

GAMBLING AND DIGITAL BETTING IN PAKISTAN: EMERGING RISKS OF ONLINE PLATFORMS

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Abstract

Digital betting and online gambling are booming in Pakistan, and despite formal bans, the market has created an untamed market, which is rather high-risk. Legal loopholes contribute to this growth since the laws that have been in place are not applicable to the new online platforms. Therefore, many offshore betting platforms and applications will run unpunished and create drastic risks. They are rampant financial fraud, illegal transfer, and money laundering that destroy the economy of the country. On the social front, these sites have been associated with the increased rates of gambling addiction, especially among young people who are the victims of intense social media marketing. The users are also at risk of severe data security threats, such as identity theft and hacking of their privacy. As a crackdown is being undertaken by authorities, by blocking apps and going after promoters, it is almost impossible to enforce the use of digital wallets and cryptocurrency due to their anonymity. This online shadow economy is a complex risk to the financial stability and social welfare in Pakistan.

Keywords: *challenges, historical context, laws, opportunities, theoretical context*

Introduction

In Pakistan, the Prevention of Gambling Act of 1977 outlaws gambling in its entirety, yet has since developed into a massive, minimum regulation digital shadow economy. The law of 1977, protecting the prohibition of physical betting dens, is simply outdated. It has formed a gray area that is actively exploited by online platforms as one of the areas of law (Fatima et al., 2024). This regulatory gap has made it easy to rapidly and uncontrollably promote digital betting apps that have become part and parcel of the social and financial fabric of the country (Pradika et al., 2024).

These offshoring sites circumvent the current financial policies through advanced techniques (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2024). They take advantage of the local payment application with easy user deposits, and more importantly, they take advantage of the anonymous transaction on the global exchanges of cryptocurrencies (Fiskaali et al., 2022). This money laundering system enables a high amount of illicit money to be transferred out of the country on a large scale and causes huge capital flight and loss of funds (Lozano et al., 2022). The size of the growth is due to pushy marketing through social media (Ghelfi et al., 2023). Well-known online content creators who have a large number of subscribers are brought to sponsor such unlawful plans, and they usually show betting as a way to enrich oneself in a short period of time (Wardle et al., 2024). This plan aims at youths, giving the impression that fraud is a legitimate thing to do (De Jans et al., 2024).

The combination of this lethal nexus of antique laws, anonymized digital finance, and high-influencer marketing has posed a danger to the nation at the national level (Arliani et al., 2023). It promotes mass addiction, economic devastation, and laundry. As a result, the regulatory agencies, such as the cybercrime investigation agencies and telecommunication authorities, are involved in a complicated, continuous crackdown on the level of the state level to close the platforms and attack creators of their functioning (Valenciano-Mendoza et al., 2023).

Research Justification

This study justifies critical research due to the impending and growing danger of unregulated web-based betting platforms that exist in Pakistan. Although the laws are being thoroughly prohibited in gambling, an artificial legal gap in the outdated legislation permits such offshore digital activities to operate, leading to the need to address it with an urgent academic analysis. There is a devastating economic challenge of the sheer scale of the phenomenon. The illegal transfer of financial resources and the fact that money laundering is widespread using anonymous online platforms, especially cryptocurrency, cause serious financial losses and tax avoidance, and pose a direct danger to the economic stability and solvency of the country. Moreover, socially and humanitarian expenses are high. The violent exploitation of the content producers on the Internet to sell these plans has boosted gambling addictions, particularly in the young population, at alarming rates. It causes individual bankruptcy, increased mental anguish, and the disintegration of social systems.

It will need a thorough research to precisely map the means through which these platforms operate, whether it is the exploitation of local payment apps to elaborate marketing or effective regulatory measures (i.e., app blocking and imposition measures). The results will be crucial in ensuring that policymakers come up with updated and focused laws that seal the digital loopholes that may render the national economy and population vulnerable due to this digital shadow economy.

Research Objectives

1. To discuss the historical context of gambling and digital betting in Pakistan.
2. To highlight the theoretical context of gambling and digital betting in Pakistan.
3. To analyze the laws regarding gambling and digital betting in Pakistan.
4. To identify the key challenges regarding gambling and digital betting in Pakistan.
5. To explore the opportunities for gambling and digital betting in Pakistan.
6. To propose effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Research Methodology

This study employed a systematic review methodology, with research objectives established accordingly. A comprehensive literature review was conducted (Komba & Lwoga,

2020). Research findings were categorized based on their content (Hiver et al., 2021; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006), and classified information was incorporated into the study by organizing it into headings (Gan et al., 2021; Pawson et al., 2005). The evaluation of classified information and titles formed the basis of the study (Page, 2021; Rahi, 2017), ensuring the integrity of the research subject and its contents (Egger et al., 2022; Victor, 2008). The criteria for selection are listed.

1. **Relevance:** Researches that directly addressed the questions posed by this study are included.
2. **Quality:** Studies that meet a certain quality threshold (e.g., methodological rigour, bias risk) are included. Most of the research is from Scopus-indexed and Clarivate Analytics journals and reputed publishers.
3. **Recency:** Consideration of the publication date to ensure that the review reflects the most current evidence. Most of the studies are from the last three years.
4. **Language:** Only studies published in English are included.
5. **Data Completeness:** Previous studies must provide sufficient data on outcomes of interest for practical synthesis; this is also ensured in this research.

This study did not use primary data from human participants; therefore, no ethics clearance letter from the ethics committee was required.

Literature Review

The literature on digital gambling typically identifies the intricate regulation issues due to the transition of land facilities to the online platforms across national boundaries (De Jans et al., 2024). International literature highlights the usual dangers, such as the accessibility, the addictive characteristics of the digital interfaces, and the challenges countries are facing when trying to trace money that is transferred across borders (Valenciano-Mendoza et al., 2023). Nonetheless, there is a notable dearth of empirical studies dedicated specifically to the peculiar combination of the laws and financial management and the promotional considerations that are particular to South Asian settings, such as Pakistan (Fatima et al., 2024).

Critical review of available domestic policy analysis has generally decided that the Prevention of Gambling Act of 1977 is old-fashioned, which does not offer sufficient legal provisions to combat the Internet-based operation (Pradika et al., 2024). Such a shortage has been cited on several occasions as the major trigger of the present boom that is avaricious. Moreover, news articles by the financial surveillance agencies highlight the innovative ways in which these sites are bypassed (Lozano et al., 2022). It encompasses the insidious interaction with mainstream local payment apps, and more recently, the heavy dependence on untraceable, decentralized financial engineering, such as cryptocurrency and peer-to-peer transfers, to cause colossal, untraceable capital flight (Arliani et al., 2023). Such results suggest that there is a fast-changing evolution in technology that is out of reach of current policy studies (Fiskaali et al., 2022).

An emergent literature exists on the social aspect that involves the digital marketing ethics and online manipulation (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2024). The policy commentators have outlined the aggressive use by large-scale social media influencers in the effort to normalize and market the illegal platforms to millions of viewers. This habit produces an illusion of legitimacy, which tremendously enhances the youth involvement and increases the addiction rate and financial devastation rates (Wardle et al., 2024). Thus, the global risks are known to the world. Yet, this review introduces a critical priority based on the detailed research that is necessary to determine the definite economic damage by presenting a map of the crypto-based financial system (Ghelfi et al., 2023) and assessing the level of social impact of influencer-like betting promotion within the limiting legal framework of Pakistan (Fatima et al., 2024).

Historical Context of Gambling and Digital Betting in Pakistan

The ban on gambling in Pakistan is more of a constitutional and religious requirement, and hence anti-gambling attitude has been clearly cemented in the very foundation of the country. It was codified in the year 1977 when the Prevention of Gambling Act was enacted. It was the comprehensive legislation of its time, and it had managed to focus on and punish the physical common gaming house and other types of operations. The legislation offered a working legal deterrent to organized, huge, on-the-ground betting operations over a number of decades (Pradika et al., 2024).

The digital era, with the emergence of the digital landscape in the late 90s and the ensuing explosion of mobile internet access in the 2010s, changed the landscape dramatically. This type of technological revolution has led to a situation where offshore organizations are able to provide live betting services to millions of citizens immediately. Most importantly, the 1977 Act, which was created to serve a non-digital world, was not modified to accommodate the online or cyber-related activities. This weakness of the law system to match the technology created an outstanding vulnerability. The archaic legislation accidentally left a legal gap in which the nation would no longer be a market where physical gambling would have been repressed. Rather, a massive shadow economy of unregulated digital gambling was able to grow, facilitating its activities with the use of anonymous digital finances (Fatima et al., 2024).

Theoretical Context of Gambling and Digital Betting in Pakistan

The key factor that will help put the rapid online betting development in Pakistan into perspective is the so-called Regulatory Lag. This theory assumes that the speed of technological innovation is always ahead of the ability of law and governance models to evolve. This inability to repeal the 1977 anti-gambling statute created an open space in jurisdiction that enabled offshore digital operations to find a place in Regulatory Arbitrage, where they are lawful in their parent jurisdiction and unwelcome in the locality.

In addition, the high frequency of this criminal Act is attributed to the Routine Activities Theory, which posits that the occurrence of crime is based on an offender (the offshore platform) being motivated and having an appropriate target (unregulated local payment systems and willing young people), and a capable guardian (effective enforcement mechanisms) is lacking. The perceived opportunity cost of high-reward crime is greatly enhanced due to the fact that there is a low possibility of being detected and punished in the short term, especially when illegally obtained transfers are transacted through anonymous cryptocurrency.

And lastly, there is the social aspect, which is based on the notion of the Normalization of Deviance. The aggressive advertising done by the well-known online content creators is used to justify an illegal act, that the dangerous behavior seem as being socially acceptable and commonplace, therefore reducing the moral constraint to entry into the game of millions of new users, especially the easily drawn young population.

Laws Regarding Gambling and Digital Betting in Pakistan

The legal environment surrounding gambling in the country is characterized by a pioneer law that is already outdated in the digital age, and it is the resultant weakness of the present crisis.

1. The Prevention of Gambling Act, 1977: This is the most significant and general law that bans all kinds of gambling. The Act prohibits the running of the so-called common gaming houses and the involvement in such activities strictly. This law is based on constitutional and religious directions, creating an uncontested, evidence-based law and judicial position on gambling in the legal system. The law can impose fines and imprisonment on both the operators and the

participants, to which the law does not deviate; nevertheless, the implementation of the law is limited to physical, tangible sites.

2. The Regulatory Lag and Jurisdictional Void: The main problem is that the applicable Act of 1977 predates the Internet and does not explicitly refer to or cover online platforms, betting applications, or cyber-based transacting. Such an omission forms a major grey area of jurisdiction. Offshore betting firms are capitalizing on this legal beat around the bush, by citing the fact that there exists no explicit law specifically prohibiting digital gambling to warrant that their services will go unaddressed within the immediate view of the archaic law, thus spreading their services with apparent impunity.

3. Existing Enforcement Mechanisms: However, since there is no specific legislation on the issue of online gambling, government regulating agencies and cybercriminals have no option other than using larger laws of the land to curb the vice. It is mainly by citing the jurisdiction of the telecommunication authorities to block off URLs and software, as well as applying the currently available legislative provisions on cybercrime to punish the promoters, fraudsters, and money launderers engaging in the schemes. This hodgepodge position, though, has serious challenges because of the decentralized and ever-changing character of the digital platform

Challenges for Gambling and Digital Betting in Pakistan

The battle against the emergence of online betting is one that is also full of challenges, but in large part this is due to the technological superiority of the site and the very shortcomings of the current regulatory framework.

1. Legal and Jurisdictional Loopholes: The Prevention of Gambling Act of 1977 is essentially an outdated law that does not directly cover cases of internet-based games and poses a serious gap in the law. Also, most of these activities are offshored, making it significantly difficult to prosecute and enforce by law. The domestic legislation of the archaic type cannot oblige the foreign operators to do so, creating a state of regulatory arbitrage that is persistent.

2. Scale, Volume, and Social Contagion: A simple presence of Scale and Volume of the number of new platforms that constantly appear overwhelms and floods the small resources of national cybercrime investigation agencies. The unstoppable and ubiquitous Normalization of Illegal Activity perpetrated by social media influencers negatively affects this attempt. This digital marketing is in high demand and attracts new young users, such that when one platform is blocked, another will replace it, and it is difficult to ensure total containment, considering this is now a virtually impossible task

3. Technological Evasion and Anonymity: The techs have Platform Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), advanced mirroring measures, to circumvent local site and application bans by telecommunication censors. More importantly, the availability of decentralized financial tools such as cryptocurrency and peer-to-peer (P2P) transfers offers almost flawless anonymity of transactions, devastating the skills of financial surveillance organs to monitor the flow and laundering of illegal capital and money.

Opportunities for Gambling and Digital Betting in Pakistan

The opportunities for national economic repaired, modernization of law, and the improvement of social well-being are great in the case of reaching a positive result in addressing the crisis of uncontrolled online betting.

1. Economic Recovery and Financial Integrity: A special initiative on illegal transfers, especially those mediated by cryptocurrency and offshore actors, is an opportunity to bring and hold back billions of dollars in money that is leaving the nation at this time. Sealing such loopholes

increases the financial integrity of the country, helps to collect taxes, and encourages the formal economy, reducing the possibility of money laundering on a large scale.

2. Improved Social Welfare and Cyber Resilience: The effective locking down of the proliferation of these schemes will result in a direct decrease in the gambling addiction rates altogether, and especially in youth, which in turn will result in improved mental well-being and social sanity. Through strengthening the national economic resilience by compelling regulators to address advanced cybercrime methods, the procedure also equips the agencies to deal with future digital threats in all sectors.

3. Modernization of Regulation and Technologies: The dynamic forces of fighting against digital betting compel the government to experience modernization of its legal framework and switch from the outdated former Act of 1977 to the new laws of cyber activity. This step creates a strong precedent of regulating the digital economy and creating a safe space for prerogative Fin tech creativity, as well as enhancing security and surveillance measures of local payment applications.

Discussion

Digital betting in Pakistan is not only a vice in society but also a grave failure on the part of the regulating state. The Obsolete 1977 Act has given birth to the Regulatory Lag, which has allowed the offshore entities to act with impunity, reshaping the problem as a physical gambling issue into a national economic and cybersecurity threat. The most important observation is the advanced technical bypasses used. Massive flight of illegal capital when we are talking about cryptocurrency transactions, and the normalization of a fraudulent procedure, promoted by the majesty of online content producers, contribute to the popularity of addiction among young people.

Although the enforcement agencies are under monumental pressure – they have to block new platforms and track down the decentralized funds all the time – it is obvious that the administration cannot afford not to act at the moment. To counter these risks, it is necessary to go beyond the solution of the piecemeal approach that has been in use and implement a holistic legislative framework that would control digital finance and online promotion as a way of transforming the present-day crisis into a pretext for massive legal and financial modernization.

Conclusion

The digital betting development presents a significant, threefold threat to Pakistan, which is perpetuated mainly by the existence of legal gaps resulting from the old legislation. The lack of regulation of this shadow economy enables the volume of illegal capital outflow through cryptocurrency, as well as contributes to a vast array of social vices through the application of online content creators to legitimize addiction, particularly among young people. Though the government is actively blocking websites, this spot patching is not the framework in which the threat can be kept in check. The final remedy lies through the modernization of laws- passing a wholesome framework that will seal the digital loopholes to maintain national economic integrity as well as keep the citizens in safe hands.

Recommendations

The issue of unregulated digital betting may necessitate a wholesale and urgent reform of legal, financial, and enforcement frameworks because they are multifaceted.

1. Create a National Inter-Agency Task Force: Have a specialized unit whose members are part of the financial regulators, cybercrime agencies, and telecommunication authorities to have a unified jurisdiction and quick response to the activities of digital betting.

- 2. Check and Lock Local Digital Payments Channels:** A recurrent security and compliance audit of all local digital payment applications should be conducted to list vulnerabilities and eliminate them instantly that the betting facilities use to store and restore funds.
- 3. Establish Mandatory Reporting Framework:** This is the establishment of a legal duty for all financial institutions and telecommunication companies to report any indications of organized illegal gambling or money laundering connected to such gambling to the applicable national enforcement agency.
- 4. Install state-of-the-art Money Tracking:** Dictate to local payment applications and banks to install AI-based transaction surveillance software that will be able to interpret suspicious patterns and automatically signify digital betting behavior and later capital flight.
- 5. Implement Zero-Tolerance Social Media Standards:** Establish and enforce legal penalties (tougher punishments) on the creators of online content and social media providers that will financially off from the surrogate advertising or marketing of financial betting mechanisms.
- 6. Implement a Public Health and Financial Literacy Campaign:** Invest and initiate a national and long-term public education campaign, mainly of young people, to inform them of the psychological dangers of addiction and the financial deceit accompanying unregulated digital gambling.
- 7. Mandatory:** Script Intensive Crypto KYC/AML compliance: require all domestic and foreign cryptocurrency exchanges and service providers doing business in the country to comply with its high Know-Your-Customer (KYC) and Anti-Money-Laundering (AML) standards on all transactions involving local currency.
- 8. Mandate ISP-Level Technical Blocks:** All Internet Service Providers (ISPs) should be required to have mandatory and dynamic DNS and IP blocking facilities in place to rapidly shut the door to new illegal betting sites and mirror sites.
- 9. Pass a Cyber Gambling Prohibition Act:** Size and pass fresh, linked, comprehensive legislation that itemizes and makes digitized betting an unlawful act, addresses the issue of cross-border online transactions as well as dominates that old-fashioned Act of 1977.
- 10. Strengthen International Enforcement Cooperation:** Share more with other foreign law enforcement agencies and regulators (e.g., Interpol) to decisively act against offshore betting operators and servers of the local citizens.

Research Limitations

This discussion is vulnerable to a number of major constraints posed by the study of an unregulated, illegal, and digitally hidden phenomenon. The major limitation is data scarcity and verifiability. With online illicit betting as a practice, quantitative data covering the demographics of users, sizes of transactions, and precise losses incurred are not readily available, nor are they large enough to rely on, and instead have to be estimated based on policy analysis and regulatory reports.

Second, there is the Anonymity of the Subject, which is also a challenge. Sites employ advanced technologies such as Virtual Private Networks and cryptocurrency to hide their activities and financial transactions, and it is practically unfeasible to determine the actual scale of illegal capital leakage and the final beneficiaries of the sites. Lastly, the study is limited to the Secondary Source Analysis. Real-time, classified enforcement data, including internal reports of cybercrime agencies on active investigations or the effectiveness of blocking efforts, is classified information. It curbs the possibility of determining entirely the existing effectiveness of regulatory counter-strategies.

Research Implications

This study has tremendous consequences for different sectors that are mandated to curb the risks of digital betting.

1. In the case of Civil Society and Social Media Platforms: The role that online content creators play in the promotion of illegal activity is documented, implying a profound need for Digital Literacy and Accountability. Civil society movements that educate people about the process of normalizing digital fraud and platforms that have more stringent content rules in promoting illegal financial schemes are clearly needed.

2. To Policymakers and the Judiciary: The results are categorical on the issue of the Regulatory Lag, which poses dangers to national security and finance. The first implication is the urgent necessity of legal modernization: the replacement of the outdated (1977) Act with the special Cyber Gambling Prohibition Act, which explicitly relates to the anonymous digital money and online transactions between countries.

3. To Financial and Cyber Regulators: The study shows that there is an essential change in the criminal approach that is characterized by the utilization of cryptocurrency and domestic payment applications. The implication is that the enforcement agencies are quickly forced to divert their resources out of the traditional crime-fighting efforts and focus on building new capabilities in digital forensics, tracing transactions, and regulatory control of decentralized financial services.

Future Research Directions

To elaborate on this initial analysis and inform and shape policy in the future, the following areas of research must be considered:

1. Comparison Analysis of Enforcement Efficacy: Future studies should include the comparative analysis of the success rates of various tools of enforcement. It consists of assessing the success of blocking websites and applications in the long term, understanding the outcome of the prosecutions made whenever the existing laws about cybercrime have been broken, and also the best practices that have been implemented in other countries experiencing the same regulatory problems.

2. Illicit Capital Flows Measurement: Future studies should be oriented towards the creation of an elaborate econometric model to estimate the level of illicit capital flight and loss of tax revenue as a result of online betting. The research must be able to follow the trace specifically on the presence of the money sent through the cryptocurrency exchanges and domestic digital payments apps to provide verifiable information to the financial authorities.

3. Psychological and Social Media Impact Assessment: It means that studies in the primary field are required to define the direct psychological effect of betting promotion offered by influencers among youth. It should entail the analysis of the specific tactics used in the social media platforms and the evaluation of their success in inoculating the risky financial behavior and addiction.

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