



The Meaning of Life According to Individuals with Gambling Behavior: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Gambling behavior can evolve into a behavioral addiction, resulting in significant psychosocial and existential consequences. **Purpose:** This study aimed to explore how individuals with gambling behavior perceive and construct the meaning of life. **Methods:** A descriptive phenomenological qualitative study was conducted with 24 individuals engaging in regular gambling behavior in the Kyrenia district of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling methods. Data was collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological method. **Results:** Four main themes emerged from the analysis: multidimensional losses, the perception of life as meaningless, maladaptive coping mechanisms, and the reconstruction of meaning in life. The results highlight that gambling-related harm extends beyond economic and social dimensions, encompassing deeper existential struggles and individuals' efforts to make sense of their lives. **Conclusion:** Gambling behavior should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon that extends beyond addiction, encompassing existential distress and meaning-making processes. Interventions that integrate psychosocial and meaning-centered approaches may enhance recovery and improve overall well-being. **Implications for Nursing:** Nurses should incorporate meaning-centered and psychosocial approaches into care by assessing individuals' sense of meaning, coping patterns, and emotional well-being. Addressing existential distress and stigma, while promoting adaptive coping and supportive therapeutic relationships, may enhance recovery outcomes.

Keywords: Gambling, Behavioral addiction, Meaning of life, Phenomenology, Qualitative research.

What does this paper add?

1. This study provides an existential perspective on gambling behavior by exploring how individuals construct meaning in life.
2. Findings indicate that gambling-related harm extends beyond addiction symptoms and includes experiences of existential distress and self-destruction.

3. The study highlights the importance of meaning-centered and psychosocial nursing approaches in supporting recovery.

Introduction

Gambling is a pattern of behavior characterized by the risking of money or a valuable asset for the sake of the possibility of gaining a greater payoff depending on

an uncertain outcome (Glimne, 2025). The World Health Organization (WHO, 2024) defines gambling as a betting behavior in which the outcome is determined based on an event based on chance, a game, or a competition, and the individual aims to gain profit accompanied by risk awareness. As digitalization, online platforms, and mobile applications have become widespread, gambling has transformed into an ever more accessible, widespread, and socially visible activity. This transformation paves the path for gambling to turn into a problematic behavioral pattern that disrupts psychosocial functioning and affects basic domains of life in some individuals, although it is limited as an entertainment and leisure time activity for some individuals (Geniş & Aksu, 2020; Moreira et al., 2023).

Gambling is a prevalent behavior in many societies and has become more accessible through online platforms and mobile technologies. Recent reports indicated that millions of individuals engage in gambling activities worldwide, while a significant proportion experience gambling-related harms ranging from financial difficulties to mental health problems (WHO, 2024).

Gambling disorder is considered a type of behavioral addiction that develops in relation to neurobiological changes in the reward and reinforcement systems of the brain and heightened sensitivity to the stimulation of these systems (APA, 2013). This disorder, which has been characterized by the repetitive and uncontrolled continuation of gambling behavior despite being exposed to economic, psychosocial, and functional negativities, involves a complex clinical picture with cognitive, neurological, behavioral, and genetic components (Clark, 2014; Potenza et al., 2019; Schuckit, 2013). According to DSM-5, gambling disorder is diagnosed by the individual suffering from a significant loss of control over gambling behavior, gambling in ever-escalating quantities in order to attain the same level of pleasure, and manifesting withdrawal-like symptoms, such as restlessness and irritability during attempts to limit or stop gambling behavior (APA, 2013).

Although individuals often perceive problematic gambling behavior as a harmless source of entertainment or excitement at the beginning, it may lead to serious individual and social consequences over time. Similarly, studies published in the literature have

emphasized that behavioral addictions are associated with psychosocial distress, anxiety, and impaired well-being among individuals and young populations (Alzayyat et al., 2024). The literature has reported that gambling disorder is associated with economic losses, indebtedness, family conflicts, disruptions in social relationships, depressive symptoms, tendency towards criminal behavior, and social isolation (Azemi et al., 2023; Çakıcı et al., 2021; Grant & Chamberlain, 2020; Karakartal, 2023; Sharma & Weinstein, 2025).

The repetitive and uncontrollable nature of gambling behavior makes it necessary to treat this disorder not only as an individual problem, but also as a major public health problem. Gambling disorder requires a multidimensional intervention due to its consequences that negatively affect the individual's psychosocial functioning, family relationships, and social cohesion. In this sense, addressing the etiology of the disorder in a holistic framework, including biological, psychological, and social components, is of great importance (Aslan et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2025; Spence et al., 2025; Swanton & Gainsbury, 2020).

From an existential perspective, the search for meaning is regarded as a fundamental human motivation, and difficulties in experiencing meaning and purpose in life may contribute to psychological distress and maladaptive coping behaviors (Frankl, 1963). A substantial body of research has demonstrated that meaning in life is positively associated with psychological well-being, resilience, and adaptive coping, whereas a diminished sense of meaning is linked to depression, hopelessness, and poorer mental health outcomes (Magomedova & Fatima, 2025; Schnell, 2020). Within addiction research, existential distress and reduced meaning in life have been identified as factors that may increase vulnerability to both substance-related and behavioral addictions by encouraging individuals to seek temporary relief from emotional suffering and feelings of emptiness (Yıldırım & Uslu, 2022). Moreover, studies focusing on gambling behavior have shown that a stronger sense of purpose in life is associated with lower levels of gambling-related problems and greater psychological flourishing (Zhang et al., 2020). Therefore, exploring how individuals with gambling behavior experience, interpret, and construct meaning in life may provide valuable insights into the psychosocial and existential processes underlying gambling behavior and contribute to a more

comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

Healthcare professionals have important responsibilities in the recognition and management of the multidimensional effects of gambling behavior on the individual, family, and society. Especially nurses have a key role in clinical practice for early identification of problematic gambling behaviors, making appropriate referrals, and contributing to the development of evidence-based interventions (Dağlı & Yüyen, 2023; Kızılkaya & Yılmaz, 2024). This professional responsibility makes it necessary to understand gambling disorder not only at the symptom level, but also based on the individual's life experiences and psychosocial needs.

The increasing prevalence of gambling behavior and the growing burden of gambling-related addiction have heightened concerns regarding its impact on individuals, families, and society, thereby generating a greater need for comprehensive scientific inquiry. Although gambling disorder has been extensively investigated with respect to its behavioral, neurobiological, and psychosocial consequences, relatively little attention has been paid to how individuals experience existential distress and construct meaning in life in the context of gambling behavior. In particular, qualitative studies exploring the subjective meaning-making processes and lived experiences of individuals who engage in gambling remain limited. Understanding how individuals interpret their experiences and position gambling within their personal world of meaning may provide valuable insights into the deeper existential and psychosocial dimensions of this phenomenon. Adopting a phenomenological perspective, this study aims to examine how individuals with gambling behavior perceive the meaning of life. The study findings are expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychosocial dimensions of gambling behavior and to address an important gap in the existing literature.

Method

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative research methodology using a descriptive phenomenological design to explore the meanings that participants ascribe to their lived experiences related to gambling behavior. A phenomenological approach was considered particularly appropriate, because the study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of how individuals

experience, interpret, and construct meaning in life within the context of gambling behavior. Phenomenology seeks to uncover the essence and meaning of lived experiences from the participants' own perspectives, making it especially suitable for exploring subjective experiences and meaning-making processes. The study was grounded in Husserlian phenomenology, which seeks to describe individuals' lived experiences as they are consciously perceived, through the use of bracketing (*epoché*) to minimize researchers' preconceptions. This study was reported in accordance with the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) guidelines.

Study Participants

The study sample consisted of individuals who engaged in regular gambling activities in the Kyrenia district of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who could provide rich and in-depth accounts of their experiences. In addition, snowball sampling was used to facilitate access to individuals within this relatively hard-to-reach population. Snowball sampling relies on referrals from initial participants to identify additional eligible individuals (Ting et al., 2025), and it is particularly effective for individuals who may be hesitant to disclose sensitive experiences, such as gambling behavior (Naderifar et al., 2017; Parker et al., 2019). Individuals who met the eligibility criteria were approached by the researchers, informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, and invited to participate voluntarily. Following the initial interviews, participants were asked whether they knew other individuals who met the inclusion criteria and might be willing to participate. Those who expressed interest were subsequently contacted by the researchers and screened for eligibility before enrollment in the study.

A total of 24 participants were included in the study. The inclusion criteria were: being 18 years of age or older, engaging in regular gambling behavior, being able to communicate in Turkish, and voluntarily agreeing to participate in the study. The exclusion criteria included inability to participate in an in-depth interview or communication difficulties that could hinder meaningful participation. The sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation, which is commonly used in phenomenological research. Data collection

continued until no new meanings, codes, or thematic insights emerged from the interviews. The final sample of 24 participants was considered sufficient to provide a rich and comprehensive understanding of the

phenomenon under investigation. The sociodemographic characteristics of participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant characteristics

Participant	Age	Gender	Educational level	Marital status	Age at first gambling	Frequency of gambling
P1	32	Male	Bachelor's degree	Married	25	Every day of the week
P2	41	Male	Bachelor's degree	Single	12	Twice a week
P3	46	Male	Bachelor's degree	Married	35	Every day of the week
P4	32	Male	Bachelor's degree	Single	27	Three days a week
P5	62	Female	Bachelor's degree	Single	40	Twice a week
P6	40	Male	Bachelor's degree	Single	23	Three days a week
P7	54	Female	Bachelor's degree	Single	50	Three days a week
P8	50	Male	Master's degree	Single	27	Twice a week
P9	21	Male	High school	Single	19	Once a week
P10	44	Female	High school	Married	42	Once a week
P11	28	Male	Master's degree	Single	17	Twice a week
P12	30	Male	Bachelor's degree	Married	7	Twice a week
P13	58	Male	Bachelor's degree	Married	52	Every day of the week
P14	26	Female	Bachelor's degree	Married	21	Three days a week
P15	47	Female	Master's degree	Married	27	Three days a week
P16	56	Female	High school	Married	9	Every day of the week
P17	48	Female	Master's degree	Married	38	Twice a week
P18	48	Female	Bachelor's degree	Married	40	Once a week
P19	30	Male	Bachelor's degree	Single	25	Twice a week
P20	26	Female	Bachelor's degree	Single	25	Twice a week
P21	24	Male	Bachelor's degree	Single	21	Three days a week
P22	32	Female	Bachelor's degree	Single	23	Twice a week
P23	24	Male	Bachelor's degree	Single	20	Twice a week
P24	41	Female	Associate degree	Married	30	Three days a week

Data Collection

Data was collected between May 1 and October 31, 2024 through face-to-face, in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted by the researchers. Prior to data collection, participants were informed about the purpose

of the study, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time. Written and verbal informed consents were obtained.

A Personal Information Form was used to collect sociodemographic data. Additionally, a semi-structured

interview form was developed based on a comprehensive literature review to explore participants' lived experiences and perceptions of the meaning of life in relation to gambling behavior (Grönroos et al., 2022; Hagfors et al., 2022).

The interview form was reviewed by three experts in psychiatric nursing and qualitative research to ensure content validity and clarity. Necessary revisions were made based on their feedback. The semi-structured interview guide included open-ended questions designed to explore participants' experiences of gambling behavior and their perceptions of meaning in life. Examples of interview questions included: "What does gambling mean to you?", "Can you describe the reasons that led you to engage in gambling?", "How has gambling affected your life and daily experiences?", "How do you feel about your gambling behavior and what thoughts do you associate with it?", and "What does meaning in life mean to you?" Follow-up and probing questions were used when necessary to obtain richer descriptions and clarify participants' experiences. Interviews lasted approximately 45-50 minutes, were audio-recorded with permission, and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The interviews were conducted by the second author, an academic in psychiatric nursing with experience in qualitative research and mental health nursing. The interviewer had received training in qualitative interviewing techniques and had prior experience conducting in-depth interviews on psychosocial issues.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological method, consistent with the descriptive approach grounded in Edmund Husserl. This method was chosen to systematically identify the essential structure of participants' lived experiences related to gambling behavior and meaning in life. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The analysis followed Colaizzi's seven-step procedure. Transcripts were read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the data. Significant statements relevant to the phenomenon were then identified and coded. These statements were used to formulate meanings, which were subsequently organized into clusters of themes. The themes were integrated into a comprehensive description of the experience, from which the underlying structure was derived. Finally, the

findings were checked against the original transcripts to ensure consistency. To enhance methodological rigor, bracketing (*epoché*) was applied throughout the study to minimize the influence of researchers' prior assumptions and experiences related to gambling behavior. Before and during data analysis, the researchers engaged in reflexive discussions and maintained reflective notes to identify and critically examine personal beliefs, expectations, and potential biases. These reflections were revisited throughout the analytic process to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in participants' narratives rather than researchers' preconceptions. In addition, peer debriefing sessions were conducted among the research team to discuss emerging codes, themes, and interpretations, thereby enhancing reflexivity and reducing potential interpretive bias. To strengthen credibility and dependability, two researchers independently coded the transcripts and compared their analyses. Any discrepancies were discussed until consensus was achieved. An audit trail documenting analytic decisions, coding processes, and theme development was maintained throughout the study. Representative participant quotations were included to support the findings and enhance transparency. Data was managed manually without the use of qualitative data analysis software.

Trustworthiness

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the study in accordance with the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement with the data, repeated reading of transcripts, independent coding by two researchers, peer debriefing, and the use of direct participant quotations to support the findings. Dependability was enhanced by maintaining an audit trail documenting methodological decisions, coding procedures, and theme development throughout the research process. Confirmability was supported through bracketing (*epoché*), reflexive discussions, and reflective note-taking to minimize the influence of researchers' assumptions and biases. Transferability was facilitated by providing detailed descriptions of the study setting, participant characteristics, sampling procedures, and data collection process, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other contexts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Science, Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee (Approval No. FSBB/15). All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Written and verbal informed consents were obtained. Participants' identities were protected by assigning codes (P1-P24), and all data was kept confidential in accordance with ethical standards and the Declaration of Helsinki.

Results

The analysis of the interview data yielded four interrelated themes reflecting how individuals experience gambling behavior and construct meaning in life: multidimensional losses, the perception of life as meaningless, maladaptive coping mechanisms, and the reconstruction of meaning in life. Each theme comprised related sub-themes derived from significant statements identified during the analysis. The findings are supported by illustrative participant quotations to preserve the depth and authenticity of the data. Table 2 presents the themes and sub-themes.

Table 2. Themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Multidimensional losses	Physical losses
	Psychosocial losses
The perception of life as meaningless	Self-destruction
	Stigma
Maladaptive coping mechanisms	Rationalization
	Projection
The reconstruction of meaning in life	Philosophy of life
	Experiential awareness

Theme: Multidimensional Losses

Participants described gambling as an experience associated with interconnected physical, psychological, and social losses. While gambling was initially perceived as a source of pleasure, excitement, and potential financial gain, participants' narratives revealed a gradual shift toward adverse outcomes affecting multiple aspects of life.

Sub-theme: Physical Losses

Participants reported that they frequently suffered from back, neck, and spine pain, fatigue, headaches, and eye pain due to prolonged immobility and screen exposure during gambling. Several participants reported that they had disrupted sleep patterns, suffered from sleeplessness, and were exposed to heavy cigarette smoke due to their gambling behaviors. The statements of three participants related to the sub-theme of physical losses are presented below:

"I wear spectacles now, because I keep looking at the screen constantly." (P4)

"It affects our physical health quite negatively." (P12)

"I have neck and lower back pain due to sitting still

for a long time." (P13)

Sub-theme: Psychosocial Losses

Many participants expressed that they maintained their gambling behavior despite an inability to enjoy anything other than gambling, restlessness, depression, intense stress, anxiety, aggressive behaviors from time to time, and feeling regret due to their gambling behavior. Moreover, only two participants reported that they were anxious about the future and felt regret. The statements of two participants related to the dimension of psychological losses under the sub-theme of psychosocial losses are presented below:

"I call gamblers 'wounded people'." (P2)

"I become aggressive; I gamble to relieve stress, but it actually makes me more stressed." (P17)

Participants stated that they were perceived as insecure in society due to their gambling behavior, they could not spare enough time for their family, they felt lonely and were socially isolated, they were ostracized by society, and family conflicts and fights increased. The statements of three participants related to the dimension of social losses under the sub-theme of psychosocial losses are presented below:

"I have turned into a hermit; I spend no time with my family." (P3)

"Over time, I tended to swear; I attribute everything around me to gambling." (P4)

"It's like I'm disconnected from life; it's just me." (P5)

Theme: The Perception of Life as Meaningless

Sub-theme: Self-destruction

While all the participants defined the meaning of gambling as entertainment, excitement, enjoyment, money, preoccupation, excitement and therapy as motivating factors in gambling, they described the meaning of gambling behavior as taking risks, making life meaningless, losing, becoming addicted, and feeling empty and self-destructive. The statements of the individuals regarding the sub-theme of self-destruction are presented below:

"It is like getting away from the world; I find it entertaining. I want to make money. The atmosphere is also nice." (P1)

"The days when I am free... The days when I am happier, and there are more things." (P2)

"When I win, I feel so strong. When I lose, I think the problem lies not with me, but with some other reasons." (P4)

"It is no good. In the end, you may lose." (P5)

"Losing your life, going to wrong places, taking wrong risks, and laziness." (P11)

"At some point, I will feel empty. I hate myself." (P18)

"Gambling is an addiction that starts off to satisfy small pleasures and quickly turns the lives of those who are unable to control themselves into a toxic habit." (P20)

"Gambling is about risk, excitement, and uncertainty—a game and an activity." (P24)

Sub-theme: Stigma

It was determined that the participants evaluated the individuals who gamble as untrustworthy, careless people; individuals who cannot control themselves; dependent, irresponsible individuals; bad, inconsiderate, dangerous, unplanned, unemployed, sick individuals with a negative perspective. Only two of the participants stigmatized themselves and had an internalized stigma. The statements of the individuals related to the stigma sub-theme are presented below:

"Sometimes I swear at myself, sometimes I hate myself. I do not want to spend all my money there, but sometimes I find it hard to restrain myself. My family warns me, but I keep going." (P5)

"I guess I have a lot of problems. I was born into this world to suffer. I always suffer. I like whatever relieves my pain. I believe that life is really a gamble. The luckier you are, the more you win. I already call life a gamble." (P7)

"People consider individual with gambling disorder to be someone who has no control over himself." (P8)

"They do not treat them like a normal person. They should respect them." (P9)

"Society looks down on them. They consider them vagrant and irresponsible people." (P17)

Theme: Maladaptive Coping Mechanisms

Sub-theme: Rationalization

One out of every three participants stated that they attempted to rationalize their gambling behaviors, life itself is a gamble, gambling helps them escape from their problems, it is acceptable if it causes no harm, and others are simply jealous of individuals who gamble. Moreover, only one participant who had a past family history of gambling behavior considered gambling as normal, an easy way to make money, and a job. The statements of the participants related to the rationalization sub-theme are as follows:

"Life is a gamble. I think everything is a gamble." (P2)

"Perhaps there is a place where I am happy, where I feel different and occupied. As if I am away from problems for a while. When I gamble, it is like I get away from real suffering." (P7)

"I think they're jealous, because they don't gamble." (P11)

"There was always a gambling behavior in our house, and this was the way to make money. My family supported me, because it was a job for them, and I made money, but my wife was always against it." (P12)

"As long as I don't lose control of myself, gambling is both entertainment and therapy for me." (P14)

"Gambling is not a bad habit. If a person controls himself and keeps himself away from going to extremes in his life, he will only gamble for his own pleasure." (P19)

Sub-theme: Projection

Many participants attributed their gambling behavior to environmental factors. In particular, the circle of friends, spouse/partner support, and venues were mentioned as factors that trigger this behavior.

The statements of the participants related to the projection sub-theme are presented below:

"The glamorous life of alcohol and gambling, presence in fortunate environments and unlimited entertainment appeal to me." (P4)

"I was inspired by my friends. I first went with their invitation." (P6)

"My partner picks me up. Besides, the atmosphere is good, and there's food and drink." (P7)

"I go to spend time with friends for activities. Many people around me gamble heavily. They invite me." (P20)

Theme: The Reconstruction of Meaning in Life

Sub-theme: Philosophy of Life

Some participants explained the meaning of life and the philosophies of life as being human, being kind-hearted, being true, valuing oneself, knowing oneself, accepting oneself as one is, doing what one loves, self-realization, and providing a good life for one's loved ones. All the other participants described the meaning of life and philosophy of life as entertainment, money, power, taking risks, pleasure and enjoyment, and the meaning of life as gambling. Only one of the participants emphasized the importance of health in the philosophy of life, and three participants highlighted the importance of children and family.

The statements of the participants related to the philosophy of life sub-theme are presented below:

"Life is all about today. The future does not matter to me." (P5)

"I guess I have a lot of problems. I was born into this world to suffer. I always suffer. I like whatever relieves my pain. I believe that life is really a gamble. The luckier you are, the more you win. I already call life a gamble." (P7)

"To recognize, accept and Realize your own personality. To be happy with your beloved ones and to be able to do what you love." (P20)

Sub-theme: Experiential Awareness

All the participants were found to be aware of the consequences of the gambling behavior and made

suggestions to create positive awareness for individuals who will begin to gamble.

"Never even try it once. Remember, the greatest lie a gambling addict can tell himself is that he is just gambling for fun." (P2)

"Never get to know gambling in the first place." (P3)

"Like most other bad behavior, gambling often begins through friends. Be mindful of your social circle." (P4)

"You do not follow the path I am on; it is a dead end. I set an example for everyone." (P5)

"Gambling is never innocent; it can ruin your life. Children should never be given too much money at a young age or at university age. Money should be controlled at certain ages." (P8)

"There is no end to this; watch out very carefully." (P13)

"If you lose yourself, if you gamble with greed, if you know your character, or if you do not know yourself and you cannot stand this, you should stay away." (P14)

"Never begin, because it is hard to give up." (P15)

"Sometimes I wonder how stupid you are, working all day and then spending all your money on someone else. It begins with fun at first, but when it turns into a habit, the pleasure goes away, and it sucks. One should spare time for oneself." (P18)

"At the end, there is usually remorse and anxiety. My advice for breaking the gambling behavior is to seek support, find other hobbies, and build up a social circle." (P24)

Discussion

This study examined the perceptions of individuals with gambling behavior regarding the meaning of life from a phenomenological perspective. The findings suggest that gambling not only leads to physical, psychosocial, and economic losses, but also exerts profound effects, including existential questioning and a search for meaning.

Although the themes identified in the analysis were conceptually interconnected, they represented distinct dimensions of participants' lived experiences. The sub-theme of self-destruction reflected the internal psychological and emotional consequences of gambling behavior, including diminished self-worth, guilt, hopelessness, and deterioration in self-perception. Stigma represented experiences of social judgment, labeling, and exclusion resulting from gambling behavior. In contrast,

maladaptive coping mechanisms referred to the cognitive and behavioral strategies participants employed to manage emotional distress, avoid life difficulties, or regulate negative emotions, often through continued engagement in gambling. Recognizing these distinctions contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted psychological, social, and existential dimensions of gambling behavior.

Multidimensional Losses: Physical and Psychosocial Losses

The findings of the present study indicated that a significant part of the participants suffered physical and psychosocial losses due to gambling behavior. Physical complaints, such as sleeplessness, fatigue, and musculoskeletal pain and psychosocial effects, such as depression, stress, anxiety, social isolation, family conflicts, and loneliness, reported by the participants suggested that gambling imposed a multidimensional burden on individuals' life domains.

These findings are compatible with the literature suggesting that gambling was not only a behavioral addiction, but also a health problem that affected the holistic well-being of the individual (Zhang et al., 2020). A study by Fong (2005) reported that health problems associated with stress were more common and the risk of hypertension, sleep disorders, digestive system disorders, and cardiovascular diseases increased in individuals with problem gambling behavior. The related studies have reported that problematic gambling behavior has a strong correlation with sleep disorders, chronic stress, and mental health problems and also leads to disruption in family relationships, social withdrawal, and a rise in subjective loneliness levels (Azemi et al., 2023; Gori et al., 2022; Lloyd et al., 2025; Newall et al., 2024; Sharma & Weinstein, 2025). These findings support results of the present study and indicated that the effects of gambling were not only limited to economic losses, but also produced widespread and destructive consequences in physical, mental, and social life spheres. This demonstrates that a holistic perspective should be adopted in the approach to gambling behavior in terms of the overall health of individuals and their social circle.

The Perception of Life as Meaningless: Self-destruction and Stigma

The association of gambling with the expectation of

entertainment and reward at the beginning, but the experience of gambling as a process that makes life meaningless and the loss of life control over time, are compatible with the literature (Binde, 2013; Gerle et al., 2025). The creation of a sense of "self-destruction" by gambling manifests the self-destructive aspect of addiction and its negative impact on life satisfaction.

The stigma experiences found in the study revealed the importance of social perception in addictive behaviors. The participants reported that gambling individuals were stigmatized as unreliable, irresponsible and dangerous by society. The literature suggests that stigma of addictive behaviors weakens the individual's social support mechanisms and adversely affects the recovery process. Stigmatizing attitudes of society are often internalized by individuals with gambling addiction. The internalized stigma also leads to concealment of problems, loss of self-esteem, guilt and shame, and hopelessness in individuals (Dabrowska et al., 2020; Karlsson et al., 2023; Quigley, 2022). This situation is compatible with statements of the participants in the present study. This finding is consistent with the literature that gambling disorder brings about multidimensional harms, not only at the individual level, but also at the family and social levels.

Maladaptive Coping Mechanisms: Rationalization and Projection

Coping mechanisms, such as denial, rationalization, suppression, projection, and displacement, have been reported to be commonly employed in gambling disorder. These strategies prevent individuals from confronting the negative effects of gambling, leading to the maintenance of the behavior and addictive tendency (Aktürk et al., 2024; Kirilov et al., 2025). When the statements of the participants were examined in terms of coping strategies, especially rationalization and projection appeared to be frequently used. The participants defined gambling as a natural part of life and rationalized it as a means of escape from problems and coping with stress, and they projected the responsibility to environmental factors. Likewise, attribution of responsibility to environmental factors through projection is a common finding in the addiction literature. The literature has emphasized that the rationalization defense mechanism is a common coping method, especially in substance addiction and behavioral addictions. This finding suggests that the

coping patterns of the participants in the present study are compatible with the literature (Ciobotaru & Clinciu, 2022).

The Reconstruction of Meaning in Life: Philosophy of Life and Awareness

While some of the participants emphasized the concepts of personal values, family, love, and self-realization in relation to the meaning of life, most of them described the meaning of life as gambling and taking risks. However, it is striking that the sub-theme of awareness stood out in the study. The participants observed the destructive consequences of gambling by experiencing them and therefore developed suggestions for others to stay away from gambling. This suggests that experiential awareness may be a preventive factor in addictive behaviors. On the other hand, in their study, Rogier et al. (2020) similarly observed the awareness of individuals with gambling addiction about the problems they experienced in their personal lives and relationships.

Beyond awareness of gambling-related harms, the findings point to a broader process of existential meaning-making. Participants' reflections on personal values, family relationships, responsibility, and future aspirations suggest ongoing attempts to reconstruct meaning following experiences of loss, disappointment, and psychological distress. From an existential perspective, meaning in life serves as a fundamental psychological resource that provides coherence, purpose, and direction, whereas a diminished sense of meaning may contribute to feelings of emptiness, hopelessness, and existential suffering (Frankl, 1963; Schnell, 2020). In the present study, gambling appeared not only as a maladaptive coping strategy, but also as a phenomenon embedded within participants' efforts to understand themselves and their life circumstances.

Overall, the findings indicate that gambling behavior extends beyond a behavioral addiction and should be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by existential meaning-making processes, coping strategies, personal identity, and social relationships.

Implications for Nursing

The findings of this study highlight the importance of adopting a holistic and meaning-centered approach in nursing care for individuals with gambling behavior. Nurses should assess not only gambling-related

behaviors, but also individuals' sense of meaning in life, emotional well-being, coping patterns, perceived stigma, and the impact of gambling on family and social relationships. Structured psychosocial assessments, reflective discussions about personal values and life goals, and routine screening for anxiety, depression, hopelessness, and social isolation may facilitate early identification of psychosocial and existential needs. Furthermore, nurses can implement psychoeducation, motivational interviewing, supportive counseling, and strength-based interventions to promote adaptive coping strategies and reduce reliance on maladaptive mechanisms, such as rationalization and externalization. Integrating these approaches into clinical practice can contribute to more comprehensive, recovery-oriented, and sustainable outcomes.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that gambling behavior extends beyond a behavioral addiction, emerging as a complex experience that reshapes individuals' sense of meaning, self-perception, and psychosocial functioning. The findings reveal that gambling is closely associated with experiences of existential emptiness, diminished self-integrity, and disrupted life coherence, while being maintained through maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as rationalization and externalization. These results highlight the need to move beyond symptom-focused approaches and adopt interventions that address the existential and psychosocial dimensions of gambling behavior. Integrating meaning-centered and holistic care strategies may support individuals in reconstructing a sense of purpose and achieving more sustainable recovery outcomes.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study was approved by the Science, Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee approval number: FSBB/15. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflict of Interests

All authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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Author Contributions

Study Design: HŞT, SE, MY. Data Collection: SE. Data Analysis: HŞT, MY. Study Supervision: HŞT,

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