



A Socio-economic Analysis of the Online Gambling

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Abstract

This research delves into the socio-economic aspects of online gambling in Iran, exploring the underlying cultural drivers that have contributed to its rapid growth in recent years. Online gambling's prevalence is intricately linked to cultural norms and values, both overt and covert, which have shaped its emergence in the country. Despite the religious, legal, and cultural taboos associated with gambling in Iran, this study investigates the cultural motifs that have challenged these obstacles, particularly among the youth. To unravel the psychological mechanisms at play among young online gamblers, this study adopts a qualitative approach, employing in-depth interviews with 17 male online gamblers aged between 20 and 40, alongside participatory observations. The data is analyzed thematically, with a focus on cultural motifs that reinforce mental accounting biases, drawing from the principles of behavioral economics. Notably, the central theme that emerges from this analysis is the "psychology of success", a worldview that influences the mindset and actions of individuals engaged in online gambling. The findings of this study reveal a significant thematic alignment between the teachings of the psychology of success and the cultural elements that bolster cognitive biases in the speech and conduct of online gamblers. The psychology of success, which emphasizes a sense of agency and empowerment, appears to drive cultural change and contributes to the widespread acceptance of online gambling despite its illegitimate status.

Furthermore, the study highlights a connection between the prevalence of online gambling and the devaluation of the national currency.

Keywords: Online Gambling, Socio-Economic Analysis, Behavioral Economy, Mental Accounting

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Introduction

Online gambling has emerged as a highly developed and easily accessible form of gambling, primarily driven by advancements in communication technologies, particularly the widespread use of cell phones. In Iran, all types of gambling are strictly prohibited by law, and its practice is further stigmatized due to its cultural illegitimacy. The prevalence and adoption of online gambling behaviors appear to be intricately intertwined with the prevailing cultural and social context. The decision-making processes and tendencies of individuals toward online gambling are significantly influenced by cultural drivers, encompassing both explicit and implicit norms and values (Hanss, Mentzoni, Delfabbro, Myrseth, Pallesen, 2014). Behavioral economists have conducted extensive studies exploring the relationship between these cultural drivers and the actions of individuals, seeking to elucidate deviations from rational decision-making in the traditional sense (Gainsbury, Tobias-Webb, Slonim, 2018).

In addition to its legal prohibition, the religious ban on gambling in Iran has resulted in a lack of precise statistics regarding its prevalence and conditions. Nonetheless, data released by institutional or state-affiliated media provides some insight into the rapid growth of online gambling activities since 2018. For instance, estimates based on reports from the Iranian Cyber Police indicate a significant increase in public reports of online gambling websites in the media during 2020, showing a staggering 58 percent rise compared to the previous year, signifying a substantial expansion of the phenomenon. Moreover, a noteworthy case reported by the Iranian Cyber Police in April 2021 involved the arrest of a single online gambling website with an astonishing financial turnover of 2 thousand billion tomans, which is approximately equivalent to 100 million dollars (calculated based on the average currency value from 2020 through early 2021) (Iranian Cyber Police, 2021). Providing further context, it is essential to consider that in 2020, the Mehr news agency estimated the combined financial turnover of all online gambling websites to be around 5 thousand billion tomans.

Furthermore, estimations reveal that a substantial amount of money, up to 1.5 billion dollars annually, is flowing out of the country through online gambling activities (Mehr news agency, 2020). This amount represents approximately 18 percent of Iran's total tax revenues in the year 2020, as reported by the Iranian National Tax Administration (2020). To provide a tangible comparison, one can juxtapose this figure with Iran's annual budget for health and medical education, showcasing a significant 34 percent ratio (Majlis Research Center, 2019). These statistics underscore the considerable financial impact of online gambling on the country's economy. The surge in internet accessibility over recent years has been remarkable, with mobile broadband subscribers experiencing a notable 21 percent increase from 2019 to 2020 (Communications Regulatory Authority (CRA) of The I.R. of Iran, 2020). However, it is essential to recognize that internet access serves as only a necessary condition for the prevalence of online gambling. Exploring the multiple angles and methods of online gambling is necessary to gain a comprehensive perspective on this socio-economic issue.

The research context surrounding the spread of online gambling in Iran is marked by a significant devaluation of the national currency, which has undergone a seven-fold decline. Additionally, there was a notable 50 percent inflation rate in 2020, a stark contrast to the 10 percent rate recorded in 2016 (Statistical Centre of Iran, 2020). This economic turbulence has set the stage for the rise of online gambling, prompting researchers to conduct a two-phase study. In the first phase of the research, a hypothesis was formulated, suggesting that individuals tend to seek risky income sources during periods of severe economic fluctuations. Analyzing data mining outputs from Telegram, a popular messaging app provided evidence that economic instability indeed contributes to the proliferation of online gambling and reinforces cognitive biases among online gamblers. The second phase of the research, which is the focus of the present article, delves into the socio-cultural origins of the mechanisms that shape online gamblers' cognitive biases. This phase centers on exploring the emerging cultural debates within Iran to shed light on how the devaluation of the national currency influences socio-cultural factors and fosters a collective behavior, characterized by the prevalence of online gambling in society. Through its qualitative approach, this article aims to bridge an existing gap in knowledge by investigating the social context surrounding the phenomenon of online gambling in Iran and examining the cultural drivers that facilitate its rapid growth. By understanding the intricate interplay of economic instability and socio-cultural dynamics, this research contributes valuable insights into the complexities of online gambling and its broader socio-economic implications in Iranian society.

Conceptual Definition

The conceptual definition of online gambling, as well as other types of gambling, involves two fundamental components: luck and money. It refers to the act of participating in an activity where individuals take chances that may lead to either financial gains or losses, contingent on their luck or chance outcomes. According to Gainsbury, Hing, Delfabbro, and

King (2014), a game qualifies as gambling if it includes the distribution of monetary rewards and the outcomes for the gambler are predominantly determined by luck rather than skill.

Problem Statement

The problem addressed in the present study is a continuation of a two-phase research project conducted by the research team of the ICT Research Institute on online gambling. The second phase, which is the focus of the present article, aims to further investigate the questions raised by the findings of the first phase using an in-depth qualitative method. The first phase of the project involved a sociological analysis of activities related to online gambling within the Telegram app, employing a mixed-method approach. Telegram was chosen as the primary research field for two key reasons: firstly, it provides a vast amount of data that is relevant to the study of online gambling, and secondly, due to the illegality of gambling in Iran, Telegram serves as a safe platform for online gambling administrators to operate and conduct promotional activities to attract users. In the first phase, data was collected from cyberspace utilizing a supervised machine learning model, specifically developed based on the logistic regression algorithm. After isolating gambling-related posts containing textual content, the researchers analyzed factors such as the number of subscribers and views. They then utilized Artificial Intelligence and statistical analysis techniques to categorize the publishing channels into different themes, including entertainment, news, trade and commerce, politics, and sports, using logistic regression and Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM). The outputs obtained from the quantitative analysis were further explored and complemented with qualitative methods, considering the textual and numerical nature of the data. This approach facilitated a comprehensive sociological analysis of online gambling in the context of Iran (Rabieie, Yousefikhah, Gorzin, Mazoochi, and Hoseini, 2022).

In the quantitative analysis conducted in the study, data were categorized and compared based on the hypothesis that the success of online gambling promotional posts in each thematic category, measured by the subscriber to view ratio, reflects a higher inclination of the audience in that category towards online gambling. The findings revealed that among the thematic categories considered, the subscribers of economic channels showed the greatest interest in online gambling posts. This observation is particularly significant as the economic category ranked first among all thematic categories by a substantial margin. However, the study refrained from solely relying on the number of views to gauge subscribers' preferences and interests. Instead, the researchers undertook a directed qualitative content analysis focusing on the textual content of the most visited promotional posts. Through this qualitative analysis, the study unveiled the role of highlighting the devaluation of the national currency as a strategy to attract the audience to the most viewed posts. This finding reinforces the theme of financial motives in online gambling activities within the Iranian context.

When considering the two dimensions of spreading and continuity, the study raises the question of how the act of online gambling becomes ingrained and established in the behavior of online gamblers. Drawing inspiration from theories exploring individuals' economic behavior in markets, particularly within the realm of behavioral economics, the study delved into the contents of online gambling promotional posts that may induce mental accounting bias in the audience. Through the analysis of the most visited promotional posts, the researchers observed that these posts had the potential to generate cognitive biases in the audience. Guided by behavioral economics theory, the content analysis identified categories of posts that were likely to induce the illusion of control in the audience, contributing to the establishment of an online gambling mindset. Additionally, the consistent use of casino chips and scores on these websites was found to be influential in triggering the "less pain of paying bias" in users. This observation further confirmed how mental accounting bias plays a crucial role in encouraging and stimulating the audience's engagement with online gambling activities.

The findings from the first phase of the research project point to two significant factors that contribute to the spread of online gambling. The first factor is economic instability, which leads to a sense of disillusionment with conventional methods of generating income and achieving material aspirations. The second factor identified in the first phase is the presence of cognitive biases embedded in the advertising strategies used by administrators of gambling websites. However, the primary observation that motivated the present study is that both macroeconomic factors and cognitive biases serve as necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for the prevalence of online gambling in Iran. The present study recognizes that online gamblers' mental mechanisms are of utmost importance in understanding the persistence of online gambling despite its prohibition and cultural stigma. Cultural fluctuations, which are more enduring than short-term economic fluctuations, play a crucial role in shaping individuals' attitudes and behaviors toward online gambling. Therefore, the focus of the present study is on exploring the drivers that reinforce these cognitive biases in the minds and behaviors of online gamblers within the specific cultural context of Iran.

The assumption that all societies react uniformly to cognitive biases, as derived from theories of behavioral economics, is challenged. People in different societies may respond differently to these cognitive biases due to cultural, social, and historical influences. As a result, understanding the mental mechanisms that lead to cognitive biases requires in-depth research on the online gamblers themselves within their specific cultural context.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this research is to investigate the cultural factors that have contributed to the normalization and prevalence of online gambling among young people in Iran. Specifically, the study aims to identify the emergent cultural motifs that have played a role in

removing the taboo associated with online gambling, enabling it to surpass cultural, customary, religious, and legal barriers and become integrated into the lives of young individuals. Additionally, the research seeks to explore how these cultural motifs have led to the generation of cognitive biases in online gamblers, particularly by exacerbating mental accounting bias.

Research Questions

1- Under what motif can the collective, mental themes that continuously drive young Iranian online gamblers to engage in online gambling be categorized?

2- What collective mental mechanisms covertly operate to reinforce mental accounting bias and generate cognitive biases in online gamblers, particularly in the context of the devaluation of the national currency?

Literature Review

According to sociological theories that emphasize social ties and group membership, an individual's actions and decisions are profoundly influenced by their social environment and structure. The extent of engagement in unhealthy behavior is closely associated with the strength of connections an individual has with family and peer groups, including school, workplace, and religious settings. Proponents of this perspective argue that individuals who invest their time and effort in conventional activities, such as family life, education, sports, religious practices, and leisure pursuits, are less inclined to partake in risky and unhealthy conduct. These conventional activities provide a sense of belonging and adherence to social norms, acting as protective factors against detrimental behaviors. The significance of an individual's beliefs and commitments to religious values and societal norms is also emphasized in this explanation. The influence of these beliefs and norms varies depending on the strength or weakness of the individual's social ties. Strong social ties can reinforce positive behaviors and discourage unhealthy conduct, while weaker ties may lead to a higher propensity for engaging in unhealthy behaviors (Breen, Hing, Gordon, & Buultjens, 2012; Reith & Dobbie, 2011; Delfabbro & Thrupp, 2003; Orford, Wardle, Griffiths, Sproston, and Erens, 2010).

The study titled "The role of family, religiosity, and behavior in adolescent gambling" by Casey, Williams, Annik, Schopflocher, El-Guebaly, Hodgins, and Wood (2011) examines the association between family dynamics, religiosity, and behavioral factors in adolescent gambling. Among adolescent male participants, the research findings indicate that those who engage in gambling experience more conflict within their family environment compared to adolescent male non-gamblers. Furthermore, these male gamblers are more likely to associate with peer groups that have a higher inclination towards gambling and are also more prone to

using drugs. On the other hand, the study reveals that adolescent female gamblers, when compared to their non-gambling counterparts, exhibit more attention and thought problems and display higher tendencies of rule-breaking behavior. Irrespective of gender, the research emphasizes that higher levels of religiosity serve as a protective factor against engaging in gambling activities.

Research on adolescent gambling in Iran is relatively limited, possibly due to the religious and legal stigma surrounding the subject, leading to its academic neglect and limited media coverage. Nevertheless, some notable studies have been conducted. Kabiri, Rahmati, Share'pour, and Shadmanfa'at (2015) adopt a social psychology approach to explore the relationship between individual conduct control, instant gratification, excitement, and deviant behavior in the context of gambling. Using questionnaires and quantitative analysis in universities located in Rasht, a town in northern Iran, the researchers found that various factors, such as levels of self-control indicators (e.g., anger, egocentrism, hastiness, risk-taking, physical activities, and unskilled activities), social ties (connectedness, commitment, occupation, and beliefs), and the strength or weakness of social sanctions, act as rational choice indicators driving individuals towards gambling. Aliverdnia, Kabiri, Rahmati, and Shadmanfa'at (2016) build on Akers' Theory of Social Learning and employ questionnaires to study students in Rasht universities. Their research highlights the influence of social connections with gamblers on the occurrence of gambling behavior among the students under study.

Likewise, the study recognizes the significance of formal and informal sanctions based on the cost-benefit principle and the influence of imitating significant others on gambling behavior. Additionally, it introduces a fourth factor, which focuses on the positive or negative connotations individuals attach to gambling-related concepts. In a similar vein, Shadmanfa'at and Kabiri conducted a study inspired by the Theory of Social Learning, specifically in Rasht universities. Their research highlights the role of socialization in shaping an individual's propensity toward gambling. By examining the mutual relationship between the individual and their environment, this study aims to identify the reasons behind individuals' engagement in gambling and how the social environment (including family, peer groups, media, and general social surroundings) influences their behavior. Through the use of questionnaires and quantitative analysis, the researchers observe that the more prominently gambling is perceived or promoted within one's family, peer groups, living environment, and media consumption, the higher the likelihood of an individual engaging in gambling activities.

The current literature on the factors influencing online gambling behavior in Iran predominantly focuses on identifying the social environment's effects, including family, peers, religion, politics, and media, on individuals' propensity to engage in online gambling activities. While these studies offer valuable insights into the social drivers of online gambling, they often overlook the deeper mental mechanisms and cultural stimuli that drive

young people to gamble in Iran. Furthermore, the continuity of online gambling behavior, where it evolves into daily habits, has not been adequately explored in the mentioned studies. Despite the growing prevalence of online gambling in Iran, there is a notable absence of in-depth qualitative research that delves into the underlying layers of this phenomenon.

Theoretical Lens

The researchers in Italy conducted a study in 2017 to examine the impact of income inequality on students from two different regions. Their findings revealed that students from regions with higher income inequality were more susceptible to engaging in gambling activities (Canale et al., 2017). In a separate study conducted in Britain in 2010, researchers investigated the role of social factors in gambling behavior. They specifically focused on the occupational position of individuals and its association with gambling tendencies. The study found that day laborers were the occupational group most inclined to gambling (Orford, Wardle, Griffiths, Sproston, & Erens, 2010). However, it's worth noting that while mathematical economics has been used to study the prevalence of gambling, the evidence provided may not be entirely conclusive. According to Payne, a psychology professor at the University of North Carolina, scientific evidence suggests that poverty itself may not be the root cause of social problems in societies. Instead, the perception of inequality could be a driving factor that leads individuals to engage in anomie behaviors (Payne, 2018).

Classical economic ideas, centered around the notion that individuals engage in rational choice based on cost-benefit analysis, have historically been the prevailing economic paradigm. Social scientists from various disciplines, such as sociology, political science, and anthropology, have utilized this paradigm for decades to comprehend human behavior, viewing individuals as purposive actors who make informed decisions. Prominent thinkers like Becker (1976), Radnitzky and Bernholz (1987), Hogarth and Reder (1987), Swedberg (1990), and Green and Shapiro (1996), have expanded the rational choice approach, applying it beyond traditional economic domains. They have explored how rational choice theory can be relevant in understanding a wide range of human actions and behaviors. In the 1980s, behavioral economics emerged as a field of study pioneered by scholars like Kahneman and Tversky (1979) and Thaler (1980). Behavioral economics seeks to explain the relationship between psychology and economics, incorporating insights from Prospect theory. Arrow (1986) has also contributed to this discussion, addressing the topic of behavioral economics and challenging the view of economists who assert that economic behavior solely rests on rationality or lacks any theoretical framework. Arrow argues that there exist many accurate behavioral theories that economists should consider and incorporate into their analyses.

Behavioral economics delves into the impact of cultural, sociological, anthropological, and cognitive psychological factors on individuals' economic behaviors. It draws on various branches of social science to elucidate the economic behavior of gamblers, especially when

they continue gambling despite experiencing losses (Thaler, 1980; Dijkstra & Hong, 2019). This phenomenon is known as the sunk cost fallacy, where individuals factor their past investments into their decisions, even if it is economically irrational (Mankiw, 2020:271). In the realm of behavioral economics, a key focus is on understanding the different biases that influence how gamblers navigate high levels of uncertainty and complexity in their decision-making processes. Scholars in this field strive to demonstrate the significance of mental mechanisms in shaping gamblers' choices, which can divert them from making purely rational calculations of costs and benefits. "Heuristics" or "Rules of Thumb", introduced by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982), is one of the most renowned concepts in behavioral economics. This refers to mental shortcuts that individuals utilize to simplify decision-making and arrive at judgments more quickly. Among these heuristics, Tversky and Kahneman identified three primary categories: Availability, Anchoring and Adjustment, and Representativeness.

Indeed, the Availability heuristic is a cognitive bias where individuals tend to rely more on information that is readily available to them. This means people give greater weight to things they have been exposed to or can easily recall, rather than considering less accessible or less memorable information. The Anchoring and Adjustment heuristic refers to the tendency of individuals to be influenced by an initial piece of information when making subsequent judgments or decisions. The initial information acts as an anchor, and people then adjust their choices based on that anchor. For example, in a shopping scenario, if a person encounters an expensive item first, they may perceive other options as more affordable in comparison, even if they are still expensive in absolute terms. The Representativeness heuristic involves making judgments or decisions based on stereotypes or generalizations, rather than relying on factual or statistical evidence. Moreover, other cultural components, like social proof, where people are influenced by others' behavior, and value attribution, where more time and effort lead to increased perceived value, also play roles in shaping economic behavior (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982 and See also Camerer & Loewenstein, 2004:10-11)

As previously discussed, Kahneman and Tversky (1979) introduced the prospect theory, challenging the notion that individuals' financial behavior is solely driven by the pursuit of maximizing expected utility. Instead, they proposed an alternative perspective that takes into account the way people interpret and categorize financial decisions. One of the key aspects they identified is the presence of loss aversion bias (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979 & 1982). According to prospect theory, individuals experience a heightened emotional response when faced with the prospect of losing something they already possess. This emotional reaction leads people to exhibit risk-seeking behavior when they encounter losses and, conversely, become more risk-averse when the possibility of making a profit arises. Empirical studies on cognitive biases have shed light on the inconsistencies between market estimates and actual

probabilities. A notable illustration of this discrepancy can be observed in horse racing betting, where a well-known phenomenon termed the "favorite longshot bias" is evident (Griffith, 1949).

Thaler and Sunstein (2008) emphasize the significance of understanding individuals' systematic errors and biases, which they refer to as "mental accounting," to comprehend financial decisions that may seem inconsistent with traditional economic logic. Thaler (1999) introduced the concept of mental accounting, highlighting how people often make irrational and detrimental decisions driven by subjective criteria. In a study conducted in 2008, Thaler and Sunstein delve further into this bias, providing insights into the underlying reasons. They argue that the diverse methods of information processing that individuals employ to predict events, along with various subjective and argumentative practices, contribute to the prevalence of mental accounting (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008; Thaler, 1999). As a result, internalized beliefs and perceptions play a significant role in shaping financial choices. The notion of mental accounting suggests that money does not hold a uniform, independent value in the individual's mind. Instead, its value is constructed based on various factors, such as how it is intended to be used or allocated in individuals' mental framework.

The first phase of this study is built upon a theoretical foundation that posits the prevalence of mental accounting bias in economic circumstances marked by crises and a lack of long-run order and rules. Under such conditions, individuals are more prone to succumb to mental accounting biases, leading to decision-making errors, particularly when confronted with choices demanding extensive information (Thaler, 1999). Following the exploration of the initial research question, the subsequent phases of the study will shift their focus to examining specific elements present in case narratives. These case narratives will shed light on the intellectual and subjective stimulants internalized by online gamblers during their engagement in online gambling activities and while making risky decisions.

Methodology

As discussed in the problem statement, the current study represents phase 2 of a larger project that adopts a mixed methodology approach due to the diversity of data types involved. In mixed methodology, data is collected, analyzed, and interpreted using both qualitative and quantitative methods. This can be achieved through parallel, simultaneous, or consecutive modules, as is the case in the present study. Phase 1 of the project primarily deals with numerical data and quantitative research questions, while phase 2, which is the focus of the present study, centers around narrative data and qualitative research questions.

The rationale and function of deductive theory encompass both inductive and inquisitive aspects, allowing for the interplay of inductive-deductive reasoning and inquiry within research. Mixed research methodology involves the use of both confirmatory and exploratory

approaches, characterized by a combination of questions and premises. Emphasizing its exploratory nature, the current qualitative phase initiates a series of research questions. Furthermore, the application of purposive sampling in qualitative research is justified, as it allows for the deliberate and purposeful selection of participants. Mixed research designs rely on triangulation, involving the integration of multiple methodologies, theories, and notably, diverse data sources. The findings and results derived from such research are commonly known as meta-inferences (Mohammadpour, 2011).

In this study, a two-phase research design was employed to conduct a socio-economic analysis of online gambling. Phase 1 utilized a quantitative research approach with confirmatory methods and deductive logic to analyze the data. In this phase, data was collected from a larger sample of young male online gamblers to establish initial insights into the socio-economic factors associated with online gambling. In Phase 2, a qualitative research approach was adopted, focusing on an in-depth exploration of the topic. Unstructured in-depth interviews were conducted with 17 young male online gamblers, aged between 20 to 40, who were in an average socio-economic position. This sample was chosen because, in Iran, young men in this age group often experience a cultural shift, transitioning from financial dependence on their families to facing social pressure in pursuit of their material dreams.

Sampling

Data saturation is a crucial concept in qualitative research, defined as the point where no new information or themes emerge from the data. Various scholars have offered different definitions and perspectives on this phenomenon. For instance, Guest et al. (2006) describe theoretical saturation as the point where data ceases to provide new insights. Similarly, Morse et al. (2014) suggest that data saturation occurs when researchers encounter the same information repeatedly without gaining any new knowledge. However, Jacqueline Low (2019) challenges the prevailing definitions of data saturation in the research literature, asserting that they suffer from certain shortcomings. Low argues that these definitions tend to overemphasize the role of the number of interviews in achieving data saturation, and they rely on the assumption that no new information will emerge after a certain point. Low maintains that this approach can limit researchers' perspectives and prematurely terminate data collection without exploring all potential insights.

Moreover, overemphasizing repetition and frequency as the sole indicators of data saturation risks overlooking specific cases and unconventional ideas that may contain valuable insights. Similarly, defining saturation solely based on scrutinizing other aspects of interviews, such as coding, analysis process, and validation, is also flawed. While these aspects are crucial for enhancing the research's credibility, tying them directly to the concept of saturation may limit researchers' ability to explore novel and unexpected findings.

Jacqueline Low proposes an alternative perspective that advocates for an applied definition of data saturation.

For Low (2019), the traditional definition of data saturation, which focuses on the lack of new information in the data, is misleading. Instead, Low aligns with Glaser (2001) in proposing that data saturation occurs when the process of conceptualizing and comparing different cases reveals no new features of the conceptual model. At this stage, sufficient conceptual density is achieved, allowing the integration of hypotheses to produce and complete the background theory. Low's definition emphasizes theoretical and conceptual precision over mere repetition of information. It challenges the assumption that saturation is achieved through comprehensive data analysis or the production of an explanatory or absolute conceptual model. Rather, data saturation, according to Low, is reached when the data analysis sufficiently addresses the research's primary questions. This includes determining whether the research explains broad categories or concepts related to the phenomenon under study and whether the extracted conceptual model aligns meaningfully with previous scholarship. An affirmative answer to these questions indicates that data saturation has been achieved (Low, 2019). In line with Low's applied definition of data saturation, the present research opted to conclude the process of data gathering and analysis after 17 cases, at the point where data saturation was attained.

The research employed a multi-faceted sampling approach to explore the online gambling phenomenon. Initially, web pages and channels associated with various gambling websites engaged in advertising and user attraction were visited. From there, random users who had left comments were initially contacted. Subsequently, efforts were made to identify and exclude fake and advertising users from the sample. Systematic sampling techniques were then employed, focusing on selecting subjects from similar ethnic and class groups to enhance precision. Additionally, the researcher made diligent efforts to diversify the gender and age groups among the participants. Consequently, the majority of online gambling users in the sample were found to be young males, aged between 20 and 40. However, the participants' narratives revealed that women had a more significant presence in the field of online gambling than previously perceived. Furthermore, concerns were expressed regarding the hearty reception of online gambling among teenagers in recent years. Compounding these concerns, the absence of legal and religious prohibitions regarding age restrictions for online gambling in Iran has allowed the industry to exploit this age group. Despite the thorough sampling efforts, the study recognizes certain limitations in representing the full diversity of subjects within the online gambling community. The underground nature of online gambling has resulted in certain segments, such as women and teenagers, being more deeply concealed and harder to detect. Cultural norms surrounding gambling in society have led these individuals to take extreme precautions to maintain anonymity as gamblers. Even employing snowball sampling, where participants refer other potential participants, failed to yield a

sufficient number of female online gamblers. Male online gamblers who knew female online gamblers were unable to establish the required level of confidence for participation.

Ethical Consideration

The interviews were conducted at the convenience of the interviewees, typically during nighttime, to accommodate the clandestine nature of gambling and the need for secrecy. Each interview commenced with the researcher providing information about themselves and the purpose of the project, along with a detailed explanation of the research process, if required. The interviewees were explicitly assured that their identities would remain anonymous and their personal information would be treated with utmost confidentiality and protection to allay any fears of potential police intervention. A professional and empathetic approach was adopted to ensure that the interviewees felt safe and secure, with the explicit promise of no admonishment for their participation. To avoid causing any distress, the respondents were not directly queried about sensitive details such as age, ethnicity, and occupation through a pre-designed questionnaire. Instead, they were encouraged to divulge these particulars during the interview process once a basic level of trust had been established.

Conducting interviews for this study presented several challenges due to the legal and religious prohibition of gambling in Iran, as well as the prevalence of Covid-19 and the resulting lockdown measures. As a result, the majority of interviews were conducted online, while only three interviews were conducted in person. To minimize potential bias in the responses, visual question-and-answer sessions were conducted over extended periods and through multiple calls. The recruitment process involved identifying users who had left non-advertising and non-promotional comments on online gambling websites and channels. These identified users were then invited to participate in the interviews. Before the interviews, private conversations were initiated to establish trust and confidence with the potential interviewees.

The second stage of the research involved audio calls, video calls, and in-depth interviews, complemented by participatory observation. During this stage, participants were requested to introduce the online gambling game in which they most frequently engaged. To gain deeper insights into the participants' experiences, the researcher created accounts on the same online gambling website as the subjects and engaged in simultaneous gameplay. This participatory observation approach facilitated the establishment of a shared horizon between the researcher and the online gamblers, enabling a better understanding of their thought processes and motivations. Additionally, participatory observation served to enhance the validity of the research findings by observing the emotional reactions of online gamblers after wins or losses. These reactions provided valuable criteria to evaluate and validate the information gathered during the interviews. For instance, in one instance of participatory observation, the observer was severely and aggressively scolded for using the word "lose," with the online gambler emphasizing the importance of avoiding such language during

gameplay to prevent actual losses. This example highlights the influence of the psychology of success on the online gambler's behavior, a noteworthy finding identified in the present research.

In addition, the subjects in the study attributed their daily losses and wins to their mood on that particular day. Interestingly, on days when they experienced losses, they frequently expressed the sentiment of starting with a negative mood. Upon exploring the subjective meanings behind this statement, it became evident that the subjects believed in the "power of the mind", wherein their emotional state influenced their online gambling outcomes.

To further reduce the influence of the nature of the field (cyberspace) on the generalizability and interpretive credibility of the study's results, the researchers turned to the posts and content shared by the subjects online. This consultation followed an inductive logic approach, aiming to gain additional insights into the participants' perspectives. The content obtained from online sources was considered during the interpretation of the findings. The combination of interpretation and observation in this study enabled the researchers to adopt an abductive approach (Zokaei & Veisi, 2021). This back-and-forth process allowed for a comprehensive examination of the research data and enriched the overall analysis.

Interviewing

The interviews were carried out over three months, starting on January 21, 2022, and concluding on April 20, 2022. After the first month, during which repetitions increased, and primary saturation occurred in the researcher's mind, the immersion stage began concurrently. As categories and subthemes emerged, efforts were made to address any gaps left by previous interviews. In qualitative research, there are various methods for data collection, with interviews being a prominent approach. These interview methods include structured, semi-structured, open-ended, focused, formal, and informal interviews. Structured interviews are not suitable for exploratory studies or studies aimed at theory production, as they have a predefined goal and differ from the underlying logic of exploratory research. On the other hand, unstructured interviews are valuable in exploratory studies, allowing the researcher to delve deep into the data (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Flick, 1998). Qualitative and unstructured interviews do not rely on a set of predetermined questions. Instead, the questions arise at the moment, serving as a tool to understand or clarify the observations and experiences during the interview. Informal interviews involve the researcher not posing specific questions but rather relying on interactions with the interviewees to guide the conversation (McNamara, 2010).

Consequently, this study opted for the unstructured interview approach, enabling the participants to freely present their lived experiences in online gambling. During the interviews, interlocutors were encouraged to share their narratives, which often began with clichéd and viral experiences in public places. The researcher's role was to exhibit patience, allowing the narratives to unfold naturally and not become engrossed in superficial accounts.

In some cases, it required hours of conversation before the more profound and meaningful experiences emerged.

Analysis

The primary responsibility of the researcher entails thematically analyzing and comparing the diverse data, identifying common characteristics among the information, and categorizing it according to relevant motifs. Through coding, events are labeled based on their relevant themes, and these motifs are subsequently compared with events within specific topics. To ensure accuracy in the analysis, the data must be systematically organized, as the logical arrangement of data forms the foundation upon which coding, analysis, writing, theorizing, and reading are built (Tuckett, 2005).

Following the approach proposed by Guest, MacQueen, & Namey (2011), the thematic analysis of the interview outputs involved three stages: open, axial, and focused coding. By immersing themselves in the narratives, the study aimed to identify the statements and ideas driving gambling-related decisions. The codes extracted during the open coding stage were then combined based on the similarity of subject matters, resulting in axial codes. By adopting a semantic comparison approach, the researchers sought to uncover underlying meanings and subthemes, elevating the findings to a higher level of abstraction. Ultimately, from the six axial themes identified, the central theme of the study emerged. The researchers' creativity and resourcefulness played a crucial role in enriching the findings.

Table 1

The Online Gamblers' Profiles and their Games types

| Cases | Age grade | Employment | Marital status | Highest education |
|---------|-----------|---------------|----------------|----------------------|
| Case 1 | 23-28 | Employed | Single | Bachelor's degree |
| Case 2 | 29-34 | Unemployed | Divorced | Bachelor's degree |
| Case 3 | 35-40 | Employed | Married | Diploma |
| Case 4 | 35-40 | Self-Employed | Divorced | Master's degree |
| Case 5 | 29-34 | Employed | Divorced | Diploma |
| Case 6 | 29-34 | Self-Employed | Single | Diploma |
| Case 7 | 23-28 | Self-Employed | Engaged | Bachelor's degree |
| Case 8 | 35-40 | Unemployed | Single | leave the university |
| Case 9 | 29-34 | Conscript | Single | Master's degree |
| Case 10 | 23-28 | Unemployed | Single | Bachelor's degree |
| Case 11 | 35-40 | Self-Employed | Divorced | Bachelor's degree |
| Case 12 | 29-34 | Unemployed | Cohabiting | P.H.D |
| Case 13 | 35-40 | Employed | Married | Diploma |
| Case 14 | 29-34 | Unemployed | Single | Bachelor's degree |
| Case 15 | 35-40 | Self-Employed | Engaged | Bachelor's degree |
| Case 16 | 23-28 | Employed | Single | Bachelor's degree |
| Case 17 | 23-28 | Conscript | Single | Diploma |

The interviewees in this study were exclusively chosen from a pool of men who engaged in daily online gambling for a period exceeding one year.

Regarding the sample's categorization, a review of different types of online gambling among Iranian online gamblers led to the identification of three distinct sorts of betting. The first group encompasses betting on sports tournaments, such as soccer. The second category includes virtual games, wherein an individual participates in a virtual game resembling cards or backgammon on an individual basis. The third category comprises games designed by gambling websites, entirely reliant on luck.

Table 2

The Game types

| Types of Games | Definition |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Betting on sports competitions | Betting on all kinds of sports competitions, including football (the majority) in Iran and foreign countries, horse riding or volleyball, etc. |
| Virtual games | Participation in all kinds of virtual games such as similar to cards or backgammon individually, etc. |
| utterly on luck | A type of interaction with betting systems where only luck is involved in winning, such as the Explosion Game |

Results

1. The power of the mind (the genie within): This axial theme can be explained by the two following subthemes.

1.1. Law of Attraction

The subtheme of "Attracting Positive Things" was observed frequently among the study's interlocutors during their engagement in online gambling activities and when determining their risk tolerance level. The secondary motif of "positive thinking" played a significant role in this context, leading online gamblers to place less emphasis on the mathematical probability of winning when making decisions about their risk level. Instead, they relied on the belief that focusing on desired outcomes would influence the results. For instance, expressions such as "you must think about winning with all the power of your mind to win" or "when you think you are going to lose, you should not play" served as critical indicators of this mindset. It appears that online gambling users consider themselves to possess an inner "genie" capable of fulfilling their biggest dreams, drawing inspiration from the teachings of success psychology. The phrase "Be careful what you wish for" embodies a widely held doctrine in the psychology of success genre, advising believers to be mindful of their desires, as they are likely to manifest.

1.2. Agency Detection Bias

Agency Detection Bias is another mechanism through which the power of the mind exerts its influence. This cognitive bias leads online gamblers to overlook or discount the tricks employed by online gambling websites, while also distorting their perception of the actual chance of winning. Specifically, the bias generates a tendency among online gambling users to attribute their losses to subjective factors, such as thoughts about loss or mentioning the word "losing". Belief in the power of the mind and its strength serves to reinforce the websites' tricks and strategies in the minds of online gamblers. It is important to note that based on the narratives and observations, none of the participants in this study believed in the advertising ploys commonly depicted in video clips, showing an online gambling administrator winning large sums or leading a luxurious life due to online gambling accomplishments. This observation suggests that such video clips may be targeting teenagers who were not part of this study's statistical population. Instead, external and independent factors, combined with a belief in the power of the mind, contribute to the manifestation of this bias in the context of this research field.

For instance, one interviewee expressed, "Never say the word 'lose' in front of me". He strongly believed that when the thought of losing crossed his mind, it would materialize into reality. Another interviewee emphasized, "The law governing all cosmos and nature has proved that when you think about losing too much, you will lose more." This self-blaming mechanism, influenced by the psychology of success, has led to cognitive biases for online gamblers, as they tend to attribute their losses to personal thoughts and feelings while covertly downplaying the role of tricks and ploys adopted by the online gambling industry in their financial setbacks.

1.3. Greed-Isolation

The study's findings suggest that the mechanisms leading online gamblers to opt for high-risk options often result in losses. According to the interviewees, greed was perceived as an uncontrollable personal attribute. Statements such as "You can have a nice income provided you keep your greed under control" and "Iranians are greedy" shed light on this observation. In common parlance, greed is often associated with acquisitiveness and rapacity. However, the notion of greed remains vague and immeasurable, lacking a specific realm and defined boundaries. As a result, it often serves as a convenient explanation for diverse phenomena.

Nevertheless, the participants in this study consistently identify greed as a personal attribute. When online gamblers experience losses, they often attribute these failures to their inability to control their greed, leading to self-blame. As a result, the impact of administrators' use of mechanisms generating mental accounting bias is overshadowed by the individuals' tendency to blame themselves for their losses due to their perceived greed. Interestingly, the

findings suggest that certain mechanisms propel online gamblers to choose high-risk options, and these mechanisms are often disguised by attributing them to personal greed. In contrast, the teachings of the psychology of success encourage individuals to wish for more boundlessly and irrationally. There are shared meanings between this doctrine of the psychology of success and the notion of the psychology of greed, with the former being viewed positively within the dominant discourse, while the latter is seen as an individual sin. These paradoxes are evident in the cases under study, where online gamblers unanimously attribute their losses in online gambling to personal greed while glorifying the pursuit of dreamlike wishes.

This self-blaming tendency is further reinforced when merged with the aspect of isolation. In Iran, gambling is illegal and considered forbidden by both religious and cultural norms. Due to strict police actions, online gambling has been driven underground, leading Iranian online gamblers to hide their activities not only from their families but also from their close friends. The participants expressed sentiments like "You cannot talk about online gambling with anyone" and "online gambling renders you alone because you cannot tell anyone you are a gambler. Online gambling isolates you". Nearly all participants shared a similar narrative, indicating that the secrecy surrounding their online gambling activities contributes to feelings of isolation. Interestingly, the participants believed that having a non-gambler accompany them while online gambling could help them avoid recurrent errors resulting from greed. To explore this, a small-scale experiment was conducted during which the researcher accompanied the participants as a non-gambler, providing them with an experimental environment where they were no longer isolated, and a non-gambler could assist them in controlling their behavior. The results showed that while the experiment did not entirely differ from online gambling in isolation, further technical experiments and larger-scale investigations may yield more accurate insights. Nevertheless, these observations demonstrate that even non-gamblers assuming the controller's role are susceptible to similar biases as the gamblers.

The above finding suggests that in the social context of Iran, the interplay between greed and isolation among online gamblers leads to a neglect of the mathematical nature and actual probabilities involved in online gambling, without verifying the accuracy of online gambling websites' promises.

2. Activating Luck (Magic Beans)

In the context of online gambling, particularly in activities like soccer betting that are more prevalent in Iran, websites often assign higher coefficients to items or events with higher risks, such as the number of penalties a team may receive during a game. This practice essentially means that riskier behavior is associated with the potential for greater rewards. The unanticipated alignment between the online gambling industry and the psychology of success

plays a crucial role in explaining why individuals are inclined to take substantial risks and opt for options with high coefficients, even when the odds of success are extremely slim or seemingly impossible.

The concept of luck activation explains why individuals are willing to assume significant risks in online gambling, even when the likelihood of winning is minimal. Advertisements and teachings related to the psychology of success influence individuals to seek new avenues for income generation and to try their luck in unfamiliar paths and methods, driven by the hope of eventually experiencing a stroke of luck. Avoiding risks, on the other hand, is seen as depriving oneself of potential opportunities to achieve significant success and lead a fulfilling life. The belief that taking higher chances will lead to better luck and greater achievements is a well-known doctrine in the psychology of success, popularized by Brian Tracy. This belief in the potential of "magic beans" is likely to become a fervent conviction in the mind of online gamblers, overshadowing the intricate and dry principles of mathematical economics.

3. Subjective Class

The narratives presented in this study offer valuable insights into the existence of a subjective class within the minds of online gamblers. This class is shaped by the influence of elaborate and expensive advertisements orchestrated by online gambling administrators, which in turn is reinforced and solidified through the application of success psychology. Essentially, individuals who encounter economic challenges under current conditions find themselves drawn towards online gambling as a means to achieve their material aspirations. However, as time progresses, they are compelled to conceal their involvement in online gambling due to the cultural stigma associated with such activities, particularly when it comes to revealing their alternative source of income to significant others. Consequently, these individuals become isolated with their illusory dreams, gradually distancing themselves from their objective class. The allure of online gambling and its promise of limitless possibilities serve to magnify the dreams of these online gamblers, further alienating them from their objective class. As they envision their entry into a new subjective class, reinforced by pervasive advertising through video clips and selectively constructed narratives portraying successful investors, online gambling assumes a sacred and revered status in the minds of online gamblers. Even losses are perceived as essential rites of passage, akin to sacrifices made in pursuit of wishes and desires. Phrases like "...you are a loser when you stop playing...", "You do not count as a loser until you withdraw your money...", or "I say I am not a loser. I have been trained (by my losses). I have paid for my education..." (referring to the sums lost) aptly demonstrate the emotional attachment of the subjects to this emerging subjective class, making it difficult for them to revert to their original objective class. One subject's narrative particularly accentuates the theme of attachment to the subjective class. The narrative provided by the subject powerfully exemplifies the profound attachment to the subjective

class that arises within the world of online gambling: "One of my close friends, upon learning about my gambling habit, asked me, "Ali, how much did you lose?" I reluctantly disclosed the amount. To my surprise, he wrote a check for that exact sum and handed it to me. He said, "You are no longer a loser. Take this money and quit online gambling." I spent the entire night contemplating his words. The next morning, however, I made a difficult decision. I returned the check to my friend, realizing that the lost money was not the true issue at hand".

4. Postponed Prosperity¹

In Phase 1 of the analysis of Telegram posts, a noteworthy correlation emerged between advertising and the devaluation of the national currency in Iran, particularly in relation to online gambling. Initially, it was anticipated that the posts would prominently mention economic hardships such as currency depreciation, unemployment, housing unaffordability, and basic welfare needs as primary reasons motivating individuals to engage in online gambling. Surprisingly, the subjects did not directly attribute their involvement in online gambling to a sense of poverty. Instead, they displayed a false sense of subjective class consciousness. Despite participating in online gambling activities, the online gamblers did not find relief from their feelings of poverty and disadvantage. Instead, their engagement in online gambling provided them with a perceived sense of postponed success. This sense of postponed achievement served as a substitute for their disappointment with the formal economic policies amid the crisis-ridden economic conditions in the country.

The observed prevalence of online gambling in Iran appears to be linked to significant economic fluctuations and unpredictable market movements. While some individuals may profit considerably from such fluctuations, many others are subjected to financial losses. For instance, the Iranian stock market crash in September 2020, as hinted at in the narratives of the subjects, exemplifies this scenario, with references made to the Iranian Stock Exchange being akin to online gambling. Furthermore, the endorsement of online gambling is bolstered by sudden declines in the national currency's value, which is frequently exploited in online gambling advertisements through allusions to dollar income and business opportunities. Concurrently, the prevalence of success-oriented psychology fosters an environment where individuals are motivated to defy traditional cost-benefit analyses, while simultaneously discrediting the conventional principles governing wage-for-labor arrangements. An illustrative example of this mindset can be discerned in a gambler's statement, as follows: "Gambling does not fulfill your dreams. It enlarges them".

Central Theme: The central theme that emerges from the findings points to the influence of success psychology on online gambling behaviors, with a focus on the theoretical origins of themes. Existing literature has paid limited attention to the impact of success psychology

¹ Self-deception about wealth that is to be realized in the future

and writings that explore the power of the mind on individual decision-making and mental accounting. Success psychology aims to shape an individual's subjective criteria and has gained significant prominence in Iran over the past two decades. This ideology has given rise to a plethora of content, including numerous best-selling books and seminars. It has become a widely utilized media keyword and a captivating subject for both general and specialized magazines and web pages. A notable example illustrating the popularity of success psychology in the country is the book titled "The Complete Works of Florence Scovel Shinn". Remarkably, this book has undergone 61 printings as of the time of this writing and consistently ranks among the best-selling books in Iran every year. The book is categorized as dealing with the law of attraction, wealth, and happiness, further underscoring the prevalence of success-oriented themes in Iranian society (Source: <https://ketab.ir/Stats>).

In her work, Florence Scovel Shinn imparts the notion that thoughts and imaginings can materialize into real-life events. One illustrative example involves a man who became consumed by fear of a rare disease. His relentless focus on the disease, through extensive reading and contemplation, led to his tragic demise, according to the author. This scenario, as described by Shinn, illustrates the power of one's thoughts and fantasies, with the man essentially falling victim to his excessive fantasizing. The authors belonging to this group tend to blend elements of science, such as biology and psychology, with pseudo-scientific concepts to lend credibility to their writings. Shinn, in her book, contends that speech possesses a potent ability to bring either happiness or misery to individuals. She argues that our spoken words are absorbed by our subconscious mind and eventually transform into vivid imaginations, which subsequently manifest in reality. This perspective asserts that the language we use has the profound ability to shape our life and death. Moreover, advocates of this ideology encourage their followers to pursue grandiose and seemingly unattainable dreams. They propose reaching for aspirations that defy statistical likelihood. Shinn's invitation to embrace boundless dreams becomes even more thought-provoking when she advises readers to speak sparingly about their endeavors and share their aspirations only with those who offer hope and encouragement. In essence, she suggests avoiding individuals who may express discouragement or dismissiveness, using phrases like "this is impossible" or "you are too ambitious" (Scovel Shinn, 2007).

Brian Tracy serves as another prominent example in this context, with his works attaining significant popularity, reaching up to 20 or more printings. Tracy's ideas can be exemplified in several instances. One of his renowned concepts advocates that the key to unlocking good luck lies in persistently trying one's luck on multiple occasions. Additionally, Tracy firmly believes that deeply ingrained convictions have the power to shape an individual's reality. Accordingly, a person's achievements or failures are attributed to their subjective expectations, and success in any given endeavor is influenced by one's positive expectations related to that particular event. Tracy further imparts advice to parents,

encouraging them to instill in their children a strong belief in their capacity to attain any goal or accomplishment, irrespective of their available resources and opportunities. According to Tracy, this belief serves as the most valuable lesson parents can impart to their children (Tracy, 2022, 2021, 2022, 2021, & 2022). Moreover, Tracy's perspective contends that individuals pursuing the same objective, regardless of their diverse socio-economic backgrounds, encounter equivalent pathways and principles. This assertion is backed by observations of several prominent and wealthy individuals who emerged from modest beginnings.

By assuming the presence of universal laws governing socio-economic progress that impact all individuals alike, this doctrine instills self-blame in individuals for their living conditions. Moreover, it provides abstract solutions for achieving economic goals, such as the idea that trying one's luck more frequently leads to increased good fortune (Proctor, 2022), subtly guiding individuals in their online gambling decisions. According to this perspective, words possess frequencies and vibrations, and when expressed mentally or verbally, they combine to manifest into reality. The adherents of this ideology hold the belief that everything possesses energy, and hence, jotting down dreams and keeping them close can bring them to fruition—a purportedly universal phenomenon. Bob Proctor's work serves as an illustrative example, with his numerous books and seminars like "How to Take Control of Your Life", "Ideas Can Change Life Circumstances," "You Are What You Think You Are", and "Magic of Believing" widely present in bookstores, magazines, and websites (Bob Proctor, Jack Canfield, & Michael Bernard Beckwith, 2019, Proctor, 2022, Allen, 2021). Evident thematic similarities between this discourse and the narratives offered by the study's interviewees reveal a subjective mechanism reinforcing cognitive bias and mental accounting bias in online gamblers' minds. This mechanism generates ideas that support cognitive biases when making risky decisions and encourages online gamblers to take significant risks while dismissing potential pitfalls under the guise of a universal and sacred discourse.

Conclusion

This research delves into the intricacies of online gambling behavior and its perpetuation by examining the phenomenon through two dimensions: engagement and repetition. By understanding the mechanisms that embed online gambling in the gambler's behavior and lead to its reproduction, the study aims to shed light on the cultural changes surrounding online gambling in Iran. Specifically, it seeks to identify the factors that have contributed to the expansion of online gambling despite its legal and religious prohibition, thus de-tabooing the practice. Employing a qualitative methodology, the study gathered data through in-depth interviews with 17 online gamblers between the ages of 20 and 40. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret and analyze the collected data. While existing literature on online gambling focuses primarily on the psychological dimension, exploring the impact of

individual conduct control levels and social influences based on learning and communication with other online gamblers, the cultural aspects underlying the prevalence and reproduction of online gambling have received limited attention.

The study aims to address the gaps in the existing literature. Phase 1 of the study (conducted by Rabiei, Yousefikhah, Gorzin, Mazoochi, and Hoseini, 2022) confirms the role of structural drivers, such as economic instability, in the widespread prevalence of online gambling. Additionally, it sheds light on the manipulative tactics employed by online gambling businesses to target their audience extensively through social media. This phase also highlights how these tricks distort people's mental accounting from a behavioral economics perspective. Building on the findings of Phase 1, Phase 2 (the present study), grounded in the behavioral economics paradigm, delves deeper into the psychological and microanalytical aspects of online gambling. It shifts the focus towards cultural elements that contribute to the development of cognitive biases in online gamblers. The cultural themes identified in this phase are associated with the devaluation of the national currency, which has accelerated cultural changes. The central theme that emerges from the findings revolves around success psychology. Success psychology represents a worldview that promotes positive thinking and encourages risk-taking. Shared meanings between the notions of success psychology and the themes extracted from the interviewees' narratives indicate that success psychology has played a role in reinforcing cognitive biases, thereby contributing to the increase and reproduction of online gambling behavior. This is achieved by advocating individualism and emphasizing self-agency, which leads individuals to attribute failure to themselves.

As previously discussed, the concept of the power of the mind, or the law of attraction, plays a significant role in success psychology, asserting that thoughts manifest into energy and eventually materialize into reality. This law claims that what an individual thinks about will indeed come to pass. The narratives obtained in this study reveal how this idea influences users' decisions in online gambling, acting as an underlying mechanism that generates cognitive biases. Examples from Brian Tracy's teachings demonstrate the connections and similarities between the law of attraction and online gamblers' narratives, supporting the observation that these ideas lead individuals from agency detection bias to self-blame within the context of the greed-isolation nexus. Consequently, individuals who blame themselves seek to reform their approach by relying on external factors ("If someone is by my side and controls me, I will win") without critically examining their own intellectual and subjective influences. This reliance on success psychology, specifically the theme of luck activation, leads individuals to enter a subjective class, wherein they believe in achieving ambitious goals through the teachings of success psychology. This belief becomes deeply ingrained and reinforced by the notion of postponed prosperity. The subjective class and the aspiration for postponed prosperity deter online gamblers from quitting online gambling even after a win

and withdrawing their winnings. It is worth noting that before the mass-production industry of success psychology emerged, individuals engaged in online gambling, but it was not as prevalent due to cultural taboos. However, the rise and expansion of success psychology ideas over the past two to three decades have played a significant role in undermining traditional notions of labor and eroding cultural and religious barriers resistant to gambling.

The devaluation of the national currency in Iran, coupled with the availability of online gambling tools, has activated various cultural drivers. Studies conducted in Nigeria (Adebisi, Alabi, Arisukwu, & Asamu, 2021) have indicated that currency devaluation and rampant inflation can lead to increased vulnerability among the youth, particularly concerning unemployment. In such circumstances, individuals may resort to a selective biography, opting for unconventional paths, and gambling can be perceived as an alternative to the limitations of everyday life. However, in the case of Iran, the legal prohibition of gambling has resulted in its clandestine nature, causing young Iranian online gamblers to refrain from openly sharing their involvement, fearing potential police action. This secrecy creates a distinct disparity between the present study and the Nigerian study. The concept of "resorting to a selective biography" remains incomplete in the Iranian context due to the criminalization of gambling. The young individuals involved in gambling choose to conceal their perceived involvement in any criminal activity.

Diagram No. (1): Themes



The present study stands out from typical behavioral economic analyses of online gambling by emphasizing its sociological aspect. It highlights that individual behaviors can be reflective of the influence of macro social structures. By examining the effect of macro-socio-economic forces on behaviors and their underlying mechanisms, this research contributes to knowledge in this field. The findings from both phase 1 and phase 2 of this study reveal the significance of macroeconomic variables, such as rising inflation, unemployment, and societal disappointment, along with shared cultural themes like success psychology, in driving the expansion and reproduction of online gambling behavior. The study showcases how shifting from mathematical economics (as derived from quantitative methods) to behavioral economics (as explored through in-depth interviews) allows for a more comprehensive and multidimensional analysis of the phenomenon under study. Thus, the present research adopts an innovative methodology. By utilizing a mixed methodology, it harnesses two data fields. First, the study employs extensive virtual network data through artificial intelligence techniques and comprehensive statistical and content analysis conducted by technical specialists. Second, sociologists adopt a similar perspective and depth as that of the subjects,

providing valuable insights into the mechanisms of gambling and its profound impact on young individuals.

Practical Implications

1. **Cultural Awareness and Debates:** This study can catalyze cultural and traditional debates, encouraging discussions and dispelling superstitions related to online gambling in a free and open environment. Engaging individuals with theoretical and empirical knowledge, it can foster awareness and critical thinking, promoting a more informed approach to online gambling-related issues.
2. **Education on Economic and Behavioral Mechanisms:** It is essential to educate the public about the economic and behavioral mechanisms of online gambling and investment. Raising awareness of cognitive biases and cultural and intellectual influences on decision-making can empower individuals to make more informed choices. Equipping people with knowledge of investment mechanisms and enhancing financial intelligence can mitigate the impact of delusional positive thinking and foster a more rational approach, particularly in times of failure.
3. **Legalization and Regulation:** The study advocates for the legalization of online gambling while concurrently criminalizing abusive practices that exploit individuals. Bringing online gambling into a regulated and supervised framework can help prevent online gamblers from suffering enormous losses, prevent currency flight, safeguard against child involvement in online gambling, and regulate online gambling websites. Legalization ensures traceability and accountability, replacing underground platforms with a more transparent and controlled industry.
4. **Media Engagement and Sharing Experiences:** The media can play a crucial role in promoting practical and empirical knowledge among individuals involved in online gambling. Forming focus groups and providing a platform for online gamblers to share their experiences and challenges can elevate public understanding and judgment about the complexities of online gambling. This approach also helps counteract the isolation imposed on online gamblers, empowering them to resist manipulative tactics and become more informed consumers in the online gambling environment.

Thaler and Sunstein (2008) propose libertarian paternalism to tackle mental accounting bias arising from excessive information influencing choices. This approach assumes that people lack complete information in real-world decisions, relying on assumptions, conspicuous rules, and social cues. It suggests that informed experts engage in choice architecture to guide people's decisions. However, this strategy faces criticism, particularly in Iran, where police action has not been successful. Instead, involving young people in cultural policy-making to enhance cultural awareness is proposed as a more effective approach.

Empowering the youth with knowledge and participation can lead to informed decisions aligned with their values, fostering meaningful and lasting behavioral changes.

Research Limitations and Suggestions

The present project has several limitations that should be acknowledged. One major weakness is the difficulty in accessing online gambling administrators, especially those located abroad, or hesitant to talk due to fear of potential police repercussions within the country. Overcoming this limitation could have led to a more comprehensive analysis, shedding light on additional aspects of online gambling. Future research should focus on addressing this gap by employing alternative methods and approaches to gather information from a wider range of sources.

Additionally, the scope of this study did not encompass certain crucial aspects of online gambling in Iran, such as its association with economic corruption, money laundering, and rental accounts. Researchers interested in this subject matter are encouraged to delve into these areas to gain a deeper understanding of the interplay between online gambling and these illicit activities.

Another limitation is the absence of gender segregation in exploring various aspects of online gambling. The present research was unable to conduct a comparison due to cultural sensitivity surrounding women's online gambling. Future researchers should make a deliberate effort to explore this dimension to comprehensively analyze the implications of online gambling on different gender groups and their respective experiences.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest regarding the publication of this work. In addition, the ethical issues including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and, or falsification, double publication and, or submission, and redundancy have been completely witnessed by the authors.

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