



Cross-border gambling as late-life leisure: social practices, mobility, and moral tensions in a Thai–Cambodian borderland

El juego transfronterizo como ocio en la vejez: prácticas sociales, movilidad y tensiones morales en una zona fronteriza entre Tailandia y Camboya

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Abstract

Introduction: Gambling among older adults is frequently framed through moral or clinical lenses, yet its function as a socially embedded leisure practice remains underexplored, particularly in borderland contexts characterized by recreational scarcity and high everyday mobility.

Objective: This study examined gambling among older adults in a Thai–Cambodian borderland, focusing on participation patterns, mobility-based accessibility, socio-psychological motivations, and perceived impacts on well-being and family relationships.

Methodology: A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed. Quantitative data were collected from 440 older adults using multi-stage stratified cluster sampling, complemented by in-depth interviews with 132 older adults, family members, and community leaders.

Results: Lifetime gambling participation was reported by 41.6% of respondents, with high awareness of informal shuttle-van systems facilitating access (78.2%). Gambling functioned primarily as coping-oriented leisure driven by social engagement (mean = 4.12) and alleviation of loneliness (mean = 3.95). A paradox of impact emerged, whereby subjective gratification (43.4%) coexisted with emotional strain (67.2%) and financial depletion (67.8%).

Discussion: The findings indicate that gambling operates as a structurally conditioned leisure substitute shaped by borderland mobility and a persistent recreational vacuum rather than individual pathology.

Conclusions: Leisure-led policy responses emphasizing accessible, socially meaningful, and age-appropriate alternatives are essential for supporting later-life well-being in peripheral contexts.

Keywords

Late-life leisure; gambling behavior; borderland mobility; recreational vacuum; coping leisure.

Resumen

Introducción: El juego en adultos mayores suele interpretarse desde enfoques morales o clínicos; sin embargo, su función como práctica de ocio socialmente integrada permanece poco explorada, especialmente en contextos fronterizos caracterizados por escasez recreativa y elevada movilidad cotidiana.

Objetivo: Examinar el juego en adultos mayores residentes en una zona fronteriza entre Tailandia y Camboya, con énfasis en los patrones de participación, la accesibilidad mediada por la movilidad, las motivaciones sociopsicológicas y los impactos percibidos en el bienestar y las relaciones familiares.

Metodología: Se empleó un diseño mixto convergente en paralelo. Los datos cuantitativos se recopilaban de 440 adultos mayores mediante muestreo por conglomerados estratificado, complementados con entrevistas en profundidad a 132 informantes clave, incluidos adultos mayores, familiares y líderes comunitarios.

Resultados: La participación en el juego fue del 41.6%, con un alto nivel de conocimiento de sistemas informales de transporte que facilitan el acceso (78.2%). El juego operó principalmente como ocio de afrontamiento, impulsado por la interacción social (media = 4.12) y la mitigación de la soledad (media = 3.95). Emergió una paradoja de impacto, en la que la gratificación subjetiva (43.4%) coexistió con tensión emocional (67.2%) y deterioro financiero (67.8%).

Discusión: Los hallazgos indican que el juego actúa como un sustituto del ocio condicionado estructuralmente por la movilidad fronteriza y un persistente vacío recreativo, más que por una patología individual.

Conclusiones: Se requieren políticas de ocio orientadas a la creación de alternativas accesibles, socialmente significativas y adecuadas a la edad para promover el bienestar en la vejez en contextos periféricos.

Palabras clave

Ocio en la vejez; conducta de juego; movilidad fronteriza; vacío recreativo; ocio de afrontamiento.

Introduction

Population aging has become a defining feature of contemporary societies, reshaping not only health and welfare systems but also everyday patterns of leisure, social participation, and emotional well-being. Leisure in later life is increasingly recognized not merely as a discretionary activity, but as a critical resource through which older adults sustain social connection, regulate emotional stress, and preserve a sense of meaning amid shrinking social roles and changing life circumstances (Toepoel, 2013; Fakoya et al., 2020). While a substantial body of research has highlighted the benefits of leisure engagement for aging populations, much of this scholarship has been developed in contexts where recreational opportunities are institutionally organized, culturally legitimized, and spatially accessible (Merchant et al., 2020; Jun & Choi, 2024). Consequently, far less is known about how older adults negotiate leisure in environments characterized by structural constraint, limited alternatives, and a persistent “recreational vacuum,” particularly in peripheral and rural settings where leisure choices are shaped less by preference than by availability.

Within this broader literature, gambling occupies a particularly ambiguous position. Dominant research traditions have tended to frame gambling through moral, legal, or clinical lenses, emphasizing deviance, addiction, or individual risk (Subramaniam et al., 2015; Guillou Landreat et al., 2019). Although these perspectives have generated important insights, they have also narrowed analytical attention to individual behavior, often obscuring the social and spatial conditions under which gambling becomes meaningful in later life. Emerging gerontological scholarship suggests that, for some older adults, gambling functions less as an economic pursuit and more as a socially embedded leisure practice that provides stimulation, companionship, and temporary relief from social isolation (Zaranek & Chapleski, 2005). Qualitative studies further indicate that gambling may operate as a routine social practice embedded within everyday leisure and relational networks rather than as an exceptional or deviant act (Johnson et al., 2024). Such interpretations are frequently conceptualized through the notion of coping-oriented leisure, wherein leisure practices function as adaptive responses to stress, loss, and constrained life circumstances, contributing to emotional regulation and resilience in later life (Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000; Denovan & Macaskill, 2017). However, these perspectives remain underdeveloped in non-Western and peripheral contexts, where older adults face a persistent recreational vacuum and limited access to age-appropriate leisure alternatives.

This limitation is particularly evident in borderland contexts, where everyday life is shaped by mobility, informality, and the coexistence of multiple regulatory regimes. In such settings, accessibility to gambling is actively structured through transnational mobility infrastructures, including informal transportation systems, rather than determined solely by individual preference (Ford, 2023). In Southeast Asia, and notably in Thailand, these dynamics intersect with strong normative frameworks rooted in Buddhist moral teachings that emphasize restraint, alongside strict legal prohibitions under the Gambling Act of 1935. Importantly, Thailand has now entered a super-aged society, with older adults comprising more than 21% of the national population. This rapid demographic transition has intensified long-standing structural challenges, particularly in peripheral and borderland regions where age-appropriate leisure infrastructures and social services have not expanded at the same pace as population aging (Nilstomt et al., 2024). Within this context, older adults routinely encounter gambling opportunities as part of normalized everyday mobility, producing a socio-moral disjunction between legal and religious ideals and the lived realities of later-life leisure.

Despite the global relevance of these dynamics, empirical studies have seldom examined how borderland infrastructures shape gambling as a form of late-life leisure. Even less attention has been given to how such practices become embedded within family and community relations over time (Johnson et al., 2023; Pitt et al., 2023). To address this gap, the present study examines gambling behavior among older adults living in a Thai–Cambodian borderland, using Si Sa Ket Province as an empirically grounded case study. Preliminary descriptive findings from this dataset, focusing on attitudinal dimensions and motives, have been previously reported in Thai-language outlets (Tongterm et al., 2024; Thaklong & Tongterm, 2024); however, the present study advances the analysis by reconceptualizing gambling within a socio-structural leisure framework that foregrounds mobility, leisure constraint, and social embeddedness rather than clinical pathology. Specifically, this study aimed to: 1) examine patterns and prevalence of gambling behavior, with particular attention to access to



cross-border casinos and the role of shuttle-van mobility systems; 2) analyze the socio-psychological motivations underlying gambling as a form of coping-oriented leisure in response to a recreational vacuum; and 3) explore perceived impacts of gambling participation on individual well-being and family dynamics. By situating gambling within the intersecting domains of mobility, leisure constraint, and social embeddedness, this study demonstrates that late-life leisure practices are shaped not only by individual choice, but also by structural conditions and relational contexts in peripheral settings.

Method

To address the study objectives and ensure analytical coherence with a socio-structural interpretation of gambling as late-life leisure, this research employed a context-sensitive Convergent Parallel Mixed-Methods Design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This design was intentionally selected to capture both the structural prevalence of gambling participation and the lived meanings, relational dynamics, and infrastructural conditions through which gambling is embedded in everyday life within a Thai-Cambodian borderland. Given the complexity of leisure practices shaped by a persistent recreational vacuum, reliance on a single methodological tradition would have been insufficient. Accordingly, quantitative and qualitative components were integrated to provide a comprehensive and empirically grounded interpretation of gambling as a socially embedded form of late-life leisure.

Research design and epistemological orientation

This study adopted a mixed-methods design with an interpretive epistemological orientation, moving beyond a clinical or moralized framing of gambling toward an understanding of gambling as a socially embedded leisure practice. Quantitative components were employed to document the scope, patterns, motivations, accessibility, and perceived impacts of gambling participation among older adults. Qualitative components were used concurrently to contextualize these patterns within everyday social practices, family relations, and community norms. This positioning aligns with methodological scholarship emphasizing the necessity of integration when examining complex social and health-related phenomena in aging populations (Mertens, 2019).

Study context

The research was conducted in Si Sa Ket Province, a northeastern Thai province located along the Thai-Cambodian border. The area is characterized by routine cross-border mobility, proximity to casino-based leisure economies, and a persistent lack of age-appropriate, state-supported recreational provision for older adults. Informal shuttle-van systems linking rural communities to gambling venues represent a distinctive structural condition in this setting and function as a form of manufactured accessibility shaping leisure choices in later life (Jones & Ferdoush, 2018). This borderland context therefore constitutes a suitable empirical setting for examining gambling as late-life leisure embedded within structural constraint rather than individual preference alone.

Participants and sampling strategy

The study population comprised community-dwelling older adults aged 60 years and above who had resided in Si Sa Ket Province for at least one year. The quantitative phase employed a multi-stage stratified cluster sampling strategy to ensure geographic and socio-spatial representativeness across the province ($n = 440$).

Sampling was conducted in four stages. First, 11 out of 22 districts (50%) were randomly selected using simple random sampling. Second, one subdistrict was randomly selected from each selected district. Third, two villages were randomly selected per subdistrict, resulting in 44 village clusters. Fourth, approximately ten older adults were recruited from each village using community-based convenience sampling. The final sample size was determined using Yamane's formula (1973) at a 95% confidence level, ensuring sufficient statistical power to generalize findings within the borderland context.

Inclusion criteria required participants to be aged 60 years or older, to have resided in the study area for at least one year, and to be capable of providing informed consent. Individuals with severe cognitive impairment or significant hearing limitations were excluded to ensure data reliability and ethical integrity.



Qualitative subsample and interpretive credibility

To enhance interpretive depth and relational validity, a purposive qualitative subsample of 132 informants was drawn using a perspective triangulation strategy (Patton, 2015). This subsample comprised 44 older adults who reported gambling participation, 44 family members, and 44 community leaders or local administrators. This tripartite structure enabled examination of the paradox of impact across individual, familial, and community lenses rather than from a single experiential standpoint.

Qualitative data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved. Credibility was strengthened through member checking, whereby emerging interpretations were iteratively discussed and verified with participants during fieldwork (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data generation and instrumentation

Quantitative data were collected through face-to-face interviews using a structured questionnaire. Content validity was assessed by three experts in aging, leisure studies, and social research, yielding an index of item-objective congruence of 0.84 (Turner & Carlson, 2003). A pilot test confirmed cultural appropriateness and clarity. The motivational scale demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82, exceeding accepted reliability thresholds (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The survey documented demographic characteristics, gambling participation patterns, perceived impacts, and accessibility to shuttle-van services, which were known to 78.2% of the sample.

Qualitative data were generated through semi-structured in-depth interviews focusing on everyday gambling practices, motivations, family dynamics, and community perceptions. To minimize social desirability bias, interviews were conducted in informal community settings using a neutral research persona and non-judgmental questioning techniques.

Data analysis and ethical considerations

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, in direct alignment with the research objectives. Qualitative data were analyzed using interpretive thematic analysis, with attention to recurring patterns related to borderland mobility, recreational constraint, coping-oriented leisure, and relational embeddedness (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred at the interpretive stage, allowing statistical trends to be examined in dialogue with lived narratives rather than treated as separate analytical streams.

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of Sisaket Rajabhat University (Protocol No. HE652007). Voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality were strictly observed. Participants were explicitly informed that their responses would not be used for legal, moral, or clinical evaluation, thereby fostering a non-judgmental environment essential for discussing sensitive leisure practices in later life.

Results

The results are presented to elucidate how gambling operates as a form of late-life leisure within the specific socio-spatial conditions of a Thai-Cambodian borderland. Rather than conceptualizing gambling solely as an individual behavior, the findings foreground the interaction between structural accessibility, socio-psychological motivations, and relational consequences embedded in everyday life. Accordingly, the results are organized to first delineate patterns and prevalence of gambling participation in relation to borderland mobility and access to gambling spaces. They then identify socio-psychological motivations through which gambling is framed as a meaningful leisure choice amid social isolation and limited recreational alternatives in later life. Finally, the results document perceived impacts on individual well-being and family dynamics, highlighting the coexistence of subjective enjoyment and accumulated social strain within a normalized borderland context.

Socio-spatial accessibility and gambling participation in a Thai-Cambodian borderland

The findings demonstrate that gambling constitutes a salient component of later-life leisure practices among older adults living in the Thai-Cambodian borderland. Of the 440 respondents, 41.6% reported



lifetime engagement in gambling, while 25.0% indicated active participation within the past six months. This pattern suggests that gambling persists as an ongoing leisure practice in older adulthood rather than a residual behavior carried over from earlier life stages.

A central structural factor shaping gambling participation was socio-spatial accessibility, particularly through the shuttle-van mobility system that connects rural households to gambling spaces, including cross-border casinos. Although direct participation in cross-border casinos was reported by only 1.1% of respondents, a substantially larger proportion of participants, amounting to 78.2%, reported awareness of or access to shuttle-van services facilitating such travel. This finding indicates that gambling-related mobility has become socially normalized within the local leisure environment, effectively reducing physical, economic, and social barriers to participation despite legal and geographic boundaries. The widespread awareness of mobility infrastructure, even among individuals who do not regularly cross the border, suggests a form of latent accessibility through which casinos are perceived as a proximal rather than distant leisure option within everyday life.

Most gambling activity was reported in community-based environments, accounting for 36.1% of participation, including local lottery outlets and social events. However, qualitative accounts consistently described the shuttle-van system as a shared social mechanism rather than a purely logistical service. As one participant explained, "It is not just a ride; they take care of us, give us food, and we sit together like a group." These accounts illustrate how mobility infrastructure functions as an informal substitute for limited state-supported recreational provision, transforming gambling-related travel into a collective and socially supported leisure practice within the borderland context. Within this recreational vacuum, the mobility system provides not only transportation but also social visibility, companionship, and a sense of group belonging that is otherwise limited in the residents' daily lives.

Gambling as coping leisure in a recreational vacuum

Analysis of motivational factors reveals that gambling engagement among older adults is primarily driven by socio-psychological needs rather than instrumental financial gain. The highest-rated motivations were social engagement and excitement (mean = 4.12, SD = 0.72), followed by the alleviation of loneliness (mean = 3.95, SD = 0.78) and the socio-cultural normalization of gambling within community or family networks (mean = 3.65, SD = 0.85). In contrast, economic aspirations were rated at a moderate level (mean = 3.20, SD = 0.92), indicating that financial motives played a secondary role in shaping gambling participation in later life. These patterns suggest that gambling venues function not primarily as sites of economic pursuit, but as socially meaningful leisure spaces that resemble informal community gathering points for older adults.

Taken together, these motivational patterns point to the presence of a recreational vacuum within the borderland, in which gambling emerges as a dominant leisure choice under conditions of constrained or absent alternatives. Participants consistently characterized gambling spaces as environments where they felt socially recognized and emotionally engaged, often contrasting these experiences with feelings of social invisibility in everyday rural domestic life. As one older adult stated, "The casino is the only place where we feel seen and active; it feels like our social club." Such accounts indicate that gambling spaces operate as informal leisure settings that provide opportunities for social interaction, excitement, and routine participation that are otherwise limited in later life.

Qualitative narratives further reveal that gambling participation was frequently framed as a means of coping with social isolation, bereavement, and the gradual narrowing of social roles associated with aging. Rather than emphasizing monetary outcomes, participants highlighted feelings of liveliness, companionship, and temporary relief from psychological distress, suggesting that gambling functioned as a coping-oriented leisure practice within a context characterized by limited age-appropriate recreational infrastructure in the borderland setting.

The paradox of impact: individual well-being and familial embeddedness

The perceived impacts of gambling participation reveal a structural paradox between short-term psychological benefits and longer-term socio-economic strain. At the individual level, 43.4% of respondents identified gambling as a source of daily happiness and mental stimulation, indicating that participation was experienced as emotionally rewarding and cognitively engaging in everyday life. However, these perceived benefits coexisted with high levels of reported stress (67.2%) and depressive

symptoms (67.2%), suggesting a pattern of cyclical relief in which temporary emotional gratification was accompanied by a persistent and accumulated psychological burden.

At the familial and community levels, gambling participation was deeply embedded within social relationships rather than practiced in isolation. Over half of respondents (52.3%) reported that family members were aware of their gambling activities, reflecting a form of domestic normalization within household contexts. While gambling occasionally facilitated shared social moments, it was also fundamentally associated with financial depletion (67.8%) and reported relational strain (38.3%) within families. As one participant reflected, “Everyone in the family knows, but when money runs out, arguments begin,” illustrating how normalized leisure practices may generate cumulative relational tension and a condition of passive tolerance that masks underlying socio-economic erosion.

Within the borderland context, gambling was widely perceived as a normalized component of everyday life rather than as deviant behavior. This normalization appeared to reduce the visibility of transitions from leisure participation to harm, complicating both family-level monitoring and community-level responses. As gambling became routinized through social networks and mobility systems, its negative consequences were often recognized only after significant emotional or financial strain had accumulated, reinforcing the condition of socio-moral disjunction between lived realities and formal legal prohibitions.

Taken together, these findings indicate that gambling in later life operates as a socially embedded leisure practice shaped by structural accessibility, psychosocial needs, and relational dynamics rather than as a purely individual or pathological behavior. The results demonstrate that mobility infrastructures enable participation, that gambling functions as coping-oriented leisure within a peripheral recreational vacuum, and that its impacts are characterized by a precarious paradox between subjective gratification and familial or socio-economic strain. This empirical synthesis provides a coherent foundation for the following discussion, which situates these patterns within theoretical perspectives on late-life leisure, borderland mobility, and the normalization of risk in everyday social contexts.

Figure 1. The socio-structural framework of gambling as late-life leisure in a Thai–Cambodian borderland

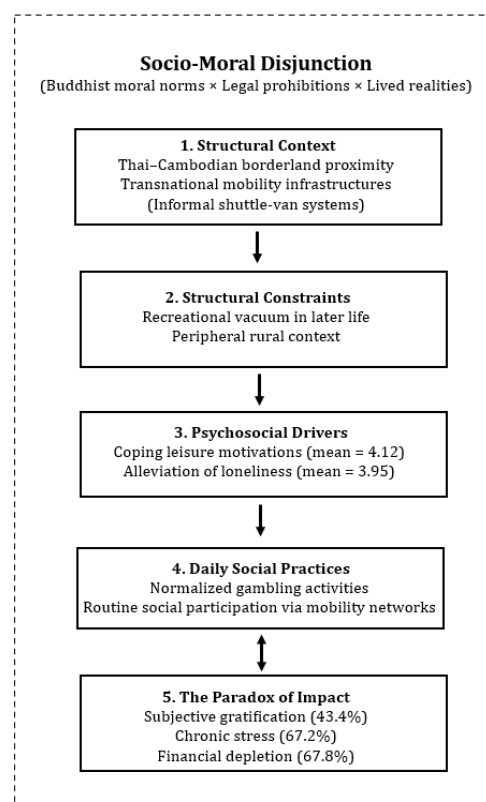


Figure 1 illustrates a socio-structural framework through which gambling emerges as a form of late-life leisure in a Thai–Cambodian borderland. The model depicts a sequential process linking structural context, recreational constraints, psychosocial drivers, and everyday social practices, culminating in a paradox of impact characterized by simultaneous subjective gratification and cumulative socio-economic strain. The framework is situated within a broader condition of socio-moral disjunction, reflecting tensions between moral norms, legal prohibitions, and lived realities, which shape but do not directly determine individual behavior.

Discussion

The present study advances the understanding of gambling among older adults by reframing it as a form of late-life leisure shaped by structural conditions rather than individual pathology or moral deviation. Grounded in empirical evidence from a Thai–Cambodian borderland, the findings illuminate how leisure practices in later life are negotiated at the intersection of mobility infrastructures, recreational scarcity, and relational embeddedness. This perspective aligns with contemporary leisure theory, which conceptualizes leisure in later life not merely as discretionary activity, but as a critical resource for sustaining meaning, social presence, and emotional regulation under conditions of vulnerability and constraint.

Borderland mobility as a structuring force of late-life leisure

A key contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that gambling participation among older adults is structured less by intentional transgression than by routinized accessibility embedded in everyday mobility systems. The high level of awareness regarding informal shuttle-van services (78.2%) indicates that gambling opportunities are encountered through ordinary patterns of movement rather than pursued as exceptional or illicit acts. This finding highlights a distinctive borderland dynamic in which transnational mobility infrastructures quietly organize the horizon of possible leisure choices (Ford, 2023).

Importantly, the shuttle-van system operates as more than a logistical mechanism. It functions as a form of social infrastructure, providing predictability, companionship, and informal care. In peripheral borderland contexts where state-supported recreational services are limited, such infrastructures effectively define which leisure practices remain viable in later life. While research in urban settings has demonstrated how built environments shape leisure engagement (Finlay et al., 2021), the borderland context adds a critical layer of complexity. Here, manufactured accessibility does not diversify leisure options but channels older adults toward a singular, high-risk activity, rendering gambling a structurally enabled practice embedded within routine mobility rather than an exceptional choice (Jones & Ferdoush, 2018; Yang et al., 2023).

Crucially, this shuttle-van system represents a form of place-based social innovation specific to the borderland context. Unlike urban transport infrastructures that connect older adults to a wide range of recreational destinations, the shuttle-van networks in this region are functionally oriented toward casino access, reflecting the absence of equivalent leisure infrastructures. This spatial specificity helps explain why gambling emerges as a dominant leisure practice in borderland settings but is far less structurally entrenched in non-border urban contexts.

This finding underscores that accessibility alone is not inherently beneficial; its implications depend fundamentally on the range of leisure alternatives available.

Recreational constraint and gambling as coping-oriented leisure

Beyond mobility, the motivational patterns identified in this study reflect a broader condition of recreational constraint. High ratings for social engagement and excitement (mean = 4.12) point to a persistent recreational vacuum, particularly in rural later life, where opportunities for meaningful participation steadily diminish. Leisure coping theory suggests that individuals mobilize accessible activities as adaptive responses to stress, loss, and declining social roles (Toepoel, 2013).

The present study extends this theoretical framework by demonstrating that coping-oriented leisure is not merely an individual strategy but a structurally conditioned response to scarcity. While studies in

non-borderland contexts often frame older adult gambling primarily as financial risk-taking or health-compromising behavior (del Pino-Gutiérrez et al., 2022), the findings here diverge by illustrating that in the borderland setting, the “social club” atmosphere and the pursuit of social visibility are central drivers. Gambling is reconfigured from a profit-oriented activity into an existential filler, offering stimulation, routine, and recognition in contexts where alternative forms of engagement are absent or inaccessible (Denovan & Macaskill, 2017). This divergence highlights how spatial and infrastructural conditions fundamentally reshape the meaning and function of leisure practices.

The paradox of impact and relational embeddedness

One of the most analytically significant contributions of this study is the articulation of the paradox of impact. While gambling provides subjective enjoyment and momentary emotional regulation (43.4%), these benefits coexist with chronic emotional strain (67.2%) and material vulnerability. This pattern challenges linear interpretations of leisure as uniformly beneficial and diverges from idealized “successful aging” models. Instead, it reveals a process of cyclic relief, in which short-term emotional regulation is achieved at the cost of longer-term stability.

Crucially, gambling is not practiced in isolation but is relationally embedded within family life. Family awareness (52.3%) and passive acceptance delay the recognition of harm, allowing emotional and financial strain to accumulate gradually. Similar dynamics of routinized social practice have been documented in diverse cultural contexts (Johnson et al., 2024). However, in this borderland community, normalization is intensified by socio-spatial distance from centralized regulatory oversight. As a result, risky leisure practices can sustain social connection while simultaneously generating latent vulnerabilities that remain largely unaddressed until cumulative strain becomes visible.

Socio-moral disjunction and the limits of regulation

The findings further illuminate a structural disjunction between lived leisure practices and dominant normative frameworks in Thai society. Buddhist moral teachings and legal prohibitions under the Gambling Act of 1935 formally discourage gambling, yet these norms coexist with normalized leisure practices in the borderland. This coexistence should not be interpreted as moral erosion. Rather, it reflects the limits of regulation in the absence of supportive leisure infrastructures.

Consistent with public health research, gambling behavior among older adults is shaped primarily by social, environmental, and infrastructural determinants rather than individual morality alone (Johnson et al., 2023; Pitt et al., 2023). Under such conditions, prohibition without provision proves insufficient. Effective policy responses must therefore move beyond deterrence and address structural leisure deficits, particularly through the development of accessible, socially engaging, and culturally resonant recreational alternatives that can fulfill the same psychosocial functions currently occupied by gambling (Guillou Landreat et al., 2019).

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that gambling among older adults in a Thai–Cambodian borderland is most coherently understood not as an isolated moral lapse, pathological deviation, or residual habit from earlier life, but as a socially embedded form of late-life leisure shaped by structural accessibility, constrained recreational environments, and relational dynamics. Drawing on mixed-methods empirical evidence, the findings reveal how everyday mobility infrastructures, particularly informal shuttle-van networks, organize access to gambling spaces in ways that normalize participation as part of routine social life rather than exceptional transgression. Within this structural context, gambling emerges as a form of coping-oriented leisure through which older adults negotiate social isolation, emotional monotony, and a persistent recreational vacuum, functioning as a substitute leisure practice that partially fills gaps left by limited institutional provision for later-life recreation at both community and policy levels. At the same time, the study identifies a structural paradox of impact, whereby short-term subjective gratification coexists with chronic emotional strain and financial vulnerability, reflecting an interaction between limited leisure alternatives and everyday infrastructural conditions that allow risk to accumulate gradually through routine practices rather than overt deviance. By integrating empirically grounded evidence with a socio-structural and leisure-oriented analytical lens, this research



contributes to global debates on aging by proposing a conceptual shift from viewing gambling in later life solely as a risk-oriented behavior to understanding it as a structurally conditioned leisure substitute embedded in everyday social life, ultimately reframing gambling not as a marginal anomaly, but as a revealing indicator of how aging and leisure are negotiated under conditions of structural constraint.

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