

Inside the Gambler's Mind: Experiences of Punters in Harare CBD

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ABSTRACT

In Zimbabwe's cities, gambling has become more prevalent, especially in the Harare Central Business District (CBD), where gambling is ingrained in daily social and commercial life. With an emphasis on their reasons for gambling as well as the coping and self-regulation techniques they use to deal with losses and emotional discomfort, this study aimed to investigate the lived psychological experiences of gamblers in Harare's central business district. In-depth interviews were used to gather information from a purposively chosen sample of fifteen punters using a qualitative research methodology. The results showed that in addition to psychological elements like hope, psychological thrill, emotional escape, and social belonging, economic hardship, unemployment, and the need for immediate financial relief were the main drivers of gambling participation. It was widely believed that gambling may lead to better living conditions as well as serve as a survival tactic. Significant emotional difficulties related to gambling, such as stress, anxiety, guilt, and irritation after losses, were also mentioned by the individuals. Punters used a variety of self-regulation techniques to deal with these emotional feelings. Limit-setting, short-term abstinence, cognitive reframing, social support, and spiritual activities were examples of coping mechanisms. On the other hand, it was also clear that maladaptive tactics like pursuing losses, and emotional avoidance were used, which frequently increased emotional pain and encouraged ongoing gambling. The study comes to the conclusion that gambling among players in Harare's central business district is a complicated phenomenon influenced by socioeconomic realities and psychological demands. In order to reduce gambling-related harm and encourage healthier coping mechanisms among urban gamblers, legislation, responsible gambling programs, and contextually relevant interventions must take these lived experiences into account.

Keywords: Gambling, Punters, Psychological Experiences, Coping Strategies

INTRODUCTION

Gambling has evolved from being a little hobby to a major worldwide phenomenon with significant psychological, social, and economic ramifications. Millions of people participate in gambling activities ranging from frequent, high-risk behavior to casual betting as digital technology and mobile platforms provide access to betting opportunities. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), up to 11.9% of men and 5.5% of women globally are affected to some extent by gambling, which currently contributes to a variety of consequences, including mental illness, suicide, financial hardship, and relationship breakdowns (WHO, 2024).

Gambling has become an increasingly visible feature of contemporary urban life across both high-income and low- and middle-income countries. Advances in digital technologies, expansion of sports betting markets, and liberalisation of gambling legislation have transformed gambling from a largely venue-based activity into an accessible, everyday behavioural practice (Griffiths, 2024). While gambling may function as entertainment or recreation for many individuals, a growing body of psychological research indicates that it can also evolve into a maladaptive behavioural pattern associated with emotional dysregulation, cognitive distortions, financial distress, and impaired psychosocial functioning (Zoraloglu et al., 2025). Understanding gambling, therefore,

requires an exploration not only of prevalence rates or economic impact, but of the subjective psychological experiences that shape and sustain engagement in gambling activities.

The present study seeks to explore the cognitive, affective, and motivational dimensions of gambling behaviour among individuals operating within the Central Business District (CBD) of Harare, Zimbabwe. Urban centres such as Harare CBD represent unique socio-economic environments characterised by high population density, informal economic activities, unemployment pressures, and increasing digital connectivity. These structural conditions intersect with psychological processes to influence how individuals perceive risk, opportunity, loss, and hope within gambling contexts (Hassim & Chiweshe, 2024). Despite the rapid expansion of betting outlets and mobile gambling platforms in Zimbabwe, scholarly attention to the lived psychological experiences of gamblers within this specific urban milieu remains limited.

Globally, gambling has been conceptualised within behavioural addiction frameworks, which highlight similarities between gambling disorder and substance use disorders, particularly in relation to reinforcement mechanisms, craving, tolerance, and impaired control (Griffiths, 2024). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR) recognises gambling disorder as a behavioural addiction, reflecting evidence that gambling activates neural reward systems in ways comparable to psychoactive substances. However, neurobiological explanations alone are insufficient. Cognitive distortions—such as illusions of control, gambler’s fallacy, and misinterpretation of near-miss events—play a critical role in sustaining gambling behaviours even in the face of repeated losses (Clark, 2010; Palmer et al., 2024). Consequently, psychological experiences of gambling are best understood as dynamic interactions between cognition, emotion, environment, and socio-economic context.

This article situates gambling psychology within the lived realities of Harare CBD, integrating global theoretical models with regional and Zimbabwean empirical evidence. By doing so, it contributes to a contextually grounded understanding of how gamblers interpret their experiences, regulate emotions, construct meaning around wins and losses, and navigate psychological consequences within a challenging economic environment.

Cognitive theories of gambling emphasise systematic errors in thinking that bias decision-making processes. Research demonstrates that gamblers often overestimate their probability of winning, perceive patterns in random sequences, and attribute losses to external factors while crediting wins to personal skill (Clark, 2010). These distortions are reinforced by structural characteristics of gambling games, including intermittent reinforcement schedules and the near-miss effect, which stimulate reward pathways and encourage continued play (Palmer et al., 2024).

The Iowa Gambling Task has frequently been employed to illustrate impaired decision-making under uncertainty among individuals with gambling problems, demonstrating preference for short-term rewards despite long-term negative outcomes (Bechara et al., 1994). Such findings underscore the role of executive functioning and risk evaluation deficits in gambling behaviour. Within economically strained environments such as Zimbabwe, where immediate financial relief may be highly valued, preference for short-term reward over long-term stability may be further intensified by contextual pressures.

Beyond cognition, emotional states significantly shape gambling engagement. The affect infusion model posits that mood influences cognitive processing and risk appraisal (Forgas, 1995). Empirical studies show that individuals experiencing negative affect, including stress, anxiety, or depressive symptoms, may engage in gambling as a coping mechanism (Zoraloğlu et al., 2025). Enhancement motives—gambling for excitement or euphoria—also predict higher risk of problem gambling.

International evidence indicates that gambling severity is positively associated with psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, and dissociation (Zoraloğlu et al., 2025). These findings align with self-medication hypotheses, suggesting that gambling may function as a maladaptive emotional regulation strategy. In contexts of economic uncertainty, such as Zimbabwe’s fluctuating currency environment and high unemployment rates, gambling may also symbolise hope or perceived opportunity, thereby embedding emotional meaning within betting practices (Hassim & Chiweshe, 2024).

Recent global prevalence studies estimate that approximately 0.1%–5.8% of adults experience problem gambling, depending on measurement tools and jurisdictions (Calado & Griffiths, 2016). Youth and young adults demonstrate higher vulnerability, particularly in regions experiencing rapid expansion of online sports betting. The World Health Organization has increasingly recognised gambling-related harm as a public health concern, emphasising the need for prevention strategies and mental health interventions.

In Europe and North America, regulatory frameworks have evolved to address advertising exposure, online accessibility, and responsible gambling practices. However, research indicates that structural changes alone are insufficient without understanding gamblers' subjective experiences and motivations (Griffiths, 2024). The psychological impact of gambling extends beyond financial loss to include shame, guilt, strained relationships, and diminished self-esteem (Langham et al., 2016).

The expansion of gambling markets across sub-Saharan Africa has been fuelled by mobile technology penetration, sports popularity, and youth unemployment (Bitanhirwe & Ssewanyana, 2021). Systematic reviews reveal rising participation rates among adolescents and young adults, yet highlight methodological gaps and limited psychological inquiry in African contexts. Most existing research focuses on prevalence rather than lived experience.

Studies in Uganda have linked adolescent gambling with substance use, peer influence, and depressive symptoms (Ssewanyana et al., 2021). In Ghana, moderate to severe gambling has been strongly associated with psychological distress among youth (Adjei et al., 2024). Kenyan university students demonstrate high rates of problematic gambling correlated with financial strain and social pressure (Mbiriri, 2023). These regional patterns suggest that gambling behaviours are embedded within socio-economic vulnerability and psychosocial stressors.

Importantly, African cultural contexts may shape unique meanings attached to gambling. Unlike Western settings where gambling is often framed primarily as entertainment, in many African urban centres it is intertwined with aspirations for economic mobility and survival strategies. Therefore, psychological experiences cannot be divorced from structural inequalities and economic precarity.

Zimbabwe has experienced prolonged economic instability characterised by hyperinflation episodes, currency fluctuations, unemployment, and expansion of informal economies. Within this context, sports betting shops and mobile betting platforms have proliferated, particularly in urban centres such as Harare (Hassim & Chiweshe, 2024). Betting outlets are highly visible in Harare CBD, often located near transport hubs and commercial centres, making gambling easily accessible.

Research on Zimbabwean youth gambling identifies both risk and protective factors. Nguruve et al. (2026) found that peer influence, accessibility, and positive attitudes toward gambling predicted engagement, while parental monitoring and awareness served as protective factors. Qualitative studies reveal that some young adults perceive betting as a viable income supplement despite recognising risks of financial loss (Moyo & Zinyemba, 2025).

Policy debates in Zimbabwe have recently intensified, particularly regarding taxation of betting winnings and regulatory reforms (Gavaza et al., 2025). However, these debates largely emphasise economic considerations rather than psychological wellbeing. Empirical research exploring gamblers' internal experiences—how they interpret losses, manage stress, or conceptualise risk—remains scarce. The absence of such scholarship limits evidence-based mental health interventions tailored to Zimbabwean realities.

Harare CBD represents a microcosm of Zimbabwe's broader socio-economic landscape. Characterised by informal vendors, commuter flows, financial institutions, and digital advertising, the CBD creates a high-stimulation environment where gambling advertisements and betting shops are integrated into daily routines. Urban stressors, including job insecurity and economic competition, may heighten vulnerability to risk-taking behaviours.

Psychologically, gamblers in this setting may experience:

1. Hope and Anticipation – Viewing betting as a potential pathway to financial breakthrough.
2. Cognitive Dissonance – Reconciling repeated losses with persistent belief in eventual success.

3. Emotional Volatility – Oscillating between excitement and despair.
4. Social Identity Construction – Forming peer networks around betting culture.
5. Stigma and Secrecy – Concealing gambling losses due to shame.

These experiences align with international findings regarding emotional regulation and cognitive distortions but may manifest uniquely within Zimbabwe's socio-economic environment.

Although gambling research in Africa is expanding, it remains disproportionately quantitative and prevalence-focused (Bitanihirwe & Ssewanyana, 2021). Few studies explore subjective psychological narratives of gamblers in Zimbabwe, particularly within specific urban spaces such as Harare CBD. Moreover, global theoretical models are rarely tested or adapted within Southern African contexts. The appeal of gambling is founded in cognitive and emotional processes, according to psychological study. According to Battersby and Tolchard (2024), persistent gambling behavior is primarily driven by psychological mechanisms such as risk-reward appraisals, chasing losses, and experiencing intermittent reinforcement through winnings. Compared to the general population, people with serious gambling issues frequently have higher rates of clinical depression, anxiety, and substance abuse; important co-morbidities influence the development and maintenance of problematic gambling behavior. Furthermore, long-term research in wealthy nations demonstrates that problem gambling is linked to a higher risk of suicidal thoughts and worse mental health, particularly in young adults whose psychosocial development interacts with financial strains and digital immersion (GambleAware, 2023).

Sub-Saharan Africa's gambling habits are unique on a regional scale due to the continent's fast urbanization, high youth unemployment, and the growth of mobile sports betting sites. In situations when formal employment is hard to come by and financial instability is widespread, research conducted in African urban centers shows that young adults often bet on sports as a kind of recreation as well as an aspirational plan for economic advancement. For instance, a phenomenological study conducted in Masvingo, Zimbabwe, discovered that youth bettors characterized their participation in sports betting as a reaction to socioeconomic uncertainties, frequently facing financial hardships, being susceptible to internet frauds, and exhibiting behaviors indicative of pathological gambling.

Similar to this, ethnographic research on urban male teenagers in Zimbabwe reveals that soccer betting is incorporated into digital skill use and informal economic activities, illustrating how larger structural factors influence gambling behavior and psychological engagement with risk and reward. The Central Business District (CBD) of Harare is a microcosm of regional and worldwide gambling trends, with betting shops, online platforms, and informal gaming activities becoming increasingly prominent. Mobile games and sports betting have become ubiquitous in everyday life, particularly among economically active adults and young people looking for alternatives to conventional work. Betting is no longer limited to traditional casinos.

Despite this extensive participation, there is still a significant lack of rigorous academic study examining the psychological effects of gambling on individuals in Zimbabwe. Few comprehensive studies have examined how cognitive processes, emotional reactions to gambling outcomes, and sociocultural circumstances affect the internal experiences of gamblers in urban African settings. The majority of the work currently in publication concentrates on economic factors or motivations.

For a number of reasons, it is essential to comprehend the subjective psychological experiences of patrons in the Harare CBD. First, it advances a more sophisticated understanding of how internal cognitive, affective, and behavioral tendencies within a local socioeconomic environment are influenced by global and regional gaming dynamics. Second, it provides important information about how gaming behavior and mental health interact in an area that frequently lacks access to public health and specialized psychological care.

Third, it can help develop interventions, legislative frameworks, and support systems that are culturally appropriate and specifically designed to address the particular difficulties experienced by Zimbabwean gamblers. This study aims to shed light on the intricacy of gambling as a social practice and an internal psychological phenomenon in Harare's urban setting by placing individual experiences within larger global and regional patterns.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to explore and understand the psychological experiences of gamblers (punters) operating within Harare Central Business District. The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Explore the lived psychological experiences of punters in Harare CBD, with particular attention to their emotional states before, during, and after gambling activities.
2. Understand the motivations underlying gambling participation
3. Identify coping strategies and self-regulation practices employed by punters to manage losses and emotional distress

Research Approach

In order to gain a thorough understanding of the psychological experiences of gamblers (punters) operating within the Harare Central Business District, this study used a qualitative research approach. This approach was deemed most appropriate because the study sought to explore subjective meanings, personal interpretations, emotional responses, and cognitive processes associated with gambling phenomena that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement alone. By giving participants' lived experiences and narratives priority, the study aimed to uncover the complexity and nuance of gambling behaviour within its actual socioeconomic and cultural context.

The interpretivist paradigm, which holds that reality is socially created and that people give their experiences meaning depending on social, environmental, and personal factors (Creswell & Poth, 2018), served as the foundation for the study. According to this paradigm, the study concentrated on comprehending how gamblers interpret wins and losses, perceive risk and control, and interact emotionally with gambling activities (Patton, 2015). Instead of imposing predefined categories or theoretical presumptions, the interpretivist approach allowed the researcher to interact closely with participants' perspectives.

Reflexivity was also made easier by the qualitative technique (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006), which kept the researcher conscious of their own positionality and possible impact on the study process. Overall, a thorough, contextually grounded investigation of gambling psychology within Harare CBD was made possible by the qualitative study methodology. The study sought to provide nuanced insights into gambling behavior that can guide culturally relevant mental health interventions, public education tactics, and policy responses in Zimbabwe by elevating the voices of bettors and placing their experiences within larger social and economic realities.

Research Design

In order to investigate the psychological experiences of gamblers (punters) in the Harare Central Business District (CBD), this study used a qualitative exploratory research design. Given the paucity of empirical research on gambling psychology in the urban setting of Zimbabwe (Sebata et al., 2025), an exploratory approach was appropriate, and the study's goal was to produce rich, in-depth insights into gamblers' actual experiences rather than to test predetermined hypotheses. The researcher was able to capture the intricacy and subjectivity of gambling-related psychological events thanks to the design's flexibility and adaptability to new themes. The study focused on the experiences of participants at a particular moment in time and was organized as a cross-sectional qualitative investigation.

The investigation of present emotional states, cognitive interpretations, and behavioral patterns related to gambling in Harare CBD was made easier by this design. The cross-sectional approach offered a useful and contextually relevant view of gamblers' psychological experiences within the current socioeconomic conditions, while noting that gambling behavior can change over time. The study was guided by a phenomenological research approach that highlighted the participants' personal perceptions and meanings of their gambling experiences. This design placed a high priority on comprehending how gamblers view and interpret gambling, including their feelings about wins and losses, opinions about control and luck, and introspective thoughts about taking risks. The phenomenological design's emphasis on lived experience (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015) allowed for the recognition of shared psychological themes among participants while acknowledging individual diversity.

Research Population

Adult gamblers (punters) who actively participate in gambling activities inside the Harare Central Business District (CBD) made up the research population for this study. This group comprises people who regularly or infrequently engage in the different types of gambling that are offered in the CBD, including lottery games, sports betting, and other legally or unofficially organized betting activities. The great number of gambling establishments, accessibility, and varied demographic of gamblers from various socioeconomic backgrounds all contributed to the focus on Harare's central business district. According to Zimbabwe's legal gambling age, the target demographic included both male and female gamblers who were at least eighteen years old.

To ensure that they could give detailed and pertinent reports of their psychological and emotional experiences, participants had to have direct, recent experience with gambling in Harare's central business district. Instead of counting the number of gamblers in the CBD, the project aimed to involve people whose personal experiences would shed light on the psychological mechanisms that underlie gambling behaviour. The research population was determined by information richness and experiential relevance rather than representativeness or statistical generalizability due to the qualitative and phenomenological nature of the study.

Understanding the meanings, feelings, and cognitive interpretations of gambling from the viewpoints of people involved in the activity was emphasized. As a result, the population was conceptualized as a social group that acknowledged variability in gambling frequency, motivations, and individual situations while sharing a shared experience of gambling in Harare CBD. Because this demographic offered first-hand accounts of the psychological aspects of gambling in an urban Zimbabwean setting, it was deemed suitable for addressing the study's aims. Instead of making broad generalizations, insights from this population are meant to provide depth and contextual understanding, which will advance our understanding of gambling psychology and guide context-specific mental health and policy treatments.

Sample and Sampling Procedure

Adult gamblers who actively participate in gambling activities inside Harare's central business district made up the study sample. The concept of data saturation, which states that participant recruitment should continue until no new themes or insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006) emerged from the data, led the sample size, which was not predetermined statistically in accordance with qualitative research standards. After interviewing fifteen people, saturation was attained, which is thought to be sufficient for in-depth phenomenological investigation. Purposive sampling was used to find participants who had relevant and firsthand gambling experience in the central business district of Harare. This method guaranteed the selection of instances with a wealth of information that might offer in-depth descriptions of gambling-related psychological experiences (Gainsbury, 2015).

Individuals who were at least eighteen years old, had recently participated in gambling activities in the CBD, and were willing to willingly discuss their experiences were eligible to participate. Maximum variation sampling was included into the purposive framework to improve diversity of viewpoints. Participants were chosen to represent a range of age, gender, gambling activity kinds (e.g., lotteries, sports betting), and frequency of gambling (occasional versus habitual gamblers). This tactic preserved the study's depth of analysis while capturing a wide variety of psychological experiences.

Participant recruitment took place in a few gaming businesses and the districts surrounding the Harare CBD. With permission from the relevant authorities when necessary, potential participants were contacted and educated about the study's objectives, procedures, and ethical considerations. For people who met the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate, in-depth interviews were scheduled at times and places that worked for both parties. Iterative sampling was used, and continuing introspection throughout data collection influenced subsequent participant selection.

By ensuring alignment between participant characteristics and emerging findings, this adaptable strategy enhanced the study's credibility and reliability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In general, the sample technique was created to strike a compromise between ethical sensitivity, diversity, and depth, allowing for a thorough investigation of the psychological experiences of Harare CBD punters.

Data Collection Procedure

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to gather data for this study, enabling a thorough investigation of the psychological experiences of gamblers (punters) in the Harare Central Business District (CBD). This approach was chosen to enable complex, in-depth stories while giving participants enough freedom to articulate their feelings, ideas, and perspectives on gambling in their own words (Guest et al., 2006). Key thematic areas of the study, such as reasons for gambling, emotional experiences, cognitive beliefs, and reactions to winnings and losses, were consistently examined across individuals using the semi-structured methodology.

An interview guide was created prior to data collection based on the goals of the study and pertinent gambling psychology literature. Instead of short or predetermined answers, the handbook featured open-ended questions and prompts meant to promote introspection and storytelling. One participant participated in a pilot interview to evaluate the questions' relevancy and clarity, and small changes were made to enhance comprehension and flow. Participants were chosen from a variety of gambling venues and surrounding public spaces within Harare CBD.

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To guarantee proper recording of responses, interviews were audio recorded with participants' consent. In order to record nonverbal clues, emotional expressions, and contextual observations that enhanced data interpretation, field notes were also gathered both during and right after interviews. Preliminary analysis was done concurrently with on-going interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018) as part of an iterative data collection procedure. By using this method, the researcher was able to improve interview questions, delve deeper into emergent topics, and ascertain when data saturation had been attained.

When no new psychological themes or insights surfaced from successive participants, the interviews were terminated. All gathered information was safely kept, and audio recordings were verbatim transcribed for examination. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant identities, and only the research team had access to the data. The reliability, profundity, and validity of the qualitative findings were guaranteed by this methodical and morally sound data collection process.

RESULTS

Demographic Data

Table 1: Demographic information of participants

Participant No.	Age	Gender	Employment Status
P1	36	F	Self Employed
P2	40	M	Self Employed
P3	27	M	Employed
P4	26	F	Self Employed
P5	35	M	Self Employed
P6	40	M	Unemployed
P7	32	M	Self Employed
P8	37	F	Unemployed

P9	23	M	Unemployed
P10	38	M	Unemployed
P11	38	M	Self employed
P12	28	M	Self employed
P13	37	M	Unemployed
P14	25	M	Unemployed
P15	36	M	Unemployed
P16	23	M	Employed
P17	31	F	Employed
P18	43	M	Unemployed
P19	52	F	Self employed
P20	28	M	Self employed

The participants' demographics show that the sample is primarily made up of economically active persons in the prime working age range. The bulk of participants were in their late 20s or late 30s, with ages ranging from 23 to 40. This age distribution indicates that people who are at a crucial life stage linked to financial responsibility, job pressure, and future-focused goals are the most likely to gamble in the Harare CBD. These pressures could make people more susceptible to using gambling as a coping or perceived source of income.

With 15 male participants and 5 female individuals, the sample was predominantly male. This disparity suggests that men predominate when it comes to gambling in the Harare CBD. Men are more visible and socially acceptable to gamble than women, which may be a reflection of broader societal norms and gendered patterns of risk-taking, public space usage, and economic activity.

Significant economic precarity among participants is revealed by the statistics with regard to work status. Only three people had a regular job, and a significant number were either unemployed or self-employed. Nearly half of the participants were unemployed, and self-employment, which frequently entails irregular or erratic income streams, was prevalent. This occupational profile highlights the connection between gambling and financial instability, implying that many gamblers may use gambling as a means of subsistence, a way to augment their income, or a reaction to the dearth of formal employment options in metropolitan settings.

The lived psychological experiences of punters in Harare CBD

Participants in the study reflected on their emotional experiences. They reported that when they bet they will be filled with excitement and hope. Participant 3 (P3) reported a sense of hope and excitement, feeling that his financial challenges might come to an end:

“When I place a bet, I feel a rush of excitement and hope. For that moment, it feels like my financial problems might finally end.”

P7 also agreed with the above adding that even when he loses, he still hopes to win in the next bet.

“Losing makes me feel angry and disappointed in myself, but I still believe the next bet will be different.”

P8 also reported that the moment he wins a bet, he will be filled with happiness, although the happiness does not last long:

“Winning gives me confidence and happiness, but it doesn’t long. Soon I feel the urge to bet again.”

Participants also reported that betting help the cope with life challenges, although it also makes them have feelings of stress, anxiety. P2 reported that:

“Betting helps me forget my worries, especially unemployment and pressure at home. Sometimes I feel anxious waiting for the results, checking my phone again and again.”

P9 however reported that he gets both stressed and guilty especially after losing money meant for important family needs.

“When I lose money, I feel stressed and guilty, especially if it was meant for transport or food.”

Participants also reported that betting give them the hope of escaping from their poverty, as well as creating illusions when they lose, that they will be close to big win.

“I see betting as my only chance to escape poverty because there are no jobs. Even when I lose, I tell myself I am learning and getting closer to a big win. I believe luck will eventually favour me if I stay patient.” (P11)

Participants reported that betting makes the punters think that they are in control, especially when they win, or when they feel they are using strategies and tactics; *“At first, I felt in control because I used strategies and statistics.”* (P13)

However, participants reported feeling a sense of loss of control when their actions are controlled by the need to bet, even though they had told themselves that they would stop betting.

“Over time, I realized I was betting even when I promised myself I would stop. Sometimes I feel like betting controls me, not the other way around.”

Participants reported that betting helps create their self-identity and self-perception. Winning bets make the punters feel smart, while losing make them feel weak and ashamed.

“Betting makes me feel smart when my predictions are correct. When I lose repeatedly, I feel ashamed and weak. I do not see myself as a gambler, just someone trying to survive.” (P14)

Participants in the study also reported that betting life is always punctuated by regrets. Punters regret when they lose money, especially when they remember that their families are not aware of the money that they spend on betting. They also regret that they should have bet more when they win. P4 reported that;

“I worry about what betting is doing to my future. I regret some of the money I lost, but I also regret not betting more when I once won. I hope one day I will stop betting and find another way to make money.”

The motivations underlying gambling participation

Participants in the study reported that the main motivation behind their participation in betting is mainly financial. The main motivation is the desire to get a fortune within a short space of time. P1 reported that;

“I gamble because I want to make money quickly. With no steady job, betting feels like the only option. Gambling is a way to supplement my income, especially when prices keep going up.”

P12 added that after losing in previous bets, punters would have to bet again with a motive to recover the money they lost in the previous bet; *“Sometimes I gamble to recover money I have already lost in previous bets.”*

Participants also reported that betting gives them a hope for a better future.

“Every time I place a bet; I imagine my life changing overnight. Gambling gives me hope that one win can solve many problems. It feels like an opportunity that I cannot afford to miss.”

The study also found that betting gives the punters excitement, thrill, and emotional stimulation, especially when after placing a bet:

"I enjoy the excitement of waiting for results; it makes me feel alive. Betting breaks the boredom of staying in town all day. The adrenaline rush keeps me coming back, even when I lose." (P8)

Participants also reported that they engage in betting as a way coping with stress and other life challenges. In other words, participants noted that betting shifts the focus of the punters from the challenging issues. P10 reported that;

"Gambling helps me escape stress and personal problems. When I feel depressed or frustrated, betting distracts me. It gives me something to focus on instead of worrying about life."

The study also found that people engage in betting as a result of social influence and peer pressure. Participants reported that they participate in betting simply because their friends will be doing it. P7 reported that;

"My friends introduced me to gambling, and now it is something we do together. Talking about odds and matches helps me feel included. If everyone around you is betting, you feel left out if you don't."

Coping strategies and self-regulation practices employed by punters to manage losses and emotional distress

Participants reported that they use several coping strategies to deal with betting losses and emotional distress. The study found that punters use cognitive coping and rationalization. P6 reported that he just tells himself that losses are normal and assures himself that he will make it in the next bet:

"When I lose, I tell myself that losses are part of the game. I convince myself that next time I will use better analysis and avoid emotional betting. I tell myself not to think too much about the money and focus on the experience."

The study also found that punters use emotional suppression and avoidance when they lose a bet. They just avoid thinking about a loss, or keep themselves busy by doing something different in order to avoid thinking about their losses:

"I try to hide my feelings and act like the loss doesn't affect me. Sometimes I avoid thinking about it by staying busy or spending time in town. I distract myself with football highlights or social media." (P10)

The study also found that punters exercise behavioural self-control attempts when they lose on a bet. They do so by setting a limit on how much they bet, stop betting for some days after losing and gambling with small amounts so that they do not feel much pain after losing.

"I set a limit on how much I can bet in a day. After a big loss, I stop betting for a few days to calm myself. I only gamble with small amounts so that I don't feel the pain too much." (P7)

When they lose a bet, the study found that punters adopt social coping and get peer support. Talking to friends about losses and sharing jokes make them cope with betting losses. Punters feel comfortable when they know that it is not only themselves who would have left.

"I talk to my friends about my losses, and they help me feel better. Sharing jokes about losing makes it easier to cope. Being around other punters reminds me that I'm not alone." (P13)

The study also found that punters sometimes worsen their emotional state by chasing losses as a maladaptive coping strategy. This is a case of pathological betting with adverse psychological consequences if not abetted early. P14 reported that:

"When I lose, I place another bet hoping to recover the money. I feel like stopping after a loss will make it worse, so I keep betting. Winning after a loss makes me feel relieved and calm again."

Participants reported that the cope through emotional regulation through hope and optimism after losing a bet. They promise themselves that they will win on the next bet and believe they will be lucky:

“I tell myself that a big win is coming soon. Hope keeps me going even after many losses. Believing in luck helps me manage disappointment.” (P11)

The study also found that punters exercise withdrawal and temporary abstinence after losing on a bet. They avoid betting shops, uninstall betting apps and take breaks to regain their emotional balance:

“Sometimes I completely avoid betting shops for a while. I uninstall betting apps when I feel out of control. Taking a break helps me regain emotional balance.”

The study found that punters also engage in spiritual and moral coping after losing a bet. They pray, seek God’s forgiveness and engage in church activities as a way of healing themselves following a loss.

“I pray for strength when I feel overwhelmed by losses. I ask God to forgive me and guide my decisions. Church activities help me reflect and calm my mind.”

Limitations and Challenges of Policy Implementation

The implementation of gambling interventions in Harare’s Central Business District (CBD) is complicated by cultural and social perceptions of gambling. Research shows that gambling in Zimbabwe is not merely viewed as a vice but is often embedded in leisure and economic activity, reflecting both traditional practices and modern influences (Rolling the Dice, 2024). Punters may therefore resist policies that stigmatize gambling, interpreting them as infringements on personal freedoms or community traditions. This cultural entrenchment makes regulatory measures difficult to enforce and socially contested.

Economic pressures further exacerbate these challenges. Zimbabwe’s fragile economy, marked by high unemployment and widespread poverty, has driven many individuals to gambling as a perceived coping mechanism or income-generating strategy. Studies highlight that betting establishments in Harare have become “temples of hope” for youth crushed under economic collapse (Observer Zim News, 2025). Restrictive policies, while designed to reduce harm, risk intensifying desperation and pushing gambling into unregulated or underground spaces. This dynamic underscores the need for interventions that balance harm reduction with recognition of gambling’s role in survival strategies.

Psychological factors also present formidable barriers. Punters often exhibit cognitive distortions such as illusions of control and the gambler’s fallacy, which reinforce persistent engagement despite repeated losses. Research in Harare confirms that gambling addiction creeps silently through communities, sustained by distorted beliefs and dopamine-driven reward cycles (State of the Nation Zimbabwe, 2025). Awareness campaigns alone may therefore prove insufficient, as gamblers rationalize their behavior and remain resistant to change. Effective interventions must address these deep-seated psychological reinforcements.

Institutional and regulatory weaknesses compound the problem. Zimbabwe’s gambling sector suffers from outdated systems, staff shortages, and regulatory blind spots, leaving illegal gambling operations free to thrive (NewsDay Zimbabwe, 2025). While government crackdowns have been attempted, enforcement remains inconsistent, undermined by limited political will and corruption (Zimbabwe Government Crackdown, 2026). Without robust institutional frameworks, policies risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative.

Accessibility of support services is another critical limitation. Across Africa, the lack of mental health awareness and facilities has been identified as a major contributor to rising gambling addiction (Ibirogba, 2024). In Zimbabwe, specialized services for gambling addiction are scarce, and stigma surrounding mental health discourages punters from seeking help. Even when policies mandate counseling or rehabilitation, affordability and availability remain significant barriers, limiting the reach of interventions.

Resistance from stakeholders further undermines policy effectiveness. Gambling operators, who profit from punters’ losses, often lobby against restrictive measures, while punters themselves may perceive interventions as intrusive or unnecessary. A recent study in Harare highlights how gamblers actively contest taxation and regulatory measures, viewing them as unfair burdens (Gavaza et al., 2025). Without stakeholder buy-in, interventions risk being undermined both institutionally and socially.

Finally, limitations in policy design hinder effective implementation. Many interventions adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, failing to account for the diversity of gamblers' experiences, from casual participants to compulsive punters. Policies often emphasize regulation rather than addressing root causes such as poverty, unemployment, and social exclusion. Scholars note that the lack of localized research data in Zimbabwe means interventions are often modeled on imported frameworks that do not adequately reflect Harare's unique socio-economic and cultural context (Nguruve et al., 2025). This misalignment reduces the relevance and effectiveness of policy measures.

CONCLUSION

The study examined the lived psychological experiences of gamblers in Harare's central business district, paying special emphasis to their reasons for engaging in gambling as well as the coping and self-regulation techniques they use to deal with losses and emotional pain. The results show that gambling is a complicated psychological and socioeconomic phenomenon that is intricately linked to daily survival, hope, and emotional control rather than just being a pleasurable pastime.

Punters used a variety of coping and self-regulation techniques in reaction to losses and emotional distress. Limit-setting, brief abstinence, cognitive reframing, social support, and spiritual practices were among the adaptive techniques that helped some participants achieve emotional equilibrium and control. Maladaptive tactics, such as loss chasing and emotional avoidance, were also visible, frequently exacerbating emotional discomfort and sustaining gambling behavior. This emphasizes the conflict between attempts at self-control and the strong contextual and emotional factors that encourage gambling.

Overall, the study shows that the psychological demands, emotional vulnerabilities, and socioeconomic realities of gamblers are strongly associated with their gambling behaviors. In order to develop culturally and contextually appropriate interventions, public awareness campaigns, and legislative responses targeted at encouraging healthy coping strategies and responsible gambling practices, it is essential to comprehend these lived experiences.

Reducing gambling-related harm among gamblers in Harare CBD may require addressing the underlying economic stressors and developing adaptive self-regulation skills.

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