

Gender and Online Gambling Behavior: a Brazilian perspective

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Gender and Online Gambling Behavior: a Brazilian perspective

This study examines how gender structures the meanings, motivations, and vulnerabilities associated with gambling in Brazil. Drawing on qualitative data from 62 participants, we compare how men and women interpret and engage with gambling in a newly regulated and weakly protected market. Men tend to frame betting as rational, emphasizing control, expertise, and financial opportunity. Women, in contrast, use casino-like apps as emotional coping tools linked to precarious work, care burdens, and material insecurity. These gendered pathways generate distinct harms: men externalize risk through cycles of escalation, whereas women internalize suffering through shame, secrecy, and silence. Aggressive marketing and easy digital access intensify these dynamics. The findings show that gambling is not only entertainment but a gendered social practice shaped by inequality, emotional need, and regulatory gaps, requiring policies that recognize differentiated forms of vulnerability.

Key-words: Gambling, Gender, Vulnerability

Track: International Marketing & Marketing in Emerging Countries

1. Introduction

Brazil has recently experienced rapid growth in betting participation among men and women. The 2023 regulation of the sports betting industry (Law 14.790) and the spread of mobile applications that emulate slot machine dynamics, often promoted by major digital influencers (Pitt et al., 2024), have accelerated this expansion. Evidence indicates that gender plays a central role in shaping engagement with these platforms. Men tend to prefer sports betting (Diaz et al., 2023), while women more frequently engage with casino style applications (Krupka et al., 2025). Across all forms of gambling, rapid adoption has produced significant social, financial, and psychological harms, which highlights the need to understand the gendered dimensions of betting behavior in Brazil.

At the macro level, the integrity of Brazilian sports has been strained as leagues, clubs, referees, and players face scrutiny for their involvement in match-fixing and betting manipulation (Graeff et al., 2025; Lavalley et al., 2024). These scandals raise concerns about the credibility of competitions, the governance capacity of institutions, and the legitimacy of the entire betting environment. Influencers, athletes, and celebrities also actively promote betting platforms. Although advertising is subject to self-regulation through CONAR (Conar, 2023), this model primarily covers traditional media and has limited reach over digital ecosystems. As a result, content created by influencers, foreign gambling websites and social media channels often circulates without effective oversight, creating substantial gaps in consumer protection. At the micro level, both male and female bettors report escalating financial losses, indebtedness and household instability as gambling becomes integrated into daily routines. Media reports describe severe outcomes such as the liquidation of assets including homes and cars, marital breakdowns and even suicide (Alves, 2024; Carvalho, 2024; Brandalise and Gentile, 2024; Seguin, 2024; Pappa et al., 2025).

Given these dynamics, we argue that gender is essential for understanding how the negative impacts of betting behavior unfold. This paper examines how gender shapes participation and vulnerability, with emphasis on the social, psychological and economic harms experienced by at risk populations.

2. Gender, Gambling, and Vulnerabilities

In newly regulated gambling markets such as Brazil, public awareness of gambling harms remains limited. Unlike countries with long regulatory histories, such as the United Kingdom, where prevention and education have created a broad understanding of risks (UK

Gambling Commission, 2023), Brazil entered the digital betting era abruptly with Law 14.790/2023. This expansion occurred without comparable investment in harm reduction, institutional safeguards, or gender-sensitive policies (Cunha, 2024). As a result, consumers interact with betting technologies in an environment where protection infrastructures are weak, and discussion of addiction, financial loss, and psychosocial harm is still emerging.

Gender strongly shapes participation and vulnerability. Men tend to focus on sports betting and describe their behavior in strategic and performance-oriented terms that reinforce confidence and cycles of loss recovery (ENV Media, 2024). Women more often use casino-style applications as emotional regulation tools to cope with stress, precarious work, childcare, and insecurity, which produces silent harms such as shame, secrecy, and delayed help-seeking (ENV Media, 2024). Women may also experience secondary harms when male partners' gambling reduces essential household resources or affects child support (Cunha, 2024).

Marketing and platform design intensify these vulnerabilities. Digital gambling is promoted as harmless entertainment (Lopez Gonzalez, Estévez and Griffiths, 2017) and relies on humor, celebrity endorsements, free money offers, smooth interfaces and gamification to normalize participation. These tactics lower perceived risk and heighten perceived control, especially among young adults and socioeconomically vulnerable groups (Gordon et al., 2023; Cahill et al., 2024).

The consequences extend beyond individual users to families and communities. Financial harms include indebtedness and in severe cases bankruptcy, while psychological harms range from anxiety and depression to suicidal ideation (Wardle et al., 2024). Families face relational conflict and instability, and communities experience reduced trust and cohesion (Wardle et al., 2024; The Lancet Public Health Commissions, 2024). Overall, gambling in Brazil is a gendered social practice shaped by inequality, emotional needs, marketing strategies and regulatory gaps.

3. Method

Given the emerging nature of the gambling phenomenon in Brazil and the need to understand how gender shapes patterns of participation and vulnerability, we adopted a qualitative research design. Qualitative methods are well-suited to examining complex, underexplored behaviors and capturing the social, psychological, and economic dimensions of gambling-related harm. This approach aligns with prior studies that have investigated similar issues in other national contexts (Miller, Thomas, and Robinson, 2018).

Data collection began with semi-structured interviews with adults recruited from college environments, who were invited to share their experiences, motivations, and perceptions regarding gambling and sports betting. At the end of each interview, participants recommended additional individuals who might be willing to participate, enabling a snowball sampling strategy. This process resulted in 55 interviews (49 men and 6 women). To complement these perspectives—and to better capture gendered experiences associated with casino-style platforms—we also conducted a focus group with 7 women employed at the same college who regularly engaged with slot-like betting applications. The male participants had an average age of 31 (range: 18–55), while the female participants had an average age of 36 (range: 19–65).

We developed interview and focus-group guides using insights from prior research on gambling behavior, cognitive biases, and psychosocial harms (Lopez-Gonzalez, Estévez, and Griffiths, 2017; Gordon et al., 2023; Cahill et al., 2024). Studies addressing the psychological consequences of gambling also informed the structure and thematic emphasis of the guide (Russell, Hing, and Browne, 2019; Valenciano-Mendoza et al., 2023). This process ensured that the interviews were theoretically grounded and capable of eliciting meaningfully rich and contextually relevant narratives.

With participants' consent, all interviews and the focus group were recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve accuracy and authenticity. Transcripts were then uploaded to Notebook LM, a qualitative data analysis tool, for systematic coding and interpretation. The analytical strategy drew on the Gioia methodology, beginning with the identification of first-order concepts grounded in participants' own language and meanings, followed by the development of second-order themes that represent broader theoretical patterns and gendered dynamics in gambling behavior.

4. Analysis

Our analysis focuses on male versus female gambling behaviour in order to underscore the differences in their vulnerabilities related to gambling.

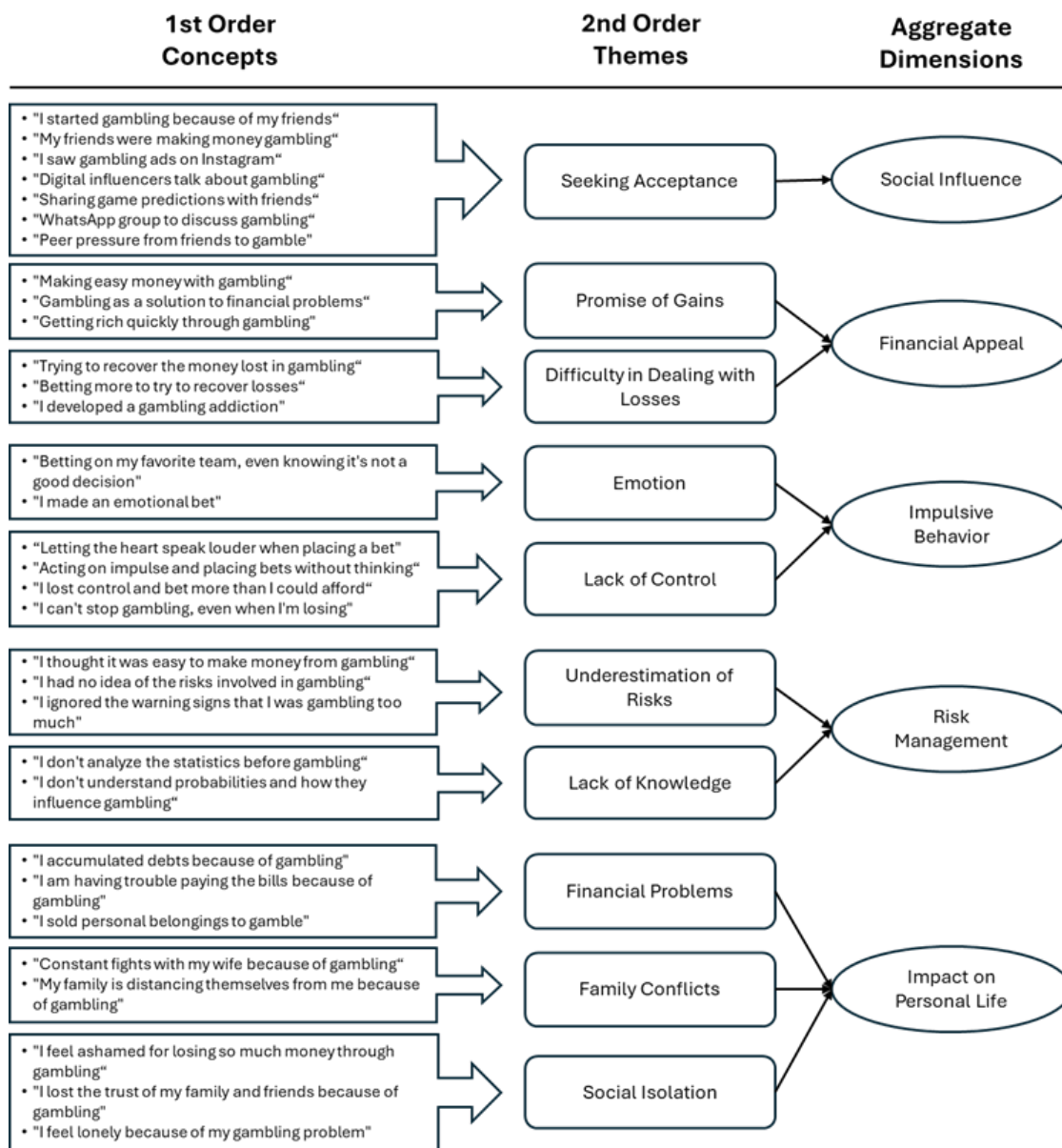


Figure 1. Male Gambling Behavior

In sum, our analysis shows that social influence, emotional dynamics and the design of digital gambling environments strongly shape betting behavior. Many participants reported entering or intensifying their betting because of peers, who made gambling appear common and profitable. Seeing friends “making money from gambling” or feeling “pressure from friends” encouraged higher risk taking and reinforced the illusion of easy gains. Participants often framed betting as a quick way to earn money, yet losses generated frustration and emotional turmoil. Several described moments of wanting to stop, such as “almost uninstalling the app,” after losing “almost everything” they had set aside.

Attempts to reduce gambling were undermined by targeted advertising, bonuses, and the ease of mobile access, which encouraged larger bets and sustained engagement. Bettors oscillated between rational analysis and impulsive action, with emotions frequently overruling logic. Excitement, team loyalty, and fandom intensified risky decisions, leading to repeated losses and escalating frustration. Together, these mechanisms illustrate how social cues, emotional needs, and platform design interact to produce recurrent and often harmful patterns of betting behavior.

Our analysis of female gambling investigates how women in situations of socioeconomic vulnerability engage in digital and informal gambling and how this consumption evolves from an episodic practice to an emotionally charged pattern, with cumulative financial, psychological, and relational effects.

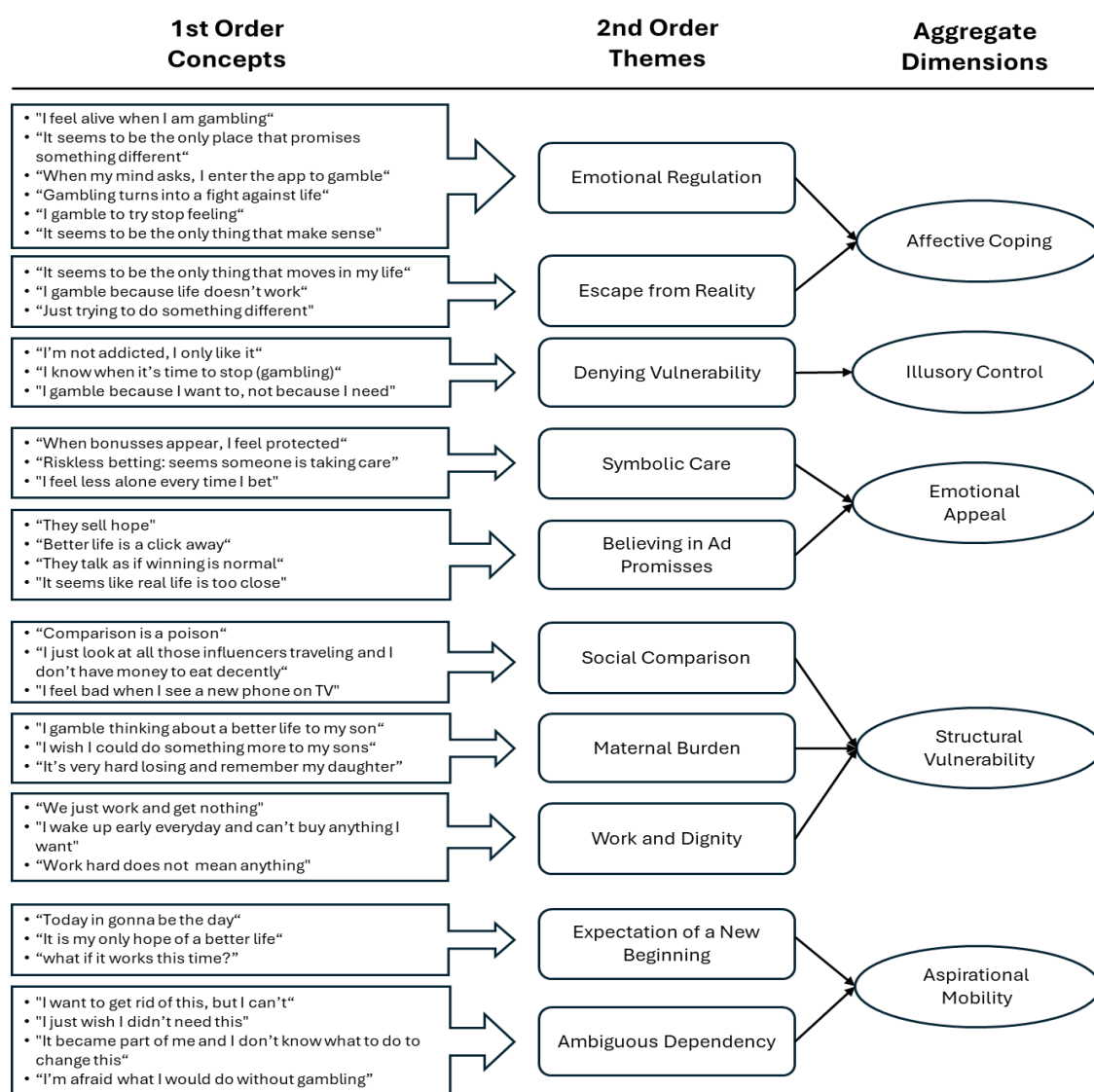


Figure 2: Female Gambling Behavior

Female participants describe betting as an emotional resource embedded in daily life, functioning less as a financial strategy and more as affective coping. For many, betting provides momentary relief from stress or stagnation—“Betting is not just money. It’s feeling that you’re alive” (Jéssica, 26)—and becomes a habitual escape when “the head makes too much noise” (Rose, 45). Across the focus group of cleaners, gambling emerged as a collective anesthesia: “We play games not to think about life,” “This seems like the only place that promises something different.” Such narratives highlight how betting provides temporary respite from emotional exhaustion, loneliness, and routine precarity.

Despite recurrent losses, women maintained a strong sense of illusory control. Participants described personal “strategies,” attributing wins to merit and losses to external manipulation—“When I win, it’s merit; when I lose, it’s a dirty game.” Denial of dependence was socially reinforced (“Addicted is someone who does not work”), allowing the illusion of autonomy to persist even as betting intensified. The platforms’ emotional appeal further reinforced engagement: bonuses and promotions were interpreted not just as incentives but as reassurance—“When bonuses appear, I feel protected” (Maria, 47). Advertisements depicting happiness and sudden wealth stimulated imaginative identification—“When you see someone happy making money, you start to imagine what it would be like” (Nathaly, 29). As the focus group summarized, gambling companies “don’t sell games; they sell promises.”

Structural vulnerability shaped the deepest harms. Losses provoked shame and concealment—“I show it when I win... When I lose, I disappear” (Luara, 28)—and silence became both a coping mechanism and a social liability. Maternal responsibility intensified guilt: women linked losses to unmet care obligations (“I’ve thought about what I could have bought for my children”). Finally, betting became intertwined with aspirations for symbolic mobility: a promise of rewriting one’s story—“Today I turn the story around.” Yet dependence was recognized as ambivalent—“I want to leave... but I don’t know how to live without” (Jéssica, 26).

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study examined the consumption of digital and informal betting among 62 participants—49 men and 13 women—with the aim of understanding how gender structures the meanings, motivations, and consequences of engaging with gambling.

The analysis reveals that, although men and women follow broadly similar trajectories of entry, intensification, and maintenance, the psychological mechanisms and symbolic meanings attached to betting diverge profoundly. For men, betting is framed as a domain of performative rationality, where strategic calculation, analytical confidence, and notions of financial optimization define the practice. Even when relying on fragile heuristics, male participants sustain an identity organized around expertise and control. Women, in contrast, describe betting as emotional coping—an everyday anesthesia that softens the strains of precarious work, motherhood, and material insecurity. Illusions of control also take gendered forms: men emphasize technical mastery, while women rely on denial of vulnerability and moral distinctions between “workers” and “addicts.” Losses are interpreted as strategic mistakes among men and as personal failures or structural injustices among women, reflecting different identity-work processes.

Financial and emotional dynamics reinforce these contrasts. For men, gambling centers on the promise of returns and financial autonomy, whereas for women, money becomes symbolic—a vehicle for escape, hope, and the imagination of another possible life. Advertising communicates differently across these meanings: energizing men through strategy and opportunity while consoling women through emotional reassurance. Shame is largely absent from male narratives, where losses are externalized and reinterpreted as technical challenges, but it is central in women’s experiences—producing concealment, silence, and isolation as protective strategies. Structural vulnerability plays a far greater role in the female sample, where gambling is intertwined with poverty, care burdens, and chronic emotional overload. Finally, aspirations diverge: men associate betting with enrichment, while women link it to symbolic reinvention and dignity. Together, these findings demonstrate that gender is not merely a demographic variable but a structuring force shaping how gambling is used, experienced, and rationalized in contexts of inequality and precarity.

Theoretically, this study advances the literature by demonstrating that digital betting functions as a symbolic and affective practice that is deeply stratified by gender. By revealing how the same consumption practice mobilizes distinct rationalities—performative and strategic among men, emotional and compensatory among women—the article reinforces the view that markets do not merely facilitate economic exchange but actively produce subjectivities, identities, and modes of coping. Betting, in this sense, becomes a device through which individuals negotiate structural pressures, emotional needs, and imaginaries of mobility. The findings therefore call for a broadened understanding of gambling consumption within the fields of consumer behavior, vulnerability, and gender studies.

In practical terms, the results indicate that public policies and regulatory frameworks cannot be gender-neutral. Interventions centered exclusively on individual responsibility, willpower, or self-control overlook the material, affective, and structural conditions sustaining gambling participation—particularly among women living with precarious work, care burdens, and chronic emotional overload. More effective responses require coordinated action across marketing regulation, mental health provision, and social protection policies, recognizing that harms emerge not only from individual choices but from the social worlds in which those choices become meaningful and necessary. This study acknowledges its limitations. The female sample is numerically smaller than the male sample, which constrains quantitative balance. Nonetheless, the qualitative depth of the narratives allows for theoretically robust comparisons across groups and reveals interpretative structures that would remain invisible in purely quantitative assessments. Future research may expand the diversity of female profiles, examine intersections with race, class, and age, and explore longitudinal trajectories to understand how prolonged engagement with betting reshapes identity, emotional regulation, and financial vulnerability over time.

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