

Compulsive gambling among young people in Algeria in the digital age: A Sociological analysis of an emerging phenomenon

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Abstract:

This article analyzes compulsive gambling among young people in Algeria through a sociological lens, based on qualitative research in the wilaya of Béjaïa. Moving beyond clinical interpretations, it shows that gambling reflects the structural vulnerabilities of Algerian youth, shaped by precarity, uncertainty, and the illusion of rapid social mobility.

Keywords: Compulsive gambling, Youth, Precarity, Digital platforms, Algeria

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the early 2010s, gambling and games of chance have undergone profound transformations worldwide, driven by the digitalization of practices, the globalization of gambling markets, and the normalization of online interfaces. Online sports betting platforms, permanently accessible via smartphones, have radically altered the relationship to gambling by making it more discreet, faster, and more immersive. These transformations have also affected societies where gambling remains morally condemned or legally prohibited.

In Algeria, the expansion of online gambling unfolds within a paradoxical context. On the one hand, gambling is officially prohibited and socially stigmatized; on the other, international platforms operate in a quasi-legal vacuum, benefiting from digital permeability and the absence of effective regulatory mechanisms. This situation creates favorable conditions for the silent expansion of gambling practices, particularly among younger generations.

Algerian youth, who represent a majority of the country's demographic structure, face long-term precarity in professional integration, high unemployment rates, and a widespread sense of social blockage. In this context, online gambling appears as a promise of rupture with the existing social order, offering the illusion of a shortcut to material and symbolic success. Gambling thus becomes a privileged lens through which to analyze contemporary tensions between aspirations for autonomy, social success, and the scarcity of objective opportunities.



The central question of this article is how compulsive gambling has gradually emerged as a socially meaningful practice among young people in Algeria, and how it is constructed at the intersection of individual trajectories and structural constraints. The core hypothesis advanced is that compulsive gambling cannot be reduced to an individual pathology but must be understood as a total social phenomenon, revealing profound transformations in the relationship to work, risk, and the future.

2. Literature Review: Clinical, Sociological, and Critical Approaches to Compulsive Gambling

Scientific literature on compulsive gambling initially developed within psychiatry and clinical psychology. The recognition of gambling disorder as a behavioral addiction in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) marked a major turning point by establishing parallels between excessive gambling and substance-related addictions. Diagnostic criteria emphasize loss of control, tolerance, psychological withdrawal, and persistent negative consequences on social and professional life.

In the Anglophone world, numerous studies have deepened this perspective. Griffiths (2005) highlights reinforcement mechanisms embedded in gambling activities, particularly the high frequency of intermittent rewards and the temporal proximity between betting and outcomes. Blaszczynski and Nower (2002), through their pathways model, propose a typology of problem gamblers that integrates emotional, behavioral, and antisocial trajectories. While these approaches offer analytical refinement, they remain largely centered on



individual pathology.

Growing criticism has targeted this medicalized framing. Several scholars argue that the clinical approach obscures the social conditions under which gambling practices develop. Reith (2007) emphasizes the need to situate gambling within its socio-historical context, demonstrating that contemporary intensification of gambling is inseparable from transformations in capitalism and the cultural valorization of risk.

French sociological research has played a decisive role in this analytical shift. Martignoni-Hutin (2005) argues that the category of the “pathological gambler” is socially constructed through institutional, medical, and statistical dispositifs. The sociologist’s task is not to deny individual suffering but to analyze the social processes through which certain practices become defined as public problems.

Howard Becker’s (1963) theory of deviance provides a particularly fertile framework. Deviance, according to Becker, is not intrinsic to behavior but results from processes of labeling and stigmatization. Applied to gambling, this perspective illuminates how gamblers gradually internalize deviant identities, reinforcing secrecy, isolation, and self-exclusion.

In the Anglophone literature, scholars such as Livingstone and Adams (2011) demonstrate that the gambling industry systematically exploits social vulnerabilities, particularly among youth and working-class populations. Gambling thus emerges not merely as leisure but as a commodified activity structured by profit-driven logics, often at the expense of player protection.

Within Muslim societies, empirical research remains limited, yet existing studies highlight the ambivalence surrounding gambling practices. Although religiously prohibited, gambling may be tacitly tolerated in informal or digital forms, contributing to a process of silent normalization (Bensaïd, 2018). This ambivalence reinforces gambling's transgressive appeal while complicating institutional regulation.

3. Theoretical Framework: Precarity, Risk, and Modern Ordeal

The theoretical framework adopted in this article articulates insights from the sociology of precarity, deviance, and digital practices. Compulsive gambling is conceptualized as a socially situated practice emerging from specific structural configurations.

Castel's (1995) notion of precarity illuminates the fragilization of youth trajectories. The erosion of stable employment and the prolongation of transitions to adulthood generate biographical insecurity conducive to risk-taking behaviors. Gambling appears here as a symbolic attempt to reclaim control over an uncertain future.

Bourdieu's (1980) analysis of social capital and risk provides further insight. When economic and cultural capital are scarce, reliance on chance may appear rational within a perceived closed social universe. Gambling thus functions as a paradoxical investment, where hope substitutes for structural resources.

Finally, Valleur and Bucher's (1997) concept of the "modern ordeal" offers an anthropological lens through which gambling can be understood as a symbolic test. By surrendering

to chance, gamblers subject their worth to trial, seeking meaning in lives shaped by frustration and uncertainty.

4. Methodology

The empirical analysis draws on a qualitative study conducted in the wilaya of Béjaïa between March and June 2024. Twenty-two semi-structured interviews were carried out with young people aged 18 to 30, recruited using snowball sampling. This method proved particularly effective for accessing a population engaged in socially concealed practices.

Interviews were conducted in diverse settings including cafés, private homes, public spaces, and informal workplaces. Discussions focused on biographical trajectories, entry into gambling, current practices, and perceived effects on everyday life. Thematic analysis enabled the identification of recurring patterns while preserving the singularity of individual narratives.

5. In-Depth Sociological Analysis of Gambling Trajectories

Entry into gambling most often occurs gradually and collectively. Several respondents describe initial experiences framed as harmless social entertainment. A 22-year-old student explains: “At first, it was just for fun. We all put in a little money and watched matches together. No one thought they would become addicted.”

This early phase is marked by strong relational dynamics, particularly within male peer groups centered on European football. However, repetition and permanent access to platforms gradually transform the practice. A 26-year-old unemployed respondent notes: “When I started playing alone at night on my

phone, I felt it was no longer the same. I wasn't playing for the group anymore, but for myself, to win at any cost."

The accumulation of losses represents a decisive turning point. Many interviewees report strategies of concealment vis-à-vis their families. A 24-year-old confides: "I lied to my mother, telling her the money was for something else. I was ashamed, but I always believed the next bet would fix everything."

In rural areas, gambling takes on a specific meaning. A 21-year-old seasonal worker describes it as an escape from isolation: "There's nothing here. When I gamble, I feel connected to the world, like I have the same chances as others." This illusion of mobility contrasts sharply with material losses, reinforcing feelings of exclusion.

These trajectories reveal a recurrent shift from collective play to individual withdrawal, characteristic of addictive processes. Gambling becomes a central organizer of daily life, structuring time, emotions, and social relationships.

6. Discussion

The findings confirm that compulsive gambling among young people in Algeria cannot be understood independently of the structural transformations shaping youth trajectories. Economic precarity, limited professional prospects, and the absence of regulatory frameworks create fertile ground for the expansion of gambling practices.

Compared to Western contexts, the Algerian case is marked by institutional invisibility. The lack of specialized treatment centers and prevention policies reinforces reliance on informal family-based coping mechanisms, which are often insufficient.



This configuration maintains gambling within the realm of silence, delaying intervention.

The massive diffusion of digital platforms also raises questions of responsibility among transnational gambling operators targeting populations with minimal legal protection. Gambling thus emerges as an issue of social justice as much as public health.

7.Conclusion

Compulsive gambling among young people in Algeria constitutes a powerful indicator of contemporary social fragilities. Far from being a simple individual deviance, it represents a socially situated response to uncertainty, precarity, and restricted mobility opportunities.

Drawing on the case of the wilaya of Béjaïa, this article has shown that gambling functions as a modern ordeal, offering the illusion of control over fate within a blocked social context. Addressing this phenomenon requires an integrated approach combining sociological analysis, public health prevention, and youth policy interventions.

Without such an approach, compulsive gambling risks becoming a lasting yet invisible symptom of social inequality and the structural impasses confronting contemporary Algerian youth.

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