

Online Gambling and Family Relationships: A Phenomenological Study

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Citation: Otkar, M.N., Özdemir, G. (2026). Online Gambling and Family Relationships: A Phenomenological Study. Journal of Gambling Issues.

Editor-in-Chief: Nigel Turner, Ph.D.

Received: 03/07/2026
Accepted: 04/01/2026
Published: 06/11/2026



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Abstract: This study explores the impact of online gambling addiction on family relationships and examines how individuals experience this process. Employing qualitative methods and a phenomenological design, the research utilized document analysis techniques to examine content from individuals sharing their experiences with online gambling addiction on the YouTube platform. Data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. The study identified three main themes: “Family’s Financial Losses,” “Deterioration of Family Relationships,” and “Family Coping Strategies.” Findings indicate that online gambling undermines trust within the family, erodes traditional spousal and paternal roles, and triggers isolation, neglect, and domestic violence. Material and moral support provided by the family was found to play a critical and protective role in the recovery process of the gambling addict. In conclusion, it is suggested that online gambling negatively affects the family structure, necessitating the implementation of family-focused and holistic social work interventions.

Keywords: Pathological Gambling, Online Gambling addiction, Family Relations, Social Work, Gambling Behaviours.

Introduction

Online gambling is a general term that covers betting and gaming activities accessible via internet-connected devices such as mobile phones, computers, tablets, and smart TVs (Gainsbury, 2015). It represents a rapidly expanding public health crisis (Messerlian et al., 2005). When elements such as being able to participate without any geographical restrictions, remaining anonymous, and socializing are added, online gambling can become much more attractive (Griffiths & Barnes, 2008). Consequently, traditional geographical barriers disappear, transforming the private home into a hidden gambling venue (Valentine & Hughes, 2012). These factors, and especially digital accessibility, have brought about a global growth in online gambling. It is seen that global gambling revenue, which was 536 billion dollars in 2023, increased to 573 billion dollars in 2024, and approximately 24% of this amount was obtained from online gambling (H2 Gambling Capital, 2024). The global growth of gambling continues in 2025, reaching 574.55 billion dollars (Research and Markets, 2025).

Additionally, with increasing digitalization and the growing gambling industry, people are increasingly turning to unlicensed or illegal betting sites. For example, 6.6% of people who gambled in the last 30 days in Türkiye engage in illegal online betting, mostly on smartphones (İlgar et al., 2025). As a result, the rapid digitalization and expansion of the gambling industry bring addictions and psychosocial problems. However, viewing this phenomenon solely through individual psychopathology ignores the relational destruction inherent in the disorder.

The expansion of the gambling sector brings with it behavioral addictions and psychosocial problems. Pathological gambling behavior is defined as a chronic inability to resist the urge to gamble, a behavior that leads to disruptions in family and professional life (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). It functions as a relational pathogen that disrupts the fundamental social unit the family (Kalischuk et al., 2006). The family institution represents the domain where these disruptions are most acutely felt. A substantial body of literature demonstrates that gambling addiction leads to severe deterioration in individuals' relationships with their spouses and family members (Dowling et al., 2016; Irie & Kengo, 2022; Kalischuk et al., 2006; Kourgiantakis et al., 2013; Valentine & Hughes, 2012). This devastation often follows a continuum of harm, beginning with short-term financial struggles, such as the inability to cover daily household expenditures, and escalating into severe violations of family security, including the unauthorized sale of jewelry or the loss of the family home (Irie & Kengo, 2022). Global data indicate that the participation rate of men in online gambling platforms (20.4%) is approximately double that of women (11.2%) (DemandSage, 2026). This prevalence among men, coupled with addiction, leads to the erosion of the individual's roles as husband and father, a loss of responsibility, the undermining of authority figures, and conflicts regarding family well-being (Arifina et al., 2024). Furthermore, gambling addiction precipitates family conflicts, deteriorating

financial situations, and declines in mental and physical health (Wenzel et al., 2008).

Beyond economic ruin, modern betting creates unique spatial challenges within the home. As Valentine and Hughes (2012) highlight, gamblers withdraw into secretive personal geographies, remaining physically present while cognitively and emotionally absent. This “emotional abandonment” undermines authority figures and shatters the intimacy of the household. With the digitalization of society, time spent on social networks, which are an integral part of daily life, is rapidly increasing. For example, YouTube is the world’s second-largest social network with more than 2.5 billion monthly active users (DataReportal, 2026). The fact that the YouTube platform offers the opportunity to reach such a wide audience also creates an opportunity to raise people’s awareness. Additionally, its massive user base and rich data pool have led to YouTube being frequently utilized as a data source in research on online gambling addiction (Costa et al., 2025; Hoebanx & French, 2023; Singer, 2025). The YouTube lets gambling addicts share their stories without feeling judged. It offers a direct, open space for people to reflect on their lives. Researchers have not yet used these digital stories to study family issues. This leaves a gap in understanding how addiction is built in natural digital settings. Traditional interviews can be tricky. People often hide their struggles at home to look better (Jacobs & Chele, 2023). This study fills that gap by using raw, intimate digital narratives.

This study is grounded in Systems Theory to understand the multifaceted impact of online gambling on family life. As Egerer (2023) highlights, gambling is not just an individual issue; it affects social systems like family, money, and the law.

Addiction is often treated as an individual disorder isolated from other factors. However, the discipline of social work considers addiction in the context of the individual’s environment. Social work evaluates human behavior through an ecological systems perspective, emphasizing the “person-in-environment framework and the complex interactions between individuals and their social milieu (Payne, 2002; Siporin, 1980). Systems theory provides an epistemological foundation for understanding online gambling addiction within the social environment (Egerer et al., 2020). Systems theory perspective consciously shifts the analysis of the phenomenon from individual flaws to broader social mechanisms and communication structures (Egerer et al., 2020). From this perspective, gambling, with the unlimited accessibility of digital platforms, brings this addictive behavior into the domestic sphere. Online gambling inherently carries risks. However, this conflicts with family values such as trust, commitment, and emotional intimacy.

In conclusion, online gambling addiction represents the collapse of interrelated systems: the individual’s psychological and economic well-being, family relationships, and social environment. This theoretical framework provides a foundation for developing holistic, family-centered

intervention strategies to address the complex challenges of the digital age. To examine the impact of online gambling addiction on family relationships within the Turkish context, this study utilizes a phenomenological approach, analyzing digital narratives to reveal how online gambling systematically dismantles family trust and transforms traditional roles.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative research method and phenomenological design to understand the essence of experiences related to online gambling disorder and its impact on family relationships. In a phenomenological design, the researcher examines experiences related to a phenomenon from the participants' perspectives (Creswell, 2017).

The primary research question addresses: "How do individuals with online gambling disorder experience this situation in their family relationships?" Secondary research questions include: "How do online gambling disorders affect family finances, and how are the effects of the resulting financial losses on family life defined from the perspective of individuals with online gambling disorder?"; "How does online gambling disorder change family ties?"; and "What coping strategies are used within the family against the negative consequences caused by online gambling disorder?" This study was reported in accordance with the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (SRQR) to ensure transparency and completeness in all aspects of the research process (O'Brien et al., 2014).

Although this study utilized only publicly available secondary data and involved no direct interaction with individuals, its ethical framework was guided by the guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) and the British Psychological Society (BPS), which advocate for a context-sensitive, harm-reduction approach in internet-mediated research (British Psychological Society [BPS], 2021; Franzke et al., 2020). The selected YouTube videos were consciously produced and broadcasted by the creators to a wide public audience with the explicit intent of sharing their addiction and recovery narratives. According to Legewie and Nassauer (2018), YouTube is an open-access platform where maximum visibility is usually the explicit goal or an accepted fact by users; this fundamentally differentiates their expectation of privacy from users on restricted-access platforms or closed support groups. To further safeguard individuals in the videos, all identifiable information, including specific channel names, real names, and visual identifiers, was completely masked, and videos were assigned codes (e.g., V1, V2). Since the study relied exclusively on the secondary analysis of publicly broadcasted, user-generated content without any direct intervention, manipulation, or interaction with human subjects, it was considered exempt from formal institutional ethics committee approval (Berger, 2012; Tanner et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the research was conducted in strict compliance with contemporary digital research ethics standards to ensure the protection of the content creators' digital identities.

Study Sample and Data Collection

Currently, the ease with which content creators can share their videos on the YouTube platform has made the reuse of high-quality audiovisual materials for research purposes more accessible than ever before (Chenail, 2011). Consequently, it serves as a repository of data on individual experiences and social phenomena. The statements of individuals in the videos can also serve a conscious effort to increase social awareness of specific issues (Fazeli et al., 2023). The study group was established using a ‘criterion-based purposive sampling’ technic (Patton, 2015), ensuring that the final 20 videos represented ‘critical cases’ capable of revealing the deep essential structures of the gambling experience within the Turkish family context. This selection followed a rigorous screening process where only individuals who explicitly constructed their identity as ‘online gambling addicts’ were included to ensure the authenticity of the ‘lived experience’. Videos that were obscured, unidentified, or gave the impression of clandestine filming were excluded from the scope of the study as they were not deemed sufficient in terms of content verifiability and ethical reliability. It was considered that such content could pose a risk to the authenticity of the narratives and the reliability of the research findings. Furthermore, a specific narrative focus was required; videos were selected only if the narrator provided a detailed account of ‘family-related outcomes,’ thereby shifting the unit of analysis from individual gambling behavior to the dynamics of the family system. Finally, following the methodology of Jacobs and Chele (2023), the ‘Social Blade’ platform was utilized to identify content from channels with significant subscriber counts and broad audiences, ensuring that the analyzed narratives reflect widely consumed and influential social discourses rather than isolated instances. The Social Blade platform provides content creators on social media with data such as subscriber and view counts, estimated revenue, video upload frequency, follower count, and growth rate.

In this context, content with high interaction indicators such as view counts, likes, and comments-and thus the power to create awareness by reaching wider audiences-was specifically preferred. The study group consists of 20 Turkish videos selected using a purposive sampling technique from the YouTube platform. In phenomenological research, the focus is not on the quantity of participants but on the depth and richness of the shared experience to reach the ‘essence’ of the phenomenon. Creswell (2017) suggests that for phenomenological studies, a sample size ranging from 3 to 10 or up to 15 is often sufficient to capture the commonalities of lived experiences. Similarly, Moustakas (1994) emphasizes that the primary goal is to select participants who have deeply experienced the phenomenon, rather than achieving statistical representativeness. Furthermore, as Patterson (2018) notes, YouTube narratives provide ‘rich, raw and intimate’ data that allow for faster thematic saturation due to the intensity of self-disclosure compared to traditional interviews. Only one of the individuals in the videos is female (V7); the others are male. This aligns with global

statistics indicating a higher prevalence of online gambling among men (DemandSage, 2026). Focusing solely on narratives with Turkish content is a theoretical choice rather than a methodological necessity. The family unit is defined as a fundamental subsystem of the social structure. The dynamics of this subsystem are in constant interaction with the macro-cultural environment in which it exists. The Turkish family structure exhibits a high degree of interdependence and unique hierarchical codes. This uniqueness provides critical data for understanding how gambling addiction transforms intra-household balances. The traditional Turkish family structure—characterized by high levels of altruism, strong kinship ties, and specific gender roles—creates a unique landscape for both the manifestation of gambling harm and the development of coping strategies.

In this study, the inclusion criteria were based on the ‘self-identification’ and ‘lived experience’ of the individuals rather than clinical diagnostic records. This methodological choice is grounded in the fundamental principles of phenomenological inquiry, which prioritizes the participant’s subjective truth and their own ‘life-world’. As emphasized by Creswell (2017) and Patton (2015), the primary unit of analysis in qualitative research is the meaning individuals assign to their experiences.

The research data were collected through document analysis, which utilize visual sources such as films, videos, and photographs (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). Data collection involved searching the YouTube platform using the keywords “online gambling,” “gambling disorder,” “gambling and family,” “gambling debt,” “internet gambling,” and “pathological gambling.” The results were sorted from largest to smallest by “number of views.” The “upload date” option in the search filters was set to “last 7 years,” limiting analysis to videos accessed between July 2025 and April 2026. The study group consists of Turkish-language content on YouTube created by individuals with online gambling addiction who share their first-hand experiences regarding the addiction process and its impact on their family lives. After watching and analyzing videos that met the criteria, data saturation was considered reached when no new themes or information emerged. Information regarding these videos is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Information Regarding Videos

Video Code	Subscriber Count	View Count	Duration	Upload Date	Access Date
V1	99.8K	136K	25:20	27 Apr 2025	13 Jul 2025
V2	5.12M	43K	31:04	14 Jul 2025	13 Jul 2025
V3	99.8K	126K	18:37	12 Oct 2024	13 Jul 2025
V4	5.12M	342K	41:58	23 Dec 2024	14 Jul 2025
V5	99.8K	51K	12:06	03 Feb 2024	18 Jul 2025
V6	10.1K	90K	18:42	06 Mar 2023	19 Jul 2025
V7	10.06K	39K	23:02	01 Mar 2025	19 Jul 2025
V8	10.06K	7.9K	18:53	05 Mar 2025	21 Jul 2025
V9	5.12M	1,4M	01:11:53	08 Nov 2023	22 Jul 2025
V10	1.04M	95K	39:31	06 Mar 2025	22 Jul 2025
V11	1.19M	984K	37:22	07 Dec 2019	22 Jul 2025
V12	1.77M	734K	37:16	09 Oct 2025	24 Jan 2026
V13	107K	26K	8:47	07 Sep 2025	24 Jan 2026
V14	108K	118K	22:53	04 May 2024	08 Apr 2026
V15	11.8K	10K	30:02	26 Feb 2025	08 Apr 2026
V16	1.55M	69K	1:14:30	10 Apr 2026	13 Apr 2026
V17	10.1K	16K	16:29	22 Jan 2022	13 Apr 2026
V18	10.1K	11K	11:28	05 Feb 2022	13 Apr 2026
V19	10.1K	24K	18:35	07 Jan 2022	13 Apr 2026
V20	10.1K	11K	11:40	16 Feb 2022	13 Apr 2026

Reflexivity

One researcher possesses extensive experience in the field of addiction and behavioral addictions, teaches courses on these topics, and has a background in qualitative research. The second researcher is proficient in qualitative research and social media analysis. While the researchers' academic experience increased the sensitivity of the "inductive" coding process used to identify themes in YouTube content, analyses were conducted in MAXQDA to maintain objectivity.

Bracketing was applied to prevent researchers' biases or theoretical expectations from influencing data interpretation. As Tufford and Newman (2010) emphasize, bracketing allows researchers to suspend their preconceptions and look at the data with deeper reflection and a "new perspective." Accordingly, the researchers kept reflective journals throughout the analysis process, and methodological notes maintained within the MAXQDA program separated the researchers' subjective approaches and assumptions from the data and bracketed them.

Data Analysis

In line with the phenomenological design, the data were analyzed using inductive thematic analysis, facilitated by MAXQDA software to ensure methodological rigour and transparency through a systematic data management process. In this study, the unit of analysis was defined as individual YouTube narratives sharing personal addiction and recovery

narratives. The analysis began with at least two comprehensive reviews of all videos, allowing for the re-experiencing of behaviors in their original context to reveal overlooked details (Luckmann, 2012). Following the transcription of narratives via YouTube's transcript feature and online subtitle tools, the documents were imported into MAXQDA to establish a systematic database. Adhering to Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, an inductive open coding process was performed, allowing codes to emerge naturally from the raw narratives without the constraints of pre-defined templates. Using the software's 'Code System' feature, these initial codes were organized into a hierarchical structure and refined into six categories. Finally, these categories were synthesized into three overarching themes—Financial Losses, Deterioration of Relationships, and Coping Strategies—maintaining a clear audit trail from the raw text to the final theoretical insights. This iterative process ensured that the findings remained deeply grounded in the participants' lived experiences, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Theme, Category, and Code

Theme	Category	Code
Family's Financial Losses	Financial Manipulation	<i>Defrauding Family Members</i>
		<i>Committing Theft Within the Family</i>
	Chasing Losses	<i>The Thought of Meeting Children's Needs</i>
		<i>The Belief That Debts Can Be Paid Off</i>
Deterioration of Family Relationships	Separation from Family	<i>Concealment</i>
		<i>Loss of the Spouse/Father Role</i>
		<i>Self-Isolation</i>
	Fragility of Family	<i>Disintegration of the Marriage</i>
		<i>Neglect/Abuse/Violence</i>
Family Coping Strategies	Financial Support	<i>Suicide</i>
		<i>Family Members Sacrificing Their Own Needs</i>
	Spiritual Support	<i>Paying Off Debts with Family Support</i>
		<i>Family Emotional Support</i>
		<i>Family Members Seeking Treatment</i>

Trustworthiness

To ensure research rigor, this study followed the trustworthiness criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). To ensure inter-coder reliability, both researchers independently coded the data sets to maintain analytical distance. Due to the interpretive nature of qualitative analysis, reliability was established through a 'consensus based' approach rather than employing statistical measures. As Harry et al. (2005) assert, in qualitative research, consensus among researchers is a more appropriate goal than numerical reliability ratings, and it is achieved through debate and clarification of points of difference until full agreement is reached. Furthermore, as advocated by Patton (2015) and Braun and Clarke (2012),

qualitative credibility is best ensured through prolonged engagement with the data and iterative thematic refinement. Confirmability was maintained by grounding the emerged themes in verbatim quotes from the YouTube narratives. Lastly, transferability was enhanced through “thick descriptions” of the sampling process, the digital context of the data, and the data collection procedures.

Findings

Theme 1: Family’s Financial Losses

Financial Manipulation

Defrauding Family Members

The economic sacrifices of family members are exploited through manipulation by the addicted individual. The effects of online gambling addiction extend beyond individual problems, causing a breakdown of trust within the family.

“... there’s no one left in the family I haven’t defrauded... I’ve defrauded everyone who shares my surname.” (V5)

“You lie to your father, your mother. My mother sold her gold ring. You lie to your brother. He gives you a quarter gold coin. You say you need it.” (V2)

“I was applying for a credit card in my wife’s name. I wanted her to lie for me, saying she was working, and I was using my wife’s credit card. My wife was facing foreclosure.” (V10)

Committing Theft Within the Family

It has been observed that online gambling addicts violate family privacy and trust. The addicted individual engages in actions that contradict their own values. Despite being aware that they are harming family members and contradicting their own moral values, the loss of control caused by behavioral addiction means that this awareness is insufficient to stop the behavior.

“...I started secretly selling my gold secretly, without knowing my husband.” (V7)

“If I saw someone from outside reaching into my mother’s bag or making her cry, I would shoot that person, but in this 9-10-year period, I’m the one who made her cry the most.” (V3)

“One night, I took my father’s phone. I’ll never forget it. I accessed his bank account through his phone. I took out a large loan from there. That money was his hard-earned money, and you go and take out a loan.” (V14)

“I sold my wife’s gold without her knowing. When she found out, we had a lot of trouble.” (V18)

“I even sold the gold coins (birth gift) that were attached to my child’s pillow the next day and gave the money to this addiction.” (V20)

Chasing Losses

The Thought of Meeting Children's Needs

Individuals with online gambling addiction are aware of their parental responsibilities, but profound cognitive distortions drive their efforts to fulfill these responsibilities. The desire to meet children's needs is deeply intertwined with the traditional 'provider' role attributed to men in the family structure. The addicted individual attempts to regain this compromised gender role through further gambling, viewing it not merely as an excuse, but as a distorted psychological solution.

"My wife and I are shopping. There's a feeling there. We're going to buy things for the children, clothes, and stuff. Let me win from online gambling and send it to my account...I don't want money to come out of my pocket." (V2)

"I'm gambling around the time my daughter is born... I have money in my pocket...that I set aside to cover my daughter's expenses. I think, 'I'll gamble this money away, win it, do some shopping, and get 7-8 thousand TL.'" (V10)

The Belief That Debts Can Be Paid Off

The individual who gambles online, suffering from the cognitive distortion of "I can pay off my debts," initially views the game as a temporary solution; however, over time, this leads to the sacrifice of family savings and even living spaces, causing significant economic harm to the family. This situation illustrates a breakdown in the family's economic subsystem. Financial depletion functions as a primary catalyst for relational decay. This process triggers a total collapse of internal homeostasis.

The addiction acts as an interactional pathogen. It disrupts the household's structural integrity. Traditional roles dissolve under debt pressure.

These findings reveal a causal chain within the family unit. The logic of gambling enters a violent conflict with family codes. It transforms the domestic sphere into a constant state of crisis.

"You don't have a car, or a house left to sell. This time you start harming your family. You start losing your gold, your savings...everything." (V1)

"I have money owed to me, but I need to pay off my debts first so I can get rid of my debt." (V3)

"Whenever these amounts increased, I always went after the losses. I had a loss of 60,000 TL. I was trying to recoup that loss by throwing in 1,000 TL or 2,000 TL." (V20)

Theme 2: Deterioration of Family Relationships

Separation from Family

Concealment

Addicted individuals exploit the trust their spouses and parents place in them to maintain their gambling habits. Gambling behavior is often concealed, particularly through manipulations such as “I am making sacrifices for the family.” However, concealment weakens emotional closeness, undermines trust, and leads to the individual’s emotional detachment from the family.

“...a gambler is a liar; his word cannot be trusted. My parents weren’t aware of this. Because it was the first time, they had encountered such a situation, they believed whatever I said... they trusted me” (V3)

“My wife asked if I had work tomorrow. I said no. She said we had plans with our friends to go out for breakfast tomorrow. I said, ‘Of course, let’s go,’ but my brain was on fire. I didn’t have enough money left to take my wife and children there for breakfast.” (V11)

“My wife calls. I say I’m working; I manipulate her. I say I’m working for you. I ask, ‘What’s missing? Is something missing from your closet, are you missing clothes, are you missing food?’” (V1)

Loss of the Spouse/Father Role

Individuals with gambling addiction lose their roles as spouses and fathers. One participant stated that his child constantly sought relationships with other men because the participant could not fulfill his paternal role due to gambling. These statements indicate that online gambling addiction damages the perception of parenthood, deepens emotional trauma within the family, and triggers intense guilt and depressive symptoms in the individual.

“My child came and wanted to sit on my lap, wanted to play, but I’m unhappy because I lost that bet, I don’t even want to see my child.” (V4)

“My child is more attached to men than women because he doesn’t see a father figure in the men he sees, the older boys. Because the child wants a father figure in his life. He wasn’t there. Or rather, he was there but not there. I used to tell my wife, ‘Let the children sleep, then I’ll go home.’ Because I was going to gamble.” (V1)

“We had to leave my wife with her mother. She told me she wanted to go to her mother’s. She didn’t want to stay there for long. Because my family keeps talking about this, their psychology is messed up... Of course, my wife said she wanted to go to her mother’s. She said she wanted to stay there for at least a few days... I left my wife with her mother. She was very affected by it. She said to me, ‘You will come and pick me up, won’t you?’” (V9)

“The trauma my children experienced during my arguments with my wife, and the expressions on their faces when we told them we were getting divorced... when I think about it now, the expressions on their faces when

they heard we were getting divorced is the most severe trauma I have ever experienced.” (V17)

Self-Isolation

In online gambling addiction, isolation is shaped not by family exclusion but rather by the individual’s emotional withdrawal into their own inner world.

“My wife and I, living in the same house, were like two strangers. Because my body goes in and out of that house, but my soul isn’t with me. I don’t see my child growing up. I’m distant from my wife and family.” (V1)

“I haven’t seen my family for a very long time. One of the biggest reasons I haven’t seen them is that while those people didn’t put any restrictions or walls around me, I chose to put up a wall around them.” (V6)

“He (my brother) wanted to see me every day, just so I wouldn’t get involved here (online gambling). He would say, ‘Come on, let’s go out for tea, let’s hang out together.’ I always avoided him.” (V9)

Fragility of the Family

Disintegration of the Marriage

Online gambling addiction damages marital relationships over time. The breakdown of family unity, separation from children, and feelings of regret become some of the most severe emotional traumas. Initially tolerated online gambling behavior, coupled with mounting debts and lost trust, leads to a breakdown of emotional bonds and the eventual dissolution of the marriage. A sense of inadequacy and hopelessness fosters the belief that the marriage is irreparable, pushing the spouse towards separation. Thus, they believe they are protecting their spouse while seeking a way to assuage their conscience.

“He started using words like ‘I’m going to divorce.’ It used to happen when he was gambling, but it was forgotten...but this time it’s getting serious. He keeps saying we’re going to divorce, it’s not working out, etc. I was saying, ‘If we’re going to divorce, let’s divorce.’ He said, ‘I don’t feel anything for you anymore. There’s no love, no affection.’” (V2)

“I told my spouse that I didn’t really believe I could recover from this process...that I didn’t trust that I could move forward...I told him we couldn’t have a life together...I brought the relationship to the point of ending with my guidance.” (V6)

“The hardest thing I experienced during this illness was being separated from my wife and my children being left without a mother.” (V17)

Neglect/Abuse/Violence

The findings reveal that online gambling addiction transforms into abusive and coercive forms of control over the spouse. The spouse is forced to consent under the guise of “persuasion” due to debt pressure, and the exploitation of the spouse in situations involving divorce and temporary

marriage indicates abuse within the family. Furthermore, in some cases caused by online gambling addiction, cognitive distortions develop, leading to the attribution of losses to innocent family members, such as children. This can damage emotional bonds within the family and potentially result in child neglect. It also creates intense stress and conflict within the family, paving the way for violence and traumatic processes with not only economic but also psychological and physical consequences.

“When banks don’t pay, they start making threats...it causes unrest at home. You constantly argue with your spouse...I try not to show it when bailiffs come. When they know, it causes arguments and unrest, and it affects the children.” (V2)

“I tried to persuade her. She cried a lot while I was persuading her; she didn’t accept it at first, but when she thought about our children’s situation, she had to...First, we decided to divorce. Because we needed to divorce first for what we were going to do, for those three months, my wife agreed to a temporary marriage so I could pay the money...For 3-4 months, I married my wife to other people like this to get that money.” (V8)

“I went home. Thank God, my wife had prepared a meal. I went to the bathroom. Right away, that money was gone. Before, I could pay the rent. Now that’s gone too. Then a verbal argument broke out between me and my wife. My wife was pregnant at the time. She went to the bathroom and came back. Blood on her hand. The baby had fallen out.” (V16)

“I have a 14-month-old daughter. After these losses, I started to think that my daughter brought me bad luck.” (V20)

The narrative provided by participant V8 illustrates the darkest, most destructive facet of online gambling addiction. Addiction transcends financial loss. Here, the spouse’s body, dignity serve as a ‘debt payment tool’. The testimony of the sole female informant reveals a pattern of severe domestic abuse, deep-seated exploitation within the family unit. Gender dynamics dictate a disproportionate, traumatic burden for women. Studies restricted to male narratives naturally obscure these severe traumatic outcomes.

Suicide

The findings show that online gambling addiction drives the individual to despair, leading them to consider suicide. It positions suicide as a distorted cognitive solution to “save” the family. The study indicates that online gambling addiction creates intense feelings of helplessness and hopelessness in the individual, triggering suicidal thoughts; however, family ties can act as a protective factor, preventing the individual from acting on the suicide.

“I tried to commit suicide. My life was ending. My wife was becoming a widow. My child was becoming an orphan. I was going to cause my family the pain of losing a child.” (V1)

“At the last moment, you give up. You say it’s not working. I can’t pay this money by working. At that stage, you think about committing suicide.” (V12)

“I thought about committing suicide quite a bit. I said I would kill myself. I went to the beach that night... I threw myself into the water. I was sinking, then coming back up, but I intended to die and be done with it... I said I would go home. I said I would do it somehow at home. I had already focused my mind on death. I went home, took a razor blade. I went underwater. You can’t bring yourself to do it. At that moment, your mother comes to mind. Your brother, your sister comes to mind.” (V14)

“When I realized I was in this quagmire, in this dead end, it was 2 o’clock, if I remember correctly. I wondered if I should commit suicide. Because you get into such a dead end.” (V15)

“It put me in a dead end... Losses came one after another. I experienced very big problems near the end of my military service. I said, ‘What have I done to my family?’ I had suicidal thoughts.” (V16)

Theme 3: Family Coping Strategies

Financial Support

Family Members Sacrificing Their Own Needs

Findings indicate that family members subordinate their own needs to alleviate the burden of debt. Therefore, financial support emerges not only as economic assistance but also as a form of intra-family solidarity aimed at protecting the individual.

“They say, ‘You can’t throw it away, you can’t sell it.’ Thank God...he told my father that this child had done something like this. My father looked at me. He said, ‘What are you doing? What are you after?’ ... My brother said, ‘I will pay off your loan, I will close it. Don’t ask him for money, I will pay off his debt.’” (V4)

“They didn’t think about buying anything or spending time with their children because they were busy paying off their children’s debts. Their only focus was on how to save their children.” (V3)

Paying Off Debts with Family Support

Family financial resources are frequently utilized to pay off online gambling debts, with parents and spouses sacrificing their savings. This demonstrates a fight for the preservation of the family and the cessation of the addiction. Family members provide economic support to the addicted individual, believing it will end their online gambling addiction, and thus strive to protect family unity.

“I spoke to my father first. I couldn’t get out of this situation. I told him everything. It’s such a disease that I included my father in this secrecy. He thought he was doing me a favor. May God bless him. He said, ‘Take this money and pay your debts.’” (V1)

“She gave me the gold she had saved while she was single.” (V4)

“My father is a retired civil servant. He has a retirement pension and a bonus. We had a house. All of this went into my trap, but the man never hesitated. He stood by me every time. May God bless him. My only way out is my family.” (V13)

“My mother gave me \$1000, three bracelets, and two gold coins... Now take these and go start your own business. Work hard and pay off your debt.” (V15)

Spiritual Support

Family Emotional Support

The findings suggest that while the addiction process causes disappointment among family members, family ties assume a protective function. Family support both prevents the crisis from deepening and strengthens the individual during the recovery process. These statements indicate that family support is experienced not only as a protective bond but also as an unconditional and continuous one. However, this situation also suggests that in some participants, it led to a blurring of boundaries, and the lack of sanctions may have made it more difficult for the addictive behavior to relapse.

“The spiritual disappointment I caused my family. No one wants to see their child in that situation...My mother said, ‘Son, whatever you have done, however much debt you have, whatever you have done to whom, it’s over and done with. After I see you alive, none of it matters.’” (V1)

“I went to my wife...I have something like this in my life...I have nowhere to go. There is no one else in my life who will understand me except you...Do you know what she said to me...maybe you will do it again, maybe you won’t, this time I will stand behind you...but don’t fall into this mistake again.” (V4)

“Even though you did all those things, even though you hurt your family, you still have them behind you. No matter what you do, you still have them behind you.” (V14)

“They never said anything bad. I wish they had... If they hadn’t given me the chance to do it again, maybe I could have controlled that behavior. I would have thought they don’t allow it. They really set a strict rule, but every time I made a mistake, they hugged me. They loved me very much. They hugged me even more each time. They said, ‘Son, okay, you’re wrong, but don’t do it again.’” (V16)

“My wife tried very hard to bring me back to my old self at least 6-7 times, even though I broke my promise.” (V17)

Family Members Seeking Treatment

The findings demonstrate that even when the addicted individual does not acknowledge their addiction, family members often seek treatment and support. The guiding and persistent attitude of mothers is particularly

effective in establishing contact with professional support, despite the individual's initial denial. It has been observed that families primarily apply to associations for this purpose.

"A year after my mother started gambling, she said, 'There's an association, should we go?' ... I said, 'Mom, what are you saying? I'm not addicted.'" (V5)

"We finally found a solution here (the association). May God bless them. The reason I come here (to the association) is because of them (my family)." (V13)

"My mother opened your program... Because I didn't see it as an addiction... I was stubborn with myself. I came (to the association) after 1.5 months. I'm so glad I came." (V12)

"My sister said, 'There's an association, would you like to go?' ... They said there's a process. The doctor said you'll stay here for 90 days. I said I can't stay for 90 days. He said you'll get better." (V16)

Discussion and Conclusion

This research demonstrates that online gambling addiction negatively affects family members and relationships in multiple dimensions. Despite these adversities, the efforts of addicted individuals to maintain their roles as spouses and fathers, combined with the material and moral support families provide, suggest that traditional family ties have not entirely disintegrated. However, these roles lose functionality due to addiction. Consequently, the experiences of an individual addicted to online gambling are shaped around the themes of "Financial Losses for the Family," "Deterioration of Family Relationships," and "Family Coping Strategies." These three themes interact with each other. "The Family's Financial Losses" (Theme 1) undermines trust and erodes spousal and paternal roles. As a result, "Deterioration of Family Relationships" (Theme 2) occurs. To prevent this deterioration, "Family Coping Strategies" (Theme 3) are used to keep the family unit alive.

Online gambling addicts transform their behavior into a purpose, such as meeting family needs, through cognitive distortion. Therefore, the findings of the study show that, based on system theory, virtual gambling addiction should be considered as a relational phenomenon that includes the social environment and family, beyond individual pathology.

Online gambling addiction leads to financial manipulation and loss-seeking behaviors, resulting in financial loss for the family. Addicted individuals undermine family trust by engaging in behaviors such as defrauding family members and theft within the family. Banks et al. (2018) noted that due to addiction, situations such as defrauding relatives with the same surname, selling parents' savings and jewelry under the pretext of necessity, and forcing families to pawn valuables are frequently encountered. A study by Magoon et al. (2007) revealed that 80% of individuals with gambling addiction took money without permission from

those they lived with. These findings are strongly supported by Subramaniam et al. (2017), who reported that problem gambling inflicts a spectrum of financial harms on the family, ranging from short-term crises, such as the inability to pay rent or meet daily household expenditures, to severe, long-term consequences. Consistent with the narratives of the participants in our study who admitted to secretly selling their spouses' gold and withdrawing unauthorized loans from their parents' accounts, Subramaniam et al. (2017) emphasized that gamblers frequently resort to stealing from family members, selling valuables, and mortgaging houses, which ultimately leads to a profound loss of family assets. Furthermore, it was observed that individuals addicted to online gambling believed they could meet their children's needs and pay off their debts through gambling. Similarly, Wang (2018) stated that online gambling addicts believed they could compensate for their financial losses through gambling, and that over time, online gambling shifted from a purely entertainment-based activity to a means of recovering losses and generating income. Online gambling addiction leads to the addicted individual's separation from the family, rendering the family unit fragile and disrupting family relationships. The behaviors of concealment, loss of the spouse/father role, and self-isolation, which characterize this separation, demonstrate that the shame and guilt experienced by the addicted individual cause them to withdraw from family relationships. Addicted individuals conceal their gambling to avoid undermining the trust of family members and to continue gambling. Valentine and Hughes (2010) found that participants hid their online gambling problems from their close circle until they were unable to pay their bills. Erdoğan (2019) stated that gambling addicts hide their addiction and debts from their families, thus causing the erosion of family trust and the continuation of gambling addiction. When individuals realize the adverse effects of online gambling on family relationships, they report feeling guilt, shame, and discomfort at being unable to fulfill their family roles. Similar to the findings of our study, Arifina et al. (2024) stated that men lose their roles as husbands or fathers due to online gambling addiction. One of the remarkable findings of our study is that, considering the patriarchal dynamics in Turkish society, the loss of the father role has a devastating effect on the family system. Koçak et al. (2025) stated that online gambling addiction leads to neglect of the real world and deepens self-isolation. The fragile family structure increases the risk of neglect, abuse, and violence, while potentially precipitating marital disintegration and suicidal ideation. Pirdaus et al. (2024) stated that online gambling addiction negatively affects mental health, disrupts emotional communication in marriage, and increases the risk of divorce. Buaton and Yusnadi (2024) stated that physical or verbal violence occurs within the family due to online gambling. Armoon et al. (2023) found that suicidal behavior is significantly higher in individuals with gambling addiction compared to the general population. In the study by Şahin et al. (2025), it was found that the economic difficulties experienced by gamblers,

especially their heavy debt situation, are one of the most significant and critical triggers that lead individuals to suicide. Suicide is the final point of the system's inability to maintain balance and its existence. In other words, breaking away from the system begins to be seen as a way out when the system loses its harmony with the individual's existence and needs. When we think of the family as a system, the negativities brought about by virtual gambling addiction function as factors that accelerate the destruction of this system. It is as if the system is undergoing entropy, and the family is trying to create negative entropy with coping strategies. One of the striking findings of this study is the strong presence of material and moral support from families as a coping strategy. Families sacrifice their own needs to pay off debts, provide emotional support, and seek treatment. Heiskanen (2017) stated that families lend money and take out loans to help individuals with gambling addiction pay off their debts. Krishnan and Orford (2002) stated that families provide moral support by ensuring that the addicted individual attends Gam-Anon meetings, accompanying them, and making them feel loved despite their addiction. In our study, it was also observed that families sought solutions to online gambling addiction by contacting associations. This situation indicates that, despite the negativity, altruism persists in the Turkish family structure and that families are active in the fight against addiction. The findings of this research indicate that online gambling is not merely an individual problem but is directly related to the family system. Online gambling disrupts trust, roles, and boundaries within the family, leading to the disintegration of the family system. Family members within this system then attempt to develop coping mechanisms. Therefore, this study examines the impact of online gambling on the family system from a holistic perspective, grounded in a systems approach.

In conclusion, online gambling addiction negatively affects families financially and emotionally, but it does not destroy family ties. Families play an effective role in the recovery of individuals with online gambling addiction. Therefore, it is necessary to expand family-focused support groups like Gam-Anon, where families share their experiences, and to increase awareness initiatives regarding online gambling addiction from a social work perspective. Social work policies should address the consequences of online gambling at multiple levels. Family integrity is increasingly at risk. Politics must be tailored to the specific needs of children, spouses, and parents. Identifying the factors that weaken family bonds is essential to providing holistic, family-centered care. Furthermore, it is recommended that new research be conducted in the field of social work on the relationship between online gambling and families. Expanding research that examines the impact of family involvement on treatment processes and its influence on treatment outcomes is essential for developing effective intervention models. While current data suggest that online gambling addiction is more common in men than women, there is a gap regarding the place of women with virtual gambling addiction within

the family system. Future social work research must prioritize gender-equal sampling.

Study Limitations

This research is limited to videos accessed through the YouTube platform, covering the period between 2019 and 2026. Due to its qualitative nature, the opinions expressed in the accessed videos may not reflect the experiences of the broader population with online gambling disorder. Therefore, the conclusions reached from the data are context specific. Although no face-to-face interviews were conducted with the participants in the study group, the videos examined provide important data regarding the impact of online gambling disorder on family relationships. A notable limitation of this study is the gender imbalance within the sample, which includes only one female informant (V7). However, this distribution aligns with global epidemiological data. Online gambling prevalence remains significantly higher among men than women (DemandSage, 2026). This situation allowed us to obtain findings on paternal roles but prevented us from obtaining findings on maternal roles.

STATEMENT OF COMPETING INTERESTS

None declared.

ETHICS APPROVAL

Not required. This study used secondary de-identified data.

RELATIVE CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors conceived of the study. MNO and GÖ conducted the data collection, performed the qualitative analysis using MAXQDA, and contributed to the theoretical framework. GÖ wrote the initial draft of the paper under the supervision of MNO. Both authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND FUNDING SOURCES

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

RESEARCH PROMOTION

This study explores the systemic impact of online gambling on family dynamics through the lens of lived experiences shared on digital platforms. The findings reveal how gambling addiction functions as a source of entropy within family systems and highlight the critical need for rights-based social policies and specialized support groups like Gam-Anon.

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