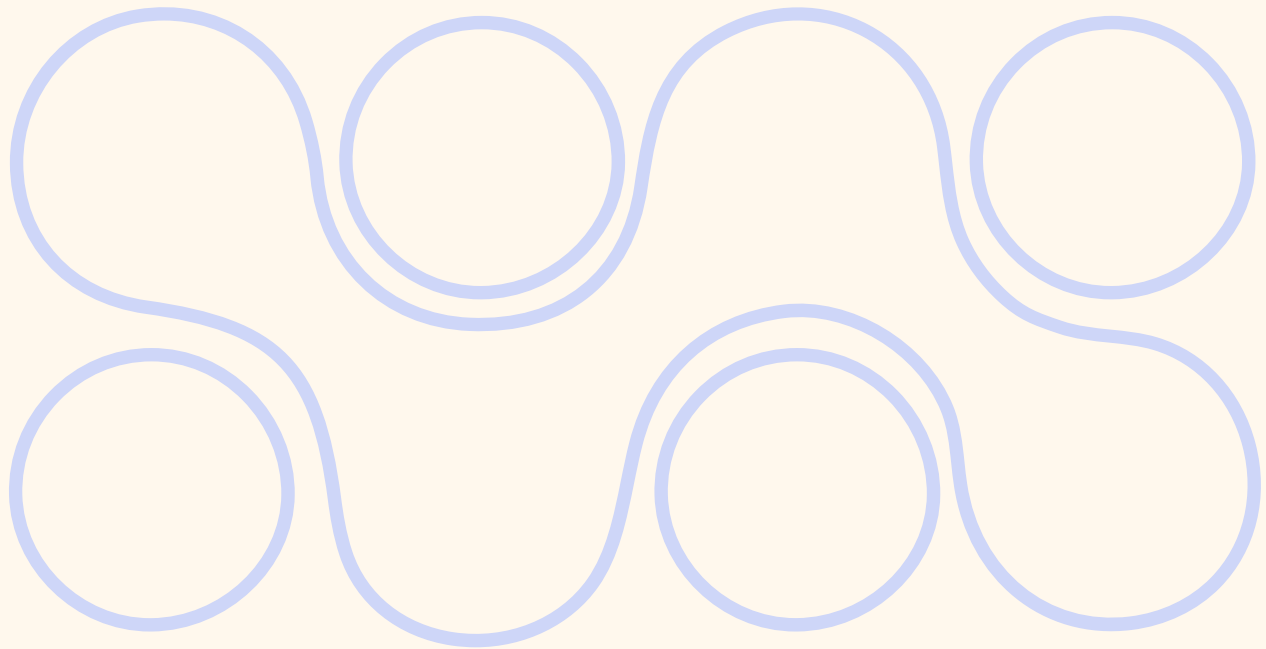


“It would Never have Happened Without the Pandemic”

Study on the increase in online
gambling habits during the pandemic.



Why this study?

During the pandemic, our social lives shrank, our habits went digital, and for some people, **online gambling became more than just a pastime**. The pandemic has transformed access to gambling, causing a massive shift to online platforms.

This research explores the experiences of 58 people who gamble in Quebec and who increased their online gambling habits during the COVID-19 health crisis.

The objective of this study was to examine the structural and environmental factors that contributed to this increase, as well as the role of gambling in these people's daily lives.

Methodology:

- Qualitative component of a mixed-methods longitudinal project
- 58 semi-structured interviews (Zoom) between July and November 2021
- Thematic analysis
- Two profiles:
 - Migrant (offline → online)
 - Continuous (already active online)

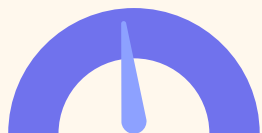
Profiles:



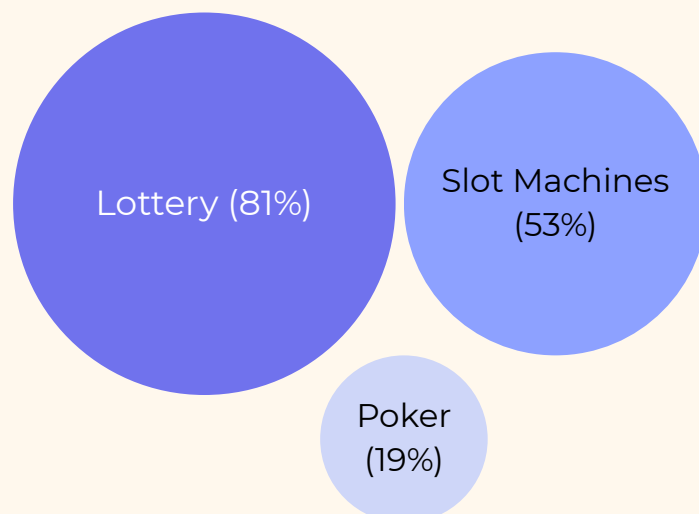
Of respondents were men



Had a post-secondary degree



Type of games:



Increase in practices during the pandemic

The study shows that, for many people, the pandemic resulted in **more time, more bets, and more variety in online gambling.**

This intensification took **two main forms:**

A temporary increase

For many, the **increase was limited in time**, often concentrated in the first months of lockdown when social activities were suspended.

Two scenarios emerged:

- **A temporary increase with no lasting consequences**, described as “a phase,”
- **A more concerning increase, but one that was corrected** by self-awareness or the implementation of personal strategies (self-exclusion, voluntary limitation).

“If I spent \$50 over three months, it was fine. In the sense that I wasn’t hooked, it was just to alleviate boredom, if you will.”



“Well, maybe I have a bit of a feeling that I’m no longer in control, unlike before, when I felt that I had control over gambling. Now I feel more like gambling is controlling me.”

A sustained increase

For others, **the increase persisted over time and remained** part of their daily lives at the time of the interview.

In some cases, this more regular practice was not perceived as problematic.

But for others, **it was accompanied by a gradual loss of control.**

Why have these practices become more widespread?

While the pandemic was a catalyst for many, **it was primarily the characteristics of online gambling**—and its digital environment—that facilitated the integration of this activity into daily life, sometimes temporarily, sometimes more permanently.

The study identifies several key factors that often interact dynamically:

Constant accessibility

Online gambling is available anywhere, anytime.

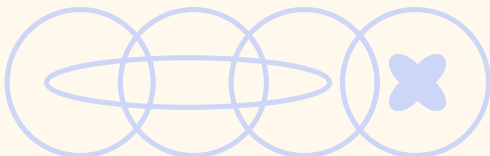
It fits easily into daily routines: phones are always close at hand, platforms are easy to use, and it is possible to gamble without anyone seeing, at any time of day.

The digital environment enables immediate access to games across a variety of devices, without time constraints or travel.

This convenience encourages **more frequent and potentially less conscious gambling.** The use of electronic payments (e.g., credit cards) makes losses less tangible, making it easier to exceed personal limits.

“I gambled more, it was easier, I mean I was in front of the screen, when you have to go buy tickets, [...] but then it became easily accessible.”

“When you’re at home, it’s all by credit card. So, it’s very easy to go over your self-imposed budget.”



Retention practices that promote engagement

Participants described **powerful retention mechanisms**: notifications, incentive emails, automatic top-ups, and personalized offers.

These strategies, often perceived as pushy, **maintain an active link** with the platform and encourage continued play, sometimes beyond what was initially planned.

“There is, I won’t call it harassment, but a certain obligation, they send [notifications] to you all the time to keep you as a customer.”

Omnipresent advertising and promotions

Many participants emphasized **the importance of increased advertising** during the pandemic: TV, emails, social media, etc.

The increase in screen time made this exposure even more striking.

These messages and offers (contests, bonuses, promotional money) had several effects:

- **introduction** to new games,
- **increased playing time**,
- incurrence of **additional spending**.

Some even described **a feeling of weariness, even annoyance**, at repeated advertisements.

For others, these promotions represented **an additional temptation** that was particularly difficult to resist for those trying to quit.

“Yes, because that’s how it is with Loto-Québec: you play a little, then you don’t for a week or two, and they send you a little message: ‘Here’s a little gold for you to go play with.’ So they’re, they know how to entice gamblers.”

The role of gambling during the pandemic: four scenarios

Beyond accessibility and operators' commercial practices, online gambling has become part of participants' lives by fulfilling two main functions:

- **Substitution:** replacing leisure activities or habits that are impossible to practice due to health measures,
- **Compensation:** alleviating or compensating for difficulties related to the crisis context (stress, isolation, boredom, precariousness).

Replacing pre-COVID outings and leisure activities

When restaurants, bars, and social activities disappeared, **many turned to online gambling as a substitute “little pleasure”**—a way to recreate a moment of relaxation or treat themselves.

Continuing offline gambling habits

Players who frequented casinos or organized games among friends found in digital platforms and videoconferencing **a way to maintain their gambling routines**, despite the distance.

Seeking an emotional escape

Stress, isolation, boredom: for many, gambling served as a psychological outlet. **Winning or simply playing offered distraction, excitement, or a break** from a monotonous and anxiety-inducing daily routine.

Gambling to make up for financial shortfalls

Some people, affected by job loss or reduced income, **hoped that gambling would compensate for their economic insecurity**.

Conclusion

Online gambling has crept into our lives discreetly but with effectiveness.

During the pandemic, it sometimes filled a void - temporal, and financial voids, and in some cases, took root.

For some players, this was a temporary adjustment. For others, the exceptional circumstances led to a marked increase in gambling, or even a loss of control.

The collected testimonies reveal the **decisive impact of the digital environment**, both in terms of its accessibility and in the commercial strategies of operators, which are often perceived as intrusive.

These findings highlight the importance of **rethinking the regulation of commercial practices** in online gambling, particularly during crisis situations, and of strengthening **prevention efforts** among vulnerable groups.



To go further

- **For yourself or your loved ones:**
 - Ask yourself about your gambling habits: frequency, motivation, impact on daily life
 - Turn off notifications from gambling platforms
 - Talk about your habits with someone you trust if they worry you
- **For education, health, or community professionals**
 - Include discussions about digital use in workshops or interventions
 - Raise awareness about the loyalty mechanisms used by platforms
 - Provide support resources

Key takeaways

The pandemic was a turning point in many people's online gambling habits.

Online gambling is **more accessible, more discreet, and more stimulating** than ever before.

It **can play an important role in times of crisis**—providing distraction, relief, and compensation.

The digital environment is designed to build loyalty: reminders, rewards, incentives.

It is **crucial to ensure stricter** regulation of digital marketing and to offer appropriate prevention measures.

Useful resources

- **Gambling: Help and Referral**
 - By phone (24 hours a day, 7 days a week)
 - Montreal and surrounding areas: 514-527-0140
 - Quebec: 1-800-461-0140
 - Chat (Quebec residents only)
 - [Click here to start a conversation](#)
- **Quebec addiction resource directory**
 - Access the directory [by following this link](#).

References

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Chaire de recherche sur
l'étude du jeu
Research chair on gambling studies



hermes@concordia.ca