

“Prayer Helps Better Than a Psychologist”: Islam, Capitalism, and Gambling Addiction in Kazakhstan

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Abstract. This article analyses the rapid rise of gambling addiction in Kazakhstan within the broader context of Central Asia’s evolving gambling economy. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, it shows how digital technologies, regulatory gaps, and neoliberal reforms have expanded gambling access while deepening its harms. Official statistics vastly understate the problem, while unofficial estimates suggest hundreds of thousands are affected. The consequences—family breakdown, indebtedness, and corruption within public institutions—indicate that gambling addiction should not be seen merely as an individual pathology but as a structural vulnerability embedded in digital capitalism and fragile governance. A key contribution of this study is its focus on religion, particularly Islam, as an underexplored dimension of coping. Practices such as prayer, fasting, and mosque-based support provide culturally embedded repertoires of resilience, often perceived as more effective than secular therapy. Yet these strategies prove fragile under mounting debts, family obligations, and social pressures, underscoring the need for complementary measures. The article therefore calls for integrated responses that combine faith-based, clinical, and structural interventions. By situating Kazakhstan’s experience within global debates, it advances a pluralistic, context-sensitive framework that moves beyond Western secular models and offers fresh insights into gambling addiction in Muslim-majority and post-socialist societies.

Keywords: Gambling Addiction, Kazakhstan, Digital Capitalism, Islam, Public Health, Central Asia.

Introduction

The proliferation of information and communication technologies has accelerated social transformations across the globe, reshaping everyday life in ways both visible and hidden (Curran *et al.* 2016, Reed 2018, Korsakienė *et al.* 2024). One striking manifestation of these transformations is the rapid expansion of the gambling industry, which has become increasingly entrenched in both developed and developing contexts alike (Kingma 2009). The Central Asian region—historically characterised by closed political regimes and state-controlled market economies (Melvin 2004, Adams and Rustemova 2009, Anceschi 2021)—is no longer insulated from such global dynamics. Indeed, even a short visit to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, or Turkmenistan is enough to observe the visible presence, and often legal sanctioning, of casinos, lotteries, and sports betting services (centralasia.news 2023, Kun.uz 2023). These emergent patterns are intimately tied to the growing enthusiasm of Central Asian governments to diversify their revenue streams and stimulate tourism—an industry that remains largely underexploited, yet carries the promise of economic gain.

However, this unfolding process has simultaneously opened a Pandora's box of social harms and vulnerabilities, most visibly manifested in the rising prevalence of gambling addiction (Reith *et al.* 2019, Abbott 2020). What initially appeared as a state-sanctioned economic strategy has, in many contexts, laid bare deep societal fissures—ranging from mental health crises to heightened risks of criminality and corruption (Banks 2017, Adolphe *et al.* 2019, Berdaliyeva *et al.* 2021). These transformations, though rapid and uneven, call for a grounded scholarly inquiry—one attentive not only to the economic dimensions of gambling but also to its broader societal reverberations. A closer look reveals that gambling addiction is not an isolated pathology but a prism through which to examine the entanglements between individual vulnerabilities, community resilience, and the governance strategies of authoritarian-leaning regimes. Understanding these dynamics is essential for grasping the far-reaching consequences of gambling for society, the economy, and modes of governance across the Central Asian region. This article therefore frames gambling addiction not only as a moral or medical issue but as a lens through which to explore how neoliberal market reforms, post-socialist governance, and Islamic moralities intersect. In this sense, addiction becomes a site where capitalist expansion meets religious and cultural repertoires, illustrating broader tensions between economic liberalisation and moral regulation in Muslim-majority societies like Kazakhstan.

Internationally, there exists a vast body of literature on gambling addiction, much of which focuses on identifying its primary factors and causes, as well as exploring strategies and treatments for addressing the problem (as will be discussed in greater detail in the literature review section). Yet, when one turns to the state of the art on gambling addiction

in the context of Central Asia, it becomes evident that relatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to examining the underlying explanations and causes of this phenomenon. Issues of gambling addiction are made visible and discussed far more frequently in mass media than in academic scholarship and publications. The existing body of publications on gambling addiction in Central Asia—particularly those focusing on Kazakhstan—has been produced primarily in Russian or local Central Asian languages. While valuable, these works often remain inaccessible to a broader international audience. This oversight is somewhat striking, given the scale and rapid expansion of the gambling industry in the region and the profound social, economic, and political problems that gambling-related harms have already generated.

This article explores these processes in the Central Asian context, with a specific focus on Kazakhstan—a predominantly Muslim society that highlights the tensions between market liberalisation, social control, and pressing public health challenges. The main rationale for focusing on Kazakhstan is that it represents both the most liberalised gambling market in Central Asia and a context in which state authorities simultaneously seek to regulate the industry, mitigate its social costs, and project an image of modernisation and economic growth. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork, including ethnographic observations and 20 in-depth interviews with individuals struggling with gambling addiction, the article shows how, in a social setting where around 70 percent of the population identifies as Muslim, Islam and its everyday practices emerge as central resources in resisting gambling. Prayer, fasting, and mosque-based support provide culturally embedded forms of resilience, often absent in secular treatment models, underscoring the importance of local moral and religious orders in shaping responses to addiction. Foregrounding this religious dimension highlights the need to correct mainstream literature on gambling addiction, which remains dominated by Western secular frameworks. Effective responses, we argue, must engage with the cultural and religious repertoires through which individuals resist compulsion. This calls for pluralistic, context-sensitive approaches that recognise diverse pathways to recovery. In this regard, Kazakhstan provides an archetypal example—relevant not only for the Central Asian region but also for Muslim-majority societies confronting similar challenges of gambling addiction.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section situates the study within the global gambling boom and examines how this trend has unfolded in Central Asia. The third section turns to Kazakhstan, outlining the legal and regulatory framework and exploring the demographic, social, and structural dimensions of gambling. The fourth section reviews international literature on gambling addiction, situating the Kazakhstani case within global debates and highlighting both parallels and distinctive features shaped by its socio-political context. The fifth section outlines fieldwork and methodological considerations, while the sixth presents empirical findings from ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews

with gamblers and administrators. The conclusion synthesises the study's key insights, empirical and theoretical contributions, and offers evidence-informed recommendations for addressing gambling addiction in Kazakhstan.

The Global Gambling Boom and Its Central Asian Repercussions

In this section, to guide the reader, we will establish the broader global framework within which the Kazakhstani case will later be situated. We will outline international gambling trends and their spillover into Central Asia, setting up a clear foundation for the national-level analysis that follows in the subsequent sections.

The global gambling industry has expanded rapidly, with projections estimating its value at \$700 billion by 2028 (Grand View Research 2025). This surge is driven by liberalised regulatory regimes, digitalisation, and the sector's penetration into emerging economies (Reith *et al.* 2019). Central Asia, once shaped by rigid Soviet-era prohibitions, has not remained insulated from these currents.

Kazakhstan occupies a distinctive place in Central Asia's gambling landscape, at once a pioneer and a paradox. Gambling was legalised in 1999, and by 2007 reforms confined casinos to two special zones. Yet by 2020, online betting platforms, mobile apps, and social media had propelled the industry far beyond these geographic limits. What began as a contained experiment in economic development became a borderless digital economy, prompting the state to reassert control through stricter regulatory measures in an effort to curb escalating social and institutional harms. Kyrgyzstan (2022) and Uzbekistan (2025) followed Kazakhstan in legalising gambling after more than a decade of prohibition, though legislation in this field remains at an embryonic stage. Yet long before these reforms, gambling thrived in fragmented, unregulated forms—operating through informal networks, private spaces, and digital platforms largely beyond state oversight. By contrast, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan maintain some of the world's most prohibitive regimes, where blanket bans render nearly all gambling illegal. Such prohibitions reflect the authoritarian logic of governance in these two countries, where tight control over leisure, morality, and informal economies serves as a tool of political insulation. Nonetheless, gambling persists in clandestine spaces—private homes, hidden venues, and digital platforms—demonstrating the limits of prohibition.

These divergent trajectories, often attributed to market forces or technological change, are in fact rooted in broader state–society relations and shifting governance across the region. The rapid spread of gambling carries profound socio-economic repercussions, magnified by entrenched inequalities. Poverty, precarity, and social disconnection leave many individuals vulnerable, with gambling frequently serving as a form of escapism—an “exit route” from everyday hardship and uncertainty, yet one that deepens structural vulnerabilities rather than alleviating them. The

spread of inexpensive smartphones and affordable internet has opened new digital gateways for gambling, from betting apps to influencer-driven promotions and Telegram channels beyond state oversight. Governments, especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, have promoted gambling zones as instruments of revenue and tourism. Yet economic incentives consistently outweigh regulatory safeguards, producing a policy landscape where market logics dominate and social protection remains secondary—illustrating the tensions between fiscal gain, governance capacity, and the protection of vulnerable populations.

Central Asia stands at a critical juncture. Policymakers must weigh the apparent economic benefits of gambling—tax revenue, jobs, tourism—against mounting social costs borne by families, communities, and institutions. While regulation may seem attractive to states seeking revenue, without parallel investment in public health, education, and social safety nets, long-term harms will outweigh short-term gains. This article examines these dilemmas through the case of Kazakhstan, which offers unique insights into the regional gambling landscape. Its regulatory trajectory, socio-economic and legal context, and institutional responses reveal broader patterns of market expansion, weak governance, and social vulnerability. The following sections situate these dynamics within Kazakhstan’s evolving gambling economy, drawing on policy developments, empirical data, and lived experiences to illuminate their complexities.

Gambling in Kazakhstan: Industry, Addiction, Regulation, and Societal Repercussions

Building upon the preceding discussion of global and regional dynamics, this section narrows the analytical lens to the national context of Kazakhstan. The analysis transitions from broad structural forces to an examination of the specific institutional, legal, and socio-cultural frameworks that underpin the development of the country’s gambling sector. Particular emphasis will be placed on the evolution of state regulation, the role of policy actors, and the socio-economic factors influencing both the operation and perception of gambling within Kazakhstani society. This focused inquiry provides a critical foundation for understanding how global and regional trends are refracted through the distinctive political, economic, and cultural conditions of Kazakhstan.

Over the past two decades, Kazakhstan has experienced a profound transformation in its gambling landscape. From Soviet-era prohibitions, the country moved toward liberalisation, formally entering the era of legalised gambling with the adoption of the 2007 Law “On Gambling Business.” In line with broader post-Soviet regulatory experiments, the law confined land-based casinos to two designated zones—Kapchagay and Shchuchinsk. These state-sanctioned enclaves were intended to capture the economic benefits of gambling while shielding society from its risks, reflecting a

familiar strategy of combining market reform with moral regulation through spatial separation.

By 2020, however, this territorial logic had largely collapsed. The rapid rise of online platforms, mobile betting applications, and social media promotion propelled gambling beyond geographic controls. Smartphones and financial technologies facilitated access within households, workplaces, and everyday routines, transforming gambling into a pervasive and largely unregulated phenomenon. Kazakhstan now faces an escalating crisis of gambling addiction that reflects not only technological change but also deeper societal transformations. Accelerated digitalisation, fragmented regulatory capacity, and widening social dislocation have produced a complex constellation of public health risks, institutional vulnerabilities, and economic pressures. What began as a controlled experiment in revenue generation has evolved into a borderless digital economy with profound social consequences.

In turn, these developments were also reflected in financial indicators. By 2022, legal gambling revenues had surged to nearly 600 billion tenge (approximately USD 1.12 billion) annually, compared to just 90 billion tenge (around USD 167 million) in 2020 (Infozakon.kz 2024). Over a five-year period, the industry's total output exceeded 1 trillion tenge (circa USD 1.86 billion) (ranking.kz 2024)—a figure that not only signals explosive demand but also exposes the state's limited capacity to regulate the sector's rapid digital proliferation. As a result, the territorial logic underpinning earlier legal measures proved increasingly anachronistic. Mobile applications, mirror websites, VPN technologies, and social media influencers circumvented geographic restrictions and normalised gambling as an everyday practice. In effect, gambling became accessible anytime and anywhere, with minimal institutional guardrails in place—laying bare the widening gap between formal legal frameworks and the lived realities of digital practices.

The rise of online gambling in Kazakhstan has been enabled by regulatory gaps, aggressive advertising, and the use of alternative financial instruments such as cryptocurrencies, which further complicate oversight. The scale of addiction is both staggering and elusive. Official records remain minimal—by mid-2024, only 19 individuals had been formally diagnosed with “ludomania” in state-run clinics (orda.kz 2024). Unofficial estimates, however, suggest that between 350,000 and 440,000 people suffer from gambling addiction (Top-news.kz 2025). Youth are particularly vulnerable. A 2022 survey found that 72% of students had experimented with gambling, nearly half before the age of 18 (Inbusiness.kz 2024). Gender patterns are also shifting: women accounted for 25% of those seeking treatment in 2023, up from 12% in 2021 (Kzaif.kz 2024). The human costs are profound. Reports of gambling-related suicides are rising (Infozakon.kz 2024), while nearly 40% of divorces are linked to gambling-induced conflict and financial collapse (Liter.kz 2024). In 2024 alone, more than 36,000 people sought professional help (Altaitv.kz 2024), and over

110,000 used the eGov portal to self-exclude from gambling (Gov.kz 2024). These figures underscore both the breadth of the crisis and growing public awareness, as gambling addiction increasingly destabilises households, communities, and institutions.

Beyond its social repercussions, gambling addiction poses serious risks to Kazakhstan's public administration. Between 2020 and 2022, more than 800 officials were flagged for gambling-related misconduct, with losses exceeding 500 million tenge (circa USD 930,000) (Gov.kz 2024). Particularly troubling was the violation of exclusion protocols: over 300 civil servants were found to have breached self-exclusion rules, exposing institutions to risks of bribery, fraud, and coercion. In 2023, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, addressing the Security Council, ordered tighter restrictions for civil servants, military personnel, and indebted individuals (Infozakon.kz 2024). He further urged law enforcement to confront rising crimes linked to gambling, reframing the issue from a private vice to a systemic threat with implications for governance integrity and national stability.

In response to escalating harms, Kazakhstan has recently launched its most comprehensive legal offensive against gambling addiction. Between 2023 and 2025, successive reforms signaled a shift from permissive tolerance to active containment. At the center is the 2024 Law Against Ludomania, which bans gambling among civil servants, military personnel, and indebted individuals, with violations punishable by dismissal. The law also introduced sweeping advertising bans, raised the legal gambling age from 21 to 25, and mandated biometric ID verification at online and land-based venues—marking an unprecedented attempt to tighten state control over the sector.

Despite legal reforms in 2024–2025—including a national self-exclusion registry and prohibitions on gambling among officials—enforcement remains uneven. Over 35,000 gambling websites persist, often resurfacing through mirror domains and VPNs, while cryptocurrencies enable anonymous transactions that evade conventional oversight. These dynamics led Kazakh Prime Minister Alikhan Smailov to label gambling addiction a “threat to national security” (Check-point.kz 2024), noting that nearly half of family breakdowns were linked to gambling harms. Such admissions underscore that addiction destabilises not only households but also the wider social fabric underpinning state legitimacy.

Thus, gambling addiction in Kazakhstan can no longer be seen as a private vice. It has become a pervasive public health and governance challenge, deeply entangled with digital capitalism, fragile regulatory frameworks, and cultural transformations—constituting a structural vulnerability that requires multi-layered, context-sensitive responses.

Literature Review: Situating Kazakhstan in Global Theoretical and Empirical Debates

In order to delineate the boundary between contextual analysis and conceptual framing, this section undertakes a synthesis of the international scholarly literature on gambling addiction. By engaging with diverse theoretical and empirical contributions from the global research corpus, it aims to identify the key conceptual frameworks, definitions, and debates that structure contemporary understandings of gambling-related harm. This synthesis not only situates the study within established academic discourse but also provides the analytical lens through which the empirical material from Kazakhstan will be interpreted in subsequent sections. In doing so, it bridges the broader theoretical perspectives on gambling addiction with the specific socio-cultural and institutional realities of the Kazakhstani context.

The rise of gambling addiction in Kazakhstan is not an isolated anomaly but reflects wider global tendencies. Across diverse contexts, gambling has become a pressing social problem with far-reaching economic, cultural, and public health consequences (Reith 2007, Cosgrave and Klassen 2009, Kingma 2009, McCarthy *et al.* 2019).

Mainstream academic explanations of gambling addiction have largely emerged from medicine and psychology, where the emphasis falls on individual pathologies—impulsivity, genetic predisposition, or cognitive distortions—as key explanatory factors (Petry *et al.* 2005, Clark *et al.* 2009, Grant *et al.* 2009, Clark 2010, Wardle *et al.* 2019). In line with this focus, treatments have centred on individual-level interventions, including counselling, cognitive-behavioural therapy, and self-exclusion programmes (Blaszczynski and Nower 2002, Granero *et al.* 2021). The biopsychosocial and pathways models of gambling further provide frameworks for tailoring interventions to gambler profiles by combining biological, psychological, and environmental factors (Griffiths and Delfabbro 2001).

While valuable, these approaches remain partial. Sociological and public health perspectives emphasise that gambling addiction is also shaped by wider structural and cultural forces (Raybould *et al.* 2021, Bowne and Jarldorn 2022, Thomas *et al.* 2023). From this vantage point, gambling addiction should be understood as an expression of neoliberal capitalism, the commercialisation of leisure, growing inequalities, weakened community ties, and the normalisation of risk-taking (Thomas *et al.* 2013, McCarthy *et al.* 2019, Waitt *et al.* 2022). Hence, addressing these harms requires structural interventions: regulating advertising, restricting venue density in disadvantaged areas, curbing predatory practices, and providing community-based support (Bowden-Jones *et al.* 2019, Wardle *et al.* 2019, Thomas *et al.* 2023). Equally vital are gender-sensitive and culturally informed programmes, as men more often face financial losses while women encounter emotional and relational harms (Macía *et al.* 2023, McCarthy *et al.* 2023). Preventive youth-focused education further reduces long-term risks (Blinn-Pike *et al.* 2010, Pitt *et al.* 2017).

The review of existing literature on gambling addiction suggests that the most effective strategies combine micro- and macro-level interventions: providing accessible treatment and support for individuals while

simultaneously implementing structural reforms and community-based initiatives that reduce inequality, regulate gambling industries, and challenge cultural narratives that normalise risk-taking. The key inference is that only by recognising the interplay between personal vulnerabilities and broader societal drivers can gambling-related harms be effectively reduced.

Kazakhstan's experience reflects global dynamics in which gambling has moved from a marginal leisure pursuit to a mainstream industry embedded in digital economies. Online betting platforms, cryptocurrencies, and influencer-driven marketing have rendered traditional restrictions obsolete. What was once confined to state-designated zones is now borderless, accessible to anyone with a smartphone.

The drivers of addiction in Kazakhstan also echo international patterns. While individual traits such as impulsivity or distorted thinking are relevant, it is structural conditions that make gambling so pervasive. Youth are especially vulnerable, as digital games and social media normalise risk-taking and encourage long-term dependency. Kazakhstan also illustrates a global contradiction: states act both as regulators and beneficiaries of gambling. Although advertising bans, biometric checks, and higher age restrictions have been introduced, their impact is weakened by poor enforcement, resilient online platforms, and the state's fiscal interest in gambling revenues. This tension between public health protection and revenue generation is a recurring dilemma worldwide.

In Western contexts, there is precedent for integrating spiritual and peer-based approaches into gambling recovery. For example, Gamblers Anonymous (GA), a mutual-aid 12-step fellowship grounded in spiritual principles (such as surrendering to a "higher power," moral inventory, and prayer), is often used as an adjunct to professional therapy in Western countries (Ferentzy *et al.* 2006, Schuler *et al.* 2016). While it is not formally affiliated with any creed and welcomes atheists, it includes spiritual components such as opening or closing prayers and encourages reliance on spiritual resources. Several studies and reviews indicate that GA participation may enhance abstinence maintenance and provide social support, especially when coupled with formal therapeutic interventions (Petry 2005, Oei and Gordon 2008, Schuler *et al.* 2016, Penfold and Ogden 2022). Likewise, mindfulness-based and spiritually informed interventions have gained traction in gambling treatment. Mindfulness interventions, derived from Buddhist contemplative practice, emphasize non-judgmental awareness of thoughts, emotions, and urges, and techniques such as "urge surfing" (Loo *et al.* 2014, Melero Ventola *et al.* 2020, Lee *et al.* 2021, Furnell and Van Gordon 2024). Pilot evidence from an 8-week group program among problem gamblers showed increased mindfulness, and qualitative reports of improved self-control, stress reduction, and presence (though relapse prevention effects were not tested) (Chen *et al.* 2014). More broadly, mindfulness has been integrated into CBT frameworks, and the emerging literature supports its promise in reducing relapse risk across

behavioral addictions (Goldsmith *et al.* 2023). These Western precedents underscore that religious, spiritual, or contemplative practices are not confined to non-Western cultures but have been leveraged therapeutically to support recovery. Their existence reinforces our contention that interventions for problem gambling should not rely solely on clinical models; rather, they should engage meaningfully with local cultural and spiritual repertoires.

Kazakhstan's crisis therefore exemplifies the structural, cultural, and technological forces shaping gambling harms globally. Addiction here is less an individual failing than the product of broader processes—the commodification of leisure, the spread of digital capitalism, and deepening inequality. Yet Kazakhstan adds a distinctive dimension to international debates. While Western contexts have long explored spiritually informed pathways to recovery through movements such as Gamblers Anonymous and mindfulness-based interventions, Kazakhstan reveals how these dynamics manifest within an Islamic moral framework. Our fieldwork highlights how Islam provides both moral boundaries and practical tools for resisting compulsion. By foregrounding this religious dimension, the Kazakhstani case reinforces the global insight that effective responses must move beyond exclusively secular clinical models toward pluralistic, culturally and spiritually grounded approaches suited to Muslim-majority and post-socialist societies.

Before presenting our empirical findings, the next section reflects on our ethnographic fieldwork in Almaty, conducted between February and May 2025.

Fieldwork, Material and Ethical Considerations

This section marks a methodological shift from the preceding theoretical and contextual discussions to the presentation of the study's empirical foundations. It outlines the research design, data collection strategies, and analytical approaches that underpin the study's findings. Here, we demonstrate how the data gathered through our ethnographic fieldwork not only substantiate the preceding conceptual arguments but also generate new insights into the dynamics of gambling regulation and its socio-cultural context in Kazakhstan. In this regard, the fieldwork material presented in the following sections constitutes the paper's principal "value added", grounding the analysis in firsthand evidence and enhancing its contribution to broader scholarly debates.

We conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Almaty, Kazakhstan, between February and May 2025, across three visits amounting to one month in the field. All three authors participated. While each is fluent in Russian, the second and third authors—both native Kazakhs—conducted interviews when participants preferred to speak Kazakh. The first author, as a non-native, contributed an external perspective by interrogating the logics of taken-for-granted practices. This insider-outsider dynamic (Reyes 2020)

became central to our ethnographic approach, enabling a more nuanced understanding of gambling as both everyday practice and social problem.

We employed a combination of snowball and random sampling techniques to recruit participants. Fieldwork was conducted at various gambling venues in Almaty, where individuals actively engaged in gambling were approached and invited to participate in the study. Following initial recruitment, participants were asked to refer acquaintances who were also involved in gambling activities, thereby facilitating the snowball sampling process. All participants self-identified as ethnic Kazakhs. The final sample comprised 20 participants (15 men and 5 women) with diverse socioeconomic and occupational backgrounds, including civil servants, entrepreneurs, school teachers, healthcare professionals, a carpenter, a cook, a university researcher, and unemployed individuals. Participants also represented a broad age range, from individuals in their twenties to retirees. This heterogeneity in demographic and professional characteristics enabled the exploration of a wide range of perspectives and experiences related to gambling. However, it is important to note that the findings are not intended to be generalisable to the broader population. Rather, the study adopts a qualitative approach aimed at achieving depth of understanding and contextual insight, rather than statistical representativeness.

Methodologically, we employed participant observation, informal conversations, and semi-structured interviews. Observations were carried out in several gambling halls, especially bingo venues, where we systematically documented gambling behaviours, social interactions, and the sensory environment—layouts, soundscapes, visual stimuli, and staff–client interactions. These observations provided a rich backdrop for interpreting interview data, situating individual narratives within the broader gambling milieu.

We conducted twenty semi-structured interviews with individuals directly affected by gambling addiction. Interviews took place both inside gambling venues—bingo halls, betting lounges, and bars—where participants often spoke candidly while embedded in gambling culture, and in more neutral sites, such as cafés and restaurants, when privacy was preferred. The interviews traced personal gambling trajectories, from first encounters to the development of habits, as well as the cognitive distortions and justifications that sustained them. Participants described psychological motivations—excitement, stress relief, pursuit of luck—alongside the financial and social costs borne by families. We explored their struggles with self-control, recognition of addiction, and recourse to support networks, whether familial, communal, or professional. Importantly, we invited reflection on strategies of resistance and asked participants to imagine their lives without gambling.

In addition, two in-depth interviews were conducted with gambling hall administrators. These figures, positioned between customers and institutions, provided valuable insights into operational practices, customer profiles, and the moral ambiguities of their role. They described themselves

as simultaneously “psychologists” and “diplomats,” mediating between distressed gamblers, families, and institutional demands. Their perspectives enriched our understanding of how gambling is sustained, managed, and normalized within institutional settings.

A striking theme to emerge across many accounts was the role of Islam. Religious practice—especially *namaz* (prayer), fasting, and mosque attendance—was frequently cited as a source of strength and a moral framework for resisting gambling. For some, Islam offered discipline and temporary abstinence, even if relapse often followed under financial or social pressures. This underscored the importance of faith as an underexplored, culturally embedded protective factor, and it became a central pillar of our analysis.

This research underwent ethical review and approval by the the Ethical Review Board of Zhetysu University, Kazakhstan. To foster trust, we adopted a non-judgmental stance, assured participants of anonymity, and clarified the research purpose. All names, sites, and identifying details have been altered. Taken together, these measures enabled us to capture both the lived experiences of gamblers and the perspectives of those managing gambling environments, situating addiction within Almaty’s social, cultural, and institutional landscape.

“Namaz (Prayer) Helps Better Than a Psychologist”: Observations at the Eldorado Bingo Hall in Almaty

The Eldorado gambling hall in Almaty announces itself before one even steps inside. From the street, its entrance glows with sharp blue neon, the sign “Eldorado” hovering above glass doors that reflect passing headlights and the faint flicker of a television inside. The illuminated frame draws the eye like a beacon, its sleek modern design standing in contrast to the worn concrete of the surrounding street. Stepping past the threshold, the ambience shifts: the air is cool, dim, and curated, thick with the muffled hum of machines and the faint scent of alcohol and smoke. Inside, the décor is a carefully staged paradox—plush red velvet chairs and bar fronts set against matte black walls, dotted carpets, and crystal pendant lights that shimmer above the counter stocked with bottles. The space projects luxury and comfort, yet its atmosphere remains heavy. Screens glow from multiple walls, broadcasting numbers and games; rows of terminals line the floor where players lean forward silently, their faces illuminated by the cold blue light of the monitors. Roulette tables are draped in red cloth, ready for play, while the VIP doors at the back hint at more exclusive rooms beyond. The room is never loud—no cheers, no laughter—but alive with a low, restless energy. Players’ eyes remain fixed, their bodies still, as though suspended between anticipation and despair.

Bolat sits hunched near the back of the room, his thumb moving rhythmically over a strand of prayer beads hidden in his pocket. The beads click softly, almost drowned out by the electronic chorus of the hall. He recalls the longest reprieve he has managed—six months without gambling,

a stretch sustained by daily namaz and fasting. “*Namaz gave me strength,*” he says, his voice subdued, almost swallowed by the ambient noise. “*Namaz helps better than a psychologist. But when the debts came, every day the phone rang. I couldn’t resist.*” For Bolat, prayer is both sanctuary and reminder of failure: a temporary shield against compulsion, but one that falters under the weight of financial obligation.

Across the hall, Aigerim, a schoolteacher in her late forties, plays cautiously, her bets small and deliberate. Her perfume faintly mingles with the sour smell of cigarettes, a contrast that seems almost out of place in the smoky room. Divorced and with adult children who remain unaware of her visits, she guards her secret carefully. During Ramadan she had managed to stop completely, convinced that her renewed religious discipline would break the cycle. “*For a while it worked,*” she admits, eyes fixed on the screen. “*I prayed, I stayed away. But then the repairs at home, the expenses, the worries... they pushed me back.*” When she falls silent, her gaze lingers on the spinning numbers, as though searching for an order in their randomness.

Near the roulette table, Maks from Shymkent leans back on his chair, shifting between Russian, Kazakh, and Uzbek phrases as he jokes with a dealer. His movements are restless—tapping fingers on the table, adjusting his phone screen, leaning forward when the wheel slows. He, too, once found stability in prayer. “*Namaz should be enough,*” he says, half to himself. “*But when debts pile up and work is heavy, you come out of the mosque and the world pushes you here again.*” For Maks, religious ritual carries him for stretches of time, quieting the urges, but the pressures of family and finances gnaw at the edges until his resolve frays.

Then there is the oil worker from Atyrau, a man in his forties whose presence exudes confidence. Unlike the others, he insists he is not addicted. He recalls once winning eighteen million, though he has since lost eleven. “*I am still in the plus,*” he shrugs. Yet even he acknowledges that the men he knows who avoid gambling do so through namaz. “*Prayer is the only real way,*” he says plainly. He dismisses psychologists and rehabilitation centers as irrelevant, external solutions that lack legitimacy in his social world. For him and his peers, the mosque is the anchor—but even anchors sometimes slip. His wife manages his salary card, a subtle but telling concession to the possibility that his confidence may not be enough.

The administrators who oversee Eldorado witness these rhythms daily. They describe themselves as half-administrators, half-psychologists—sometimes hiding players from their wives, sometimes calming men on the brink of collapse. One recalls a customer who nearly took his life after losing company funds. “*Almost everyone who tries to stop talks about namaz,*” she says. “*Prayer, fasting, being in the mosque—these help more than psychologists. But debts, family quarrels, the pressures outside... they undo everything. They always come back.*” Her words carry a quiet guilt, as though her work requires her to bear witness to the cycle without the power to interrupt it.

By midnight the hall feels suspended in time. The smoke hangs low, the air stale but dense with unspoken prayers. Bolat murmurs short surahs between spins, his lips moving in rhythm with the click of his beads. Aigerim leans forward, whispering to herself that tomorrow she will stop, perhaps after morning prayer. Maks scrolls through a dua (a prayer of invocation) his friend from the mosque has sent him, then slips the phone back into his pocket as the wheel begins to spin. The oil worker laughs easily, but his eyes flash quickly toward the exit when the door opens, as if wary of being seen.

In Eldorado, faith is everywhere—invoked, whispered, carried in pockets as beads, stored on phones as reminders, rising in silent prayers between wagers. It offers strength, structure, and moments of reprieve, yet it is not impermeable. Debts, family obligations, and social shame press harder, pulling people back through the neon-lit doors. Islam, for these players, is less a permanent cure than a rhythm of resistance and relapse: a fragile yet vital resource at the threshold between hope and compulsion.

Authors' notes and reflections

The rhythms of gambling in Almaty unfold as cycles of highs and lows, painfully familiar to both players and administrators. Managers of halls such as Eldorado rarely describe gambling as leisure; rather, they see it as a chronic illness marked by visible withdrawal and sudden relapse. Abstinence may last months, yet the sound of another's win or the arrival of a creditor's call draws individuals back inside. The trajectories of Bolat, Aigerim, and Maks illustrate this pattern: early wins that created misplaced confidence, temporary reprieves sustained by faith or family obligations, and inevitable returns under mounting debts and emotional strain. The consequences are consistent—oscillations between fleeting euphoria and crushing despair that scar both individuals and families.

For many, Islam represents the most trusted refuge. Prayer, fasting, and mosque attendance provide moments of discipline and self-control. Bolat insists that “namaz helps better than a psychologist,” while Aigerim recalls Ramadan as a form of spiritual training that temporarily enabled abstinence. Maks likewise describes prayer as a stabilising rhythm, if fragile. These accounts resonate with Islamic teachings that frame gambling (*maisir*) as sinful and destructive, and with wider research showing how prayer fosters mindfulness, accountability, and belonging (Ano and Vasconcelles 2005, Abu-Raiya and Pargament 2015, Achour *et al.* 2016). Yet testimonies also underscore the limits of religious coping: while effective in producing abstinence, prayer seldom prevents relapse once financial pressures or family obligations intensify. At the same time, these narratives demonstrate how Islamic ethics operate within and against the forces of neoliberal capitalism. While prayer and faith provide a moral economy of self-restraint, they do so within a socio-economic system that continuously generates dependency, debt, and anxiety. This tension aligns

with global debates on how religious coping mechanisms mediate—but cannot fully resolve—the contradictions of capitalist modernity.

This fragility is compounded by stigma. Gamblers and administrators describe a culture of secrecy in which addiction is hidden from families, colleagues, and peers. Women face particular shame; Aigerim concealed her gambling from children and colleagues to avoid moral judgment. Administrators confirm that “not one has gone to a psychologist,” reflecting mistrust of secular therapy and the absence of culturally sensitive support. In this context, Islam functions as both moral compass and socially legitimate coping mechanism—yet one that cannot resolve structural problems such as indebtedness or family conflict. In post-socialist Kazakhstan, this also reflects broader governance dynamics, where the state implicitly endorses religion as a vehicle for social discipline. Thus, faith-based resilience operates not only as personal salvation but as a form of moral governance within a neoliberal policy framework. Moreover, mosque attendance and proximity to devout individuals play a critical communal role in sustaining recovery efforts. The mosque often serves not merely as a site of worship but as a moral and social space where individuals find accountability, mentorship, and encouragement from peers and imams. Through regular participation in communal prayers and religious gatherings, recovering gamblers re-enter networks that reinforce ethical conduct, provide belonging, and reduce isolation—key factors that help prevent relapse. In this sense, Islam functions not only as a personal spiritual resource but also as a collective moral infrastructure that fosters mutual monitoring and self-control.

Our observations suggest that gambling in Kazakhstan is not simply a private weakness but a culturally situated struggle. Islam provides discipline and temporary reprieve but not a permanent cure. Without broader interventions—combining faith-based counselling, financial rehabilitation, and destigmatised psychological support—the cycle of prayer, relapse, and despair will continue to reproduce itself in neon-lit halls such as Eldorado.

Gambling, Family, and Faith

The results of our twenty semi-structured interviews echoed what we observed in the gambling sites, revealing a recurring cycle of compulsion, secrecy, and only fleeting moments of reprieve. In the words of one man, “*My wife dragged me to a psychologist. I sat there for three sessions, but the urge never left. Only when I began namaz did I feel real strength*” (Serik, male, 35). Across testimonies, the same pattern emerges: encounters with psychologists or treatment centers often provided temporary relief, but lasting abstinence was only found in moments of religious discipline — prayer, fasting, or immersion in mosque communities.

Many respondents described being ushered toward formal treatment by concerned relatives. “*Parents begged me to join a rehabilitation*

programme. I went, but it felt like empty talk. In Ramadan I fasted — that was the only time I really stopped” (Marat, male, 42). Another reflected, *“The treatment center made me sign papers, attend lectures. I left and went straight back to the hall. The mosque was different — there I finally felt shame before God”* (Ravan, male, 48). Such accounts show the limits of secular rehabilitation models in contexts where moral and religious frameworks carry greater legitimacy than psychological diagnoses.

Family pressure recurs as a central theme in our interviews. Wives, parents, and children implored men to stop, sometimes with ultimatums, sometimes with tears. *“My children cried and told me to stop. I promised them, then went out at night to play in secret. It was only when I started reading namaz that the guilt outweighed the urge”* (Yerlan, male, 39). These testimonies illustrate the paradox of family involvement: pressure intensifies shame, but without an internal anchor, many continued gambling in secret. This interplay between moral accountability and emotional coercion situates the family as both an agent of neoliberal responsibility and a transmitter of religious ethics, highlighting how addiction recovery is governed through affective and moral economies.

Treatment and rehabilitation centers and hotlines offered advice that seemed detached from the lived reality of compulsion. *“rehabilitation center counselors gave me brochures and advice. I hid them under my bed and kept playing. Later, when I opened the Qur’an, I realized where the real answer was”* (Nurasyl, 36). Similarly, *“I called a hotline once. They told me to distract myself. But distraction doesn’t erase the desire. Only the namaz quieted my mind”* (Arman, male, 41). The sense of disconnect between therapeutic tools — distraction, self-monitoring, hobbies — and the overwhelming immediacy of craving reflects why many participants turned elsewhere.

Religion was not simply a belief system but a practical technology of self-control. As Askar (male, 40) put it: *“Psychologists told me it was an illness. My father told me it was a shame. But it was the imam who told me it was haram. That word finally broke me.”* For others, the rhythm of Islamic practice introduced structure that rehab could not sustain: *“My friends sent me to a rehab program. It helped for a month, then I relapsed. Namaz gave me something no program ever could — inner control”* (Timur, 37). Several spoke of fasting as a bodily intervention against compulsion. *“My wife cried, my children begged, I swore I would quit. Still, I played secretly on my phone. Only when I took up fasting did the appetite for gambling weaken”* (Baty, male, 34). This notion of religion-as-technology echoes theories of governmentality and self-discipline, where Islamic practice becomes a means of regulating the self amid capitalist pressures and post-socialist uncertainty.

The mosque was frequently described as a social anchor. *“My father said: psychologists won’t save you, go to the mosque. He was right. In the mosque I found people who watched over me”* (Alikhan, male, 45). For some, it was less about sermons than solidarity: *“The rehabilitation center*

was full of people like me, but most went back. I realized that unless I changed my soul, nothing would change. That's when I started praying again" (Bakhtiyar, male, 47). These voices highlight how communal religious practice fosters accountability absent from formal therapies.

Participants repeatedly framed gambling in moral, not medical, terms. *"The treatment center told me to avoid bad company. But my worst enemy was myself. Namaz and zikr finally taught me how to fight my own nafs"* (Shyngys, male, 31). Others described a visceral experience of spiritual truth: *"treatment center volunteers called me every week. I lied to them, saying I was fine. But when I read the Qur'an, I couldn't lie to myself anymore"* (Asel, female, 42). The act of prayer created what therapy could not — an embodied, enduring boundary against relapse.

Thus, our fieldwork demonstrates that Islam occupies a crucial palliative role when individuals find themselves trapped in cycles of gambling. While secular interventions — psychologists, treatment centers, and hotlines — provide visibility and symbolic support, they rarely succeed in altering behavior on their own. By contrast, religious practice offers not only moral condemnation but also daily routines, communal accountability, and embodied discipline that participants described as effective in curbing their addiction. At the same time, this reliance on Islam does not erase the broader social and economic forces — indebtedness, unemployment, and the ubiquity of betting platforms — that repeatedly draw people back into gambling. The challenge, then, is not to replace clinical or state-led interventions with religion, but to situate treatment strategies within the cultural and moral frameworks that individuals themselves recognize as legitimate sources of strength.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

In concluding, the paper reaffirms its contribution: by integrating global perspectives, national dynamics, and grounded fieldwork insights, it demonstrates how Kazakhstan's case enriches global understandings of gambling addiction in religious and post-socialist contexts. Accordingly, this study has shown that gambling addiction in Kazakhstan is not merely an individual pathology but a social phenomenon embedded in the country's digital economy, fragile regulatory environment, and moral landscape. The rapid growth of online platforms, combined with the state's ambivalent role as both regulator and beneficiary of gambling revenues, has created fertile ground for addiction—fracturing families, generating debt, and deepening stigma.

Within this setting, our empirical material highlights Islam as a central resource in shaping recovery pathways. Religious prohibitions derived from the Qur'an provide moral boundaries and practical tools for resisting temptation. Participants consistently described daily prayer (namaz), fasting, and reframing gambling as a spiritual illness as more effective than clinical interventions. Yet religious coping has limits. Prayer and fasting foster discipline and temporary reprieve, but relapse often

follows when debts, family obligations, or emotional pressures intensify. Some participants reported guilt or fatalism that worsened distress. Islam, therefore, should be seen as a powerful but partial therapeutic mechanism—most effective when combined with counselling, financial rehabilitation, and supportive policy frameworks. In addition, the preventive dimension of mosque-based communities deserves particular emphasis. Imams and devout congregants often act as informal counsellors, identifying behavioural risks early and guiding individuals toward both spiritual reflection and practical discipline. These religious networks help translate faith into everyday accountability, thereby bridging the gap between personal piety and communal wellbeing. Such dynamics demonstrate that religious spaces are not only therapeutic but also preventive arenas—supporting long-term abstinence through moral reinforcement and collective responsibility.

Nevertheless, the empirical material presented here compels a rethinking of addiction treatment in Kazakhstan. Islam functions not merely as a set of prohibitions but as an active therapeutic resource that provides structure, accountability, and hope. This insight enriches global debates by showing that effective responses must engage with cultural and religious repertoires, rather than relying exclusively on clinical models. Far from being a local peculiarity, Kazakhstan's experience underscores the need for a pluralistic and globally sensitive approaches to combatting gambling addiction—one that recognises multiple pathways to recovery. More broadly, this case demonstrates how neoliberal governance, religious morality, and post-socialist transformations converge in shaping subjectivities of addiction and recovery. By linking theory and data, the paper underscores that ethnographic insight into everyday practices of prayer, debt, and self-restraint can illuminate macro-level processes of moral economy and governance.

Building on the aforesaid insights, several policy implications emerge. First, mosque communities could be formally engaged as partners in prevention and rehabilitation programs, with imams trained to identify early signs of gambling-related distress and to refer individuals to professional counselling. Second, the implementation of the 2024 Law Against Ludomania could be strengthened by introducing collaborative frameworks between the Ministry of Health, Islamic spiritual administrations, and social service organisations to align clinical interventions with culturally grounded faith-based support. Third, state-funded public awareness campaigns might emphasise religious and moral narratives against gambling, integrating them into broader health promotion strategies to enhance legitimacy and community reach. Finally, local governments could incentivise the establishment of integrated support centres combining psychological therapy, debt counselling, and mosque-based mentorship programs. Such measures would operationalise the study's call for pluralistic, context-sensitive approaches, translating

empirical findings into concrete steps for policy and practice in Kazakhstan and comparable Muslim-majority contexts.

That said, it should be noted that this study has certain limitations in assessing whether religious practices lead to lasting recovery. We defined recovery primarily in qualitative terms, drawing on participants' self-reported abstinence sustained over several months, observable behavioral changes recorded during follow-up interactions, and their continued integration into mosque-based communities. Although some respondents reported extended periods of abstinence lasting six months or longer, most narratives revealed cyclical patterns of improvement and relapse. Given the ethnographic nature of the research, no systematic quantitative tracking of relapse rates was undertaken. Consequently, while religious coping mechanisms appeared to foster psychological stability and intermittent abstinence, definitive evidence of sustained, long-term recovery remains limited. This finding highlights the need for further research examining the long-term effects of faith-based coping and its interaction with broader socio-economic and therapeutic supports.

Note: Through Kazakhstan’s eGov portal or eGov Mobile app, individuals can voluntarily self-exclude from gambling by submitting a digitally signed request that immediately adds them to a national registry blocking access to licensed gambling and betting platforms for a chosen period (up to 10 years). Gambling operators must check this registry using a person’s individual identification number and are legally required to deny participation to anyone listed. This process helps prevent impulsive or addictive gambling by creating a legally enforced, time-bound barrier that individuals cannot revoke until the exclusion period ends.

STATEMENT OF COMPETING INTERESTS

None

ETHICS APPROVAL

This research underwent ethical review and received approval from the Ethical Review Board of Zhetysu University, Kazakhstan, on January 15, 2025, as part of the research programme grant “Integrative Study of Gambling Addiction in Kazakhstan and Multidisciplinary Strategies for Its Minimization” (grant number BR24992927), financed by the Committee of Science of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

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RESEARCH PROMOTION

This study examines the rapid rise of gambling addiction in Kazakhstan within the broader context of Central Asia’s expanding digital gambling economy. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, it reveals how technology, regulation, and neoliberal reforms have deepened gambling harms while highlighting religion—especially Islam—as a key yet fragile source of resilience. The findings call for integrated faith-based, clinical, and structural interventions that move beyond Western secular models to address addiction in Muslim-majority, post-socialist societies.

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