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Behind the Cards: A Qualitative Exploration of the Lived Experiences of the People with Gambling Addiction

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I. INTRODUCTION

Playing against the odds between player against banker, coupled with eagerness to win more with its side bet propositions viz the super six and draw gives thrill and excitement, along with other table games and captivating bubbly sounds of electronic gaming machines and its millions of jackpots displayed in humongous monitors. Aside from it, is the hype casino marketing strategies from a bunch of complimentary food and beverages, entertainment and luxurious stay in the hotels. Wherein patrons would hesitate to go home and rather spend for more deals and spins. Oblivious to the casino's profit aphorism, "more deals, more income". It is an advantage if the hand of luck sided with patrons with winning streak, opposite to its other side of fate, the losing streak. The strong desire to get even gradually being drawn and dependent to gambling.

Additionally, the contribution of the digital revolution, online gambling has emerged in the industry with its fusion with fast cash transactions and widespread advertisements in social media platforms which kick in the expanding number of problem gamblers. Online gambling caters a "one stop shop" games from baccarat, roulette, poker, blackjack, color games, bingo and even sports have been betted.

Gambling addiction, also known as Ludomania, is an impulse disorder which involves a chronic and progressive preoccupation with information gathering, project organization, money-making plans, and mental relieving of outcomes. (Rosenthal, 2019). Gambling addicts or individuals suffering from gambling addiction are unable to control their urge to gamble with a willingness to risk something valuable in the hopes to gain more valuable. (Healthdirect Australia, n.d.) From a mere curiosity of the game and the casino setting, experiencing the momentum of the winning, and eventually escalates the bets in chasing losses, leading to addiction that causes serious consequences including illnesses, damage to family, career, and personal life. In some studies, gambling addiction is regarded as a contagious disease because of peer pressure which is considered a significant predictor of the condition in that it depends on the number of individuals involved, who may be involved, and the frequency, its duration, priority, and intensity of association with peers (Cho & Chu, 2014).

The study of Bergman (2024) highlights the gambling addiction statistics worldwide which varies between 1.2% -6.0% and views it as a global problem. Various countries have their share on this phenomenal issue. In the statistics, albeit Latvia has the biggest gambling problems in the world with 6.0% percent of its population involved, China has the most gambling addicts, close to 60 million or 40% of the Chinese population are gambling addicts. Also, countries like the United States with 1.2-6.2% or 20 million Americans, Canada with 3.2% or 1.2 million Canadians, Australia with 3.1% of the population have gambling problems. Other European countries like Austria 1.1%, Denmark 3.2%, Finland 3.3%,

France 2.9%, Germany 2.3%, Italy 3.0%, Norway 1.4%, Spain 2.2%, Sweden 4%, and the United Kingdom 2.8% of their respective population also experience gambling problems.

Also, in the testimonies of the conducted research on pathological gambling and its prevalence in different countries the crime involvement of the participants was motivated by gambling like in an Argentinian study found that 77% of a sample of 62 gamblers in a support group had committed at least one illegal act because of gambling. In Quebec Canada, 68% of the members of a Gamblers Anonymous group reported that they have participated in criminal activity because of gambling and over one third of them reported that they had stolen money from their employer to gamble and compared to the results of the 1990 Maryland Department of Mental Health and Hygiene survey, in which 62% of the members of the local Gamblers Anonymous group admitted that they had resorted to an illegal act because of their gambling, stealing money being the most common crime. (Lind et al., n.d.)

In the Philippines, the government regulates gambling through the Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corporation (PAGCOR), which oversees land-based and online casinos. PAGCOR also plays an essential role in promoting Responsible Gaming practices. This includes offering programs such as Player Exclusion, which allows individuals to self-exclude from gaming venues if they feel their gambling habits are becoming problematic. PAGCOR has also established counseling and rehabilitation services to assist individuals struggling with gambling addiction.

These initiatives are in line with the country's legal framework, including Presidential Decree No. 1602 (1978) and Republic Act No. 9287 (2004), which criminalize illegal gambling and impose stricter penalties for related offenses. The government's approach to gambling regulation seeks to strike a balance between providing a legal avenue for entertainment and addressing the public health concerns arising from gambling addiction (PAGCOR, n.d.).

Despite these regulations, gambling addiction remains a significant issue. A notable example of this issue was when the gunman stormed the hotel in Manila in the year 2017, wherein the perpetrator was a former government employee with a racked-up bank debts of 4 million pesos (\$81,000) driven by excessive gambling activity. The perpetrator entered the gaming area firing shots and igniting fire to gaming tables, leading to the deaths of 24 resort guests and 13 employees, due to smoke inhalation. After confrontation with the responding police the perpetrator committed suicide. Leaving a tragic memory to all affected by it. (McKirdy, 2017)

Hence, even with the conducted previous research and generated regulation policies to combat this sensitive issue, its effect and numbers of gambling addicts is continuously increasing alongside with the towering casino buildings and steadfast online gambling connections.

It is in this context that the researcher is an assistant security officer for twenty-two years in the gaming industry, seriously conveying responsible gaming as part of social responsibility for witnessing what is truly beyond in the casino industry. Encountered incidents caused by gambling addicts, witnessed their deterioration on health and wealth and listened to the agony of their family members. This serves as the researcher's contribution to the individual, family and community struggling on this phenomenal concern.

The researcher conducted qualitative research on this difficult and sensitive issue to answer the question why or what is more beyond the problem. Qualitative research is suited in this issue to generate a natural flow of dynamics and observe the participants during the interview. In this process a questionnaire, recorded interview and documentary analysis were utilized. The result of the study aimed to pique the interest of the community in the lived experiences of people with gambling addiction, creating a better understanding for the people struggling on the labyrinth of gambling addiction. This also determined the incidence of illegal gambling, proposed measures to solve the prevailing problems. And lastly, identify the implications of the study to Public Administration.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study explored the lived experiences of people with gambling addiction in the province of Pampanga along with the illegal gambling incidence using phenomenological research design. This is a qualitative research type that aims to extract the purest data that has not been attained before and attempt to determine the subject's experiences related to the phenomenon and the factors that have influenced the experience of the phenomenon. (Prakash.Srivastava, 2023) This involves gathering and analyzing non-numerical data used to better understand people's beliefs, behaviors, attitudes, and experiences. (Proofed & Proofed, 2023)

The participants were chosen based on deliberate selection to collect data for the study using non-probability sampling technique based on the criteria set by the researcher. In this case, the investigation specifically involved individuals drawn to gambling addiction living in the province of Pampanga, to determine and understand their lived experiences.

Investigated participants here include twenty (20) people with gambling addiction in the Province of Pampanga. The breakdown of the twenty (20) respondents was based on their games played; four (4) table games players; (4) slot machine players; (6) online gambling players and (6) mixed games of either table games, slot machines and online gambling. The year covered was initiated in 2019 up to present. 2019 was during the pandemic wherein online gambling industry boost and involve increasing gambling addiction and its adverse effects, worst of this is suicidality.

As for the methods of gathering procedure, questionnaire, recorded interview and documentary analysis were utilized. Along with thematic data analysis, a widely recognized method for analyzing qualitative data, particularly in phenomenological and exploratory studies. By utilizing this method, the researcher can examine how gambling addiction affects individuals' lives, focusing on recurring experiences, emotions, and perceptions.

And lastly, ethical considerations were prioritized to ensure the protection of participants' rights and confidentiality.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The researcher explores the presentation, analysis, and interpretation of data collected on the lived experiences of people with gambling addiction in the Province of Pampanga. Using phenomenological approach, the researcher aims to capture the unique narratives and experiences of the participants.

1. Incidence of Illegal Gambling in Pampanga

This section presents detailed data on the reported cases of illegal gambling in the province of Pampanga. The table provides the number of the cases recorded in the years 2023 and 2024. The researcher obtained this information directly from the Pampanga Provincial Police Office (PPPO) through email, as the data is not publicly available on any media outlet or online platform.

Table 1
Cases of Illegal Gambling Report

Types of Gambling	<i>f</i>		R
	2023	2024	
Color Game, Drop Ball, Dice	73	102	1
Tupada	48	28	2
Illegal Number Games	16	39	3
Cara Y Cruz	10	27	4
Total	147	196	

Source: Pampanga Police Provincial Office (2024)

The data from the Pampanga Provincial Police Office (PPPO) provides an overview of illegal gambling activities within the province for the years 2023 and 2024. It categorizes gambling cases into four types: Illegal Number Games, Cara y Cruz, Tupada, and other games like color game, drop ball and dice. A clear trend can be seen in the numbers: total cases rose from 147 in 2023 to 196 in 2024, representing an overall increase in illegal gambling incidence. This indicates a growing challenge in curbing illegal gambling in the region.

Looking deeper into the categories, the most significant increases were observed in Illegal Number Games and Cara y Cruz. For Illegal Number Games such activities like jueteng, lotteries and bingo that are not regulated by the government doubled, rising from 16 in 2023 to 39 in 2024. This suggests a surge in the popularity or accessibility of illegal number-based betting activities.

Cara y Cruz, a traditional coin-flipping gambling game, saw an even sharper proportional rise in cases, from 10 in 2023 to 27 in 2024. This nearly threefold increase could reflect the game's growing prevalence in informal or localized settings, potentially due to its simplicity and the lack of significant equipment or preparation needed to play.

Interestingly, the number of cases related to Tupada, or illegal cockfighting, decreased significantly, from 48 cases in 2023 to 28 cases in 2024. This is a notable shift, especially since Tupada often involves larger gatherings and organized operations. The decline may point to successful law enforcement crackdowns specifically targeting this activity or increased public awareness about its illegality. However, it's also possible that Tupada activities are continuing but have become harder to detect, which would require further investigation.

The other form of illegal gambling, such as color game, drop ball and dice, recorded the highest number of cases in both years and also saw the largest numerical increase—from 73 in 2023 to 102 in 2024. This game is commonly found in carnivals classified as *perya* games. The color game is simply betting on 6 different vibrant colors. Its winning depends on the result of the dice that could multiply into three. While the drop ball has a layout of face cards, ace, ten and nine, its winning is decided where the drop ball stops. And the dice game known as 7-11, is the mini version of the craps. Instead of using 3 dice, locals used two dice to roll. The large and growing numbers in this category highlight the adaptability of gambling operators and the need for a broader understanding of these less conventional forms of illegal betting.

In total, the data suggests that while enforcement efforts may have successfully reduced activities like Tupada, other forms of gambling—particularly Illegal Number Games and Cara y Cruz—are on the rise. The growing prevalence of other forms of illegal gambling indicates that illegal gambling is a dynamic issue, with participants and operators shifting to different methods as conditions change.

Exposure and Accessibility

Based on the narratives of the participants, many of their first experiences with gambling come from those closest to them. Friends, family, or co-workers often introduce them to gambling activities, and this introduction begins informally and early on. For instance, Jack of Cards mentioned, *"I came from the family of gamblers,"* underscoring how gambling practices are passed down through generations. When gambling is treated as a family or social norm, the boundaries between legal and illegal gambling can become blurred, and the activity is seen as harmless or routine.

This social acceptance of gambling as a "normal" activity often contributes to an environment where illegal gambling can thrive. In settings where gambling is regularly practiced by family or friends, individuals are more likely to participate without questioning the legal status of the games. This aligns with the research by Yang et. al (2019), who found that illegal gambling tends to flourish in communities where peer networks actively support or participate in it, creating an atmosphere where gambling is socially accepted despite its risks. As gambling becomes normalized in such environments, individuals are more likely to feel encouraged to try their luck, sometimes bypassing legal avenues are more accessible or familiar illegal options.

Convenience and Accessibility of Online Platforms

The rise of online gambling also has made illegal gambling highly accessible, especially for younger audiences and those who may not have the means to visit physical casinos. Online platforms offer users instant access to a variety of games and betting options, often without the restrictions that legal casinos impose. Many participants pointed out that social media and other online platforms bombard users with gambling advertisements, often promoting easy and fast payouts. For example, ads for online casinos might promise substantial rewards or bonuses for signing up, which can be tempting for individuals who are curious about gambling or looking for quick income opportunities.

Also, digital advertising on social media plays a significant role in drawing to these sites. According to Min et al (2022), illegal gambling sites often rely on targeted ads and direct messages to reach potential customers, slipping through regulatory oversight to gain more users. The circumvention of national regulations allows illegal gambling operators to expand their reach without the same scrutiny or restrictions as physical casinos. Participants explained that these ads are frequent and hard to ignore, sometimes making it difficult for individuals to avoid exposure to gambling opportunities even if they initially had no intention to gamble.

Furthermore, online gambling platforms also appeal to individuals by offering convenience and anonymity, which further lowers the barriers to participation in illegal gambling. Unlike regulated casinos,

online platforms may not require strict age verification or financial limits, making them attractive for people who might otherwise face legal barriers. In Pampanga, the easy access and anonymity of online gambling can make it difficult for law enforcement to monitor illegal gambling activities effectively.

Motivations and Economic Appeal

For the gamblers in Pampanga, financial hardship is a major reason they turn to illegal gambling. When money is tight gambling can seem like a quick way to earn extra income. For example, King of Diamond shared, *"I just taught that gambling could provide extra income."* This response shows that people facing financial challenges may see gambling as an easy solution to their money problems. For those low-income areas, access to legal gambling venues might be limited, making illegal gambling options even more attractive because they are often closer and easier to reach.

Illegal gambling offers people in financial distress the hope of winning big and improving their situation. The ideas of "getting rich quickly" can make gambling very appealing especially when people are desperate for money. In these situations, the risks may seem worth it if there is a chance of earning much-needed cash. But the reality is often harsh—many end up losing more than they win, making their financial situation even worse.

Moreover, some participants mentioned that illegal gambling felt more rewarding because it allowed for higher bets and bigger payouts compared to legal gambling. Participant 6, noted that they could earn more money through informal, unregulated games, saying *"There are more chances of winning in illegal gambling than in the casinos."* This shows that people are often drawn to illegal gambling because they believe they can make more money faster than they could in a legal casino.

Since illegal gambling is less controlled, it often has fewer rules and limits, which means people can place larger bets. For some, this potential for high returns makes illegal gambling seem more exciting and profitable. However, without proper regulation, these games can be risky and unfair, with no guaranteed of fair play. Still, for those hoping to win big, these risks are sometimes ignored, as the focus remains on the chance to make quick money without the usual restrictions.

Social Implications and Consequences

Based on the narratives of the participants, illegal gambling is so deeply embedded in the community that it is often viewed as an ordinary activity. Ober of Hearts noted, *"As long as I have money, I would definitely gamble, it's normal for us to gamble anywhere."* This suggests that gambling has become socially accepted and woven into daily routines. When gambling is normalized like this, younger generations often see it as a typical, making them more likely to adopt similar behaviors.

When a community widely accepts gambling, it creates a cycle where each generation views it a standard practice. This pattern was also observed in research by Marko et al. (2022), which highlighted how cultural acceptance can embed gambling into daily life, increasing overall participation. Such widespread acceptance makes it challenging to reduce gambling-related harms because the activity is socially reinforced and more people are inclined to participate without fully understanding the risks.

Moreover, since illegal gambling operates without regulation it brings significant financial and social risks for those involved. Many participants reported falling into deep debt, which creates a heavy financial burden. Ace of Spades mentioned, *"My income is just a payment for my debt because of gambling, I am struggling because of this."* This illustrates the dangerous cycle of debt that can result from unregulated gambling, where individuals gamble more in an attempt to recover losses but often end up in further debt.

Financial stress from gambling losses can lead to conflict within families, as the emotional and financial tolls affect household dynamics or limits to prevent excessive losses, but illegal gambling lacks these protections. The absence of support and safeguards leaves gamblers vulnerable to financial collapse and social consequences, including strained family relationships and isolation from support networks. The unchecked growth of illegal gambling increases these risks and contributes to community-wide impacts that make recovery difficult.

Efforts to Curb Illegal Gambling

Some participants believe that stronger community action and local law enforcement could help reduce illegal gambling. For example, Participant 18 suggested that *"Maybe it is much better to intensify the vigilance of the barangay officials to this kind of activities."* This indicates a belief that closer watch by local leaders could discourage illegal gambling at the community level. The study by De Jesus et al. (2022) found that partnerships between community leaders and police effectively reduced cases of illegal

gambling. These partnerships focused on consistent monitoring and public education, which raised awareness about the risks of illegal gambling and helped create a supportive environment for change.

In some areas, such community-based interventions have successfully encouraged residents to report illegal gambling, making it more challenging for operators to continue their activities. When local officials are actively involved in monitoring and educating the public, it can create a sense of shared responsibility, helping to prevent gambling problems from growing.

Additionally, due to limited resources and support, some participants have turned to self-control to manage their gambling habits. For instance, Ober of Acorns explained that they avoided certain social situations to reduce temptation, saying, *"I avoid the company of my gambler friends."* This shows that some individuals are taking it upon themselves to break free from the cycle of gambling by avoiding places or people that encourage the habit.

While self-discipline can be an effective personal strategy, it often is not enough to tackle the larger problem of illegal gambling in the community. Personal efforts like these can be challenging to maintain without a support system and broader interventions. Research shows that relying solely on self-regulation can be difficult, especially when gambling is normalized in social networks, making it hard for individuals to distance themselves from gambling environments (Marko et al., 2017).

Synthesis

The data on the incidence of illegal gambling and the thematic analysis on the participants' narratives provides a detailed examination of illegal gambling in Pampanga, shedding light on the rise of this activity, its underlying causes, and the efforts to address it. Based on data obtained from the Pampanga Provincial Police Office, the report highlights a significant increase in illegal gambling cases, rising from 147 in 2023 to 196 in 2024. These cases span different forms of gambling, including Illegal Number Games, Cara y Cruz, Tupada (illegal cockfighting), and an "Others" (color game, drop ball, and dice game) category that captures newer or less common gambling types. Notably, cases of Illegal Number Games and Cara y Cruz have sharply increased, while Tupada incidents have declined. The "Others" category accounts for the largest share of cases, suggesting the emergence of unconventional gambling activities.

Illegal gambling is deeply entrenched in Pampanga's social and cultural fabric. It often begins as a family or community activity, normalized through social networks and traditions. Many individuals are introduced to gambling by relatives or peers, making it a routine part of daily life in some communities. This cultural acceptance fosters an environment where gambling, whether legal or illegal, is difficult to challenge or regulate. The intergenerational nature of gambling also reinforces its persistence, as behaviors are passed down and remain socially embedded.

Economic hardship is another major factor driving illegal gambling. For many participants, it is seen as an opportunity to quickly earn money, especially during times of financial difficulty. Informal gambling is often perceived as more lucrative, offering higher payouts with fewer restrictions compared to legal gambling. However, these perceived benefits come with significant risks, including financial losses and cycles of debt that can worsen economic struggles.

The accessibility of illegal gambling has been amplified by the rise of online platforms. These platforms, often promoted through social media, make gambling more convenient and anonymous, particularly for younger individuals. This shift toward digital platforms has made regulation and law enforcement increasingly challenging, as online gambling operates outside traditional frameworks of oversight. The combination of ease of access and aggressive advertising has widened the reach of illegal gambling in Pampanga.

The social consequences of illegal gambling are profound. It often leads to financial instability, strained family relationships, and vulnerability to exploitation due to the absence of regulatory safeguards. Communities where gambling is normalized find it especially difficult to address these issues, as gambling behaviors are deeply ingrained and widely accepted.

Efforts to combat illegal gambling have seen some success through community-based initiatives and stricter enforcement by local authorities. Partnerships between barangay officials and the police, coupled with public education campaigns, have raised awareness about the risks and consequences of illegal gambling. However, individual attempts to avoid gambling are often insufficient without broader systemic interventions. The document emphasizes the importance of sustained community vigilance and a coordinated approach to address the dynamic and evolving nature of illegal gambling.

In summary, the document highlights illegal gambling as a complex issue influenced by cultural traditions, economic conditions, and modern technology. While some progress has been made in addressing the problem, the persistent increase in cases and the adaptability of gambling practices underscore the need for more comprehensive strategies that combine enforcement, education, and community engagement.

2. Lived experiences of people with gambling addiction

This section shares the participants' narratives, highlighting their personal journeys and the impact of gambling on their lives. Each story provides insight into their struggles, motivations, and perspectives on gambling.

Case 1. King of Clubs

King of Clubs is a 37-year-old man, married, and employed in a casino industry. Before gambling entered his life, he worked as a security guard and lived comfortably. He recalls how his ATM account never ran out of money. He generously supported his mother and siblings, and even gave extra cash to his wife. His wife never questioned his income or expenses, trusting him completely.

In 2008, King of Clubs was promoted and moved into a boarding house with coworkers who were avid gamblers. Their influence drew him into the world of e-games, particularly baccarat. At first, King of Clubs experienced the thrill of winning. He started small, betting only ₱100 to ₱200, but soon his winnings grew to ₱5,000 or more in a single session. Encouraged by these wins, he kept playing. However, as his addiction grew, so did his losses. He began borrowing money just to keep gambling, falling deeper into debt.

King of Clubs fondly remembers how he initially used his winnings to buy things for his mother and improve their home. However, as his addiction spiraled, he could no longer afford to help his family. Gambling consumed his life. He gambled daily—after work, in the early hours of the morning, and any time he had a chance. His initial spending limit of ₱2,000 quickly escalated to ₱5,000 or ₱10,000, depending on how much he could borrow. When his losses mounted, King of Clubs resorted to lies to explain missing money. He told his wife he had been robbed or had lost his wallet. He even went as far as pawning personal belongings to fund his addiction. The biggest win he ever had was ₱75,000, which he immediately used to pay off debts. But this win was rare compared to his losses, which sometimes reached ₱40,000 in a single day or ₱200,000 in a month. Over time, King of Clubs estimates he lost about ₱2 million to gambling.

Though King of Clubs tried to stop gambling, it wasn't easy. He would quit temporarily when he ran out of money, only to start again when he felt he could "win it back." To distract himself, he tried hobbies like raising chickens, but the temptation to gamble always crept back. He realized that even starting with a small bet could reignite his addiction.

For King of Clubs, the worst consequences of his gambling were the confrontations with angry creditors. He was taken to the barangay multiple times because of unpaid debts and even had people show up at his house demanding repayment. These moments of humiliation made him reflect on his choices, but they weren't always enough to make him stop.

Looking back, King of Clubs believes the best way to avoid gambling is to stay away from gamblers and their social circles. Drinking sessions with friends often led to gambling, so he now avoids such gatherings. He warns others never to try gambling, not even "just for fun."

King of Clubs' story is a cautionary tale of how gambling, which started as a harmless pastime, took over his life. It's a reminder of how quickly addiction can destroy financial stability, relationships, and self-respect. Despite everything, King of Clubs remains hopeful, trying to learn from his mistakes and rebuild his life one step at a time.

Case 2. King of Spades

At 26 years old, King of Spades is a cook at a restaurant and lives a bachelor's life. His income is enough to support his needs, but gambling has become a significant part of his story. What started as a pastime with friends has grown into a dangerous addiction.

King of Spades first encountered gambling through his friends. While some family members occasionally gambled for fun, it was his peer group that introduced him to baccarat. His first experience was during college, where he placed a minimum bet of ₱500. He won ₱5,000 that day, and the thrill of winning stayed with him. At the time, he felt content with small victories and would walk away satisfied. However, over the years, his mindset changed. Winning became a stepping stone to bigger bets, and the cycle of gambling began to consume his life.

Initially, King of Spades gambled sparingly. However, in 2022, his habits escalated. He began gambling three times a week, often after work. Sometimes, he would gamble straight through the night, leaving no time for sleep before his next shift. His limits disappeared, and his focus shifted from walking away with winnings to chasing the thrill. He describes how he would let his winnings grow only to lose everything by the end of the game.

His biggest loss happened when he managed to grow his gambling fund to ₱90,000, only to lose it all. Despite the financial strain, he avoided extreme measures like pawning belongings or being reported to authorities. However, he did borrow money twice to fund his gambling, which gambling affected his relationships and mental health. His parents, especially his father working abroad, found out about his gambling through his godfather, who worked as a casino dealer. This confrontation forced him to pause and reflect. While he initially stopped gambling after being discovered, the temptation brought him back.

The most significant realization came when he identified the signs of addiction. He found himself craving the thrill of gambling, even when he had no pressing financial need. The desire to gamble became a habit he couldn't ignore, and he acknowledged that he had become addicted.

King of Spades recently learned about self-banning as a way to control his addiction. His godfather suggested he file an application to prevent himself from entering casinos. Although he hasn't sought psychological help, he admits to struggling with the emotional toll of gambling. For him, the key to stopping lies in personal commitment. He acknowledges that avoiding gambling is easier said than done, as the temptation is strong, especially during moments of boredom or stress.

Reflecting on his journey, King of Spades advises others to focus on self-discipline. He believes that even though external measures like self-banning can help, the real change must come from within. He admits that it's difficult to resist the pull of gambling but hopes to regain control over his life.

Case 3. King of Diamonds

Between 2001 and 2009, King of Diamonds worked tirelessly, cooking for call center employees and later transitioning to a tire company. During these years, he was exposed to gambling, but it wasn't a significant part of his life. By 2006, he occasionally tried his luck at baccarat but kept it under control.

His life was relatively stable. Even when his father became ill, gambling helped him pay off debts and support his family. With his then-wife (now ex-wife), who worked as a casino manager, he built a comfortable life. Together, they saved money, managed a catering business, and appeared to have a bright future.

Gambling became a habit as he chased the allure of easy money. At first, he had strict limits. After finishing his shifts, he would head to the casino, play for an hour or two, and leave once he reached his daily target. This control allowed him to win regularly and even fund his stepsiblings' education. Gambling seemed manageable—until it wasn't.

As time went on, the losses mounted. His savings disappeared, and his debts grew. King of Diamonds found himself borrowing money to gamble, sometimes surrendering his ATM card to lenders as collateral. The weight of his gambling addiction began to strain his relationships, especially his marriage.

In 2017, everything fell apart. His financial troubles, combined with the closure of their store, led to separation from his wife. She moved to Manila and began a new relationship, leaving him devastated. The revelation of her infidelity was a crushing blow. It led to barangay disputes, legal settlements, and a deep sense of betrayal. During this time, his gambling addiction worsened. At its peak, he owed ₱150,000, which he eventually repaid through work in restaurants and bars. However, the emotional scars from his failed marriage and mounting debts pushed him into depression. He even contemplated suicide, but thoughts of his child kept him going. King of Diamonds made several attempts to stop gambling. At one point, he quit for a full year. However, loneliness and the familiar pull of the casino brought him back. Despite his struggles, he found some solace in work and the hope of reuniting with his child.

When asked about the best way to stop gambling, King of Diamonds emphasized that it depends on the individual. No external solution, such as bans or advice, can work unless a person is truly committed to change. He acknowledges that even after experiencing the consequences of his addiction, the temptation remains.

His story is a powerful reminder of the challenges faced by those battling gambling addiction. It highlights how easily the pursuit of "easy money" can spiral into financial ruin, emotional pain, and broken relationships. Despite the losses, King of Diamonds clings to hope, striving to rebuild his life and find meaning beyond the casino floor.

Case 4. King of Hearts

At 57 years old, King of Hearts reflects on decades of gambling and its impact on his life and family. As a father and grandfather, he has seen how gambling can destroy dreams, strain relationships, and leave scars that are difficult to heal. His story is a poignant reminder of the consequences of addiction and the hope for change.

King of Hearts' gambling journey began in his youth, influenced by his family's habits. His mother's side of the family was involved in cockfighting, and his father often played mahjong. Growing up in this environment, gambling became a natural part of his life. By the time he was in his late teens, he was already betting on cockfights and playing billiards for money. As a young man, he worked as a driver and engaged in various small jobs to support his growing family. However, gambling consumed much of his earnings. There were times when he would gamble away his entire paycheck before even going home.

The consequences of King of Hearts' gambling addiction were felt deeply by his family. He recalls a particularly painful moment when his child's baptism had to be funded by his wife, who borrowed money because he lost everything in gambling. Instead of being present for the celebration, he didn't come home, too ashamed to face his family. Frequent fights with his wife became the norm, with arguments over lost money and unmet responsibilities. There were even times when he wouldn't return home for days, avoiding the anger and disappointment of his family. As his addiction deepened, King of Hearts began pawning possessions, including his wedding ring, to fund his gambling. Despite knowing that he lost more often than he won, he kept gambling, hoping to win big and pay off his debts. But the more he gambled, the more he sank into debt.

One of the most challenging periods in his life came when he gambled ₱100,000 that wasn't his. The money had been entrusted to him by his boss, but he lost it all within two weeks, desperately trying to recover his losses. Unable to repay the full amount, he was forced to explain what happened and set up a payment plan. This experience brought him shame and strained his relationship with his employer. Another painful moment came when his children confronted him about his gambling. One of his children blamed him for not being able to finish school, saying that the family's struggles were because of his addiction. This hit him hard, making him realize the far-reaching effects of his choices.

Over time, King of Hearts started to make changes. He began separating his gambling money from what he needed to bring home for his family. Though he still gambles occasionally, he claims to have more control now. He focuses on providing for his children, especially his two who are still in college.

He also tries to share the lessons he has learned with others. He warns younger people about the dangers of gambling, sharing his own regrets and the challenges it has brought to his family.

King of Hearts believes that true change comes from within. While external help can provide support, he says that the decision to stop gambling must come from the person themselves. For him, the motivation to change stems from his family. He no longer wants his actions to hurt his loved ones or jeopardize their future.

His story is one of resilience. Despite years of mistakes and losses, King of Hearts is working to rebuild his life. He continues to battle the temptation of gambling but is determined to support his family and create a better future.

Reflecting on his experiences, King of Hearts offers a sobering conclusion: "In gambling, you don't really win. You lose money, and sometimes, you lose your family too." While he still struggles, his journey shows that it's never too late to start making better choices, no matter how deep the scars of the past run.

Case 5. Jack of Diamonds

Jack of Diamonds is a 29-year-old man who has faced a turbulent chapter in his life, shaped by the highs and lows of gambling. Although single, his experiences with online gambling, particularly *online sabong* (cockfighting), deeply affected his financial situation, relationships, and mental health.

Jack of Diamonds' journey into gambling started casually, as it does for many. At first, he placed small bets with friends, but over time, the stakes grew higher. One day, he found himself wagering as much as ₱620,000 in a single bet—money he didn't have, forcing him into debt. At one point, he managed to win big, earning ₱420,000, but these victories were fleeting. The debts quickly piled up, and soon, the consequences of his choices began catching up with him.

The stress of owing large amounts of money led to frightening moments. Jack of Diamonds recounted a time when collectors came to his house in a van, threatening him to pay up. Fearing for his safety, Jack of Diamonds pleaded with them, kneeling on the ground, and managed to scrape together

₱110,000 to show his willingness to repay. He promised to settle the remaining debt in three months, which momentarily eased the pressure but left him shaken.

Beyond the financial strain, Jack of Diamonds' gambling took a toll on his family. He admitted that his family had to pawn their land to help him pay his debts. Despite eventually redeeming it, the experience left a mark of guilt and regret. During this dark period, Jack of Diamonds also endured the tragic death of his sibling. The loss compounded his emotional struggles, leading him to seek medication—not for his gambling, but to cope with his grief. At one point, suicidal thoughts clouded his mind, and he found himself contemplating the unthinkable. However, the thought of his family—those who loved and needed him—became a beacon of hope, pulling him back from the brink.

Jack of Diamonds acknowledges the damaging effects gambling has had on his life, but stopping entirely remains a challenge. While he no longer bets as recklessly as before, he still finds himself indulging occasionally. He admits that avoiding gambling completely is difficult and that he hasn't fully committed to quitting.

Jack of Diamonds' story is one of struggle and survival. It reflects the complexity of addiction—the allure of winning, the crushing weight of debt, and the emotional scars left behind. While he has made steps to reduce his gambling, his journey towards a healthier, gamble-free life remains uncertain. For Jack of Diamonds, the road ahead will require courage, support, and a determination to break free from the cycle of addiction.

Case 6. Queen of Hearts

Queen of Hearts, a 47-year-old woman who once successfully managed her own business, enjoyed financial stability and a fulfilling life before her gambling addiction took hold. She had a steady income and was in control of her finances, able to support herself and her family without worry. However, her journey into gambling began within her own family. Growing up around family members who gambled, she was exposed to the activity at an early age, and it was normalized in her household. Later, as an adult, peer pressure from friends and family reignited this early exposure, encouraging her to join in. What started as a social activity soon grew into a serious habit as she experienced the allure and excitement that gambling offered.

In the beginning, her gambling experiences were marked by some significant wins, including jackpots that reached as high as 100,000. These large winnings were exhilarating, providing an immediate financial boost and reinforcing her belief that gambling could be both enjoyable and profitable. The thrill of winning quickly became addictive, fueling her desire to chase even bigger payouts. Her early successes convinced her that gambling was an easy way to supplement her income, leading her to invest more time and money into the activity. With each win, her attachment to gambling grew, making it increasingly difficult for her to see the risks involved.

However, this initial success soon gave way to a downward spiral. Her focus on gambling became all-consuming, impacting her business and personal life. As she lost more frequently, she found herself gambling to recover those losses, a cycle that took a heavy toll on her relationships. Her family began to notice the change in her behavior, as she spent more and more time at the casino and less time with them. The addiction strained her family, causing arguments and growing misunderstandings. Eventually, the trust between her and her loved ones eroded, and the closeness they once shared began to break apart. The very support system she had relied on for so many years was now distant and fractured.

Despite the damage to her family relationships, Queen of Hearts found something unexpected within the casino that kept her coming back: a sense of happiness and belonging. While gambling had cost her dearly in terms of family connections, the casino environment provided her with a sense of community. The people she met there became like a second family, offering her a kind of acceptance that she felt was missing elsewhere. This sense of belonging made it difficult for her to leave, even though she knew it was affecting her personal life.

The mounting strain on her family and the breakdown of trust forced Queen of Hearts to confront the reality of her addiction. Desperate to regain control, she attempted a self-ban from the casino as a means to stop herself from gambling. Unfortunately, her attempt was unsuccessful, as she was unable to pass the exam required for the self-ban program. This setback was discouraging, but it made her realize that external measures alone were insufficient to curb her addiction. Her experience with the failed self-ban highlighted the importance of internal resolve; she began to understand that no program or ban could replace the necessity of personal commitment and self-discipline in overcoming her dependency.

Despite this, Queen of Hearts does not have any plans to stop gambling. For her, the thrill and sense of belonging she finds in the casino are too strong to give up. While she recognizes the negative impact her addiction has had on her family, she is unwilling to let go of the lifestyle, at least for now. The community she has found within the casino continues to be a source of comfort and connection, making it difficult for her to consider quitting.

Reflecting on her experience, Queen of Hearts, now emphasizes that overcoming gambling addiction requires a profound personal commitment. She believes that while external support and programs can be helpful, they are only effective if combined with a strong will to change from within. Her journey has shown her that self-awareness and personal accountability are essential for breaking free from gambling's grip, but she feels that for some, the pull of gambling's excitement and the sense of community may continue to outweigh the consequences.

Case 7. Jack of Spades

Jack of Spades, a 52-year-old book distributor, enjoyed a comfortable and stable life before gambling entered the picture. He had a steady income and financial security, enabling him to live without the pressures that often drive people toward high-risk activities. For years, he managed his finances responsibly and found satisfaction in his work, which allowed him the freedom to make his own choices. However, his introduction to gambling came unexpectedly, through a friend's invitation. His friend encouraged him to try it as a harmless, entertaining pastime, and with a sense of curiosity and trust, Jack of Spades decided to give it a chance.

In his early experiences, Jack of Spades found himself on a lucky streak, winning several times in a row. These initial successes were thrilling and created a strong impression, giving him the belief that gambling could be a rewarding way to pass the time. The sense of achievement from these wins was addictive, as he felt that he had a knack for the game. This initial success hooked him, drawing him back for more. Convinced that he could replicate his wins, he continued to gamble, finding excitement in the challenge and the possibility of financial gain.

As he spent more time gambling, however, Jack of Spades started noticing the limitations and unpredictability of the activity. He experienced losses and quickly realized that winning was far from guaranteed. Rather than getting discouraged, he began to observe and learn the patterns within the games, approaching gambling from a more analytical perspective. He claims to have "learned the system," meaning he developed an understanding of his limits, and the risks involved. This insight allowed him to gamble with more restraint, treating it less as a source of income and more as casual entertainment. Unlike some who fall into addiction, Jack of Spades' ability to analyze and control his gambling behavior helped him avoid deeper pitfalls.

Now, Jack of Spades views gambling purely as a recreational activity, engaging only occasionally and with strict self-discipline. He no longer expects big wins and instead sees gambling as a lighthearted pastime rather than a serious pursuit. By maintaining a healthy detachment, he has managed to avoid the financial and emotional strain that often accompanies gambling addiction. His ability to control his impulses is a testament to his balanced approach, as he limits his time and money spent on gambling. This shift in perspective allowed him to retain his financial stability and well-being while enjoying the occasional thrill gambling provides.

Reflecting on his experiences, Jack of Spades advises others that willpower is crucial to controlling gambling habits. He believes that breaking free from addiction or preventing it in the first place starts with a strong personal resolve. According to him, no external intervention or technique can substitute for one's internal strength and determination to set limits.

Case 8. Jack of Clubs

At 39 years old, Jack of Clubs walks a fine line between responsibility and indulgence. A family man with humble beginnings, his journey with gambling highlights the complicated relationship between recreation, risk, and self-discipline. While Jack of Clubs considers himself more of a casual player than an addict, his experiences reveal both the allure and dangers of gambling.

Jack of Clubs' first exposure to gambling was rooted in his childhood. Growing up in a community where card games and betting were part of the culture, he recalls placing small bets as early as eight years old. In his family, gambling wasn't seen as a harmful vice, especially compared to drinking or infidelity, which were strictly prohibited. This early normalization of gambling planted the seeds for his future habits.

As he grew older, Jack of Clubs carved out a modest life as a driver, earning enough to provide for his family. His work took him on long routes between Manila and Baguio, with stable, albeit average, earnings. Occasionally, he would supplement his income by helping relatives manage their fishpond business. While his life wasn't luxurious, it was steady—until an unexpected turn introduced him to a different world.

Jack of Clubs' real journey into gambling began when his employer introduced him to a casino. He started cautiously, treating the experience as a recreational activity. His first game was baccarat, a card game that he found engaging yet manageable. "It wasn't a habit," he explains. "It was just entertainment." Jack of Clubs was meticulous about his spending. At first, he placed small bets, rarely going beyond the minimum required to play. He recalls winning ₱100,000 in one lucky session, an amount he proudly used to improve his family's home. Unlike many others, he never allowed his wins to fuel reckless decisions.

Despite his careful approach, the thrill of the casino began to captivate him. He would sometimes spend long hours at the tables, waiting for the "right moment" to win. For Jack of Clubs gambling was a balancing act between risk and reward, one that he managed to maintain for many years.

While Jack of Clubs maintained control in the casino, *online sabong* (cockfighting) proved to be his undoing. This digital form of gambling, which allowed bets from the comfort of one's home, felt different from the structured environment of a casino. The accessibility and fast-paced nature of *online sabong* led Jack of Clubs into a financial spiral, accumulating debts of up to ₱200,000.

The consequences of this debt were immediate and stressful. Collectors came to his house, looking for repayment. While many would hide in fear, Jack of Clubs chose to confront his problems directly. "I didn't hide," he says. "Sometimes, I even reported them to the barangay if they crossed the line."

This experience left a lasting impact on Jack of Clubs, making him wary of digital gambling platforms. Unlike the casino, where he could set limits on his time and spending, *online sabong* offered no such structure, making it easy to spiral into uncontrollable losses.

Jack of Clubs' saving grace has been his family, particularly his wife. Unlike the stories of many gamblers whose relationships break under the weight of addiction, Jack of Clubs' wife has been supportive of his gambling as long as it doesn't disrupt their household finances. On good days, when there was extra money, she would even give him a little to enjoy his pastime.

This mutual understanding has been critical in preventing gambling from becoming a source of conflict. Jack of Clubs takes pride in the fact that he has never gambled away his family's essential resources. He views gambling as a personal hobby, one that shouldn't interfere with his responsibilities as a father and husband.

For Jack of Clubs, gambling has always been about self-control. He knows the risks and takes active steps to avoid falling into destructive patterns. Unlike many who gamble recklessly, Jack of Clubs sets strict time limits for himself at the casino. "I play from 6 a.m. to 2 p.m., then I leave," he says. This structure has helped him keep gambling as a recreational activity rather than a compulsion.

When asked about the most effective way to quit gambling, Jack of Clubs is pragmatic. "It's all about yourself," he says. "You can't blame anyone else for your choices." He believes that gambling, like any vice, ultimately comes down to personal accountability.

Jack of Clubs' journey with gambling has been a mix of wins and losses, joy and stress. His story stands out because, unlike many others, he has managed to keep his gambling in check—except for his brief struggle with *online sabong*. While he admits to spending long hours at the casino, he has avoided the complete financial ruin that often accompanies gambling addiction.

Still, Jack of Clubs is not immune to the dangers. He acknowledges that the thrill of gambling can be addictive, but he resists letting it take over his life. "If you treat it as entertainment, you can keep it in balance," he says.

As for the future, Jack of Clubs has no plans to quit gambling entirely. He views it as a harmless pastime as long as it remains within his control. His experiences serve as a reminder that while gambling can be a dangerous game, it's possible—though difficult—to maintain a sense of balance and responsibility.

Jack of Clubs' story is one of moderation and mindfulness. Unlike many gamblers who lose everything, he has managed to walk the tightrope between indulgence and restraint. His experiences, particularly with *online sabong*, have taught him the importance of setting limits and staying true to his responsibilities. While gambling remains a part of his life, Jack of Clubs doesn't let it define him. Instead, he uses it as a way to unwind, always keeping his priorities in check.

Case 9. Jack of Hearts

Jack of Hearts', 36 years old, relationship with gambling began at a young age, deeply rooted in his family's culture. As a child, he accompanied his father to cockfights in their rural community. This early exposure normalized gambling for him, presenting it as a harmless pastime rather than a potential danger.

The influence of his father extended beyond cockfights. His father, a former casino dealer, regularly frequented casinos and eventually introduced Jack of Hearts to the world of formal gambling. Initially, Jack of Hearts resisted. He recalls waiting outside casinos, avoiding the tables while his father played. To ensure he wouldn't be tempted to join, Jack of Hearts would wear casual clothes like tank tops, knowing it would bar him from entering the casino.

But his father persisted. One day, he introduced Jack of Hearts to another player, urging him to observe. "Watch them," his father said. "You can earn money here." Eventually, Jack of Hearts gave in and placed his first bet on a slot machine. The stakes were low—just ₱100—and the activity felt harmless. At that point, he couldn't foresee how his life would change. What started as a simple ₱100 bet grew into a dangerous habit. At first, Jack of Hearts maintained a sense of control. Winning ₱500 felt like a big victory, and he would leave the casino satisfied after a single win. Gambling was just entertainment, a way to relax and earn a little extra money. But as time passed, the allure of bigger wins led him to take greater risks. The once-small bets of ₱100 soon turned into thousands. By the peak of his addiction, Jack of Hearts was placing bets as high as ₱40,000 per round, particularly in baccarat—a game he found both thrilling and addictive.

The turning point came on July 13, 2018, a day etched in his memory. It was the day his youngest child was born. Faced with a hospital bill of ₱64,000, Jack of Hearts thought he could solve his financial problem by gambling. He believed he could win enough to cover the costs and even save more. Instead, he lost ₱250,000 in one night.

Jack of Hearts vividly remembers the aftermath. Standing outside the casino in the rain, with no money and a mountain of regret, he questioned how he had reached this point. "Before, I was happy with just ₱500. Now I've lost everything I had saved," he recalls. It was a moment of harsh realization, but even then, it wasn't enough to make him stop. The consequences of Jack of Hearts' gambling addiction were swift and severe. Over time, he was forced to sell two cars and a motorcycle to fund his losses. He avoided borrowing money, choosing instead to sell assets to cover his debts. "I didn't drag anyone else into my mess," he says, but this came at a great personal cost.

His wife, while understanding, began to notice the growing impact on their lives. "She asked me, 'Where's our car?'" Jack of Hearts recalls. Despite the financial strain, she never abandoned him. Her approach was firm yet compassionate, reminding him that his choices were his own. "She told me, 'That's your money. You know what's right and wrong.'" This support allowed Jack of Hearts to reflect on his actions without feeling entirely alienated, though it didn't stop him from continuing to gamble at the time. The pandemic further exposed the fragility of Jack of Hearts' situation. With casinos closed and no steady income, his family was forced to move in with his in-laws. This brought new tensions, especially with his mother-in-law, who openly criticized his inability to provide. "If you don't have money, you're nothing," she told him, a statement that deeply stung. The experience made Jack of Hearts confront the reality of his choices: if he hadn't gambled, his savings would have been enough to support his family through the crisis.

The pandemic became a turning point for Jack of Hearts. The closure of casinos gave him a chance to step back and reassess his priorities. Living under the scrutiny of his in-laws and witnessing his children's needs go unmet, he began to understand the true cost of his addiction—not just in money but in dignity and stability. Jack of Hearts estimates his total losses at around ₱2 million, a staggering sum for someone who once considered ₱500 a significant win. Despite this, he considers himself fortunate that he didn't borrow money or involve others in his financial struggles.

Since the pandemic, Jack of Hearts has made efforts to regain control. He no longer plays recklessly and has imposed strict limits on himself. "When I win, I stop," he says. "I know I can't recover everything I lost." This shift in mindset has allowed him to approach gambling with caution, treating it as a mild pastime rather than a consuming addiction.

When asked about the best way to quit gambling, Jack of Hearts emphasizes the importance of personal accountability. "It's all about yourself," he says. "Even if you get banned from casinos, if you

don't have discipline, you'll find another way to gamble." For Jack of Hearts, true change begins with self-control and the willingness to confront one's own behavior.

He also warns about the dangers of chasing losses—a trap he fell into during his most intense gambling years. The belief that a big win could solve all his problems only led to deeper losses. Today, Jack of Hearts is focused on rebuilding his life. While he hasn't quit gambling entirely, he has learned to manage it in a way that doesn't jeopardize his family's well-being. He remains committed to providing for his children and ensuring that they don't grow up experiencing the same instability he faced during his gambling years.

Jack of Hearts' story is a powerful example of the toll gambling can take, even on those who begin with the best intentions. It's a journey of temptation, loss, and eventual reckoning, showing that while recovery is possible, it requires hard work, self-awareness, and the support of loved ones.

For Jack of Hearts, the road ahead is still uncertain, but his willingness to learn from his mistakes gives him hope for a more stable and fulfilling future. His story serves as both a warning and a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity.

Case 10. Ace of Clubs

At just 18 years old, Ace of Clubs found himself swept into the world of gambling through friends who encouraged him to try betting on cockpit fights. As a young security guard, he already faced financial challenges, making it difficult to balance his limited income with his personal expenses. The influence of his peers made gambling seem exciting and harmless, a simple way to make some quick cash. Initially, the experience was thrilling, and he felt a sense of camaraderie with his friends. However, he soon discovered that gambling could quickly escalate, drawing him deeper into a cycle that was difficult to break.

Despite his precarious financial situation, Ace of Clubs continued to gamble, lured by the possibility of turning his modest bets into something more substantial. Betting on cockpit fights provided an added sense of excitement, combining his interest in the sport with the anticipation of winning money. However, as time passed, he realized that winning was not guaranteed, and the losses began to accumulate. Rather than seeing gambling as just an occasional pastime, he started relying on it, hoping that his next bet would bring in enough money to ease his financial difficulties. This mindset gradually led him into dangerous territory, as he placed more trust in chance than in his own ability to manage his finances.

The cycle of losses quickly turned into a heavy financial burden. Ace of Clubs found himself struggling to pay off debts, many of which were borrowed from friends or acquaintances who had trusted him to repay. His mounting debt caused him significant stress, as he constantly worried about his finances and the consequences of not being able to repay what he owed. The reality of his situation began to set in, and he realized that his gambling habit was not only failing to improve his financial state but was actively worsening it. The pressure from unpaid debts forced him to confront the impact that gambling was having on his life.

Realizing the harm his gambling habit was causing, Ace of Clubs made a conscious effort to reduce his involvement and regain control over his finances. Although he still struggles with the occasional temptation to gamble, he now approaches it with a greater sense of caution, understanding the risks involved. He has started to prioritize his financial stability and is trying to develop healthier ways to manage stress without resorting to betting. Recognizing the role his friends played in drawing him into gambling, he has also started to distance himself from those who continue to gamble, knowing that avoiding the influence of gambling companies is crucial to maintaining his resolve.

Reflecting on his experience, Ace of Clubs advises others, especially young people, to be cautious about the company they keep and to avoid friends who encourage gambling. He has learned firsthand how quickly gambling can spiral out of control, especially for those who are vulnerable to peer pressure and financial instability. His message is a call for awareness, emphasizing the importance of setting personal boundaries and focusing on long-term financial well-being.

Case 11. Ace of Hearts

At 50 years old, Ace of Hearts, has lived a life shaped and scarred by gambling. For Ace of Hearts, gambling wasn't a choice; it was part of his upbringing. His father, a *jueteng* organizer in their hometown of Magalang, exposed him to gambling at a young age. As a child, Ace of Hearts watched his father organize games and witnessed how gambling supported their family. It was normalized in his household, becoming a tradition that Ace of Hearts unknowingly inherited.

Even before adulthood, Ace of Hearts found himself drawn to small-town cockfights and betting games. By the time he reached his twenties, gambling was already a part of his identity. However, it wasn't until later in life—when he went abroad to work as an OFW—that gambling turned into a destructive force.

Ace of Hearts spent 22 years working overseas, earning a significant income of around ₱80,000 a month with additional side jobs. He was able to send money to his family, build a house, and save a substantial amount. Yet, this financial success also gave him access to funds that fed his gambling habit. At first, Ace of Hearts justified his gambling as a way to provide for his family. He believed he could win large sums of money to send back home. However, the reality was far from that. Before he even received his salary, he was already in debt, borrowing money to cover both his gambling losses and his family's needs. "I thought gambling would help me send more money back to my family," Ace of Hearts admits. "But instead, I found myself losing everything I worked for." Ace of Hearts estimates that he has lost at least ₱10 million to gambling over his lifetime. This includes money earned from decades of hard work abroad and from the partners he relied on financially. One of his partners, a woman who supported him financially for years, eventually left after realizing that Ace of Hearts had been gambling away the money she entrusted to him. "I would tell her I needed money to build something or start a project," Ace of Hearts recalls. "But the truth was, I would gamble it all away." Even his family has suffered from his addiction. Ace of Hearts sold a house worth ₱2 million for just ₱1.5 million in a desperate bid to fund his gambling. "That money didn't even last a week," he says. "I lost it all in a matter of days." Ace of Hearts' siblings, who once tried to support him, have grown tired of his repeated promises to change. They watched as he used every excuse to justify his actions, even going so far as to lie about their financial needs to extract money from his current partner.

Ace of Hearts is painfully aware of the damage his gambling has caused, yet he feels powerless to stop. "When I don't gamble, I feel empty," he explains. "Even though I know I'll lose, I keep going back because it's the only thing that makes me feel alive."

His addiction has led him to extreme measures. Ace of Hearts has attended wakes of people he didn't know just to join gambling sessions held there. He maintains contacts with fellow gamblers who keep him informed about opportunities to bet. When his partner or siblings confront him, Ace of Hearts often promises to change. However, these promises vanish the moment he has money in his hands. "If I have money, I can't think about anything else but gambling," he admits.

The emotional weight of his addiction has taken a severe toll on Ace of Hearts. He often feels guilty about the people he has hurt, from his siblings to his partners. "They've tried to advise me so many times, but I don't listen," he says. "Sometimes I think about ending my life because I know how much harm I've caused."

Yet, these moments of despair are fleeting. Once he has access to money, Ace of Hearts' resolve disappears, and he falls back into the same cycle. He describes this as a constant battle between wanting to change and feeling trapped by the pull of gambling.

Ace of Hearts' gambling addiction continues to affect his current partner, who has been with him for over two years. Despite her support, he has already lost ₱1.5 million of her money to gambling. While she continues to provide for him, Ace of Hearts fears that she, too, will eventually leave. "She doesn't know the full extent of what I've done," Ace of Hearts confesses. "I don't know what will happen when she finds out how much I've really lost."

Ace of Hearts acknowledges the severity of his addiction, describing himself as "completely consumed" by gambling. He is aware that his actions have alienated his family and ruined his financial stability. His siblings have even suggested rehabilitation, though Ace of Hearts remains unsure if it would work for him. "When I have no money, I tell myself I'll change," he says. "But once I have cash, all those promises go out the window."

Ace of Hearts' story is a sobering reminder of the power of addiction. Despite his awareness of the damage it causes, he feels trapped in a cycle of loss and regret, unable to break free.

Case 12. Ace of Spades

At 28 years old, Ace of Spades led a comfortable life with a stable job that allowed him to enjoy financial security and independence. He was responsible with his finances and had a steady routine that left him feeling in control of his future. However, his introduction to gambling came unexpectedly through his coworkers, who regularly discussed their own gambling experiences. Curious and encouraged by his colleagues, he decided to give it a try. Initially, gambling was a social activity for him—a way to connect

with his peers and relax after work. Yet, what seemed like an innocent diversion soon began to take a toll on his life.

In the early stages, Ace of Spades' gambling experience was marked by a mix of small wins and losses, which kept him engaged. The occasional win gave him a sense of excitement and fed the hope that bigger payouts might be within reach. He continued to gamble, convinced that his luck could turn around and yield substantial rewards. But as time passed, the wins became less frequent, and the losses started to add up, creating an unexpected financial burden. What he initially saw as harmless entertainment quickly transformed into a habit that affected his financial stability, pushing him to spend more than he could comfortably afford. As his losses accumulated, Ace of Spade began borrowing money to sustain his gambling habit. At first, these were small loans from friends and family, which he intended to repay after his next win. However, with each loss, his debts grew, and he found herself trapped in a cycle of borrowing to cover both gambling expenses and everyday needs. This financial strain impacted his peace of mind, as he started to feel the weight of her mounting debt and the pressure to pay it off. The stress of his financial situation became overwhelming, forcing him to confront the reality of his addiction and its impact on his life.

Determined to regain control, Ace of Spades made the difficult decision to quit gambling. He realized that his reliance on gambling was eroding his financial security and straining his relationships. Instead of seeking external support, he focused on strengthening his self-discipline, setting personal boundaries, and building up his resolve to resist the temptation to gamble. He found strength in taking personal responsibility for his actions and committed to a path of self-control. By prioritizing his well-being and finances over the temporary thrill of gambling, he was able to break free from its grip and start rebuilding his life.

Reflecting on his experience, Ace of Spades now advocates for the importance of personal resolve and self-control as essential tools to avoid the traps of gambling. He emphasizes that the decision to quit must come from within, as relying solely on outside help or waiting for a "lucky win" to fix things can lead to deeper problems. His journey has taught him that true change begins with self-awareness and a firm commitment to personal goals.

Case 13. Ace of Diamonds

Ace of Diamonds, a 28-year-old former car dealer, once enjoyed considerable success in his career. His business in car sales provided him with a steady income and financial stability, allowing him to live comfortably and support himself independently. However, this promising life took a drastic turn when he became involved in gambling. At first, it seemed like a harmless way to add some excitement to his life, but soon it turned into a full-blown addiction. With his financial resources readily available, he believed he could handle the risks of gambling, but this confidence would soon be shattered.

Driven by the allure of big wins, Ace of Diamonds began placing increasingly larger bets, convinced he could win substantial amounts. However, within just a few days, he lost millions. These losses were a crushing blow, and they rapidly spiraled him into financial ruin. The shock and devastation of losing everything he had worked so hard to build left him feeling helpless and unable to escape the situation. In a desperate attempt to regain his lost wealth, he continued to gamble, only sinking further into debt. What began as a few losses quickly turned into insurmountable financial obligations, leaving him in a state of deep anxiety and fear as creditors began demanding repayment.

As the debts mounted, Ace of Diamonds found himself consumed by fear and despair, feeling that he had no way out. The pressure from creditors, coupled with the shame and regret he felt over his gambling choices, led him into a deep depression. The emotional toll was overwhelming, and he began to feel that his life had no escape from the cycle of debt and shame. Tragically, his despair pushed him to a breaking point, and in a moment of hopelessness, he attempted to take his own life. This experience marked a critical turning point in his journey, as it forced him to confront the severity of his addiction and the impact it had on his mental health.

Surviving this dark episode, Ace of Diamonds realized that he needed serious help to overcome his addiction and rebuild his life. Recognizing that he couldn't face this battle alone, he sought out rehabilitation, understanding that professional support was essential to his recovery. In rehab, he learned valuable tools to manage his addiction, including coping strategies and techniques for maintaining self-control. These resources, combined with a strong personal commitment to change, allowed him to make progress in his recovery. Through therapy, he worked through his feelings of guilt, shame, and despair, finding hope in the possibility of a new start.

Now on the path to recovery, Ace of Diamonds advocates strongly for the importance of seeking rehabilitation and self-help as vital steps for those struggling with gambling addiction. His experience has taught him that overcoming addiction requires both external support and internal dedication. He emphasizes that rehabilitation can provide the necessary tools and guidance, but lasting change depends on a person's commitment to self-discipline and accountability.

Case 14. Queen of Diamonds

At 43 years old, Queen of Diamonds finds herself at a crossroads. Her life has been deeply marked by gambling, a habit she picked up in her younger years and one that has since grown into an all-encompassing addiction. Queen of Diamonds' first encounter with gambling seemed harmless. Before she left for Japan to work, her cousins invited her to a casino, encouraging her to place small bets just for fun. "Try it with ₱100," they said. The environment was lively, the thrill of winning was intoxicating, and Queen of Diamonds found herself hooked from that moment on.

After returning from Japan, gambling became a more regular part of her life. By then, she had become accustomed to betting larger amounts, sometimes wagering as much as ₱80,000 in a single session. She played with a mix of her own money and funds entrusted to her by others, hoping to turn a profit. Queen of Diamonds experienced occasional wins, including a high of over ₱100,000, but these moments were rare compared to the frequent and devastating losses she endured.

Queen of Diamonds' gambling addiction spiraled out of control over the years, leaving her with significant losses. She sold two cars, her property in Tagaytay, and her jewelry just to sustain her habit. Her once-thriving business also crumbled under the weight of her addiction. "Everything I worked for is gone," Queen of Diamonds admits. The financial strain was compounded by the emotional toll of her choices, which caused a rift between her and her family. She acknowledges the pain she caused her loved ones, though she struggles to fully confront it. Her health has also been affected. Long hours spent in casinos, coupled with the stress of gambling and financial instability, have taken their toll on her physical well-being. She brushes off her illnesses as minor, saying, "Sometimes I get sick, but there's always someone willing to help me." Queen of Diamonds' addiction has isolated her from her family. At one point, they took drastic measures to protect her, banning her from casinos in Manila. "I stopped going home," she admits, feeling estranged from the people she once relied on for support.

However, Queen of Diamonds has found an unexpected sense of belonging within the gambling community. The friends she has made at the casino have become a surrogate family for her, offering companionship and understanding. "The people I've met here have never left me," she says. For Queen of Diamonds, these relationships provide solace, even as they reinforce her addiction.

Not everyone in Queen of Diamonds' life has given up on her. One of her sisters, despite initially being angry at Queen of Diamonds' refusal to stop gambling, forgave her and even helped her start over. During the pandemic, her sister gave her money to start a live-selling business. This act of kindness brought Queen of Diamonds a brief period of stability and renewed connection with her family.

Queen of Diamonds is fully aware of her addiction and the damage it has caused. "I realize every day that I'm addicted," she says. Yet, the emotional pull of gambling is too strong for her to resist. Gambling has become her way of coping with life's challenges, a temporary escape from reality that she finds difficult to let go of. Even when she acknowledges the consequences—lost money, strained relationships, deteriorating health—Queen of Diamonds struggles to act on her desire to change. "I don't want to grow old here," she says, but the comfort and familiarity of the casino keep her coming back.

One of the most significant moments in Queen of Diamonds' journey came when she adopted a dog. This seemingly small decision brought a new sense of responsibility into her life. For the first time in years, Queen of Diamonds had a reason to leave the casino and return home. "My dog gave me a reason to go home," she explains. The companionship of her pet provided her with a sense of purpose and a glimpse of what life could be like without gambling. While it wasn't a complete solution, it was a step in the right direction. Queen of Diamonds' continued struggle with gambling is deeply tied to the emotional relief it provides. The casino isn't just a place to play games—it's where she feels understood, where she can escape from the stress of daily life, and where she's found a network of friends who accept her without judgment.

However, Queen of Diamonds also recognizes that this escape is temporary. When she leaves the casino, reality sets in, and the weight of her decisions becomes apparent. This cycle of escape and regret is what makes addiction so difficult to break. Queen of Diamonds dreams of a future where she no longer relies on gambling for happiness. She knows that the road to recovery will be difficult, but she hasn't

completely given up hope. When asked about the best way to stop gambling, Queen of Diamonds points to her experience with her dog as an example. "Having responsibilities outside of gambling makes a difference," she says.

For now, Queen of Diamonds remains caught between the desire to change and the pull of her addiction. She understands the importance of taking action but hasn't yet found the strength to fully commit. "I don't want to grow old here," she repeats, holding onto the hope that one day she'll find the courage to leave the casino behind.

Case 15. Ober of Hearts

At the tender age of 21, Ober of Hearts, a construction worker and a young father, finds himself trapped in the grip of a gambling addiction that has derailed his life. Despite his simple aspirations of supporting his family and raising his child, gambling has consumed his days, his earnings, and his peace of mind.

Ober of Hearts' descent into gambling began with a casual suggestion from a friend. "This game is easy to win," his friend told him. Lured by the promise of quick money, Ober of Hearts gave it a try. He placed his first bet—₱100—and lost. Though disappointed, he shrugged it off and stopped. However, curiosity and the hope of winning drew him back the very next day. This time, he bet ₱500, but again, he lost. What followed was a dangerous cycle of chasing losses. Each time he lost, he felt compelled to bet again, believing he could win back his money. Instead, the losses mounted. "At first, my bets were small—around ₱50 per game—but they grew larger over time. Sometimes I would bet ₱500 or even ₱1,000," he recounted. These escalating bets marked the beginning of an uncontrollable addiction.

For Ober of Hearts, gambling offered a fleeting thrill. His first major win was ₱700, a moment of excitement that left him craving more. Yet, wins were few and far between, overshadowed by countless losses. The initial allure of easy money quickly gave way to desperation. "After that win, I kept playing, but I would lose again and again. My entire salary went into gambling," he admitted.

Unlike games with complex odds, Ober of Hearts found himself drawn to simpler games, particularly one where he could bet on "red" or "white" outcomes. These games made him feel as though he could predict the results, a false sense of control that only deepened his addiction. He described the experience as a mental tug-of-war, where each loss left him restless and more determined to keep playing. "Even when I'm about to sleep, I'd rather gamble," he confessed.

Ober of Hearts' gambling addiction took over every aspect of his daily routine. His work hours, breaks, and even personal time were overshadowed by his compulsion to gamble. "When I arrive at work at 7 a.m., I start gambling. During break times, I gamble. Even at lunchtime, I gamble. By the time my shift ends at 7 p.m., I'm gambling again," he shared.

The addiction seeped into his financial stability. Ober of Hearts' salary, meant to support his wife and young child, was instead funneled directly into his cash application account for gambling. The ease of cashless transactions removed any barriers, allowing him to gamble away his money as soon as he earned it. He found himself in debt, borrowing money from relatives to cover basic needs like milk for his child. "I've even had to ask my aunt for help because all I do is gamble," he admitted. The impact on Ober of Hearts' family was severe. His wife, though supportive, struggled to manage their household finances in the face of his addiction. The money that should have gone to essentials was often lost in gambling. Despite her efforts to intervene, Ober of Hearts often found ways to bypass her control and continue his habit.

Ober of Hearts deeply regretted how his addiction hurt his loved ones. He acknowledged that his child's needs were being neglected and that his relationship with his wife was under strain. "I told my wife to take control of my salary. If she handles the money, maybe I can save," he said, expressing a glimmer of hope that her involvement could help him change.

What makes Ober of Hearts' story particularly poignant is his awareness of his predicament. He knows gambling is damaging his life, yet he feels powerless to stop. "Sometimes I want to stop because I keep losing, but it's so hard," he said. The constant availability of gambling apps and the lure of potentially winning back his losses made it nearly impossible for him to resist. Even during moments of clarity, Ober of Hearts struggled to find lasting solutions. He admitted to reaching a point where he would pawn belongings just to have money to gamble. The mental and emotional toll was enormous. "When I don't gamble, I feel restless. It's always on my mind," he said, illustrating how addiction had taken over his thoughts.

Despite the depth of his addiction, Ober of Hearts has not entirely lost hope. He believes that his wife's involvement in managing their finances could be a crucial step toward recovery. By limiting his access to cash, he hopes to break the cycle of gambling and start saving for his family's future. "I've told her not to let me cash in any money because I'll just lose it," he said.

However, Ober of Hearts also recognizes that self-control is essential. While relying on his wife to handle their finances is a temporary solution, he knows that true change must come from within. The road to recovery will not be easy, but Ober of Hearts is slowly beginning to explore ways to regain control over his life.

Breaking free from addiction requires more than just willpower. It demands support from loved ones, financial safeguards, and perhaps professional intervention. Ober of Hearts journey is far from over, but his willingness to acknowledge his problem and seek help is a vital first step.

Case 16. Ober of Bells

Ober of Bells, a 34-year-old government employee and family man, has lived a life shaped by the allure and devastation of gambling. Raised in an environment where gambling was normalized, his addiction grew unnoticed for years until it finally spiraled out of control during the pandemic. Now, reflecting on his experiences, Ober of Bells opens up about the highs and lows, the regrets, and his ongoing battle to reclaim his life.

Growing up in a family where gambling was a common pastime, Ober of Bells was no stranger to its world. "Everyone in my family gambles," he shared. His childhood was marked by scenes of his relatives betting on cockfights or playing mahjong. Gambling was not frowned upon; it was an accepted part of daily life. As a teenager, Ober of Bells took his first steps into gambling. High school gatherings often included small betting games like "Lucky 9." He vividly remembers his first win during a wake in his neighborhood. "I won ₱1,000 and felt so happy. I thought, 'This is what winning feels like,'" he said, describing the thrill that planted the seed of his addiction. By college, Ober of Bells' gambling habits had escalated. He began betting larger amounts, even risking his tuition fees on billiard games. Yet, despite these early signs, he didn't recognize the danger. In his mind, gambling was just another normal activity—something everyone did.

Although Ober of Bells had gambled sporadically throughout his life, it wasn't until the pandemic that his addiction truly took hold. Isolated at home and with limited distractions, he found himself drawn to online sabong, a form of cockfighting that allowed people to place bets via apps. The convenience of gambling from his phone made it easier than ever to indulge.

What started as small, manageable bets of ₱500 soon spiraled out of control. Ober of Bells began chasing losses, placing increasingly large bets in hopes of recouping his money. "At first, it was ₱500," he said. "Then it became ₱20,000, ₱30,000, even ₱100,000. One time, I bet ₱300,000 because I was desperate to win back what I'd lost. But I lost again." For Ober of Bells, gambling was both thrilling and devastating. He experienced the occasional high, like his biggest win of ₱280,000, but those moments were fleeting. The losses far outweighed the wins. Over time, he estimates he lost between ₱600,000 and ₱700,000—an enormous sum that left him burdened with debt. "Even when you win, the money doesn't stay. You just end up gambling it away again," he explained.

The financial impact of Ober of Bells' gambling addiction was immense, but it wasn't the only cost. His addiction also took a toll on his mental health, relationships, and overall well-being. As his debts piled up, Ober of Bells began borrowing money from friends and family, often lying to secure loans.

One incident stands out in his memory. Desperate for funds, Ober of Bells fabricated a story about his father returning from abroad and needing ₱100,000. "I told my friend it was for my dad, but I used the money to gamble," he admitted, shame evident in his voice.

The stress of his addiction manifested in unhealthy habits. "When I'm depressed, I stress eat," he shared. While Ober of Bells had once lived a carefree life, the pressures of providing for a family and his growing debts left him feeling overwhelmed. "Back when I was only responsible for myself, I didn't worry about anything. But now, with a family, the stress is constant."

Despite the damage caused by his addiction, Ober of Bells finds it difficult to stop gambling entirely. There are moments when he feels hopeful, determined to turn his life around, but the temptation always lingers. "Sometimes, when I have just ₱100 or ₱200 in my fast cash apps account, I end up gambling again," he said. The accessibility of online gambling apps makes it almost impossible to resist.

Ober of Bells has taken small steps to regain control. He's managed to reduce his debts, which once totaled ₱80,000, and has expressed a desire to stop gambling altogether. "I really want to quit. I

regret ever learning how to gamble,” he said. However, he admits that the journey is far from over. The pull of gambling remains strong, and he knows that staying away will require constant effort.

Looking back, Ober of Bells is filled with regret. He wishes he had never been exposed to gambling, never felt the thrill of that first win. “I regret everything about gambling,” he said. He recognizes how deeply it has impacted his life, from his finances to his mental health to his relationships.

Ober of Bells’ addiction also reminds him of his mother, who struggled with gambling debts of her own. She once owed over ₱500,000 to the bank—a fate Ober of Bells is determined to avoid repeating. “I saw myself following the same path,” he said. “That scared me.”

Though his journey has been difficult, Ober of Bells hasn’t given up hope. He wants to quit gambling, not just for himself but for his family. He knows that change won’t happen overnight, but he’s committed to trying. “I’ve made mistakes, but I want to move forward,” he said.

For Ober of Bells, quitting gambling isn’t just about avoiding financial ruin—it’s about reclaiming his life. He dreams of a future where he can focus on his family, free from the stress and regret that gambling has caused. “I just want to stop and start over,” he said. “I want to build a better life for myself and my loved ones.”

Ober of Bells’ story is a powerful reminder of the devastating effects of gambling addiction. What starts as a harmless pastime can quickly spiral into a cycle of loss, regret, and despair. For Ober of Bells, breaking free from this cycle is a daily battle, but his willingness to confront his mistakes and seek help is a crucial step forward.

As he continues his journey, Ober of Bells’ experiences highlight the importance of awareness, support, and resilience. His story serves as a warning to others about the dangers of gambling—and as a testament to the strength it takes to overcome addiction. With determination and the support of those around him, Ober of Bells hopes to leave gambling behind and create a brighter future.

Case 17. Queen of Spades

At just 22 years old, Queen of Spades’ life was once stable, albeit modest. She worked at a Korean barbecue restaurant and managed to provide for her family. Things changed when a friend encouraged her to try a gambling game called “scatter.” “She told me, ‘You can win big here, like ₱5,000 or ₱10,000,’” Queen of Spades recalled. Intrigued by the possibility of earning more money for her child’s milk and her family’s food, she decided to try it.

Initially, she exercised caution. Queen of Spades saved up some of her salary and bet a portion of it. To her surprise, she won ₱3,000 on her first try. The thrill of winning was intoxicating. “I was dazzled by gambling,” she admitted. “I thought, if I keep playing, I can make more money before my next paycheck.” That first win set off a cycle of optimism and temptation that quickly spiraled out of control.

Like many who gamble, Queen of Spades experienced more losses than wins. At first, she borrowed small amounts from her aunt—₱1,000 at a time—believing she could pay it back with her winnings. “I thought, this is just the start. I’ll win eventually,” she said. But as the losses piled up, so did her debt. She soon owed her aunt ₱3,000, and her promises to repay went unfulfilled.

Her family began to notice her worsening behavior. Queen of Spades’ parents warned her repeatedly, telling her to stop gambling before it ruined her life. But the addiction had already taken hold. She couldn’t bear the restlessness of not gambling. “If I wasn’t playing, I felt so impatient,” she shared. “I’d tell myself, ‘Maybe I’ll win this time,’ and I’d borrow more money to keep playing.” Eventually, her aunt refused to lend her any more money. “She told me, ‘You’re always gambling. You’ve already borrowed so much from me, and you’re not paying it back.’” Queen of Spades started lying to get more funds, making empty promises about paying her debts. As her addiction deepened, Queen of Spades’ life began to crumble. Her husband left, leaving her to raise their child alone. Living with her parents, she felt the weight of their constant criticism. They scolded her for neglecting her responsibilities, and their harsh words only worsened her sense of guilt and failure.

The turning point came when she began contemplating suicide. Overwhelmed by debt and despair, Queen of Spades felt trapped. “I was losing my mind,” she said. “I couldn’t see a way out. I thought, maybe it’s better if I’m not here anymore.” She blamed herself for everything—her mounting debts, her strained relationship with her family, and even her inability to provide for her child.

Queen of Spades’ wake-up call came in the form of a family crisis. Her child fell ill with pneumonia and needed to be hospitalized. The situation forced her to confront the reality of her addiction. “I realized I couldn’t keep living like this,” she said. “Even my child was being affected. My family had to cover the hospital expenses because I couldn’t.” The guilt was overwhelming, but it also served as a

catalyst for change. Queen of Spades vowed to quit gambling for good. "I decided, enough is enough. Gambling has already ruined my life, and I won't let it ruin my child's future too."

Since that turning point, Queen of Spades has worked hard to distance herself from gambling. While the temptation still lingers, she has taken significant steps to stay away. Occasionally, she joins friends who gamble, but only as an observer, never placing bets herself. "I don't use my phone to gamble anymore," she said. "If I'm tempted, I just watch them play, but I don't participate."

Queen of Spades acknowledges that her recovery is a work in progress. She is still haunted by the gossip in her community about her gambling addiction. "People talked about me a lot," she admitted. "They'd say, 'She's so young, but she's already addicted to gambling.'" Despite the stigma, she remains determined to rebuild her life.

Looking back, Queen of Spades deeply regrets her decisions. She wishes she had never listened to her friend's advice to gamble. "I ruined my life because of that game," she said. "I let myself be blinded by the promise of easy money." Her story is a cautionary tale for others. She warns against the allure of gambling, especially for those who think it's a way to make quick money. "You might win once, but you'll lose so much more in the end," she said.

Today, Queen of Spades is focused on providing for her child and making amends with her family. She is working to rebuild the trust she lost and to repay the debts she accumulated. Though the road ahead is challenging, she is determined to create a better life for herself and her child. "I've learned my lesson," she said. "Gambling destroyed so much, but I won't let it destroy me completely. I want to move forward."

Queen of Spades' journey is a testament to the resilience of the human spirit. Despite the hardships she faced, she has found the strength to turn her life around. Her story serves as both a warning about the dangers of gambling and an inspiration for those seeking to overcome their own struggles.

Case 18. Ober of Leaves

At just 19 years old, Ober of Leaves has experienced more challenges than many face in a lifetime. Becoming a father at 15, Ober of Leaves sacrificed his education and dreams to support his new family. But when gambling entered his life, the young father's struggles multiplied, leading him into a cycle of addiction, financial strain, and family separation. Born into a broken family, Ober of Leaves grew up with a hardworking mother who supported him and his sibling through laundry work. His father, an electrician, abandoned them, leaving a gap in Ober of Leaves' life that still affects him. Despite his circumstances, Ober of Leaves was a diligent student who took his education seriously.

"I wasn't the type to slack off," Ober of Leaves said. "But when I became a father, my mom gave me a choice: stay in school or take responsibility for my family. I chose my child and my partner." This decision forced him to leave school after Grade 10, cutting short his dream of becoming an air-conditioning technician like his father.

Ober of Leaves' first exposure to gambling came through a coworker who won ₱20,000. Seeing someone earn such a significant amount so quickly sparked his curiosity. "I thought, maybe I could win too," he said. He started small, betting one or two pesos on scatter, an online slot game. At first, he had some luck. His early winnings, including a ₱4,000 prize and a ₱15,000 jackpot, gave him a false sense of hope. "I bought a secondhand motorbike with my winnings. I thought, if I could keep winning, I wouldn't need to work as hard," he shared.

What began as harmless fun quickly spiraled into addiction. As Ober of Leaves chased his earlier wins, his bets grew larger, reaching ₱30 or ₱50 per game. But the more he played, the more he lost. "I kept thinking, 'I'll win it back next time,'" Ober of Leaves admitted. Instead, he watched as his earnings and savings disappeared. His daily salary of ₱500 as a construction laborer went straight into gambling. When that wasn't enough, he took on side jobs, hoping to make extra money for his family. But even this income often ended up funding his gambling habit. The financial strain led to conflicts with his partner. "We fought a lot because I couldn't provide for our baby," he said. "Eventually, she left me and took our child." Ober of Leaves' struggles with gambling were compounded by the unresolved pain of his childhood. Growing up without a father, he felt abandoned and bitter. When they reconnected two years ago, the meeting was filled with tension. "He tried to help me change, but I told him, 'Where were you when I needed you?'" Ober of Leaves recalled.

This resentment fueled his determination to work hard as a teenager, often taking on odd jobs to help his mother. Despite his efforts, the hardships he faced made him vulnerable to the allure of quick money through gambling. The consequences of Ober of Leaves' gambling addiction reached their peak

when he couldn't provide for his child. "There were times I didn't even have money for milk," he said. These moments of failure deeply affected him. His relationship with his partner deteriorated, and his responsibilities as a father felt increasingly out of reach. "I was left with nothing because of gambling," he confessed. "I should have stopped earlier, but I didn't."

Despite the challenges, Ober of Leaves is determined to turn his life around. He hopes to rebuild his relationship with his child's mother and give his child a better life than the one he had. "I don't want my child to grow up in a broken family like I did," he said. Ober of Leaves believes that eliminating online gambling platforms could help others avoid the same trap. "If online gambling didn't exist, it would be easier to stay away from it," he said. He also advocates for creating healthier distractions and focusing on family to fill the void that gambling often tries to replace.

Looking back, Ober of Leaves regrets the choices he made. "I knew gambling was bad, but I got tempted because I thought I might get lucky," he said. He now understands that the losses far outweigh the wins and that gambling is a cycle of false hope.

His story serves as a powerful warning about the dangers of gambling, especially for young people who may see it as a shortcut to success. "Gambling ruins lives," Ober of Leaves said. "I wish I had never started." Ober of Leaves' journey is far from over, but his determination to change offers hope. He dreams of a future where he can provide for his child, reconcile with his partner, and build a stable life free from the grip of gambling. For others facing similar struggles, his advice is clear: "Find other ways to spend your time. Focus on your family. Don't let gambling take everything from you."

Case 19. Joker

Over of Bells, a 25-year-old employee in the BPO (Business Process Outsourcing) industry, found himself drawn into gambling, which quickly consumed his time and energy. Working in a demanding job with irregular hours, he faced high levels of stress and often sought ways to escape the pressures of his work environment. Gambling seemed to provide a solution, offering excitement and a break from his exhausting routine. At first, it was just an occasional activity that added some thrill to his life, but it didn't take long for it to become a serious habit that took precedence over his well-being.

As his gambling habit intensified, Joker began to neglect his health, prioritizing gambling over rest, exercise, and proper nutrition. Due to the long hours required in his job, sleep was already scarce, but he willingly sacrificed what little he had to spend more time gambling. The late nights and lack of sleep began to impact his physical and mental health, leaving him feeling constantly tired and drained. The thrill of gambling kept him going, but his body was suffering. He would push through his shifts with minimal rest, all the while thinking about his next bet. This neglect of his basic needs created a cycle of fatigue and stress that became increasingly difficult to break.

The effects of sleep deprivation and poor self-care soon began to interfere with his performance at work. His energy levels dropped, his focus declined, and he found it difficult to keep up with the demands of his job. As his health deteriorated, Joker began to experience the consequences of his choices firsthand. The impact on his performance put his job security at risk, and he realized that his gambling habit was taking a toll not just on his personal life but on his career as well. The exhaustion and lack of focus were not just affecting him but were also jeopardizing the stability he had worked hard to achieve in his career.

Recognizing the damage he was doing to himself, Joker finally made the decision to quit gambling. This was not an easy choice, as the habit had become a way to cope with stress and provided an escape from the pressures of daily life. However, he knew he could no longer ignore the harm it was causing. Determined to regain his health, he began focusing on establishing a healthier routine, making time for rest, and rebuilding his energy. By stepping away from gambling, he was able to start prioritizing his physical and mental well-being, recognizing that true stability and happiness could only come from a healthy lifestyle.

Now that he has stopped gambling, Joker is committed to maintaining his focus on self-care and well-being. Reflecting on his experience, he emphasizes the importance of health and the need to put it above any addictive habits that may seem appealing. His journey has shown him that ignoring basic needs, like sleep and nutrition, can lead to serious consequences, especially in a demanding job like his. He believes that personal well-being should never be sacrificed for fleeting excitement or short-term relief from stress.

Joker now shares his story as a cautionary tale, hoping to help others recognize the importance of prioritizing health over gambling or any other habit that threatens their stability. He advises others to learn

from their experiences and make changes before serious harm occurs, stressing that life is more fulfilling when one is physically and mentally well.

Case 20. Ober of Acorns

At 30, Ober of Acorns was a self-employed graphic artist who took pride in his independence and his ability to support his aging parents. He worked hard to maintain his financial stability, ensuring that he could provide not only for himself but also for his family. However, his life took an unexpected turn when his friends introduced him to gambling. They portrayed it as a fun activity and a quick way to earn extra income. Initially, he resisted, but curiosity and the influence of his friends eventually drew him in. What began as an occasional outing with friends soon turned into a serious habit that put his savings—and his independence—at risk.

As he started gambling more frequently, Ober of Acorns' financial security began to unravel. His early wins made him feel confident, convincing him that gambling could be a reliable source of extra cash. However, as time went on, he experienced a series of losses that began to drain his savings. Instead of walking away, he continued betting in hopes of recovering his money, which only led to deeper losses. The money he had carefully saved for years quickly dwindled, leaving him with barely enough to cover his personal expenses, let alone support his parents. The excitement that gambling once brought soon turned into stress and anxiety over his financial situation.

With his savings exhausted, Ober of Acorns was forced to rely on his parents for support once again. This dependence created a deep sense of guilt and disappointment, as he had worked hard to be financially independent and to help his family, not the other way around. His parents, though supportive, were also concerned about his choices and the sudden changes in his behavior. Having to ask for their help felt like a setback, undoing years of effort to stand on his own and be a source of support for them. The shame of disappointing them added to his determination to make a change.

Recognizing the harm that gambling was causing, Ober of Acorns decided to regain control of his life. He realized that the pursuit of quick wins had led him away from his values and his commitment to his family. Determined to rebuild, he began focusing on his self-employment work, pouring his energy into productive pursuits rather than gambling. By shifting his focus back to his business and setting new goals, he started to rebuild his finances and restore his independence. This redirection of his efforts gave him a renewed sense of purpose and reminded him of the satisfaction that comes from honest work.

As he worked toward recovery, Ober of Acorns gained valuable insight into the importance of focusing on meaningful activities rather than temporary thrills. He now advises others in similar situations to resist the lure of gambling and instead invest their time and energy in pursuits that offer real, lasting value. He believes that one's career, family, and personal growth should take precedence over gambling, which only provides fleeting excitement and often leads to hardship. By concentrating on valuable goals, he argues, individuals can avoid the pitfalls of gambling and achieve a more fulfilling life.

Ober of Acorns' journey is a testament to the resilience required to overcome gambling addiction. He hopes that his story will serve as a reminder to others of the dangers of gambling and the importance of prioritizing stability and family. By focusing on work and personal growth, he has managed to regain control and rebuild the financial security he lost.

Synthesis

The narrative from the participants shares the personal experiences of people in Pampanga who have struggled with gambling addiction. Many of the participants began gambling as a harmless social activity introduced by friends and family. Early wins created a false sense of control and hope for easy income, pulling them deeper into a cycle of addiction. As gambling became an obsession, participants often prioritized it over family and work, leading to severe financial strain and a pattern of borrowing from friends or loans.

The consequences of gambling addiction were profound, damaging relationships, finances, and mental well-being. Many participants tried to quit but struggled due to strong emotional and social influences, experiencing repeated relapses. Although some found paths to recovery through family support or new pursuits, others found it hard to leave the sense of belonging gambling provided or lacked healthy alternatives for stress relief.

To sum up, the stories provided by the respondents reveal the powerful grip of gambling addiction and its lasting impact on individuals and families. Recovery requires personal commitment, family support, and access to healthier ways of coping with stress. These narratives stand as a cautionary tale about the far-reaching effects of gambling on personal and family life.

Table 2
Age Distribution

Age	<i>f</i>	R
18-25	5	1
26-33	5	1
34-41	5	1
50-57	3	4
42-49	2	5
Total	20	n/a

The table shows the age groups of people addicted to gambling in Pampanga. The data reveals that gambling addiction affects people from different age ranges, but it is more common among younger and middle-aged individuals.

The age groups 18-25, 26-33, and 34-41 each have 5 cases of gambling addiction. This suggests that people in these age groups, who are often working or building their careers, are more likely to get involved in gambling. This could be due to financial pressures, peer influence, or the easy access to gambling, especially online.

For older age groups, the numbers are smaller. There are 2 cases for people aged 42-49 and 3 cases for those aged 50-57. This drop might happen because older individuals are less exposed to gambling environments or have different priorities as they grow older. However, these numbers still show that gambling addiction can affect older people too.

Overall, the data shows that gambling addiction is most common among people aged 18-41. This means efforts to stop gambling addiction should focus on younger adults while still helping older individuals who are struggling. Programs should be designed to address the needs and challenges of each age group to effectively reduce gambling addiction.

Table 3
Salary

Salary Range	<i>f</i>	Rank
20,000 – 30,000	8	1
30,001 – 40,000	2	2
50,001 – 60,000	1	3
60,001 – 70,000	1	3
70,001 – 80,000	1	3
Above than 100,000	1	3
40,001 – 50,000	0	7
80,001 – 90,000	0	7
90,001 – 100,000	0	7
Total	20	n/a

The table shows the salary distribution of gambling addicts in Pampanga. It gives an idea of how much they earn, and which income groups are most affected by gambling addiction.

The data shows that most gambling addicts come from the 20,000–30,000-pesos salary range, with 8 people falling into this category. This suggests that gambling addiction is more common among people with lower incomes. These individuals might see gambling to earn extra money, which could explain why this group is the largest.

There are 2 people in the 30,001–40,000-peso range, and no one in the 40,001–50,000-peso range. This gap could mean that people earning slightly more may feel less financial pressure to turn to gambling or are less likely to develop addiction.

In the higher salary ranges, the numbers drop significantly. Only 1 person is in the 50,001–60,000-peso range, another 1 person in the 60,001–70,000-peso range, and 1 person in the 70,001–80,000-peso range. For salaries above 100,000 pesos, there is also just 1 person. This shows that gambling addiction exists even among high earners, but it is less common.

No one falls into the 80,001–100,000-peso range, and the distribution generally highlights that gambling addiction affects people across all income levels, though it is more concentrated in lower-earning groups. This may indicate that financial struggles or a desire to improve their financial situation make lower-income individuals more vulnerable to gambling addiction.

Thematic Analysis on the Lived Experiences of the People with Gambling Addiction

This phenomenological analysis seeks to understand the lived experiences of the people with gambling addiction in the province of Pampanga by examining recurring themes across participant responses. Drawing on thematic analysis, the study captures the common factors influencing gambling addiction, its effect on individuals and their families, and the motivations to either continue or attempt to quit.

The Social Pathway to Gambling

For many participants, gambling was not something they sought out alone but was introduced to them by those closest to them. This social introduction plays a significant role, as it removes the uncertainty or hesitation that might otherwise deter from trying it. King of Clubs shared how colleagues encouraged him to join, saying, *“I was persuaded by my colleagues, after that I gamble continuously.”* Queen of Hearts had a similar experience, explaining that gambling felt “normal” because it was so common among family members. Being surrounded by people who already viewed gambling as an ordinary activity made it easy for them to see it as a part of everyday life rather than as a potentially harmful behavior.

Gambling as a Social Activity

Research supports the idea that gambling is often framed as a social activity, particularly in communities where it is widely accepted or embedded in local culture. Estevez et. al (2023) describes how gambling, in many cases, starts as a casual way to bond with others or have fun. For some participants, gambling gatherings or casino visits became social events, similar to group dinners or nights out, which provided an opportunity to relax and enjoy the company of friends and family. When gambling is framed in this light, it can be easy to overlook the risks involved, as the primary focus becomes socialization rather than the potential for loss.

For the participants, these early gambling experiences were often exhilarating. The excitement of the environment, the companionship, and the possibility of winning money made gambling an attractive activity. Ace of Spades recalled, *“I won a lot in my first gamble which urged me to go back and bet again.”* This initial success set up a powerful sense of optimism and anticipation for the future wins, which, according to research, can be very persuasive in keeping people engaged in gambling.

The Role of Early Wins

These first wins are particularly important in shaping how people view gambling. The thrill and satisfaction of winning often outweigh the risk, making the idea of gambling even more appealing. Jack of Clubs echoed this feeling, saying, *“It was the winning streak on my first bet that hooked me.”* Winning early on can make people feel that they are somehow skilled or lucky, leading them to believe that continued gambling will produce similar results. Even King of Clubs feels the same saying, *“I was big-headed when I won, It gives me the idea that I could easily win and gain some money.”*

This pattern aligns with the “gambler’s fallacy,” where people start to believe that their chances of winning will stay high because they have already won before. This fallacy leads to a false sense of control and predictability. Making gamblers think that if they play just right or bet the right amount, they can continue winning. Such belief creates an illusion of control, building individuals to the randomness and high-risk nature of gambling.

Social Reinforcement and Addiction

The encouragement from friends, and colleagues adds another layer of influence. When surrounded by people who enjoy gambling and share their successes, individuals feel validated in their choices. This sense of belonging within a gambling circle reinforces their behavior, making it seem both acceptable and rewarding. According to Estevez et al. (2023), when gambling is accepted or even celebrated within a social group, it can mask the warning signs of addiction.

For example, Ace of Clubs expressed how gambling just felt like something everyone was doing. This normalization is especially dangerous because it blurs the line between occasional social gambling and addiction. As gambling becomes a routine social activity, individuals might not recognize that their casual involvement is deepening into dependency. The social pathway to gambling becomes a powerful trigger that not only introduces people to gambling but also keeps them engaged, often long after the initial thrill has faded.

The Illusion of Control and Routine

The repeated pattern of gambling also creates routines and rituals further fuel the cycle of addiction. By spending time with friends or family at casinos or betting events, gambling becomes part of

a familiar, habitual routine. This reinforces the illusion of control, where each gamble feels like a decision within their power, even though the outcomes are largely random. As gambling becomes more routine, individuals may find it difficult to enjoy other forms of socialization, increasingly turning to a gambling as their primary way to connect with others. Resembling the situation, Queen of Diamonds, invited by her cousin to a casino for entertainment, started with betting one hundred until it escalated to eighty thousand which drew her to gambling addiction and declared, “*Everything I worked for is gone.*”

Over time, this social pathway becomes a trap, where individuals are both drawn in by the promise of easy wins and held by the comfort of belonging within a gambling community. They find it hard to step back because gambling has become part of how they socialize, relax, and seek excitement. The combination of social validation, early wins, and the illusion of control makes gambling not just an activity, but a way of life for some participants, often leading them down the path of addiction without realizing it.

Escalating Financial and Social Costs

The financial and social consequences of gambling addiction are intertwined in a way that often traps individuals in a cycle of debt, stress, and isolation. As seen in the participants’ stories, financial losses begin small, but the drive to recoup these losses by gambling more leads to downward spiral that only worsens the situation. Even though Queen of Hearts did not acquire gambling debt but she declared that she lost an estimated 50 million pesos in gambling. For some, this “debt spiral” is a common trap for gamblers, as illustrated by King of Diamond, who described pawning their ATM card and borrowing money just to continue gambling. At this stage, gambling is no longer about entertainment or occasional enjoyment—it has become a need, something that must be satisfied at any cost.

As these debts accumulate, people often find themselves sacrificing essential needs to fuel their addiction. Ober of Hearts’s experience highlights this struggle: they shared how gambling drained their income, leaving them unable to afford necessities like milk for their child. For many, this cycle of spending becomes so consuming that it affects every aspect of their daily lives. Work performance may suffer, bills go unpaid, and financial obligations like food, utilities, or childcare can be neglected. In some cases, as with Ober of Leaves, the financial burden from gambling led to such severe tension that eventually ended separation from their spouse.

This cycle of debt and desperation is also accompanied by intense feelings of guilt and frustration. The gamblers themselves often feel trapped in a pattern they cannot control. As debts grow, the pressure to “win it back” becomes overwhelming, creating a tunnel vision where gambling seems like the only solution to their problems. Yet, each attempt to recoup losses typically only increases their debts, pushing them further from any real financial stability. This continuous cycle of gambling, loss, and debt not only leaves people financially drained but also heightens emotional stress, leading to mental health struggles such as anxiety, depression, and despair.

Impact on Relationships and Social Connections

The social costs of gambling addiction extend beyond the gambler, affecting spouses, children, and even close friends. These loved ones often bear the brunt of the addiction’s impact, feeling helpless as they watch someone they care about prioritize gambling over their relationships and responsibilities. Ace of Hearts, for example, shared that even though their siblings repeatedly offered help, they could not find it within themselves to stop gambling. For some, gambling becomes a substitute for the emotional support that family and friends might otherwise provide, creating a barrier between the gambler and their loved ones.

This dynamic often leads to a breakdown in trust and communication, as family members experience betrayal and disappointment. Spouses and children, in particular, may feel abandoned or neglected. Many family members end up carrying the financial and emotional weight of the addiction, which can lead to frustration, resentment, and, in some cases, the dissolution of the family unit. In the narration of King Hearts stated, “*I had an argument with my son, he blamed me why he didn’t finish his school. After that I came up with the realization, everything in my life is a failure because of gambling. My two sons did not finish their studies and my wife got sick because of me*”. Studies show that family members of gambling addicts frequently experience their own forms of emotional distress, dealing with the unpredictable financial strain and worrying about the well-being of their loved one (Li et al., 2016). In severe cases, family members may feel compelled to take on financial burdens or even sacrifice their own needs to support the addict, often to little avail.

Ace of Hearts' separation from their spouse demonstrates how gambling addiction can drive a wedge between partners. The strain of continuous financial loss and broken promises often erodes trust, which is crucial for any close relationships. Even when family members try to be supportive, the addict's compulsion can make it difficult to maintain a positive relationship. Many gamblers are aware of the pain their addiction causes, but the overwhelming pull of gambling overrides their attempts to reconcile with loved ones. This creates a painful cycle: as they feel more isolated, they turn even more to gambling as a source of comfort and control, further distancing themselves from the people who could potentially help them recover.

Emotional Isolation and the Need for Comfort

For many gambling addicts, the casino or gambling venue becomes a "safe space" where they can escape the stresses and disappointments of everyday life. This space provides a sense of belonging and control, especially when their social and family lives are fraught with tension. Jack of Cards shared that, even as their debts grew and their relationships suffered, gambling remained a constant source of relief. Unfortunately, this form of relief is temporary and comes at the cost of deeper entrenchment in addiction.

The gambler's growing sense of isolation also feeds into the addiction, as they may feel misunderstood by those around them. For instance, Ace of Hearts described feeling empty when not gambling, and emptiness that family support alone could not fill. Similar to the experience of Queen of Hearts with her family members, "*I keep on telling them that I would change but no one believes me, instead I would hear them say you're stupid. I'm not happy about that and push me to search my enjoyment in casinos.*" When gambling becomes a substitute for meaningful human connection, it reinforces the person's dependence on the activity as a coping mechanism, even as it drives a wedge between them and their loved ones.

The Cycle of Conflict and Enabling

Family members, though often supportive initially, may eventually feel worn down and frustrated by the addict's repeated promises to change, only to see them relapse. This cycle of failed interventions and broken promises can sometimes turn family members into unwilling enablers. Out of a desire to keep peace or help the addict, family members might loan money, cover debts, or even take over certain responsibilities, inadvertently enabling the addiction identical to the experience of King of Hearts stated, "*It was christening of my child, I gambled and lost. My wife has to borrow money to shoulder all the expenses.*" Also, Ace of Hearts' story of repeatedly refusing family help illustrates how the support system can become a crutch that the addict relies on while continuing their gambling habits. However, enabling ultimately does more harm than good by preventing the gambler from fully experiencing the consequences of their actions, which might otherwise motivate them to seek help.

Emotional and Psychological Consequences of Gambling

Gambling addiction brings with it significant emotional distress. Many participants shared feelings of guilt, shame, and low self-worth as their addiction took over their lives. Ace of Diamonds, confided, "*I am ashamed of myself and thought of committing suicide.*" This deep shame is common among people with gambling problems and is often intensified by how society views gambling addiction. Dabrowska and Wieczorek (2020) found that the stigma attached to gambling disorders causes many addicts to feel judged, making them hesitant to seek help. The shame not only makes them feel worse about themselves but can also lead to depression and even thoughts of suicide when they feel trapped and hopeless.

The burden of gambling addiction is not just about losing money — it is about feeling one's life is out of control. Participants shared how difficult it was to talk about their struggles with others, fearing judgement and rejection. Queen of Spades explained "*I conceal my gambling addiction for the fear to be judge by the people around me, and see me as a weak person.*" The need to hide their addiction causes them to feel increasingly isolated, which only makes their struggles harder to bear. When people feel alone in their addiction, they are less likely to seek help, creating a vicious cycle of secrecy and shame that keeps them trapped.

Karlsson et al. (2023), highlighted how common it is for people with gambling problems to have suicidal thoughts, especially as their debts and losses mount. The hopelessness that comes with repeated financial and social losses makes the individual feel as though there is no way out. In this study, several participants revealed similar thoughts. Queen of Spades, for example, admitted that they had considered suicide when their debts became overwhelming. This extreme mental anguish is a serious risk for those with severe gambling addiction.

Isolation and Concealment

For many gambling addicts, the fear of being judged by others can be just as painful as the addiction itself. To avoid criticism, they often conceal their gambling habits, which only deepens their sense of isolation. Hiding the addiction can make it nearly impossible for loved ones to recognize the issue of offer support. Concealment also prevents the addict from seeking professional help, as they may worry that even reaching out could expose their struggle.

Research shows that this concealment worsens the addict's mental health over time. In their study, Dabrowska and Wiecek (2020) found that people with gambling problems who keep their addiction hidden tend to experience higher levels of stress and anxiety. They live in constant fear of being discovered and judged, which can lead to feelings of paranoia and self-hatred. As Queen of Spades shared, *"For them I am weak, seeing me drawn into gambling addiction,"* illustrating how strong this fear of judgement can be. Rather than finding relief, the gambler feels increasingly burdened, caught between the addiction and the need to keep it a secret.

Depression and Suicidal Thoughts

The emotional strain of gambling addiction can often push people into severe depression. A study by Hodgins et al. (2014) revealed that gambling addiction is strongly linked to depressive systems, with many gamblers reporting persistent sense of hopelessness. This is due to both the financial losses and the sense of failure that gambling brings. When individuals see no way to recover from their addiction or escape their debts, they can feel as if they have lost control of their lives entirely. Ace of Diamonds's statement about ending his life is, sadly, not uncommon in the world of gambling addiction. Karlsson et al. (2023) found that people with severe gambling problems often struggle with suicidal thoughts, especially when they feel that their debts, damaged relationships, and broken promises are impossible to repair. The repeated cycle of winning, losing, and borrowing can leave a person feeling powerless, as though they are in a never ending loop of despair.

In the worst cases, suicidal ideation can escalate. In one rare but serious report, a person struggling with gambling disorder attempted suicide after feeling completely overwhelmed by debts and family strain. Karlsson et al. (2023) emphasized that this feeling of "no escape" is a driving force behind suicidal thoughts in those with severe gambling problems. The sense that gambling has taken everything from them—their money, their relationships, and even their self-respect—makes it difficult for them to see any future beyond their addiction.

Challenging in Quitting and Patterns of Relapse

Many people who struggle with gambling addiction truly want to quit, but staying away from gambling is often more difficult than they expected. Participants in this study talked about their strong desire to stop, yet many found it challenging to stick with their decision. Temptations—such as seeing friends gamble or hearing about someone else's big win—could pull them back into gambling. For instance, King of Diamond admitted, *"I tried to stop for a year but when I'm alone the temptation to gamble was there."* These experiences align with findings by Rockloff et al. (2022), who noted that the emotional pull of gambling often makes relapse likely, especially in environments where gambling is easy to access. This can create a feeling of being trapped in a cycle, where the effort to quit repeatedly leads back to the same behavior.

Triggers and Environmental Cues

External triggers play a huge role in the difficulty of quitting gambling. Just seeing familiar gambling venues, hearing about a friend's win, or experiencing stress can spark desire to gamble again. King of Diamond's experience highlights how being around gambling triggers brings up powerful urges. This is supported in the research of Blaszczynski and Nower (2022), where they found out that environmental cues can trigger memories and feelings associated with gambling, making it difficult for those trying to quit. These cues can create a "craving" to gamble that is hard to resist, even after months or years without gambling.

Social environments also make quitting difficult. When friends or family members gamble regularly, it can be hard for someone trying to quit to stay on track. According to research by Hing et al. (2016), social pressure and group dynamics are significant factors in gambling behavior. If an individual is surrounded by others who see gambling as normal or even fun, it is challenging for them to break free from the habit. King of Diamond's struggle to avoid gambling while being around friends who still gamble is a clear example of how these social influences make recovery harder.

Self-Exclusion and Its Limitation

Self-exclusion—banning oneself from gambling venues—is a common method people try to use to quit. In this study, several participants mentioned attempts at self-exclusion. Joker explained, “*I wanted to request for self-banning, but every time I have money I just end up in the casino.*” Self-exclusion can work in some cases, but it has limitations, especially when people lack structured support to reinforce their decision. In the study of Gainsbury et. al (2014) found that self-exclusion is often only partially effective because, without additional support, individuals may find ways to circumvent the ban or switch to other forms of gambling, such as online platforms that are harder to control.

Self-exclusion can also create a false sense of security. Many people think that banning themselves from casinos is enough to prevent relapse, but without addressing the underlying emotional and psychological reasons for their addiction, they may still struggle with the urge to gamble. Queen of Hearts shared her experience in self-banning telling, “*I already applied for self-banning abroad but I failed because of the scratch card, it was a test if your committed to your request.*” Joker’s account also highlights this challenge: simply having access to extra money became a trigger that led them back to gambling, despite their ban. Gainsbury et. al (2014) emphasized that self-exclusion needs to be paired with other support measures, like counselling for it to be truly effective.

Isolation and Lack of Support

Another major challenge in quitting gambling is the feeling of isolation. Participants in this study often described how difficult it was to resist gambling without support from the family or friends. Being alone in their struggle made it easier to relapse, as they had no one to encourage them or hold them accountable. King of Diamond, for example, mentioned that the loneliness they felt after quitting was a factor that drew them back into gambling. This pattern is common among those dealing with addiction; when support systems are weak or absent, the risk of relapse increases.

Support networks are essential for long-term recovery. A study by Dowling et.al (2019) showed that the people who receive regular encouragement and help from loved ones are more likely to succeed in quitting gambling. However, in this study, many participants felt they did not have the support they needed, which made them feel more alone and vulnerable to relapse. Without encouragement and accountability, the journey to quit gambling can feel overwhelming, making it easier to fall back into old habits.

Coping Strategies and Support Systems

To manage their gambling urges, many participants found that alternative activities and family time helped, at least in the short term. Ober of Acorns, for example, said, “*I allotted more time with my family and to recreational activities to distract my interest in gambling.*” Engaging in other activities can provide a temporary break from gambling, allowing individuals to focus on something positive and meaningful. But while these personal efforts were helpful for some. Most participants found they needed stronger support to fully recover.

Research by Suomi et al. (2023) highlights the value of family support in helping people overcome gambling addiction. Family members can encourage, motivate, and hold the person accountable during their recovery. However, many participants felt that family support was not enough. Often, family members became frustrated by repeated relapses or simply did not understand the depth of addiction. Some even gave up trying to help, leaving the individual feeling even more isolated. When family support is not strong or consistent, it is harder for people to stay on track with recovery, especially during stressful moments or times of temptation.

Alternative Activities and Hobbies as Coping Strategies

Many participants mentioned trying to distract themselves with hobbies or spending more time with family to avoid gambling. Taking those hobbies, such as exercising, gardening, or even learning new skills, provided them with healthier ways to spend their time and energy. This approach aligns with research by Hing et.al (2015), which found that engaging in alternative activities can help reduce gambling urges by giving individuals a positive focus and improving their mental well-being.

However, these efforts often provided only temporary relief. For example, Ober of Acorns shared that although spending time with the family helped distract them, the pull to gamble was still strong. Without ongoing support, these distractions alone were not always enough to stop the addiction from creeping back in, especially during times of stress or financial struggle. The study by Hing et.al (2015) confirms that while alternative activities are helpful, they work best when paired with a supportive environment and additional resources like counselling.

The Need for Professional Counselling and Community Support

The participants frequently express the need for professional help to make a lasting change while family support was helpful, many found that they needed guidance from professionals who understood addiction. Ober of Hearts mentioned, *"My family supports me but still I can't stop myself from gambling."* This suggests that personal determination and family support, while valuable, may not be enough to sustain long-term recovery.

Professional counselling offers more structured support, helping individuals explore root causes of their gambling addiction and develop strategies to manage triggers. Research by Gainsbury et al. (2014) supports this view, noting that counselling and behavioral therapies are highly effective in helping people address the emotional and psychological reasons behind their gambling behavior. These therapies can teach individuals coping skills, stress management techniques, and help them rebuild confidence without relying on gambling.

Additionally, community-based intervention programs, such as support groups or workshops can provide a sense of belonging and understanding that many addicts need. In a study by Dowling et al. (2019), participants reported that support groups helped them feel less alone and more motivated, as they could share experiences and learn from others facing similar challenges. These groups offer encouragement and hold people accountable, which can be especially helpful during vulnerable times when they might otherwise relapse.

Furthermore, another barrier for many participants in this study was the limited availability of local support services and rehabilitation programs. For many, gambling addiction support centers were either unavailable or too far away to access regularly. This lack of resources meant that most participants had to rely on willpower alone to fight their addiction, which often proved unsustainable. Joker shared, *"I wanted to ask for help but nothing was available near me, I was left to be on my own."* This isolation from professional support left participants more vulnerable to relapse and discouraged from them fully committing to recovery.

The absence of accessible rehabilitation services in rural or underserved areas is a widespread issue. Gainsbury et al. (2014) found that when addiction services are scarce, people are more likely to relapse because they do not have the consistent, structured support they need. These findings emphasize the importance of making rehabilitation services more available in areas where they are most needed including increased funding for the establishment of rehabilitation centers in rural areas and the integration of mobile or telehealth addiction services. Collaboration with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community leaders can help raise awareness and ensure that services are tailored to the specific needs of underserved populations. Additionally, training local healthcare providers to deliver addiction support can enhance the sustainability and reach of these interventions. Making rehabilitation more accessible can significantly improve recovery rates and reduce the overall impact of addiction on communities.

Synthesis

The thematic data reveals how social influences, early wins, and a sense of control initially draw individuals into gambling. Friends, family, or colleagues often introduce gambling as a social activity, removing initial hesitation. Most of the participants' early wins create a false belief in their control over gambling outcomes, fueling optimism that eventually leads to dependence. Social reinforcement plays a major role, as gambling with others makes it seem acceptable, masking signs of addiction.

Over time, gambling becomes routine, part of social life, and even a source of comfort, especially when life becomes stressful. As addiction deepens, financial problems escalate. Small losses lead to attempts to "win back" money, causing a spiral of debt and often leading individuals to sacrifice basic needs. This financial burden often damages relationships, creating stress and isolation, which can worsen addiction.

In addition, the emotional toll of gambling is severe. Many participants experience guilt, shame, and a sense of isolation, often feeling judged by society and hiding their struggles from loved ones. In extreme cases, some experience depression and suicidal thoughts, feeling trapped by their addiction and the impact on their lives.

Moreover, breaking free from gambling is challenging, especially with triggers in the environment, social pressure, and a lack of support. Attempts at self-exclusion and alternative hobbies provide temporary relief but often fall short without structured support. Counselling and support strategies for long-term change. However, participants report limited access to professional help in rural areas, underscoring the need for more available rehabilitation services.

3. Proposed Measures to Solve the Prevailing Problems in Gambling

To address the ongoing issues related to gambling in Pampanga, the researcher provided proposed projects focusing on improving law enforcement, increasing community awareness, and reducing attraction of illegal gambling or gambling in general.

Table 3
Proposed Measures

Problems	Proposed Measures	Objectives	Strategy	Expected Outcomes
Lack of awareness and education on gambling addiction	Conduct regular awareness campaigns on gambling addiction. Distribute informational materials in public areas such as barangays, schools, and marketplaces. Dissemination of PAGCOR's Responsible Gaming Program	Increase public knowledge about the risks of gambling addiction.	Community education and awareness.	Reduced stigma around seeking help, more informed community regarding the dangers of gambling.
Limited support services for individuals struggling with gambling addiction	Establish support groups and counselling centers for gambling addicts. Provide training for social workers on addiction support.	Ensure accessible support options for individuals seeking help.	Mental health and support services development.	Improved recovery rates and reduced incidence of gambling addiction in the community.
Peer pressure and normalization of gambling within communities.	Create community programs that promote alternative recreational activities. -Organized events or workshops that emphasize healthy habits and discourage gambling.	Reduce the social acceptance of gambling as a common pastime.	Promotion of positive social norms.	Shift in community attitudes towards gambling, leading to lower rates of gambling initiation.
Easy access to gambling online platforms.	Implement stricter regulations on gambling advertisements, especially on social media. Intensify screening regulation on online gambling platforms, prohibiting individuals included in Responsible Gaming not allowed to play, especially minors.	Minimize exposure and access to gambling options, especially for vulnerable groups.	Regulatory control and enforcement.	Reduced influence of gambling advertisements, lower rates of underage and impulsive gambling. .

Financial burden due to gambling-related debt	<p>Offer financial counseling and debt management programs from individuals affected by gambling.</p> <p>Provide education on responsible financial practices to prevent gambling-related issues.</p>	Alleviate financial stress related to gambling debts.	Financial education and support	Decreased financial strain among affected individuals, improved financial stability in communities.
Lack of community-level interventions from prevention and support.	<p>Encourage barangay-level intervention programs to monitor and support at-risk individuals.</p> <p>Engage barangay officials to collaborate with NGO's focused on addiction recovery.</p>	Ensure community involvement in addressing gambling addiction.	Strengthening of community governance and support networks.	Increased community engagement in prevention efforts, support for those at risk.

The table presents a structure approach to addressing the issue of gambling addiction in Pampanga. It identifies specific problems related to gambling addiction and proposes measures designed to combat these issues at both the community and individual.

Lack of awareness and education on gambling addiction. Many people in Pampanga might not fully understand the risks associated with gambling addiction, which can lead to individuals falling into addictive behaviors without recognizing the signs or knowing where to seek help. To address this, regular campaigns and distributing informational materials in public spaces such as barangays, schools, and marketplaces. These materials could include pamphlets, posters, and even community talks that inform people about the signs of addiction and how to seek help. Also, disseminating to the public the PAGCOR's Responsible Gaming program that includes self banning application which is accessible through web that could intervene individuals gambling addiction. By raising awareness, these measures aim to reduce the stigma associated with gambling addiction, encouraging more people to seek help when needed and increasing overall understanding within the community. This can foster a more supportive environment where individuals feel less isolated in their struggles with gambling.

Limited support services for individuals struggling with gambling addiction. Support services for those dealing with gambling addiction may be limited in Pampanga, leaving individuals without resources for help or recovery. Establishing support groups and counseling centers can provide individuals with the resources they need to recover. Training social workers in addiction and support would also ensure that there are professionals who understand the unique challenges of gambling addiction and can offer appropriate support. This approach aims to increase the availability of support, improving recovery rates and helping individuals regain control over their lives. Having accessible support services reduces the sense of isolation among addicts and creates a pathway for them to move towards healthier lifestyle.

Peer pressure and normalization of gambling within communities. Gambling can become normalized when it is deeply embedded in social cultural practices, making it harder for individuals to resist peer pressure or to recognize it is a harmful activity. To counter this normalization, the table recommends community programs that offer alternative recreational activities and events that promote healthy lifestyles. Workshops that focus on the risks of gambling could shift community attitudes by encouraging people to view gambling less favorably and avoid it as a pastime. By promoting positive social norms, these interventions can reduce the peer pressure associated with gambling and help prevent it from becoming normalized. When alternative activities available, people, especially young individuals, are less likely to view gambling as the main source of entertainment.

Easy access to gambling online platforms. The accessibility of gambling online platforms makes it easy for individuals to engage in gambling, increasing the risk of addiction. This problem could be mitigated by enforcing stricter regulations on gambling advertisements, especially on social media, which

often targets younger audiences. As well as the regulation in the fast cash apps the need for intensification in its screening for its players in mini gambling apps is a must. Even with its frequent reminders for prohibited person to play these apps still it could easily access including, government employees, members of the Armed Forces in the Philippines and person included in National Database Restricted Personality (NDRP), this are the person existing banning order and person under 21 years old, which is considered the legal gambling age in the country. Limiting access, especially for vulnerable groups such as young people, can reduce the likelihood of impulsive gambling and lower the rates of addiction. By regulating advertisements and monitoring access, the community can control the exposure that individuals have to gambling opportunities.

Financial burden due to gambling-related debt. Gambling addiction often leads to significant financial difficulties, with many individuals facing debt due to gambling losses. This financial burden can create a vicious cycle, where individuals gamble more in the hope of recovering their losses, leading to even greater debt. In gambling venues financiers were prohibited, lending money to individual with the purpose of gambling is ground for banning. Whilst, the gambling online platform with its collaboration with fast cash transaction apps connected with online banking, easy surmount of losses is expected. Hence, offering financial counseling and debt management programs specifically tailored for those affected by gambling can help individuals manage and reduce their debt. Education on responsible financial practices can prevent further gambling-related financial issues by promoting better money management skills. With access to financial counseling, individuals struggling with debt can find ways to regain financial stability. By reducing financial strain, these programs can help affected individuals break the cycle of gambling and improve their overall quality of life.

Lack of community-level interventions for prevention and support. Without active community-level interventions, many individuals facing gambling addiction may feel unsupported and lack access to resources that could help them. The table suggests that barangay officials play a more active role in monitoring and supporting at-risk individuals, perhaps by collaborating with NGOs that specialize in addiction recovery. This grassroots approach leverages local resources and establishes a support network within the community. When communities are actively involved in prevention and support efforts, they can offer more tailored assistance to individuals in need. This strategy helps at-risk individuals receive help more readily and ensures that the community collectively contributes to reducing gambling addiction.

This study highlights important insights into how gambling addiction affects communities, especially in the province of Pampanga, and provides valuable information that public administrators can use to improve policies and services.

The findings suggest that more effective policies are needed to regulate gambling, especially illegal forms that can harm communities. Public administrators could use this study to push for stricter laws on gambling establishments, enhanced monitoring, and age restrictions on both physical and online gambling. By doing so, they can work toward reducing the accessibility and appeal of gambling in at-risk areas (Bernhard, 2021).

Also, the study shows the importance of community-based support for individuals affected by gambling addiction. Public administrators can collaborate with local leaders, barangay officials, and NGOs to set up support groups and counseling services within communities. This approach can help prevent addiction and provide recovery support close to home, increasing the chances of successful intervention (McDaniel & Zuckerman, 2018). Such community-based support could make public services more accessible and responsive to citizens' needs.

In addition, educating the public about the risks of gambling and promoting awareness are essential steps that public administrators can take. By launching community education programs and workshops in schools, barangays, and public spaces, they can help people, especially young individuals, understand the risks of gambling and resist social pressures to participate. According to a study by Wu and Tak (2020), education and awareness campaigns have been effective in reducing risky behaviors in communities, which suggests a similar approach could work for gambling prevention.

Moreover, gambling addiction often leads to significant financial and emotional stress for individuals and families, affecting overall community well-being. This has implications for public health services, as addiction can lead to mental health issues and family conflicts. Public administrators could use these findings to advocate for increased funding for mental health services and support programs

specifically tailored for those affected by gambling addiction (Sullivan et al., 2019). This would ensure that public health systems are better equipped to handle the broader impacts of gambling addiction.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study the following conclusion was drawn.

1. **Social Influence on Gambling:** Many people start gambling because of social influences, like friends or family. This shows that a supportive environment can either help avoid gambling, or unhealthy, can lead people into gambling without understanding the risks.
2. **The Power of Early Wins:** Winning early in their gambling experience made many participants feel confident about gambling, leading them to believe they could win again. This confidence encouraged them to gamble more, creating a false sense of control and making it harder to stop later.
3. **Financial and Emotional Costs:** Gambling addiction creates serious financial problems and emotional pain. Many participants lost money meant for basic needs, and their relationships with family suffered. This addiction did not only impact them financially; it also caused stress, guilt, and sadness.
4. **Isolation and Secrecy:** Addicted individuals often hid their gambling due to shame, which only made them feel more alone. This isolation kept them from getting help and worsened their feelings of guilt and anxiety, creating harmful cycle that was difficult to break.
5. **Difficulty of Quitting and Risk of Relapse:** This study shows that quitting gambling is challenging. Even with strong intentions to stop, environmental triggers and social influences make it easy to fall back into gambling, especially when facing stress or reminders of past wins.
6. **Limited Help from Self-Exclusion:** Many participants tried self-exclusion by banning themselves from gambling places, but this alone was not enough to stop them. Without structure support, it was difficult for them to avoid gambling in the long term.
7. **Need for Personal Commitment and External Support:** This study concludes that recovering from gambling addiction needs both personal resolve and social or family support. People trying to stop gambling benefit from a strong support network and alternative ways to handle stress, which can make their path to recovery easier.

Recommendations

The following recommendations and suggestions are offered in the light of the study's findings and conclusions:

1. LGU Pampanga may initiate public awareness campaigns to educate residents on the risks of gambling and the impact of social influence. Providing information in community centers, schools, and workplaces would help people understand gambling's potential dangers, especially for those introduced to it by friends or family.
2. LGU Pampanga may develop community programs that highlight the risks associated with early wins in gambling. Workshops can teach individuals that gambling is based on luck rather than skill, reducing the false confidence that fuels addiction.
3. LGU Pampanga may consider partnering with local financial institutions to provide counseling sessions for individuals affected by gambling. These services can educate residents on managing finances and avoiding debt, especially for those who have already encountered financial difficulties due to gambling.
4. LGU Pampanga may organize workshops to guide families on how to support loved ones struggling with gambling addiction. By fostering open and non-judgmental communication, families can play a supportive role, encouraging addicts to seek help without fear of shame or secrecy.
5. LGU Pampanga may partner with mental health organizations to create accessible recovery programs. These programs should offer counselling, support groups, and tools for managing triggers and preventing relapse. Such initiatives will help those seeking to quit gambling find the long-term support they need.
6. LGU Pampanga may collaborate with local gambling establishments to enhance self-exclusion programs and offer follow-up support. By incorporating counseling sessions and follow-up activities, they can help ensure these programs are more effective for residents attempting to quit.
7. LGU Pampanga may increase community offerings for sports, arts, and hobby clubs to provide residents with healthier entertainment and social options. Creating accessible and engaging

alternatives to gambling will encourage people to build social connections and manage stress in positive ways.

8. LGU Pampanga may establish easily accessible mental health services that focus on addressing the psychological effects of gambling addiction, such as depression and shame. Community-based counseling and peer support groups can help individuals cope with these challenges and reduce their likelihood of relapse.
9. LGU Pampanga may encourage community members, especially families and friends of gambling addicts, to create a strong support network. LGU Pampanga may also organize support group meetings to foster a sense of community and resilience among those affected by gambling.
10. LGU Pampanga may consider local policies that limit access to gambling venues or control the advertising of gambling, particularly in vulnerable areas. Regulations can help reduce exposure to gambling for at-risk populations and create a safer environment for Pampanga residents.

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