through the influence of peers and social media exposure. Participants

admitted that their first encounter with online gambling was not intentional but was heavily influenced by people around them. Participant 1 shared, “My friend told me to try the game because there was a big chance of winning. Out of curiosity, I tried it (SS1, P1).” This statement shows how peer encouragement, coupled with the lure of easy money, plays a key role in breaking initial resistance to gambling. Social media platforms, especially Facebook, played a significant role in the initiation of gambling for many participants. For instance, participant 2 recalled, “It appeared on Facebook while I was scrolling (SS21, P2).”

Another said, “I saw bloggers on Facebook winning big amounts (SS41, P3).” These statements illustrate how gambling-related content appears passively yet frequently on users' feeds, promoting the illusion that big winnings are normal and attainable. This digital exposure conditions users to perceive gambling as a risk-free and rewarding activity, which encourages them to engage even if they did not intend to beforehand. Friends' personal stories of winning also served as powerful motivators. Participant 4 noted, “I was influenced by my friend who won. He told me to play because he won big (SS64, P4).” This reflects how social circles act as informal promoters of gambling, framing it as a shared opportunity rather than a potential risk. Similarly, participant 6 added, “On Facebook, you see people winning big, and it makes you want to join (SS105, P6).” These examples reinforce the idea that perceived peer success significantly contributes to gambling initiation, especially when amplified by social media. Digital accessibility further removes barriers. As participant 7 stated, “There were so many posts on Facebook, with links below, and I clicked because they had won (SS124, P7).”

With gambling apps and platforms only a click away, impulsive decisions become easier to make, particularly for those curious or hopeful for a quick win. The combination of personal influence, compelling digital content, and effortless access sets the stage for users to enter gambling with little to no awareness of its potential consequences. This theme reveals how gambling initiation is often not a planned act but the result of a persuasive digital and social ecosystem that glamorizes risk while concealing long-term harm.

Online gambling initiation is often fueled by peer influence, where individuals are lured into play through friends' suggestions or observed behavior. Research repeatedly demonstrates that adolescents are particularly susceptible to such social contagion, where behaviors and

norms spread through peer networks (Parrado-González et al. 2023; Russell et al. 2018; Sirola et al. 2021; Yip et al. 2017). For example, a longitudinal study found that perceived peer approval and personal susceptibility to peer pressure significantly predicted gambling initiation (Parrado-González et al. 2023). Likewise, qualitative evidence highlights how participants joined gambling because friends vouched for its legitimacy or potential for winning. This dynamic aligns with peer-based models of risk behavior, where personal experimentation is often socially driven rather than intentional.

Perceived rewards and emotional highs sustain gambling

There are captures about how early wins and the emotional gratification bring reinforce continued gambling behavior. Participants consistently expressed that their first encounters with online gambling were marked by excitement and minor or major wins that made the experience enjoyable and seemingly worthwhile. Participant 1 shared, “At first, I won a little, but I enjoyed it. That’s why I kept playing (SS2, P1).” Participant 2 echoed this, saying, “because I won, I just kept playing (SS22, P2).”

These wins, though sometimes small, created an emotional reward loop that fueled repeated engagement. For many, initial wins were not only emotionally satisfying but financially impactful, intensifying the motivation to continue gambling. A participant stated, “My first 10 pesos bet won 2,000 pesos (SS42, P3).” Another followed with an even larger win: “I deposited ₱500 and won ₱12,000, so I started playing every day (SS66, P4).” These extraordinary returns, though rare, gave players a false sense of control and success, prompting them to continue gambling daily in pursuit of the same outcome. Participants also revealed that the perceived possibility of large winnings served as a powerful psychological motivator. “Because you can win big amounts (SS87, P5),” reflected the deeply rooted hope that gambling could lead to sudden wealth.

Similarly, “I hoped to win big because I won the first and second time, so I kept on winning (SS106, P6).” The combination of occasional success and the emotional high of winning built an illusion that gambling was a reliable means of financial gain. This perceived success also translated into lifestyle satisfaction, reinforcing gambling as a means to fulfill personal desires. One participant noted, “I kept playing because I was winning and could buy what I wanted... I was motivated thinking I could get rich (SS146, P8).” Another summed it

up: “After winning big, I continued playing because I thought I could win again (SS186, P10).” These statements show how early wins fuel false hopes and emotional highs that sustain gambling behavior, blurring the line between fun and dependency.

Early small or large wins often act as powerful reinforcements that sustain gambling behaviors by triggering emotional highs and false beliefs of control. Empirical studies confirm the “big win effect,” where initial successes significantly increase subsequent gambling engagement and spending (Immunize Nevada 2024; Edson et al. 2023; Tan 2025; Sirola et al. 2021; Bolat et al. 2025). For instance, even modest early wins can induce overconfidence and optimism bias, giving players a warped sense of skill or luck (New York Post, 2024). Behavioral models, such as operant conditioning and reinforcement learning, explain that satisfiers like a win, increase the likelihood of repeating the behavior (Iyer et al. 2020). Combined, these psychological mechanisms explain why many gamblers chase the emotional high of wins (Edson et al. 2023; Bolat et al. 2025; Sirola et al. 2021).

Online gambling becomes a habitual, unstructured routine

This reflects how participants’ gambling behaviors evolved into daily patterns that consumed their time, disrupted sleep, and replaced normal routines. Many described gambling as an activity they engaged in every day without breaks. One participant shared, “I play every day, seven days a week (SS126, P7).” Another echoed, “I play almost every day (SS67, P4).” These statements show that what may have started as occasional play quickly became a persistent habit embedded in daily life. Participants also reported a lack of structure in their routines, with gambling occupying random and extended hours, especially at night. One said, “I kept gambling all night, and it became a routine (SS187, P10).”

Another stated, “I barely sleep anymore because I keep playing, thinking I’ll win (SS44, P3).” These accounts highlight how gambling not only disrupted participants’ circadian rhythms but also replaced essential activities like sleep and rest, further embedding the habit into their lifestyle. The habit was often justified by beliefs in “golden hours,” or specific times when winning was supposedly more likely. One participant said, “There’s a so-called ‘golden hour’... so I play during those times (SS165, P9).” This belief added a perceived structure to the otherwise unregulated habit, encouraging players to

organize their day or night around gambling sessions. Yet, instead of creating a healthy structure, it reinforced dependency and preoccupation, reducing time for work, family, and self-care.

Moreover, the emotional grip of gambling made participants prioritize it above relationships and responsibilities. One participant reflected, “There wasn’t a day I didn’t play, even on Sundays (SS107, P6).” Another added, “I played every day, I only slept for 2 hours, then played again (SS23, P2).” These narratives illustrate how the behavior evolved into an uncontrollable daily cycle, often unstructured and driven by compulsion rather than conscious choice. This theme underscores the dangerous shift from entertainment to addiction, marked by a loss of time, health, and balance.

Across multiple studies, online gambling is shown to foster habitual and compulsive behavior due to its ease of access and high-frequency engagement. The constant availability of gambling via mobile devices allows users to engage at any hour, reinforcing automatic patterns of use (Hong et al. 2019; CUHK Business School 2024; Karger 2025; Investopedia 2025). Research on mobile gambling indicates that intermittent reward scheduling and the “snacking” nature of app-based play contribute to persistent engagement even when real monetary rewards cease (Karger 2025). According to behavioral theories of automatization, repeated actions, such as nightly gambling sessions, become ingrained in everyday routines, making change increasingly difficult (Sirola et al. 2021; Hong et al. 2019; Karger 2025). This habitual pattern persists unless confronted by intentional disruptions or interventions.

The effects of online gambling on individuals’ quality of life

Gambling triggers emotional instability and mental strain

This theme captures how prolonged and excessive online gambling deeply affects a person’s psychological and emotional well-being. For many participants, gambling was not just a financial burden; it became a source of constant stress, anxiety, and mental exhaustion. As one participant stated, “It’s stressful, especially when I lose (SS8 P1).” Another added, “I get upset and sometimes misbehave at home (SS9 P1).” These initial signs of irritability and mood swings were only the beginning of deeper emotional disturbances caused by addiction. Over time, emotional distress worsened as losses accumulated and debts piled up. The weight of owing money became unbearable for many, triggering depression and avoidance. One participant shared, “I

became depressed because I always lost. I started hiding because my lenders were looking for me (SS27 P2).” Another admitted, “It’s exhausting to have so many people looking for me to collect debt (SS49, P3).”

This constant fear and pressure eventually evolved into paranoia, as captured by one statement: “I’m afraid I’ll be found by someone I owe and get sent to jail (SS51 P3).” The mental toll extended beyond fear and depression; it began to affect personal relationships and moral boundaries. One participant reflected on how gambling distorted their values, saying, “My mental and emotional state was affected because I even lied to my mother to play (SS71 P4).” The compulsion to continue playing despite the harm caused became emotionally overwhelming. “I’m super stressed because I don’t want to stop playing (SS94 P5).” These sentiments reflect the internal conflict between knowing the damage being done and still feeling unable to stop. As gambling addiction progressed, it disrupted both mental clarity and daily functioning. One participant admitted, “My life became chaotic, I lost clear thinking, I would fight my wife if she didn’t give me gambling money (SS110, P6).” The toll even manifested physically, as one described, “I experienced constant headaches from lack of sleep due to gambling overnight (SS191 P10).”

Online gambling has been shown to contribute significantly to emotional instability and mental health deterioration among users. Participants in the study reported symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and heightened stress, especially after financial losses or during debt collection encounters. This aligns with findings from Potenza (2022), who emphasized that gambling disorder is associated with high rates of comorbid mental health issues, including depression and anxiety. Emotional volatility is heightened in digital gambling due to its accessibility and speed, leading to more frequent and intense losses and wins, which create psychological turbulence (Hing et al. 2022). Moreover, the pressure to recover lost funds often leads to obsessive behavior and compulsive play, as supported by research on problem gambling dynamics (Chóliz 2021).

The burden of gambling often leads to interpersonal conflict and emotional withdrawal. In the current study, participants described episodes of anger, guilt, and aggression, particularly toward family members who questioned their gambling behavior. According to Gainsbury and Blaszczynski (2020), problem gambling often triggers strained social dynamics and increases emotional distance between

gamblers and their loved ones. The unpredictability of gambling outcomes can also cause mood swings and a dependence on gambling for emotional highs, followed by devastating emotional lows after losses (Shaffer et al. 2021). Such cycles of emotional instability can lead to social isolation and worsen psychological resilience over time (NCRG 2023).

Gambling erodes relationships through conflict and detachment

This theme reveals how online gambling leads not only to personal distress but also to the gradual breakdown of meaningful social and familial bonds. Several participants shared that gambling consumed their time and energy, isolating them from the people who cared about them most. One described, “I no longer have time for my family (SS133 P7).” Another echoed this detachment, saying, “I have no time for family and friends anymore because I’m too tired (SS52 P3).” These statements reflect how gambling replaces personal connections with emotional fatigue, preoccupation, and withdrawal. The emotional toll extends beyond just being unavailable; it creates emotional distance and disconnection. One participant admitted, “I have no more time for my family because I’m always on my phone playing (SS170 P9).”

Another noted how deeply this addiction altered their sense of identity and belonging: “I had no time to talk or eat with them anymore. It felt like I was living a different life (SS192 P10).” Such detachment not only causes physical absence but also signals the loss of emotional connection and shared experiences. More seriously, the addiction caused tension and emotional rupture within intimate relationships. A particularly painful confession came from a participant who said, “It felt like I lost my love for my wife because I chose gambling over her (SS112, P6).” The act of consistently prioritizing gambling over a spouse or family eventually weakens the foundation of love and trust. Another participant acknowledged the wider damage: “My relationship with my family and friends has become bad (SS95, P5).” These words reflect how deeply gambling can strain not just romantic relationships but also friendships and broader support systems. Finally, the emotional chaos brought by the addiction left some participants feeling overwhelmed and mentally unstable. One admitted, “I feel like I’m going crazy (SS132, P7).” This mental and emotional unraveling often coincided with detachment from loved ones, suggesting that as gambling deepens, individuals become

increasingly disconnected not only from others but also from themselves. The theme ultimately shows that gambling is not a solitary problem; it radiates outward, damaging the emotional ties and daily interactions that form the fabric of a person's social life.

Online gambling creates a ripple effect that extends far beyond personal financial loss; it fractures the social and emotional fabric of relationships. Participants described withdrawing from conversations, meals, and shared activities with their families, signaling a growing detachment fueled by their gambling behavior. This detachment is echoed in research by Hing et al. (2022), who found that problem gambling significantly increases the risk of relationship breakdown due to secrecy, dishonesty, and preoccupation with gambling. As individuals immerse themselves deeper in gambling, their emotional availability decreases, frequently leading to feelings of neglect among partners, children, and friends (Orford 2021). Often, relationships shift from mutual support to mistrust, as deception and manipulation (e.g., hiding losses or borrowing without consent) become common coping mechanisms (Gainsbury & Blaszczynski 2020).

Neglect of work and school reflects gambling disruption

This theme explores how participants' excessive online gambling resulted in a serious decline in academic and professional functioning. Many described how gambling disrupted their daily routines, particularly through sleepless nights and daytime fatigue. One participant shared, "I stay up all night playing, wake up late, and lose motivation to attend school (SS171, P9)." The preoccupation with gambling not only replaced rest and responsibilities but also weakened the desire and capacity to meet work or academic expectations. Several participants acknowledged the widespread negative consequences of gambling in their lives, especially its impact on their routines and priorities. One remarked, "Scatter had a huge impact on me (SS193, P10)." Another similarly expressed, "It had a huge negative impact on my life (SS135, P7)." These statements emphasize that the consequences extended beyond finances; they fundamentally disrupted the individual's structure, motivation, and engagement with their daily obligations. The ripple effect of gambling also strained relationships and social roles. A participant shared how gambling led to the collapse of their marriage: "100%, my relationship with my wife is ruined. I don't think it can ever go back to the way it was (SS114, P6)."

Likewise, social circles deteriorated, as another said, “Yes, I lost my friends (SS96, P5).” These losses reflect how gambling not only disrupted academic and work performance but also undermined essential support systems, further isolating the participants. Ultimately, the disruption extended to a full transformation of the participants’ lives. Many described it as a life-altering experience with lasting consequences. One participant stated, “It had a huge impact on my life (SS74 P4).” Another added, “My life completely changed (SS53 P3).” These testimonies demonstrate that gambling reshaped not only how participants spent their time but also how they viewed their futures, responsibilities, and relationships. It highlights the urgent need for intervention when gambling begins to interfere with basic functioning and life direction.

Online gambling significantly disrupts individuals’ academic and professional responsibilities, as evidenced by many participants who prioritized gambling over work or school. Several were admitted to absenteeism, chronic lateness, or lack of motivation, particularly due to sleepless nights caused by extended gambling sessions. Research confirms this trend: productivity and focus are often diminished when gambling becomes habitual, leading to absenteeism, unfinished tasks, and deteriorating job or academic performance (Lopez-Gonzalez et al. 2021). These patterns are especially prevalent in younger individuals, whose school commitments clash with the addictive nature of gambling apps that operate 24/7 (Black et al. 2022). Consequently, the digital accessibility of gambling fosters continuous disruption to essential life routines.

Informants cope with the consequences of online gambling

Reduction efforts are self-initiated and struggle-driven

This theme highlights how participants attempted to reclaim control over their lives by taking personal steps to limit or eliminate access to online gambling platforms. Unlike formal interventions or professional treatment, these efforts were largely self-motivated, often occurring after repeated losses, emotional distress, or relational breakdowns. A common strategy involved removing digital access points, as seen in the statement: “I deleted all the Scatter apps (SS196, P10).” Others echoed the same action, such as “Delete everything to end this (SS139, P7).”

The deliberate removal of gambling apps signified both a cry for help and a firm attempt at withdrawal. “I uninstalled GCash and all

online apps (SS118, P6).” GCash, in particular, was a gateway platform that enabled easy deposits and bets, so removing it represented a crucial step toward limiting temptation. For many, uninstalling apps was not just technical; it was deeply emotional. “I deleted all the gaming apps (SS100, P5).” This shows a consistent, personal pattern of trying to break the cycle without external prompting. For some, the struggle became so intense that actions turned drastic and symbolic. One participant recalled, “I threw my phone in frustration, and now I don’t have one (SS79, P4).” This act reflects a profound inner conflict and frustration at the inability to quit, showing that the urge to change often came with emotional turbulence. Similarly, “I turned off my phone and deleted all apps and GCash (SS57, P3).” The statement illustrates how cutting off access became an act of self-preservation amid addiction. These testimonies reveal that while participants made sincere efforts to stop gambling, their journey toward recovery was riddled with emotional struggle and lacked professional guidance. The theme emphasizes the value of structured support systems, as most participants relied solely on their willpower and desperation to break free, often only after experiencing severe consequences.

Individuals affected by online gambling addiction often self-initiate reduction efforts, primarily motivated by emotional exhaustion and financial ruin rather than professional intervention. In the current study, participants shared how they deleted gambling apps, uninstalled GCash, and even discarded their phones in frustration, illustrating a desperate but self-driven attempt to break free from the addictive cycle. These behaviors reflect findings by Gainsbury and Blaszczynski (2020), who noted that self-help methods are commonly used by problem gamblers, especially when stigma or shame prevents them from seeking formal assistance. Often sporadic and emotionally driven, these self-initiated attempts lack the structured support that clinical interventions typically provide.

Support is sought informally: Professional help is rare

This highlights how individuals struggling with online gambling addiction primarily turn to family and personal strategies for help rather than seeking formal, professional intervention. A majority of participants expressed that their first instinct during moments of breakdown was to lean on loved ones rather than mental health professionals or addiction counselors. One participant shared, “I asked

my parents for help because I couldn't handle it anymore (SS197, P10).” This reflects a deep reliance on familial emotional support in times of crisis. Spirituality and prayer emerged as significant informal support systems, especially from family members who witnessed their loved one's distress. Another participant admitted, “I didn't seek a professional, but my mom kept praying for me so I wouldn't fall deeper into depression (SS198, P10).”

These statements show how support systems were deeply rooted in household faith and concern, rather than in structured psychological intervention or rehabilitation programs. Aside from turning to loved ones, many participants also adopted personal methods of reducing gambling exposure, particularly through the restriction of digital access. For instance, one said, “I disregard my phone now; I use it only for calls and texts (SS140, P7),” while another added, “I stopped using my touchscreen phone and switched to a keypad phone just for calls and texts (SS119, P6).”

These choices show a conscious effort to cut off gambling triggers through device limitations rather than seeking external behavioral therapy. Further, individuals attempted to reconnect with their responsibilities and routines as a form of personal rehabilitation. One shared, “I started helping with house chores. I also stopped using my phone (SS81, P4).” Another noted, “My whole family found out, so I stopped using my phone to avoid seeing gambling content (SS58, P3).” These statements demonstrate how recovery often begins with family intervention and self-discipline. Despite the gravity of their situation, most participants did not seek professional counseling, underscoring a gap between addiction severity and formal treatment engagement, a crucial consideration for future community-based support initiatives.

Despite the significant psychological and financial consequences of online gambling, many individuals choose not to seek professional support. Instead, they turn to informal sources such as family members, friends, or spiritual practices. This pattern was evident in the participants' testimonies, where most expressed relying on family encouragement or prayer rather than counseling or clinical intervention. This finding is consistent with studies by Hing et al. (2021), which highlight that feelings of shame, guilt, and fear of stigma prevent gamblers from accessing formal help. Moreover, Gainsbury et al. (2020) noted that culturally embedded values, particularly in collectivist societies, often favor family-based coping over institutional aid.

Coping involves lifestyle change and self-discipline

This reflects how individuals recovering from online gambling addiction actively adjust their routines and behavior to rebuild their lives. After recognizing the destructive effects of their gambling, many participants shifted toward healthier and more purposeful daily activities. One noted, “I go fishing with my uncle when my mom invites me so I can enjoy and relax (SS199, P10).” This activity not only offered a productive distraction but also restored family bonding and emotional connection. Rebuilding discipline in daily life became a cornerstone of recovery. Another participant shared, “It’s easier to wake up now, I no longer skip work, I’m saving money, and I’ve started repaying my debts (SS141, P7).” These efforts show the importance of regaining structure and responsibility, particularly in work and financial management.

Similarly, “I’m saving money now to restore the savings I used up (SS120, P6).” It is highlighting a renewed commitment to fiscal responsibility and long-term recovery. Simple home-based tasks and entertainment also served as healthy replacements for gambling. “I just watch TV and help with cooking and cleaning at home (SS102, P5).” Illustrates how everyday chores became a means to stay grounded. Others shared more structured routines: I watch Netflix movies, cook at home, and join my mom in praying the rosary (SS82, P4). These new patterns signify emotional healing and the reintegration into family life. Lastly, digital platforms were repurposed for non-gambling content. “I watch TikTok and YouTube instead (SS59, P3).” The statement reflects a conscious effort to redirect screen time toward harmless entertainment. Collectively, these statements demonstrate that recovery from gambling is rooted in creating new habits, restoring personal discipline, and finding joy in simple, nondestructive routines, showing that sustainable change starts with everyday choices and intentional living.

Coping with online gambling addiction often requires individuals to make deliberate lifestyle changes anchored in discipline and daily structure. Many participants in the study reported shifting their routines from digital dependence to physical and social engagement, such as fishing, household chores, or watching movies with family. These behavioral changes reflect an intentional detachment from gambling triggers and a redirection toward healthier habits. According to Edson et al. (2022), successful recovery from gambling disorder

often begins with changes in daily routines and a focus on physical activities that restore control and purpose. Self-discipline is not only a reactive tool but also a preventive strategy, helping individuals create new behavioral boundaries.

Conclusion

This study draws attention to the complex nature of internet gambling addiction as a behavioral health issue and a criminological concern. Participants' accounts demonstrate how curiosity, peer pressure, and ubiquitous digital exposure may convert casual gaming into compulsive gambling, a phenomenon exacerbated by the seamless incorporation of mobile payment systems and the influential power of social media. Initial successes, emotional peaks, and misleading incentive systems reinforce this cycle, highlighting the disparity between statistical likelihood and personal decision-making. Consequently, these discoveries necessitate a multifaceted response. Policymakers should reinforce digital payment regulations and augment platform accountability; educators and mental health professionals must develop prevention programs targeting cognitive distortions and offering healthier coping mechanisms; and communities must bolster informal social controls to mitigate opportunities for harm. This research integrates criminological theory with lived experience to enhance knowledge of the societal consequences of online gambling and establishes an evidence-based framework for future interventions and legislative reforms.

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