

## Adolescents, Online Gambling, and Moral Deviance: A Phenomenological Study in an Urban Environment in Medan, North Sumatra

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### Abstract:

This study aims to examine adolescents' involvement in online gambling practices and its impact on moral degradation by tracing its causal factors and the forms of deviant behavior that emerge. The urgency of this research is based on the widespread accessibility of online gambling among teenagers and the weakening of social control in the digital era. A qualitative method with a descriptive phenomenological approach was employed. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with six male adolescents in Pahlawan Subdistrict, Medan Perjuangan District, Medan City, and analyzed using an interpretative phenomenological approach. The findings reveal that adolescents' engagement in online gambling is driven by peer influence, easy access to digital technology, interest in sports and the illusion of control, compulsive and addictive behavior, and as a form of escape from psychological pressure and boredom. Gambling activities are financed through pocket money, parental allowances, and even the sale of personal belongings. The primary impact of this practice is moral degradation, manifested in habitual lying, manipulating parents, incurring debts under false pretenses, and stealing or pawning goods. This study contributes to the discourse on adolescent deviant behavior by highlighting often-overlooked moral and social dimensions. The findings also carry important implications for youth protection policies, value-based digital literacy enhancement, and social interventions involving families, schools, and communities. The originality of this research lies in its focus on the moral experiences of adolescent online gamblers in a specific urban local context, which has rarely been explored in previous studies.

**Keywords:** Online Gambling Impact; Adolescents; Moral Degradation.

### Abstrak:

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji keterlibatan remaja dalam praktik judi online dan dampaknya terhadap degradasi moral, dengan menelusuri faktor penyebab serta bentuk-bentuk perilaku menyimpang yang muncul. Urgensi penelitian ini didasarkan pada maraknya akses judi online di kalangan remaja serta melemahnya pengawasan sosial di era digital. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan fenomenologi deskriptif. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam terhadap enam remaja laki-laki di Kelurahan Pahlawan, Kecamatan Medan Perjuangan, Kota Medan, dan dianalisis menggunakan pendekatan interpretatif fenomenologis. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keterlibatan remaja dalam judi online dipicu oleh pengaruh teman sebaya, kemudahan akses teknologi digital, minat terhadap olahraga dan ilusi kontrol, perilaku kompulsif dan kecanduan,

serta sebagai bentuk pelarian dari tekanan psikologis dan kebosanan. Aktivitas perjudian didanai dari uang jajan, pemberian orang tua, hingga hasil penjualan barang pribadi. Dampak utama dari praktik ini adalah degradasi moral yang ditunjukkan melalui kebiasaan berbohong, manipulasi terhadap orang tua, utang dengan alasan palsu, hingga mencuri dan menggadaikan barang. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi terhadap kajian perilaku menyimpang remaja dengan menyoroti dimensi moral dan sosial yang selama ini terabaikan. Temuan ini juga memiliki implikasi penting bagi kebijakan perlindungan remaja, penguatan literasi digital berbasis nilai, serta intervensi sosial yang melibatkan keluarga, sekolah, dan masyarakat. Keaslian penelitian ini terletak pada fokusnya terhadap pengalaman moral remaja pelaku judi online dalam konteks lokal perkotaan, yang belum banyak dikaji dalam studi sebelumnya.

**Kata Kunci:** Dampak Judi Online; Remaja; Degradasi Moral.

## INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of online gambling among adolescents has become an urgent social issue in the context of digital technology development in Indonesia. According to the Chief of the National Police, General Listyo Sigit Prabowo, throughout 2022 the Indonesian National Police uncovered 1,154 cases of online gambling (Guritno & Prabowo, 2022). This situation is further aggravated by data from the Ministry of Communication and Information (KOMDIGI), which reported that from July to September 2023 alone, 124,439 pieces of online gambling content on various social media platforms were taken down or had their access blocked (KOMDIGI, 2023). This condition illustrates the massive and organized spread of internet-based gambling practices in Indonesia's digital sphere.

Indonesia is even recorded as the country with the highest number of online gambling players in the world. Based on monitoring by *Drone Emprit*, the number of online gambling players in Indonesia reached 201,122 people, placing it at the top globally (Dian, 2023). Alarmingly, this practice is no longer limited to adults but has extended to all layers of society, including children, students, university youth, teenagers, and both men and women (Hardiansyah & Asriwandari, 2016). The shift from conventional to digital gambling access patterns has made this activity increasingly difficult to monitor through formal legal and social control systems.

Adolescents have become one of the main contributors to the rising cases of online gambling. The World Health Organization (WHO), as cited by Ragita & Fardana (2021), defines adolescents as individuals aged 10–24 years, a group that demographically exhibits high intensity in the use of digital devices. The 2022 report by the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII) showed that the highest internet penetration was among the 13–18 age group, reaching 99.16% (Pahlevi, 2022). Such high internet access among adolescents creates a vast opportunity for risky behaviors, including online gambling. Globally, UNICEF noted that the prevalence of online gambling among adolescents is 2 to 4 times higher than among adults (Putri, 2023).

Although the development of information technology brings many benefits in the fields of education and communication, its negative impacts are also very real, especially concerning the morality and character of the younger generation. The internet has created an interactive space that is not only free but also without boundaries. This has facilitated the emergence of deviant practices such as access to violent games, pornography, and engagement in online gambling. According to Tranggono et al. (2023), the danger of technological advancement lies in its ability to accelerate the moral decline of adolescents, who tend to use technology for short-term pleasures rather than productive purposes.

Several previous studies have attempted to explain the impact of online gambling practices on adolescent behavior. First, some studies highlight the psychosocial and academic effects of online gambling addiction. Sahputra et al. (2022) noted a decline in academic performance, weakened motivation for religious observance, and the emergence of psychological disorders and social alienation among adolescents involved in digital gambling. Addiyansyah & Rofi'ah (2023) also found that adolescents' motivations for engaging in online gambling are often triggered by economic pressure and environmental influences, which lead to deviant behaviors such as criminality and deteriorating social relationships. Similar findings were reported by Al Goni et al. (2024), who showed that online *slot* gambling participants frequently experience emotional outbursts, neglect of responsibilities, and decreased productivity and concentration in their studies.

Second, some studies have focused on the influence of digital technology on adolescents' moral degradation. Sofyana & Haryanto (2023) asserted that the internet has become a gateway to the violation of ethical values and social norms, ranging from exposure to violent content and hate speech to participation in online gambling. Waty

et al. (2022) even demonstrated that dependence on digital devices leads to weak self-control, neglect of academic tasks, and low social awareness among adolescents.

Third, other studies have emphasized the social factors that drive adolescents to engage in online gambling. Factors such as disharmonious family relationships, lack of parental supervision, and peer pressure are cited as important elements in explaining adolescent involvement in deviant behavior. Saepudin Kanda & Aziz (2024) reported that online gambling is also associated with symptoms of severe emotional distress, prolonged stress, and even impaired brain function. However, these studies tend to be general in nature and have rarely explored specific local social contexts in depth.

One important gap that has yet to be addressed by previous studies is the lack of in-depth empirical research on specific local contexts, especially in urban areas such as Pahlawan Subdistrict, Medan Perjuangan District, Medan City. In fact, this area is one of the regions with high internet access in Medan City and is vulnerable to deviant practices rooted in digital behavior. The scarcity of contextual data and findings on local dynamics highlights the urgent need for further research.

Based on this gap, this study aims to examine how online gambling affects the moral degradation of adolescents in Pahlawan Subdistrict, Medan Perjuangan District, Medan City. The focus of this study is directed toward three main aspects: (1) the forms of moral degradation experienced by adolescents involved in online gambling, (2) the driving factors behind their involvement, including the role of social environment, family, and peers, and (3) the patterns of internet usage and characteristics of online gambling practices they engage in.

This research departs from the argument that adolescents' involvement in online gambling directly affects the decline in their moral and social behavior, as indicated by the weakening of values such as honesty, responsibility, respect toward parents and teachers, as well as the disruption of adolescents' life orientation regarding education and religion. The initial assumption to be tested is that online gambling addiction among adolescents is not solely caused by individual factors, but also by the surrounding social structure, such as weak family control, environmental pressure, and unrestricted access to devices and internet networks. Therefore, this study seeks to provide a more contextual and in-depth understanding of moral degradation among adolescents due to online gambling practices in the digital era.

## METHOD

This study focuses on male adolescents aged 15–21 years who reside in Pahlawan Subdistrict, Medan Perjuangan District, Medan City, and who have been actively involved in online gambling practices for at least the past three months. This unit of analysis was chosen because this age group represents a critical stage in the formation of character and morality, and is also part of the demographic with the highest internet penetration in Indonesia. In the local context, this area exhibits intense digital social dynamics, making adolescents more vulnerable to technology-based deviant behaviors. The study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the impact of online gambling involvement on moral degradation among adolescents.

A qualitative approach with a descriptive phenomenological design was employed, as it enables the researcher to explore the informants' subjective experiences in depth (Maxwell, 2009; Rahim & Dilawati, 2022). The *phenomenological* approach allows for an understanding of how adolescents interpret their involvement in online gambling—morally, socially, and psychologically. This method is relevant to the research objective, which is to contextually examine how online gambling activities affect adolescents' moral values within their environment. Furthermore, this approach helps interpret internal dynamics that cannot be captured through quantitative methods.

The primary data source in this study consisted of adolescent informants who met specific criteria: (1) male, (2) aged 15–21 years, (3) residing in Pahlawan Subdistrict, and (4) actively engaged in online gambling for at least the past three months. Informants were selected using a *purposive sampling* technique, followed by *snowball sampling*. Six adolescents were chosen as the main informants. A number of verification indicators were used to confirm their involvement in online gambling, including direct admission, proof of accounts on online gambling websites, evidence of transactions via bank accounts or *e-wallets*, and screenshots of gambling apps or websites they used. Additional validation was conducted through cross-checking with parents, teachers, and community leaders. All informants were provided with a full explanation of the research objectives and process and voluntarily consented to participate as research subjects, in accordance with ethical research principles.

Data collection was carried out primarily through *in-depth interviews* using a semi-structured approach. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, lasting 25–30 minutes per informant, guided by an interview protocol aligned with the study's focus. All conversations were recorded using an audio device and transcribed *verbatim*. In addition, the researcher conducted *participant observation* in the social environments where the informants interacted, to capture the contextual background surrounding the online gambling practices. Supplementary documentation such as screenshots, field notes, and other visual materials were collected to enrich the data. To ensure data validity and reliability, the researcher also conducted source triangulation by involving teachers, parents, and community leaders as additional informants.

The collected data were analyzed using the *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)* approach (J. A. Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). This technique allows the researcher to understand how informants assign meaning to their subjective experiences, particularly regarding their involvement in online gambling and its moral implications. The analysis began with repeated readings of interview transcripts, identification of key themes, coding, and the development of interpretive narratives that reflect the meaning of each informant's experience. Emerging themes included moral perceptions of gambling, motivations for gambling, risk perception, and reflections on value violations. These interpretations were then connected to theoretical frameworks on morality and social deviance to generate a more comprehensive understanding.

Through this approach, the study seeks to contribute empirically to the understanding of the relationship between online gambling practices and adolescent moral degradation, while also explaining the socio-psychological dynamics behind their involvement. Ethical research standards were upheld throughout the process, including maintaining informant confidentiality, obtaining written consent, and ensuring that participation was voluntary and based on full understanding of participants' rights and responsibilities.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Adolescent Characteristics and Indicators of Online Gambling Addiction

Online gambling addiction among adolescents is a phenomenon that involves not only technological access but also complex psychological and social dynamics. According to Griffiths (2022), online gambling addiction can be identified through several indicators, including: (1) preoccupation with gambling (constantly thinking about or planning gambling activities), (2) increasing frequency and duration of gambling, (3) spending beyond financial means, (4) inability to control or stop gambling habits, (5) lying to close ones about gambling activities, and (6) disruption of social, academic, or family functioning due to gambling.

This foundation is reinforced by the *American Psychiatric Association* in the *DSM-5* (2023), which states that pathological or compulsive gambling behavior can be diagnosed if an individual exhibits at least four out of nine problematic behavioral criteria within the past 12 months. These include strong urges to gamble, irritability when attempting to stop, gambling as an escape from stress, and engaging in illegal acts to obtain gambling money.

In the context of this study, the five male adolescent informants interviewed exhibited patterns that fulfilled most of the above indicators. All informants reside in Pahlawan Subdistrict, Medan Perjuangan District, Medan City, and are aged between 15 and 21 years. They are actively involved in various forms of online gambling, ranging from *Bola 88* (soccer betting), *slot* machines, *togel* (lottery), *poker*, to digital *casino* games. The following table summarizes the basic data of the informants:

**Table 1. Research Informants**

No	Informant Code	Age	Gender	Status	Types of Online Gambling
1	AB	21	Male	University Student	<i>Poker, Bola 88</i>
2	AN	19	Male	Student	<i>Togel</i>
3	AL	18	Male	Student	<i>Bola 88</i>
4	BT	18	Male	Student	<i>Slot, Togel, Bola 88, Dadu</i>
5	RM	15	Male	Student	<i>Bola 88, Casino</i>
6	AT	15	Male	Student	<i>Slot, Togel</i>

The majority of informants were in late adolescence (ages 18–21), except for RM, who was only 15 years old. Hurlock (1978) stated that late adolescence is a stage in which individuals begin to develop emotional stability and social responsibility. However, field observations reveal that the informants were experiencing value disorientation

and weak self-control, as evidenced by their use of parental money for gambling and tendencies to manipulate their environment to sustain the habit.

Based on the research findings, it was discovered that adolescent gamblers had fulfilled several indicators of online gambling addiction, as follows:

#### **First, Preoccupation with Gambling**

One of the most prominent indicators of online gambling addiction is *preoccupation*, or a persistent focus of thought on gambling activities. In this study, nearly all informants showed that gambling was not merely a recreational activity but had become part of their mental and emotional routine. Informant AB, a 21-year-old university student, explicitly stated that he frequently thought about soccer match schedules, calculated potential winnings, and developed betting strategies even during academic or religious activities. This kind of *preoccupation* demonstrates that gambling occupies a significant space within the adolescents' cognitive and affective structure, displacing their focus on social and educational responsibilities.

*"Sometimes, even on campus, I open the Bola 88 app, check the match schedule, and start thinking about where to place my bet and how much. Sometimes before bed, that's what's on my mind—not school assignments." (AB, 21 years old)*

#### **Second, Increased Frequency and Duration of Gambling**

Symptoms of *tolerance* or the increasing need for gambling intensity also emerged in the interviews. Informants BT and AL mentioned that they initially gambled only once a week for entertainment. However, over time, the frequency increased to once per day and even twice a day during certain periods. This progression indicates the presence of psychological adaptation typical in addiction processes, where individuals require higher intensity to experience the same level of satisfaction.

*"At first, I only played on weekends, just for fun. But eventually, there was this urge to keep going. Now, I play almost every night, especially when there are big matches." (BT, 18 years old)*

*"If I don't play for a day, it feels like something's missing. Especially after losing, I want to get the money back, so I keep playing again and again." (AL, 18 years old)*

#### **Third, Spending Beyond Financial Capacity**

Addiction is also marked by excessive spending, even beyond one's financial capability. Four out of five informants in this study admitted to using their pocket money, parental allowances, and even selling personal items to fund their gambling activities. RM, who is only 15 years old, mentioned that he once secretly sold his old phone without his parents' knowledge. This behavior shows that gambling had surpassed the limits of affordability, forcing individuals to sacrifice other needs in order to sustain their habits.

*"I once sold my old phone, told my parents it was to buy school books, but actually it was to top up my slot balance. The money was gone in a day—I didn't even realize it." (RM, 15 years old)*

*"I even borrowed money from a friend, said it was for an assignment, but actually it was for betting on soccer. Happens a lot." (AN, 19 years old)*

#### **Fourth, Inability to Stop the Habit**

Another sign of addiction is the inability to stop despite being aware of its negative impacts. Informant AN stated that he once tried to quit for a week but ended up feeling anxious, restless, and "empty" without gambling. This is a form of *withdrawal* symptom commonly found in behavioral addiction, usually accompanied by discomfort, emotional emptiness, and a tendency to relapse into problematic behavior.

*"I really tried to stop once. But after just three days, I felt super anxious, couldn't focus, like something was missing. Eventually I played again—and even bet more than before." (AN, 19 years old)*



### **Fifth, Lying and Manipulation**

All informants admitted to lying or manipulating information to parents, teachers, or friends to conceal their activities. These lies included making up excuses for money usage, manipulating time, or fabricating academic narratives to obtain additional funds from parents. Such manipulative strategies act as defense mechanisms commonly seen in addiction, where individuals attempt to protect their habits from external intervention.

*"I once told my parents the money was for a tutoring module, but it was for gambling. If they found out, I'd definitely get scolded, so I had to make up a smart excuse." (BT, 18 years old)*

*"Sometimes I pretend I'm doing group work, but actually I'm just hanging out and betting. If I don't lie, I can't get away with playing." (AL, 18 years old)*

### **Sixth, Impaired Social and Academic Functioning**

The impact of online gambling addiction is also visible in declining academic performance and disrupted social relationships. Informant BT admitted to receiving lower grades due to staying up late and skipping school. AB mentioned that he missed several university classes because he stayed up too late gambling. Meanwhile, RM confessed to stealing money from his mother's purse because he no longer had a balance to play. These actions indicate a significant deterioration in social functioning as a result of addiction.

*"My grades dropped drastically this semester because I often sleep at 2 or 3 in the morning. Sometimes I skip class because I'm too tired—all because of gambling." (AB, 21 years old)*

*"I once took money from my mom's wallet, said it was for snacks, but actually it was to fund my gambling account. After losing, I couldn't resist the urge to win it back." (RM, 15 years old)*

In summary, this study finds that the adolescents' behaviors clearly demonstrate symptoms of addiction. These adolescents, aged between 15 and 21 years, all of whom are students or university learners, have unrestricted access to digital devices and internet connectivity. Their gambling activity is not merely a temporary form of entertainment but has become an ingrained habit in their daily lives.

The informants generally reported frequently thinking about gambling outside their playtime, feeling restless when not playing, and showing increasing frequency and duration over time. The money used for gambling came from personal sources such as pocket money, parental support, and even sales of personal belongings. In addition, they tended to lie or manipulate parents and teachers to continue gambling. In several cases, the gambling habit had interfered with academic performance, family relations, and social interaction. These symptoms align with the indicators of online gambling addiction as proposed by Griffiths et al. (2012), which include preoccupation, tolerance, loss of control, manipulative behavior, and impaired social functioning.

### **Factors Driving Adolescent Involvement in Online Gambling**

To gain a deeper understanding of adolescent involvement in online gambling activities in Pahlawan Subdistrict, Medan Perjuangan District, Medan City, this study conducted in-depth interviews with several adolescents who explicitly acknowledged their participation in digital gambling practices. Based on the interviews, it was found that adolescents' interest in online gambling is not caused by a single factor, but rather results from the interaction of various external and internal factors. Five main themes were identified from the analysis: (1) peer influence, (2) ease of access to digital technology, (3) interest in sports and illusion of control, (4) addiction and compulsive behavior, and (5) escapism from boredom and psychological pressure.

#### **First, Peer Influence**

One of the dominant factors encouraging adolescents' involvement in online gambling is the influence of their peer group. Gambling activity is understood not only as an individual action but also as a form of social adaptation to gain acceptance within a peer environment. Based on interview findings, most informants stated that they were first introduced to and engaged in online gambling through interactions with close friends.

One informant, AB (21 years old), explained that his habit of online gambling emerged as part of group activities. He stated:

*"I usually play online gambling by following my friends. When we hang out together, we usually play poker, but when I'm busy, I just play Bola 88 soccer betting."*

This statement indicates that AB's involvement in online gambling was influenced by the social dynamics of his group, in which gambling was perceived as a form of participation in collective activities. This aligns with Shaffer's opinion, as cited in Larasati et al. (2024), who argues that peer groups are powerful social units that shape adolescent behavior, lifestyle, and activities. These groups not only serve as spaces for social identification but also function as behavioral models, social reinforcers, and value comparators.

In a similar context, Diananda (2019) states that adolescent involvement in online gambling generally begins with social interactions involving peers who are already familiar with the games. This is supported by the findings of Thaib et al. (2025), who report that intensive communication among peers has a significant influence on adolescents' tendencies to engage in digital gambling activities.

### **Second, Ease of Access to Digital Technology**

In addition to social influence, the ease of access to digital technology also serves as a crucial factor that strengthens adolescents' involvement in online gambling. The rapid development of information technology has created a digital space that allows various forms of online entertainment to be accessed easily, quickly, and privately. Within this context, online gambling becomes one of the activities that takes advantage of these digital opportunities.

Informant AN (19 years old), a high school student, revealed that one of the reasons he was drawn to online gambling was its practicality and perceived safety. He stated:

*"Online gambling feels safe because no one's going to raid it like traditional gambling. It's also easy to play—just need a smartphone. I usually play togel because the process is simple, and I can do it anywhere and anytime."*

AN's statement illustrates that the mobile, anonymous, and flexible characteristics of digital technology provide adolescents with great ease in accessing gambling websites without significant physical or social barriers. This aligns with the findings of Addiyansyah and Rofi'ah (2023), who argue that the development of digital technology has made online gambling increasingly popular among adolescents. They note that the transformation of gambling from conventional to digital forms allows the activity to be carried out in a hidden manner, making it more difficult for families and schools to monitor.

In line with this, Supratama Supratama et al. (2022) asserts that with only a smartphone and internet access, adolescents can access various forms of digital gambling. This condition has led to the rapid growth of adolescent involvement in online gambling, especially when not accompanied by adequate control or digital literacy from their surrounding environment.

### **Third, Interest in Sports and the Illusion of Control**

Personal interest in the world of sports, particularly soccer, serves as one of the gateways for adolescent involvement in online gambling. Information obtained from the interviews indicates that some adolescents base their betting decisions on their knowledge of specific teams, players, or competitions. Their confidence in their ability to predict match outcomes leads to an illusion that they have control over something that is inherently random. This phenomenon, in psychological studies, is referred to as the *illusion of control*—a mistaken belief that one can influence or control the outcome of unpredictable events.

One of the informants, AL, expressed the connection between his love for soccer and his habit of placing bets during live matches:

*"I've always loved soccer, especially when my favorite team is playing. I always place online bets during those matches. The amount varies—from small bets to millions of rupiah. The bigger the bet, the bigger the profit."*

This statement indicates that the motivation to gamble does not stem solely from economic desire but also from a need to "test" one's intuition and sports knowledge. This aligns with Langer's explanation, as cited in

Pradikasari and Isbanah (2025), who states that individuals experiencing the *illusion of control* believe they have influence over event outcomes, even when they do not. Sriyana (2025) adds that online gambling systems are structurally designed to reinforce the illusion of winning and create a false sense of control, which ultimately increases the tendency to keep gambling.

#### Fourth, Addiction and Compulsive Behavior

Adolescents' involvement in online gambling does not always stop at the experimentation phase but can develop into compulsive behavior that signifies the emergence of addictive symptoms. The research findings show that several informants had developed a strong dependency on gambling activities, with repeated urges to gamble despite experiencing negative consequences psychologically, socially, and financially.

This is reflected in the statement of informant BT, who admitted to having sacrificed many of his personal belongings to cover losses from gambling:

*"All my stuff has been sold just to cover the losses from online gambling. I've played all kinds—slot, poker, togel, dadu, Bola 88, and others."*

BT's statement demonstrates that his gambling behavior has surpassed self-control. He not only shifted from one type of game to another but also exhibited a pattern of escalating risk, typical in addictive behavior. This corresponds with the findings of Manullang et al. (2024), who state that online gamblers, after experiencing early wins, tend to increase their bet values and repeat the behavior compulsively. Aprilia et al. (2023) further note that individuals with addictive tendencies will continue to obsess over gambling, develop psychological tolerance toward time and financial loss, and experience great difficulty in ceasing the behavior. In fact, according to Addiyansyah and Rofi'ah (2023), addiction is the most visible consequence of involvement in online gambling, marked by significant behavioral changes and damaged social functioning.

#### Fifth, Escapism from Boredom and Psychological Pressure

Some adolescents become involved in online gambling not merely due to economic factors or external influences such as peer pressure, but also due to deeper psychological reasons. Interview results show that feelings of boredom, stress, and emotional pressure often serve as the background for gambling activities. In this context, online gambling is positioned as a form of emotional compensation that provides instant gratification and distraction from unpleasant psychological states.

Informant RM revealed that he often gambles when feeling bored or when his favorite soccer team is playing:

*"I usually play casino games to kill boredom, and I also often play online soccer betting whenever my favorite team is playing."*

This statement illustrates that gambling is used as a *coping mechanism* or emotional outlet when the individual feels mentally fatigued or lacks productive activities. Ditya Kesuma (2023) notes that boredom is one of the main triggers of adolescent involvement in online gambling, especially since many gambling platforms are designed to resemble visually engaging and interactive online games. Meanwhile, Supratama et al. (2022) emphasizes that online gambling often serves as a temporary escape for individuals facing internal stress or family conflict. In many cases, gambling becomes a form of escapism from difficult life realities, particularly in environments that are permissive toward deviant behavior.

**Table 2. Adolescent Gambling Behavior Patterns Based on Dominant Factors**

Informant	Dominant Factor	Types of Gambling Played	Behavioral Pattern
AB	Peer influence	<i>Poker, Bola 88</i>	Plays when hanging out with friends; follows group habits
AN	Access to digital technology	<i>Togel</i>	Plays independently and frequently; takes advantage of easy access



AL	Interest in sports and illusion of control	<i>Bola 88</i>	Bets during favorite team matches; believes he can predict outcomes
BT	Addiction and compulsive behavior	<i>Slot, Togel, Bola 88, Dadu</i>	Plays continuously; shifts between games; sells personal items to cover losses
RM	Escapism from psychological pressure	<i>Bola 88, Casino</i>	Plays when bored or stressed; increases bets after winning

The table above shows that each informant in this study displayed different patterns of gambling behavior depending on the dominant factor influencing their involvement in online gambling. These patterns reveal the complex personal and social dynamics underlying adolescent gambling behavior, ranging from external influences such as peer groups and easy technological access, to internal drivers like interest in sports, emotional needs, and compulsive tendencies.

On one hand, social influence is clearly evident in AB's case, where gambling is treated as part of a collective activity with peers. This behavior aligns with the role of peer groups as dominant agents of socialization during adolescence (Larasati et al., 2024; Thaib et al., 2025). In this context, gambling is practiced as a form of social adaptation and an effort to gain legitimacy within the group.

Meanwhile, AN illustrates how access to digital technology allows gambling to become part of a personal routine. Devices such as smartphones and freely available applications encourage adolescents to gamble individually and spontaneously, without the need for social mediators. This phenomenon confirms the arguments of Supratama (2022) and Addiyansyah & Rofi'ah (2023), who state that open digital infrastructure facilitates adolescent involvement in risky activities without sufficient supervision.

AL's case demonstrates the link between sports interest and the *illusion of control*—the belief that one's knowledge about matches or favorite teams can influence betting outcomes. As Langer explains, in Pradikasari & Isbanah (2025), this illusion often strengthens one's confidence to place bets and creates a false sense of control over uncertainty.

Furthermore, BT's case shows a pattern of involvement that has developed into addiction. He not only exhibits preferences for various types of gambling but also shows a loss of control over his behavior, even selling personal items to continue gambling. This indicates that gambling has shifted into a compulsive behavior pattern, signaling the loss of self-control, as described by Aprilia et al. (2023) and Manullang et al. (2024).

On the other hand, RM represents adolescents who use gambling as an emotional outlet. In moments of stress or boredom, gambling becomes an instant escape that offers both entertainment and distraction from internal pressures. As noted by Ditya Kesuma (2023) adolescents with specific psychological backgrounds are more vulnerable to using online gambling as a negative coping mechanism.

These findings as a whole suggest that adolescent involvement in online gambling results from the interaction between structural and individual factors. Social factors such as weak parental and environmental control, peer influence, and the absence of adequate digital regulation serve as enabling conditions that increase the likelihood of adolescents engaging in gambling. On the other hand, internal factors such as emotional needs, limited moral literacy, and identity-seeking lead adolescents to use gambling as a destructive form of self-expression.

Thus, it can be concluded that adolescent involvement in online gambling reflects a systemic failure in building a protective social environment and a robust digital literacy system. Online gambling is not only a technological challenge but also a moral and psychosocial crisis that requires collective intervention from families, schools, and the broader society.

### Moral Degradation of Adolescents Involved in Online Gambling

Adolescents' involvement in online gambling practices affects not only their financial and social aspects but also causes severe damage to their moral and spiritual dimensions. Based on observations and in-depth interviews conducted in Pahlawan Subdistrict, Medan Perjuangan District, the most apparent impact of this practice is the moral degradation experienced by the adolescent gamblers. This degradation is manifested in a series of deviant behaviors such as systematic lying, theft, misuse of family funds, consumption of prohibited items, and, in some cases, school dropout.

One of the most evident forms of moral degradation is the misuse of family funds. Informant AB openly admitted that he used the money given by his parents for college needs as gambling capital, even going so far as to pawn his personal belongings. He stated:

*“Every time I play online gambling, I always use the money my parents give me for monthly expenses. Sometimes I also pawn things like my phone and laptop.” (AB, 21 years old)*

This behavior indicates a loss of moral responsibility toward parental trust and a shift in values from independence and honesty to manipulation and opportunism. A guidance counselor at one of the schools where the informants study also expressed concern:

*“We suspected the decline in academic performance and frequent truancy. After investigation, it turned out some students had started gambling online. They often skip school—and some even dropped out because of addiction and inability to concentrate.”*

In addition, manipulation and lying to parents became common patterns to sustain gambling behavior. Informant AN admitted that he often fabricated reasons to obtain money:

*“Sometimes I lie to my parents, asking for extra money for school fees... The rest is usually spent going out with my girlfriend and friends—eating out, karaoke, movies, and shopping.” (AN, 19 years old)*

These lies are not spontaneous but deliberately planned, showing that moral degradation has become internalized as a survival mechanism. One of the informants' parents also voiced concern:

*“We, as parents, trusted that the money was used for school. It turns out it was used for gambling. We just recently found out our child had pawned his laptop—even though we bought it from our savings.” (Parent of AN)*

A more serious form of moral degradation is found in hedonistic and consumptive behavior. Informant AL stated that whenever he won a bet, he would use the money to indulge:

*“Whenever I win in online gambling, I usually deposit part of the money and use the rest to celebrate—buy food and alcoholic drinks.” (AL, 18 years old)*

*This phenomenon drew serious attention from a local religious leader:*

*“Today's youth have lost their way. They're not only gambling—they're starting to drink alcohol too. This goes completely against Islamic values and our local customs.” (Ustadz Z, local religious leader)*

Excessive consumerism and celebrating victories with forbidden items show that online gambling has become a status symbol and a means of expressing unchecked freedom—signaling a significant spiritual decline.

In extreme cases, moral transgressions include theft. Informant RM (15 years old) admitted to committing petty crimes to obtain money for gambling:

*“When I lose... I often borrow money, and sometimes I justify doing whatever it takes to get it. I secretly pawn things from home... even steal items that I can sell.” (RM, 15 years old)*

*The neighborhood head confirmed these concerns:*

*“Several parents have come to complain that their children often steal things at home. Some secretly sell their phones. After investigation, we found the money was used for gambling.” (Neighborhood Head, RT 04, Pahlawan Subdistrict)*

These findings clearly indicate that moral degradation among adolescents has crossed social and legal boundaries. In several cases, informants even dropped out of school, unable to maintain academic discipline due to gambling addiction and its associated lifestyle.

In general, this study identifies four main patterns of moral degradation experienced by adolescents as a result of their involvement in online gambling: First, the misuse of family finances emerged as the most common early symptom. Nearly all informants used money intended for education and daily needs—such as school fees or monthly allowances from parents—as gambling capital. This behavior reflects a neglect of moral responsibility and a weakening sense of respect for family trust. Second, a pattern of systematic manipulation and lying was consciously practiced by the adolescents toward parents, teachers, and their social environment. These lies were crafted to obtain extra money under false pretenses, such as school-related needs, device repairs, or academic costs, while in reality, they were used to support gambling activities. This demonstrates a significant regression in the development of values such as honesty and integrity, which should ideally be internalized during adolescence. Third, the study found a tendency toward a consumptive and hedonistic lifestyle accompanying gambling winnings. The money was not used for productive purposes but spent on consumption activities like dining out, purchasing luxury goods, and consuming alcohol. This phenomenon reflects a shift in value orientation—from simplicity and responsibility to immediate pleasure that violates social and religious norms. Fourth, the most serious form of moral degradation was manifested in major violations such as theft and pawning family belongings without permission. Several informants admitted to selling or pawning items such as smartphones, laptops, and even household appliances secretly, in order to continue gambling. These actions indicate the loss of moral and spiritual control, as well as an increasing tendency to justify minor criminal behavior to fulfill the urge to gamble.

These four patterns show that adolescent moral degradation does not occur abruptly but develops gradually through a process marked by declining adherence to ethical, social, and religious norms. Without adequate supervision and guidance from the social and family environment, these patterns can easily evolve into more destructive forms.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that adolescent involvement in online gambling in Pahlawan Subdistrict, Medan Perjuangan District, has a direct impact on the emergence of significant forms of moral degradation. Four primary patterns of deviant behavior were identified: the misuse of family finances, systematic lying to parents and teachers, a consumptive and hedonistic lifestyle, and minor criminal acts such as theft and pawning family belongings without permission. These tendencies do not occur sporadically but are rather planned, recurring, and internalized within adolescents' daily behavioral patterns. These symptoms were not only revealed by the adolescent informants but also confirmed by community figures, teachers, parents, and religious leaders involved in the data collection process.

Theoretically, this phenomenon of adolescent moral decline can be explained through Lawrence Kohlberg's moral development theory, which states that adolescents are ideally expected to reach the conventional stage of moral reasoning, where individuals obey social norms and laws due to an awareness of the importance of social order (Kohlberg, 1968). However, the results of this study instead show a form of *moral regression*: adolescents revert to egocentric and pragmatic motivations, acting solely based on personal gain without consideration for moral or social consequences (Erfan et al., 2024). This condition is exacerbated by the lack of religious value internalization, as explained by Zakiah Drajat (2005), who emphasized that adolescents who have reached the *baligh* stage should already possess full awareness of moral and spiritual responsibility for their actions. Yet in this context, such awareness appears absent—adolescents blatantly violate religious and social norms, including gambling, lying, stealing, and consuming prohibited substances.

These findings strongly align with previous studies discussed in the introduction. Research by Sahputra et al. (2022) and Addiyansyah & Rofi'ah (2023) shows that online gambling among adolescents triggers deviant behaviors such as criminal acts, declining academic motivation, and social disruption. The study by Al Goni et al. (2024) further notes that digital gambling addiction negatively impacts emotion regulation and concentration. However, the current research offers *novelty* by focusing on a specific local context—namely the urban middle-class community in Pahlawan Subdistrict—and reinforces the findings through community-based narratives from teachers, neighborhood heads, religious figures, and parents. Additionally, this study explicitly maps the progressive nature of moral degradation—from minor lies to criminal behavior—a pattern that has not been explored in depth in previous studies.

More broadly, the findings can be interpreted as a social and ideological symptom of shifting values in the digital era. Historically, adolescents in Indonesian society have been positioned as subjects of moral and spiritual

education through the layered systems of family, religious institutions, and schools. The family, in particular, holds the primary role in instilling foundational values through parenting models that emphasize spirituality, emotional intelligence, and intrinsic religious motivation. Perbowosari et al. (2025) argue that democratic parenting styles combined with spiritual intelligence positively contribute to the development of adolescents' religious character. Furthermore, research by Tadjuddin et al. (2019) suggests that holistic parent-child interaction—particularly within authoritative frameworks—supports healthy moral development. In culturally rich regions such as Pandalungan, local values and traditional wisdom are integrated into family structures, as demonstrated by Susanto et al. (2020, 2022), who assert that locally grounded caregiving reinforces adolescents' moral resilience.

On the other hand, Indonesia's formal education system—especially religious-based institutions like *pesantren*—has the mandate to harmonize academic education with religious values. However, the effectiveness of religious education in public schools is often constrained by the ideological burden of state narratives and a curriculum structure that lacks contextual relevance to adolescent needs (Mujiburrahman, 2020; Pakpahan et al., 2025). Nonetheless, efforts have been made by some religious schools in Yogyakarta and West Sumatra to develop inclusive curricula that promote interfaith tolerance (Parker, 2014). The concept of *lived religious citizenship* even suggests that religious education grounded in real-life experiences is more effective in cultivating moral awareness that is resilient to social pressure.

Yet the entry of digital technology has introduced complex new challenges. On one hand, devices such as smartphones provide access to educational and spiritual opportunities; on the other, they also facilitate adolescents' engagement in destructive behaviors such as online gambling (Larson, 2024). In this context, the previously layered moral education system—family, religion, school—appears fragile when faced with the onslaught of digital culture that offers instant entertainment, false social identity, and escape from reality. Raffar et al. (2025) even argue that unless guided by adaptive and context-sensitive spiritual approaches, adolescents risk losing the moral anchors that should have been instilled from an early age.

Unlimited internet access and weak social control have generated serious negative consequences for Indonesian adolescents. High internet penetration among teenagers has significantly increased their exposure to harmful content such as pornography, digital fraud, online violence, and *cyberbullying* (Wahanisa et al., 2021). Unfortunately, the lack of specific regulation and social control over such practices makes adolescents the most vulnerable group to experiencing psychosocial harm.

One tangible consequence of this condition is the rising prevalence of mental health problems among adolescents. Uncontrolled internet use has been linked to *digital addiction*, reduced sleep quality, diminished social interaction, and increased isolation from family and peers (Arenas-Arroyo et al., 2025; Charmaraman et al., 2020). Moreover, several studies have reported associations between excessive internet attachment and increased symptoms of depression, anxiety, and even suicide attempts among adolescents (Hökby et al., 2016; Holfeld & Sukhawathanakul, 2017).

In addition to mental health effects, adolescents also experience behavioral and social disorders, including addiction to social media, which directly influences lifestyle, decision-making, and self-control (Maliha & Nurmala, 2023). Research by Rakhmawati et al. (2021) confirms that internet addiction among Indonesian adolescents has become an urgent public health issue, with consequences that include physical disorders, declining academic performance, and the distortion of social norms. Furthermore, unfiltered internet exposure also increases the risk of sexual exploitation—both online and offline—especially among male adolescents in large urban areas such as Yogyakarta (Rahman et al., 2025).

This condition is exacerbated by the weakening of social control mechanisms within adolescent environments, including families, schools, and local communities. The lack of supervision and absence of preventive action has allowed deviant behaviors—such as online gambling, digital violence, and juvenile delinquency—to develop unimpeded. A study by Sarbini et al. (2023) shows that community efforts, such as blocking radical groups, can reduce juvenile delinquency when done informally through advisory and educational approaches. Conversely, in the absence of such approaches, adolescents tend to seek validation from peers who share similar deviant tendencies. This is reinforced by Andrianie et al. (2024), who assert that peer relationships greatly influence adolescent involvement in problematic internet use; negative peer connections increase the likelihood of deviant behavior.

From an ideological perspective, the phenomenon of adolescent moral degradation due to online gambling reflects the penetration of *capitalist* and *consumerist* values into the identity of Indonesian youth. Online gambling is no longer merely regarded as entertainment—it has become a symbol of social status, a space for digital identity



expression, and a coping mechanism for life pressure and boredom. In a culture that increasingly normalizes instant consumption and competitive lifestyles, online gambling becomes a shortcut to sensation, social recognition, and personal gratification.

Research by Fahrudin et al. (2024) shows that the rise of consumerism in Indonesia directly contributes to the spread of online gambling practices, especially among young people. Although Indonesia has regulations prohibiting gambling, easy access, fast gameplay features, and the narrative of instant rewards constructed by gambling platforms have made the practice increasingly attractive, particularly for adolescents in search of identity. The structural characteristics of online gambling platforms—such as fast interfaces, instant bonuses, and integration with social media—have created an *illusion of control*, promoted compulsive behavior, and accelerated the development of addiction (Solehudin et al., 2025).

Socially, this gambling behavior is reinforced by peer influence and social media, which often normalize digital betting as a form of entertainment or a “rewarded game.” Hume and Mort (2011) emphasize that adolescents tend to view online gambling as fun and low-risk, not as an activity with legal and moral consequences. Moreover, the penetration of consumerist values drives many adolescents to pursue instant gratification at the expense of virtues such as hard work, honesty, and responsibility. Baulch (2013) observed that globalization and consumer culture have shifted the life orientation of Indonesian youth from collectivism toward consumption-driven individualism.

This situation is worsened by weak law enforcement against online gambling practices, which not only causes legal and economic losses but also creates a moral and psychosocial crisis among adolescents (Wibowo & Limijadi, 2024). In the long term, online gambling addiction can trigger mental disorders such as anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal (Critselis et al., 2013). Thus, this phenomenon can no longer be viewed merely as a personal issue or individual deviance, but as a *structural symptom* rooted in the imbalance between technology access, market ideology, and the absence of value-based protection in the digital lives of Indonesian adolescents.

Reflections from this study indicate several serious social dysfunctions in addressing adolescent involvement in online gambling:

First, family control systems are shown to be weak in detecting and preventing adolescent engagement in digital spaces. Many parents are unaware that their children are gambling, even when personal items are pawned or systematic lying occurs. This is consistent with King and Delfabbro (2016), who found that parents often lack adequate supervision over their children's gambling behavior—and may even unintentionally facilitate it by giving them money without oversight. Kaya and Deveci (2022) also note that distant relationships, rejection by father figures, and insecure attachment patterns are key predictors of adolescent involvement in online gambling.

Second, educational institutions appear to lack early detection mechanisms and effective interventions to address behavioral symptoms caused by gambling. Adolescents with experiences of domestic violence or dysfunctional family settings are more vulnerable to addiction and other deviant behaviors (Quancai et al., 2023; Shek & Yu, 2014). This is exacerbated by unsupportive family communication patterns and a lack of emotional warmth. Byrne and Lee (2011) highlight that closed and unresponsive parenting styles lead adolescents to reject risk-prevention strategies offered by schools or families.

Third, local communities such as neighborhood units (*RT*) and religious leaders also lack sufficient social mechanisms for mentoring and educating adolescents. In many cases, community responses only occur after serious deviance has taken place, rather than through early prevention. Dittman et al. (2025) note that most parents even regard gambling as a secondary issue compared to other risks such as bullying, which leads to the neglect of gambling in community-level youth guidance efforts.

Fourth, the absence of ethics- and morality-based digital education in both schools and society worsens the situation. Parental unawareness about the risks of digital gambling (Narros-González et al., 2022) and the lack of preventive curriculum in schools widen the gap between technological development and the value protection adolescents need. Chanauria & Abbas (2025) assert that educational approaches rooted in family structures hold great potential to reduce the risk of online gambling addiction—especially when combined with moral education and *regulatory strategies*.

These dysfunctions not only jeopardize individual futures but also weaken the broader social structure in the long term. When family control collapses, education fails to provide protective values, and communities remain reactive, the digital space becomes an open arena for moral deviance. Smith et al. (2025) emphasize the importance of interventions involving families, schools, and policymakers to design comprehensive prevention



programs. Lole et al. (2025) also note that adolescents are more responsive to honest, open, and warm communication approaches than to punishment or prohibition alone.

Based on these reflections, a collaborative and systematic action plan is urgently needed: (1) Implement value- and religion-based digital education integrated into school curricula and religious activities, especially at the adolescent level. (2) Strengthen parental capacity through digital parenting programs, enabling them to understand and wisely monitor their children's online activities. (3) Develop early detection mechanisms in schools through the roles of guidance counselors, homeroom teachers, and peer-learning communities to identify deviant behavior early. (4) Empower community and religious leaders to form youth-support groups that function as alternative spaces for counseling and value development. (5) Encourage local governments to enforce stricter regulations on access to gambling websites, while also providing technology-based public complaint services. Through these measures, it is hoped that the moral regeneration of adolescents will not be further eroded by the unchecked waves of digital influence.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that adolescent involvement in online gambling practices in Pahlawan Subdistrict, Medan Perjuangan District, has a direct and serious impact on the occurrence of explicit moral degradation. Four main forms of deviant behavior were consistently identified in the field data: misuse of family finances, systematic manipulation and lying to parents and teachers, a consumptive and hedonistic lifestyle, and serious transgressions such as theft and pawning of belongings without permission. These patterns did not emerge instantly but were formed through a gradual process reinforced by weak family control, the absence of social supervision, and the lack of value-based education in the use of digital technology. These findings confirm that online gambling not only damages the economic and social aspects of adolescent life but also progressively erodes their moral and spiritual foundations.

The primary contribution of this study lies in its presentation of comprehensive empirical data on forms of moral degradation among adolescents in the context of online gambling, particularly within urban environments heavily influenced by digital culture. This research enriches academic discourse by systematically mapping patterns of moral deviance experienced by adolescents based on their dominant driving factors, while also incorporating perspectives from parents, teachers, community leaders, and religious figures as triangulated sources of data. This approach not only reveals the dimensions of individual behavior but also uncovers the social dynamics that reinforce cycles of moral deviance in the digital era. Thus, this study provides a conceptual contribution to understanding the relationship between moral degradation, digital addiction, and value crises in contemporary adolescent life.

However, this research has several limitations. Its geographic focus is restricted to a single *kelurahan* and the number of informants is relatively small, making the findings not widely generalizable. Additionally, this study has not explored in depth the roles of educational institutions and the state in responding to this phenomenon. Therefore, future research is recommended to expand the scope of study, involve more participants from diverse social backgrounds, and integrate a policy-oriented approach to identify more effective strategies for the prevention and intervention of moral degradation resulting from online gambling among adolescents.

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