

Article

The Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Sports Betting Tipsters as Professional Bettors: A Qualitative Interview Study

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Abstract: Although the COVID-19 pandemic impacted individuals who bet on sports, sports betting tipsters (SBTs; i.e., individuals who provide professional tips on the outcome of sporting events) were arguably among the most affected groups. Consequently, the aim of the present study was to explore how SBTs in Turkey were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, including alternate forms of gambling engagement (e.g., e-sports betting). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 85 SBTs aged between 20 and 48 years. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common themes. Based on the qualitative analysis, four themes emerged: (i) the meaning and role of sports betting, (ii) the effects of the pandemic on life and sports betting, (iii) comparing e-sports betting vs. traditional sports betting, and (iv) possible sports betting behavior if the pandemic continues. SBTs reported experiencing psychological distress as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic's cancellation of sporting events. More specifically, SBTs reported a sense of emptiness because of the lack of sports betting. Furthermore, SBT reported suffering a loss of income and turning to e-sports betting during the pandemic. However, the majority of SBTs did not find betting on e-sports as exciting as traditional betting but reported they would continue to engage in e-sports betting if traditional sports betting was not available. The findings of this study can contribute to a better understanding of the impact of SBTs on individuals and further provide practical implications for policymakers to promote a safe, sustainable, and long-term growth of the sports betting industry in Turkey.

Keywords: sports betting; sports betting tipsters; e-sports betting; COVID-19 pandemic; sustainable development



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1. Introduction

The novel coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19), which appeared in late 2019, soon became a global threat and was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) in March 2020 [1]. Consequently, governments have created various policies (e.g., quarantining, lockdowns, closing schools, banning events where large numbers of individuals congregate, etc.) to slow down and/or prevent the spread of the virus [2–4]. One of the consequences of these safety measures was the postponement or cancelation of almost all professional sporting events globally (national and international football [soccer] leagues and tournaments, Tokyo 2020 Olympics in Japan, Tour de France, Wimbledon tennis tournament, etc.) [5–7]. Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the sports industry, the sports betting sector was also affected worldwide, coming to a complete standstill [5,8–14]. The sports betting industry is an important sector of the global economy, generating billions of dollars in revenue and employing thousands of people [15].

Meanwhile, individuals who bet on sports were also affected by the pandemic and the behaviors and strategies of these individuals changed due to these unprecedented measures [5,8,11,15–18]. The cancellation of sporting events drastically affected sports bettors since they could no longer place bets on their favorite teams and sports. Moreover, although anyone who bet on sports was affected by the pandemic, those who bet on sports professionally (i.e., professionals) were the group that was most likely negatively affected. This is in part due to the loss of income as a result of the cancellation of sporting events. While individuals who bet on sports recreationally may be motivated to engage in sports betting for fun and excitement and to escape everyday stresses and strains [19–22], the primary motivation for those who bet on sports professionally is to make money and have a sustainable income [23,24]. While Hayano (1984) [25] defined professional gamblers as “those who derive all or a significant part of their income from gambling activities” (p. 159), Rosecrance (1988) [26] similarly defined them as individuals who “seek to carve out livelihoods from participation in gambling” (p. 221). It should be noted that these professional sports bettors are mostly affected financially as betting is the main source of their income.

Based on the idea that individuals who bet on sports aspire to have a sustainable income and livelihood through betting large amounts of money, some professionals also provide tips in relation to sports betting (i.e., they are also ‘tipsters’). Such individuals also fall within the scope of those who bet on sports professionally. Tipsters provide expert forecasts of sporting events. Their predictions may appear in sports journals, daily newspapers [27], and (with the development of new media) internet websites, and social media networks. Therefore, sports betting tipsters (SBTs) can be defined as individuals who provide information (tips) to other individuals, usually in exchange for money on the outcome of sporting events through both traditional and social media outlets. In addition, it should be noted that SBTs play an essential role in the sustainable development of the sports betting industry. According to the Global Online Sports Betting Market Research Report, the sports betting industry in Turkey has steadily grown in recent years and is expected to reach 921.4 million USD in 2026 [28]. Further, the revenue from the sports betting industry also supports the sustainable development of the sports industry in Turkey.

In recent years, those who bet on sports have had an increasing tendency towards wagering on e-sports and betting on virtual sports [16,29,30]. In addition, it is believed that as a result of the cancellation or postponement of sports events, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, professionals and tipsters have increasingly turned to e-sports betting to sustain their income [15,16]. Online tipster communities and professional tipsters can be viewed as a new type of sports-based entrepreneurship or investment analysts, and, as such, they might become role models for amateur bettors to emulate [31,32]. In this context, tipsters (who also qualify as gatekeepers/odd-setters in the name of sports betting) also affect the lives of other individuals who follow them or receive forecasting services from them [31,33–35]. López-Gonzalez et al. (2021) [32] stated that “tipsters can be harmful for bettors undergoing treatment for gambling disorder because tipsters can be viewed by bettors less as somebody who can help them and more as somebody they aspire to be” (p. 13). Therefore, exploring the SBTs’ behaviors can help better understand their impact on the lives of other individuals, develop a safer and protective gambling environment for individuals, and, ultimately, help make the sports betting industry sustainable in the long term.

Determining what changes the COVID-19 pandemic has caused in relation to the sports betting habits of SBTs is important in understanding its impact on this unique group. In addition, knowing the opinions of those who bet on sports professionally, regarding e-sport betting, may provide important information on the future of this novel form of gambling. Unfortunately, in the extant literature, the number of studies related to both professionals and SBTs is few. Additionally, previous studies on professionals were not conducted with any specific reference to SBTs [23,25,26]. More specifically, the studies that have been carried out on SBTs have focused on the performance of their betting

forecasts [8,27,33–35]. In short, no study has investigated the views and perspectives of individuals who bet professionally on sports and SBTs in relation to the social and psychological processes for sports and e-sports betting, especially in the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Consequently, the specific objectives of the present study were to (i) investigate how SBTs have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and (ii) examine the SBTs' views concerning e-sports betting within the context of professional sports betting. For this purpose, the following research questions (RQs) were addressed:

RQ1: What is the meaning and role of sports betting in the life of SBTs?

RQ2: How did the cancellation or postponement of sports events during the COVID-19 pandemic affect the lives of SBTs and their betting habits?

RQ3: Did e-sports betting carried out as a result of the cancellation or postponement of sports organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic meet the interests and excitement of SBTs to the same degree as sports betting on live events?

RQ4: How did the lack of sports betting, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, affect the SBTs' professional sports betting habits and future behavior?

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

A total of 102 SBTs were approached and 85 SBTs agreed to participate in the study (100% males; age = 29.52 years; SD = 0.65; range 20–48 years) (see Table 1). All of the SBTs participating in the study were found to have at least some risk of problematic sports betting (based on the PSBSI scores), and the majority of them (63 out of 85; 74%) were problematic sports bettors based on the PSBSI scores (Table 2). Consequently, the sample predominantly comprised professional bettors/tipsters who were experiencing gambling problems.

2.2. Procedure

The study was approved by the first author's university Ethics Committee. The data were collected between June 2020 and August 2020 (inclusive). Participants (N = 85) comprised SBTs who were interviewed via online meeting platforms (e.g., *Zoom*, *Google Meet*). To be included as a participant in the study, individuals had to have been engaged in providing sports betting tips through any online platform, as well as doing so through paid memberships. Judgment sampling (a type of purposive sampling) and snowball sampling methods were used to recruit participants. In judgment sampling, the researcher relies on their own judgment when choosing members of the target population for the study. Hing et al. [23] noted that people who gamble professionally generally prefer specific types of gambling, such as sports betting, and prefer to gamble in online environments. One of the online social media platforms most preferred by many individuals who bet on sports and used by gambling operators is *Twitter* [36], and gambling behavior on this platform has been examined in recently published studies (e.g., [37–40]). Therefore, online platforms where SBTs are heavily involved were used to target our sample.

In Turkey, the most appropriate online platform where SBTs are active is also on *Twitter*. Therefore, prior to participation, the SBTs were searched for on *Twitter* and the number of followers of the tipsters was examined. Then, the social media accounts of ten SBTs on *Twitter* were tracked for two weeks using the researchers' social media accounts. Consequently, contact was then made with the SBTs and they were (i) informed about the purpose of the study, and (ii) asked if they had a clientele group who paid fees on any online platform and how much the fee was. The SBTs reported using *Twitter*, *WhatsApp*, and/or *Telegram* to communicate their tips. The reason for asking these questions (on paid memberships, fee prices, and platforms used) was to ensure that participants were actual SBTs. Finally, they were asked if they would like to participate voluntarily.

Interviews were conducted with the tipsters who agreed to participate. Only the SBTs who reported having a clientele who paid for their sports tips and wanted to partic-

ipate were included. Then, with the help of snowball sampling, other SBTs with similar characteristics were contacted and then verified as an SBT by going through the checking procedure outlined above. The number of followers on *Twitter* of the tipsters who participated in the study varied between 1 and 12 k. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 20 to 30 min. All interviews were recorded with permission from the participants.

Table 1. Basic demographic information of participants ($n = 85$).

Participant	Gender	Age	PSBSI Score *	BAPM before COVID-19 in TL, (1€ = 7.72 TL) **	Participant	Gender	Age	PSBSI Score *	BAPM before COVID-19 in TL, (1€ = 7.72 TL) **
1	Male	30	6 (M)	7.5–10 k	44	Male	37	4 (M)	5–10 k
2	Male	24	6 (M)	5 k	45	Male	29	9 (PB)	3–5 k
3	Male	32	19 (PB)	15 k	46	Male	26	10 (PB)	6 k
4	Male	30	4 (M)	8–10 k	47	Male	32	16 (PB)	30–40 k
5	Male	26	11 (PB)	5 k	48	Male	27	5 (M)	10 k
6	Male	23	15 (PB)	20 k	49	Male	31	24 (PB)	10 k
7	Male	33	4 (M)	20 k	50	Male	31	6 (M)	15 k
8	Male	23	12 (PB)	5–10 k	51	Male	27	14 (PB)	30–50 k
9	Male	27	24 (PB)	4 k	52	Male	20	9 (PB)	2.5–5 k
10	Male	25	16 (PB)	30–40 k	53	Male	22	8 (PB)	5 k
11	Male	28	8 (PB)	50 k	54	Male	25	17 (PB)	10 k
12	Male	31	9 (PB)	10 k	55	Male	25	13 (PB)	10 k
13	Male	34	11 (PB)	5 k	56	Male	35	10 (PB)	7–10 k
14	Male	25	8 (PB)	4–7 k	57	Male	43	14 (PB)	20 k
15	Male	23	15 (PB)	3.5–5 k	58	Male	33	5 (M)	250 k
16	Male	36	13 (PB)	3–5 k	59	Male	38	12 (PB)	5 k
17	Male	36	11 (PB)	4 k	60	Male	32	8 (PB)	20–25 k
18	Male	26	3 (M)	4–5 k	61	Male	27	17 (PB)	5–7 k
19	Male	25	6 (M)	5 k	62	Male	28	13 (PB)	10–15 k
20	Male	38	11 (PB)	10 k	63	Male	39	10 (PB)	10–15 k
21	Male	28	9 (PB)	5 k	64	Male	20	4 (M)	5 k
22	Male	25	20 (PB)	3–5 k	65	Male	30	12 (PB)	5 k
23	Male	35	6 (M)	3–5 k	66	Male	39	8 (PB)	20–30 k
24	Male	23	19 (PB)	7 k	67	Male	31	8 (PB)	100 k
25	Male	23	6 (M)	5–6 k	68	Male	35	5 (M)	300–350 k
26	Male	21	19 (PB)	3–4 k	69	Male	43	4 (M)	35–40 k
27	Male	20	12 (PB)	5–10 k	70	Male	33	8 (PB)	15–20 k
28	Male	30	7 (M)	50 k	71	Male	23	3 (M)	5 k
29	Male	24	13 (PB)	10 k	72	Male	27	12 (PB)	10 k
30	Male	33	12 (PB)	10 k	73	Male	21	14 (PB)	7.5 k
31	Male	23	19 (PB)	17 k	74	Male	25	10 (PB)	4–6 k
32	Male	39	2 (LR)	10–20 k	75	Male	26	7 (M)	5–10 k
33	Male	34	8 (PB)	5–6 k	76	Male	27	21 (PB)	30 k+
34	Male	32	11 (PB)	7.5–15 k	77	Male	28	11 (PB)	25–50 k
35	Male	27	12 (PB)	5–10 k	78	Male	26	9 (PB)	30 k
36	Male	48	15 (PB)	5–10 k	79	Male	35	6 (M)	4–6 k
37	Male	23	12 (PB)	10–30 k	80	Male	42	11 (PB)	5 k
38	Male	30	12 (PB)	10 k	81	Male	23	6 (M)	8–10 k
39	Male	26	14 (PB)	5 k	82	Male	40	12 (PB)	50 k
40	Male	32	14 (PB)	3–5 k	83	Male	26	16 (PB)	50 k+
41	Male	32	14 (PB)	4–5 k	84	Male	26	11 (PB)	5 k
42	Male	30	2 (LR)	80 k	85	Male	30	12 (PB)	7–10 k
43	Male	36	9 (PB)	5 k					

Notes: BAPM = betting amount per month; TL = Turkish Liras; M = moderate; PB = problem bettor; LR = low-risk. * The final score ranges of SBASI 0 to 27: 0 = non-problem sports bettors; 1–2 = low-risk sports bettors; 3–7 = moderate-risk sports bettors; and 8 and more = problem sports bettors. ** On June 2020 1 € = 7.72 TL and the minimum wage in Turkey is 2.3 k TL.

2.3. Instruments

2.3.1. Semi-Structured Interview Questionnaire and Demographics

Participants were asked questions concerning (i) the role of sports betting in their lives, (ii) changes that had occurred in their lives, (iii) their sports betting behaviors, and (iv) their strategies as a result of the cancellation or postponement of sports events during

the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, demographic information was also collected, including age, gender, and the monthly amount of monetary spending on sports betting before the pandemic.

Table 2. Ranges of PSBSI scores.

Problem Sports Betting Severity Index Scores	n	%	Mean, SD	Range
Non-problem sports bettors	0	0		
Low-risk sports bettors	2	2.0		
Moderate-risk sports bettors	20	23.5	10.74; 4.90	2–24
Problem sports bettors	63	74.1		
Total	85	100		

2.3.2. Sports Betting Severity Index

The severity of the participants' sports betting problem was assessed using the Problem Sports Betting Severity Index (PSBSI; [20]). The PSBSI is an adapted and validated Turkish version of the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI; [41]) where the words 'gambling' and 'bet' were replaced with the words 'sports betting' and 'sports bet'. The PSBSI comprises nine items and the items are rated on a four-point scale from 0 (*never*) to 3 (*almost always*). The total scores range from 0 to 27. Participants were categorized into one of the following groups based on the PSBSI score: 0 = non-problem sports bettors; 1–2 = low-risk sports bettors; 3–7 = moderate-risk sports bettors; and 8+ = problem sports bettors.

2.4. Data Analysis

Recorded interviews were transcribed into written texts and analyzed using the NVivo (Version 12) software package. The stages followed using NVivo respectively: (i) importing data, (ii) coding, (iii) categorizing, (iv) queries, and (v) visualizing data. Interviews were conducted by researchers with knowledge and experience in qualitative research and a Ph.D. degree in communication, sports sciences, and sports management. Additionally, before coding, two training sessions were conducted in order to practice coding using content analysis [42,43]. A thematic content analysis was used to provide flexibility in capturing the complex and interacting nature of the qualitative interview [42,44]. Indeed, thematic content analysis allows for a rich and detailed understanding and explanation of unstructured data. The steps followed in the analytic process were [43]: (i) organizing and preparing the data for analysis, (ii) reading all the data, (iii) initial coding all of the data, (iv) generating descriptions and themes, and (v) representing the description and themes. An inductive approach was adopted during the analysis and the expressions used in the interpretation of the obtained data were classified as follows: 'most' (55 or more participants), 'many' (35–54 participants), 'some' (15–34 participants), and 'few' (14 or fewer participants).

The PSBSI was used to assess the problematic betting levels of the SBTs as professional bettors. The PSBSI questions were asked during the interview process and a score was then calculated by summing up the endorsements to each of the nine items. The summed scores resulted in participants being classed into one of four categories (i.e., 0 = non-problem sports bettors; 1–2 = low-risk sports bettors; 3–7 = moderate-risk sports bettors; and 8 and more = problem sports bettors). As a result of the analysis, the behavioral patterns of the SBTs were interpreted according to the problematic levels and were taken into consideration when making comments and evaluations concerning the qualitative data collected.

Validity

The interview questions were developed by researchers who have knowledge and experience in qualitative research and doctoral degrees in communication, psychology,

sports management, and behavioral addictions. Additionally, expert opinion was obtained from academics with specializations in psychology, gambling, sports, and communication.

3. Results

Based on the qualitative analysis, four key themes emerged from the data: (i) the meaning and role of sports betting, (ii) the effects of the pandemic on life and sports betting, (iii) comparing e-sports betting vs. traditional sports betting, and (iv) possible sports betting behavior if the pandemic continues. Various sub-themes of each theme also emerged. The analysis suggested that numerous themes overlapped and were interrelated. The themes ($n = 4$), sub-themes ($n = 16$), and their descriptions emerging from the analysis are outlined in Table 3. Additionally, the details of the four main themes and the 16 sub-themes, and their connection, are visually summarized at the end of the Results section (see Figure 1). As previously mentioned, approximately three-quarters of the participants in the sample met the criteria for problem gambling. Consequently, these participants tended to focus on describing how the pandemic had affected their own gambling behaviors rather than how the pandemic had affected their SBT business.

Table 3. Summary of the coding schema.

Theme	Sub-Themes	Description
Meaning and role of sports betting	Sports betting is the center of life Lifestyle Source of income Addiction Excitement	Sports bettors position sports betting at various points in their lives, and in this context, their betting habits are shaped. This theme and sub-themes were created in relation to the meaning and role of sports betting in the life of SBTs.
Effects of the pandemic on life and sports betting	Feeling of emptiness Turning to other types of betting Awareness of life Loss of income	After the COVID-19 pandemic began, almost all professional sporting events were globally postponed or canceled. This had impacts on both the lives and sports betting of SBTs. This theme and sub-themes are related to these effects.
Comparing e-sports vs. traditional sports betting	Real sports betting is better A bet is a bet E-sports betting is more exciting	SBTs turned into e-sports betting because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This theme and sub-themes were related to SBTs' feelings towards traditional real sports betting and e-sports betting.
Possible sports betting behavior if the pandemic continues	Seeking out new bets Continuing to bet on e-sports or Waiting to return to normal life Trying to quit betting gradually	As a result of the fact that the pandemic lasted longer than expected and affected all real sports betting, it was found that SBTs followed different strategies for their betting behavior during the pandemic. This theme and sub-themes are related to the strategies that SBTs said they would implement as a result of the continuation of the pandemic.

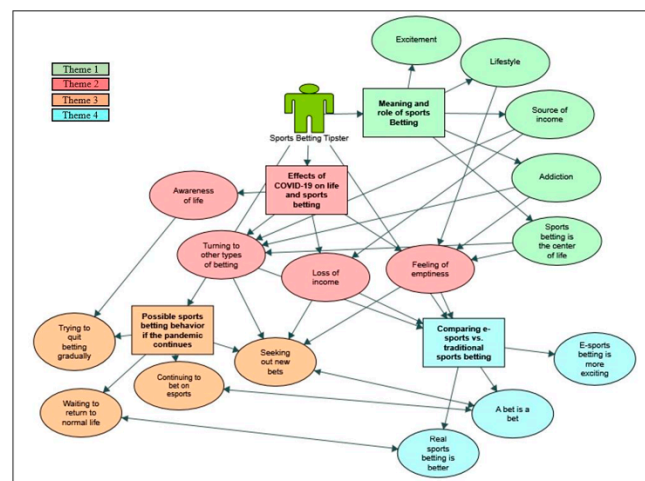


Figure 1. Summary of all main themes (squares) and the sub-themes (ovals), and their connections.

This section may be divided by subheadings. It should provide a concise and precise description of the experimental results, their interpretation, as well as the experimental conclusions that can be drawn.

3.1. Theme 1: Meaning and Role of Sports Betting

The study investigated how the SBTs were affected by the changes during the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, it was important to know the role and meaning of sports betting in the lives of the SBTs to gain a better understanding of how these individuals were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, this theme related to the importance, meaning, and role of sports betting in the lives of the SBTs. The sub-themes were: (i) sports betting is the center of life, (ii) lifestyle, (iii) excitement, (iv) source of income, and (v) addiction.

3.1.1. Sports Betting Is the Center of Life

This sub-theme emerged as a result of the admission that some SBTs place sports betting at the center of their life and that sports betting is indispensable for them. For example:

“The moments I enjoy the most and am happy in life are the moments when I bet and watch the sports match I bet on. Therefore, sports betting is a sine qua non for my life”

(Participant 33, aged 34, moderate-risk sports bettor).

“Sports and sports betting are an integral part of my life. I can tolerate the lack of many things, but not sports and sports betting” (Participant 24, aged 23, problem sports bettor).

“Sports betting is almost everything to me. I’d say my life equals betting. The sound of a goal has become the meaning of my life. In short, its absence does not allow me to breathe” (Participant 76, aged 27, problem sports bettor).

3.1.2. Lifestyle

This sub-theme emerged from descriptions of sports betting as a lifestyle. Some SBTs stated that they adopted betting as a lifestyle and that sports betting added value to their lives. For example:

“Sports betting is one of the biggest goals of my life and a lifestyle for me” (Participant 37, aged 23, problem sports bettor).

“Sports betting has a very important place in my life. I have been very good at football since I was 5–6 years old and I know all the teams very well. I devote all my time to sports betting and adjust myself to it” (Participant 73, aged 21, problem sports bettor).

3.1.3. Source of Income

In addition to the SBTs who placed sports betting at the center of their lives, some SBTs described sports betting as a source of income with a more professional and materialistic approach, although a few defined it as a labor of love. For example:

“I see sports betting as a job that helps me make a living. It’s like making money doing the job you love and getting excited while watching matches” (Participant 83, aged 26, problem sports bettor).

“For me, it was a source of hope for many years. I have always dreamed that one day I would make good money through this work. And now, with my experience and knowledge, I make good money from betting without gambling, without having any risk of losing. For me, betting is now just a good investment tool” (Participant 51, aged 27, problem sports bettor).

“I consider it purely a material gain because I play for the purpose of making guaranteed money (sure bet)” (Participant 68, aged 35, moderate-risk sports bettor).

3.1.4. Addiction

Some SBTs stated that sports betting was an addiction for them and that staying away from sports betting makes them psychologically uncomfortable. For example:

“Sports betting is just an addiction. I feel guilty when I do not make a bet that I think I am going to win. Or I lose sleep when I cannot somehow get back the money I lost. Bets appear in my dreams” (Participant 22, aged 25, problem sports bettor).

“I do see [sports betting] as a disease. But I cannot feel relaxed when I do not engage in betting, and then somehow, I find myself engaging in sports betting” (Participant 13, aged 34, problem sports bettor).

“Sports betting means losing for me. But I am keen on betting to the degree of addiction, and even though I know it is a dangerous addiction, it gives me happiness. Those who are addicted play this game mainly for the feeling and pleasure of winning” (Participant 41, aged 32, problem sports bettor).

3.1.5. Excitement

A few participants stated that they liked the excitement that sports betting gives them, and this excitement occurred mainly while watching football (soccer) matches. In addition, a few participants stated that following or watching sports events live was a complementary element of sports betting. For example:

“Excitement...I do not want to watch a match without making bet, and I cannot watch it anyway. I love the excitement of the bet” (Participant 12, aged 31, problem sports bettor).

“It is not important to win, to lose. I love the excitement, but of course, it is better to win when you are having fun. As an excitement, after making a bet, entering the betting site [gives the name of a betting office] and watching that animation, suspension of bets while watching it, and the goal... I am playing because I love that excitement” (Participant 71, aged 23, moderate-risk sports bettor).

3.2. Theme 2: Effects of the Pandemic on Life and Sports Betting

The postponement or cancellation of sports events around the world, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, affected not only the lives of SBTs, but also their sports betting preferences. Here, some sub-themes comprising how the SBTs were affected by the situation emerged. Accordingly, the sub-themes were: (i) feeling of emptiness, (ii) turning to other types of betting, (iii) awareness of life, and (iv) loss of income.

3.2.1. Feeling of Emptiness

Many SBTs stated that they felt a huge emptiness in their lives due to the lack of sporting events in which they could bet on, which, in their own words, was (as noted above) indispensable, a lifestyle, and/or addiction. While many of the SBTs had the same opinion on this issue, they emphasized the whole process as a psychologically meaningless time for them with feelings of emptiness. For example:

“I felt a big emptiness. I have never been so long away from betting, I am slowly getting used to it again with the start of the Bundesliga [German football league]” (Participant 21, aged 28, problem sports bettor).

“Bettors, like us, always feel empty when they do not have the competitions on which they can make bets. Likewise, it is the same for me. It changed my life in its entirety in a bad way. At no point in my life have I spent time apart from sports. I would say we spent life in vain” (Participant 50, aged 31, moderate-risk sports bettor).

3.2.2. Turning to Other Types of Betting

During the period when the COVID-19 pandemic affected all sports betting worldwide, SBTs' dependence on betting led them to seek pit-alternative forms of betting. Many of the

participants stated that they continued to bet during this period when there were no real sports bettings and that they turned to e-sports betting and virtual betting. For example:

“Does a betting guy care about a pandemic or something else? During the pandemic period, we invested our money in table tennis matches, which is neither fish nor fowl, and in Nicaraguan League matches in football, e-sports competitions [laughs]” (Participant 38, aged 30, problem sports bettor).

“During the pandemic, my interest in e-sports grew. I started to follow Counterstrike matches and teams. I also bet on cyber-FIFA matches and made good money” (Participant 52, aged 20, problem sports bettor).

“I turned to cyber football leagues and cyber volleyball betting, so I kept betting. We did not know what cyber league was before the COVID virus, now we’re experts” (Participant 61, aged 27, problem sports bettor).

3.2.3. Loss of Income

A few SBTs, whose aim was to make sports betting a regular and sustainable source of income, expressed that the most noticeable impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was the loss of income. For example:

“It caused a big blow to me financially because I was making [before the pandemic] a certain amount of profit by making sure bets with high amounts” (Participant 68, aged 35, moderate-risk sports bettor).

“I was adversely affected and normally had a loss of income because I was [previously] earning my income [from sports betting]” (Participant 42, aged 30, low-risk sports bettor).

“The inadequacy or lack of competition caused me to invest less. Of course, my income was affected” (Participant 51, aged 27, problem sports bettor).

3.2.4. Awareness of Life

Although most of the SBTs stated that they were adversely affected during the COVID-19 pandemic and that this led them to different outlooks, some SBTs stated that the pandemic was effective in providing a greater awareness of gambling. For example:

“I have devoted more time to my personal development. Getting away from betting even a little bit added to my life, I spent more time with my family” (Participant 19, aged 25, moderate-risk sports bettor).

“Because I was playing too much in normal times, I had a chance to rest during the pandemic period. I realized that it took a lot of place and time in my life. It made me feel really good” (Participant 82, aged 40, problem sports bettor).

“I am a little relieved. I mean, my psychology is relieved. It was a stress-free period. It made me think that I was a funnier and happier person” (Participant 57, aged 43, problem sports bettor).

3.3. Theme 3: Comparing E-Sports vs. Traditional Sports Betting

Most SBTs reported turning to other types of betting during the COVID-19 pandemic, and some preferred e-sports bets. Under this theme, some sub-themes related to the comparison of sports betting vs. e-sports betting in relation to interest and excitement. Here, the sub-themes were: (i) real betting is better, (ii) a bet is a bet, and (iii) e-sports betting is more exciting.

3.3.1. Real Sports Betting Is Better

Most of the SBTs stated that during the COVID-19 pandemic, they turned to e-sports betting, but these types of betting had some differences compared to traditional (real) sports

betting. Most of the participants were of the opinion that traditional (real) sports betting was better. For example:

“I think [e-sports and virtual sports betting] have nothing to do with real matches. It does not have the same effect on me because it doesn’t last long and is extremely amateur” (Participant 23, aged 35, moderate-risk sports bettor).

“Betting and maintaining are about how much you have a command of the sports branch that you are betting in. Since we do not have a command of e-sports and virtual betting, I think no one, like me, can maintain their excitement and interest to the same degree. I always prefer real betting” (Participant 54, aged 25, problem sports bettor).

“Betting on e-sports [vs. traditional sports betting] certainly did not create the same excitement. So, I have reduced the number of bets I was playing” (Participant 60, aged 32, problem sports bettor).

3.3.2. A Bet Is a Bet

Some SBTs stated that, when compared, e-sports and traditional betting did not create many significant changes in their betting preferences. In addition, they stated that it was important that it was enough for them to have an event that they could make a bet on. For example:

“My excitement about betting never changed under any circumstances . . . the only thing in this life that makes me happy after sex is betting. Therefore, betting is betting” Its content does not matter” (Participant 10, aged 25, problem sports bettor).

“I did not get the pleasure [as much from e-sports betting] as from [traditional] sports betting, but the pleasure it gave when I won was the same. Its difference is just the excitement when you are watching. The important thing for me is to be able to bet” (Participant 14, aged 25, problem sports bettor).

“The excitement in betting never ends, as long as we have something [competitively] that we can put money on and win” (Participant 39, aged 26, problem sports bettor).

3.3.3. E-Sports Betting Is More Exciting

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, some SBTs stated that e-sports betting was more exciting for them than traditional sports betting. For example:

“E-sport is much more exciting than [a traditional] football [bet]. I wish I had discovered it before” (Participant 28, aged 30, moderate-risk sports bettor).

“I enjoy it much more than normal football [traditional sports bet]. As long as I want to stay inside, I can continue [to bet anything], there is no need to wait for any time” (Participant 52, aged 20, problem sports bettor).

“I have experienced the suspension of odds on the betting site [giving a name of a betting site] in LigaPro as well and it was really cool. It was a very good time compared to classic betting” (Participant 71, aged 23, moderate-risk sports bettor).

3.4. Theme 4: Possible Sports Betting Behaviors If the Pandemic Continues

The SBTs said that if the COVID-19 pandemic continued for a long time, and continued to affect all sports competitions and betting, they would adopt different approaches to their betting behaviors and strategies. This theme is related to the continuation of the pandemic or, in similar situations, to the approaches and strategies that the SBTs would consider implementing. The sub-themes were: (i) seeking out new bets, (ii) continuing to bet on e-sports events, (iii) waiting to return to normal life, and (iv) trying to quit betting gradually.

3.4.1. Seeking Out New Bets

Many SBTs stated that even if the pandemic continues for a long time or something similar occurs in the future, their betting on sports and giving tips on these bets will continue. In this context, many participants asserted they would engage in new betting quests. For example:

“I would continue to engage in betting, and somehow, find a different method. Betting has been engraved on my soul and body. I will get a yellow-red card tattoo if I can” (Participant 75, aged 26, moderate-risk sports bettor).

“I do not want to give up betting. I can explore and learn e-sports or other betting, so I can bet anyway” (Participant 6, aged 23, problem sports bettor).

“I don’t think I can leave betting in any way. I would probably turn into 3x3, 4x4 betting or find something new” (Participant 31, aged 23, problem sports bettor).

3.4.2. Continuing to Bet on E-Sports

Many of the SBTs stated that they continued to bet during the pandemic period when there was no real sports betting and that, in this context, they turned to e-sports betting. Here, some SBTs stated that if the effect of the pandemic or the cancellation/postponement of competitions continued, their behavior would continue. For example:

“A bettor cannot give up that pleasure of winning. Even if a century goes by. So I would continue [betting] on e-sports” (Participant 39, aged 26, problem sports bettor).

“E-sports is a field that is pleasant and I have a command of it. I wish cyber bets existed all the time” (Participant 52, aged 20, problem sports bettor).

“I would keep betting on e-sport to earn money, but it would economically affect my life a lot. Continue LigaPro or something else until the sports betting starts. And there are other [e-sport] tournaments as well, I continue to bet on those matches” (Participant 28, aged 30, moderate-risk sports bettor).

3.4.3. Waiting to Return to Normal Life

In addition to new quests and the SBTs continuing betting on e-sports, a few participants stated that they would simply wait for the return to normal life for betting on sports if sporting events were not held due to the pandemic. For example:

“I would wait until real football matches were played. Patience is the most important thing in betting” (Participant 36, aged 48, problem sports bettor).

“I would wait for the return to normal life and betting on real matches. I would not bet until they started” (Participant 69, aged 43, moderate-risk sports bettor).

3.4.4. Trying to Quit Betting Gradually

Some SBTs noted that the long-term effect of the COVID-19 pandemic might be a factor in terms of quitting sports betting completely. Here, some of the participants stated that they could achieve this gradually. For example:

“I would start to dislike betting slowly because I cannot rely on unreal betting [virtual competitions] for a long time” (Participant 3, aged 32, problem sports bettor).

“If COVID keeps going that way, I would think about slowly quitting [betting]” (Participant 40, aged 32, problem sports bettor).

“I always prefer real bets. If COVID goes on for a long time and the matches do not start, I will gradually reduce the amount that I bet and try not to bet” (Participant 54, aged 25, problem sports bettor).

The themes, sub-themes, and descriptions of each one are explained in Table 3. However, it would be useful to explain the relationship between them based on Figure 1. As shown in Figure 1, there are direct or indirect relationships between the main themes and sub-themes.

Based on this, it is seen that the SBTs who define the place of sports betting in their lives as a “lifestyle”, “source of income”, “addiction” and “the center of life” mostly experienced the feeling of emptiness during the COVID-19 pandemic and turned to other types of betting.

It can be seen that tipsters, whose awareness of life has increased due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, wanted to quit sports betting gradually. While tipsters who tended to turn to other types of bets (those who lost income, and felt emptiness during this time), have searched for different types of bets. On the other hand, it is seen that these tipsters make some comparisons between traditional sports betting and e-sports betting as well.

Based on the statements about how the behavior towards sports betting would be in case of a continued pandemic, the tipsters said that they would return to their normal lives without betting if the pandemic continued and added that they would not bet on e-sports since traditional sports and bets on them are always better. Tipsters, who said that they would continue their bets with e-sports, or would continue looking for other types of bets, added that betting is always betting and that traditional betting or electronic sports betting did not matter to them.

4. Discussion

The present study explored how professional sports betting tipsters (SBTs) were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and their attitudes and behaviors towards e-sports betting as a result of this situation. Based on the thematic analysis, four broad themes emerged: (i) the meaning and role of sports betting, (ii) the effects of a pandemic on life and sports betting, (iii) the comparison of e-sports betting vs. traditional sports betting, and (iv) possible sports betting behavior if the pandemic continues comprising 16 sub-themes in total (Table 3).

Among the important points to be emphasized in the present study are the subjective meaning and role of sports betting for SBTs and how they were greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. SBTs in Turkey, as well as in the universal betting ecosystem, collate information concerning sports, athletes, or events (e.g., competition records, player performance, coach performance) to have a sustainable income and to provide tips to their followers. However, SBTs not only provide tips but also try to instill confidence in their target audience by openly betting with the same tips on the same sporting events as they recommend to their own clientele and followers. Consequently, SBTs can be viewed as individuals who bet on sports professionally. More specifically, the SBTs in the present study bet on sports with large amounts of money (Table 1) as well as provide tips for followers at the same time.

Previous studies (e.g., [45–51]) have reported that many individuals who bet on sports view sports betting as important in their lives (e.g., the center of their lives) and that this view affects their sports betting habits. Similarly, Jang et al. (2000) [52] stated that since the subjective meanings that individuals attribute to gambling/sports betting affect their gambling participation and gambling intentions, it is important to know these meanings. Therefore, in order to determine how the COVID-19 pandemic affected SBTs socially and psychologically, and to better understand the processes related to these effects (within the scope of the deductive approach adopted depending on the purpose and method of the study), the role, meaning, and importance of sports betting in the lives of the SBTs, and how these individuals made sense of sports betting during this unprecedented situation, were examined.

The SBTs described the importance of sports betting in their lives as the “center of life”, “addiction”, “source of income”, “excitement”, and “lifestyle”. The SBTs noted that elements, such as fun, pleasure, and joy, are inherent in betting and create a thrill, adding color to their lives. In this context, they stated that this excitement was a source of income, along with their interest in sports and the information they have and that this process. This was expressed as a lifestyle, an essential element, and/or an addiction for them. Additionally, one of the most important aspects that distinguish SBTs from people

who bet on sports in the general population is that as experts, sports betting has become a sustainable income by both betting on sports and providing tips to others. This can be interpreted as one of the main reasons why SBTs qualify sports betting as essential to their lives.

In addition, some SBTs described the role, meaning, and importance of sports betting in their lives as an addiction, with a sense of loss of control and experiencing negative consequences as a result of sports betting. This finding is not surprising because, based on the PSBSI scores, three-quarters were classified as problematic sports bettors. Some SBTs reported that sports betting was at the center of their lives and considered it indispensable, although some were aware that sports betting could be an activity that may create negative consequences for them. In addition, if the SBTs' sports betting level is very high, this may cause them to make impulsive and risky decisions that could lead to negative consequences for them. Being a tipster, these decisions may negatively affect not only the SBTs themselves but also their followers. Similarly, López-Gonzalez et al. (2021) [32] reported that tipsters could be seen as the individuals that the bettors want to become and that their behavior can be potentially harmful.

It was found that many SBTs were generally negatively affected by the lack of traditional sports betting opportunities during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, SBTs reported that they had experienced a sense of emptiness and loss of income and had turned to other types of bets. Among a minority of SBTs, positive changes were reported, such as their awareness of life having increased. Most SBTs here put sports betting at the center of their lives, adopting it as a lifestyle, and positioning it, in their own words, as "indispensable" and an "addiction". This appeared to be an important precursor to the feelings of emptiness that many SBTs experienced.

Changes within both the sports and innovations in sports betting products have led to increases in potential betting frequency [53]. Today, there are many options for sports betting, such as live bets and mobile betting, where individuals can make sports bets regardless of time and place [53–55]. Newall et al. (2021) [53] identified fixed-odds sports betting products as "structural characteristics of payout interval and potential betting frequency (in-play betting), multiplier potential (accumulators, complex bets, multis), win probability and payout ratio (all bets), bettor involvement (custom sports betting products, cash out), the skill required (all bets), and near-misses (accumulators, complex bets, multis)" (p.371). However, all of these characteristics may increase problematic sports betting, resulting in potentially negative consequences such as negative mood, depression, feelings of guilt, anxiety, addiction, and physical and mental health issues [20,46,51].

Individuals with gambling problems and problems with sports betting can experience psychological, social, and economic problems [23,56–58]. For these and similar reasons, individuals with gambling problems could pose a risk to the individuals in their social environment [59]. Given that approximately three-quarters of the participants in the sample met the criteria for problem sports betting, it is perhaps not surprising that some SBTs turned to different sports (e.g., table tennis, Japanese sumo wrestling) and areas where they were less experienced, such as e-sports to make bets. In this respect, tipsters conveying their advice on e-sports (which they had less experience with compared to traditional sports) to their followers may cause their followers to experience various financial losses and negative consequences (psychological, social, and economic).

According to LaPlante et al. (2014) [60] engaging in multiple types of gambling is a strong risk factor for experiencing gambling problems. Since some people may switch from one type of gambling to another in an attempt to recoup losses, this can lead to an escalation in the amount and frequency of their gambling. In other words, individuals who participate in a variety of gambling activities, such as lottery games, casino games, and sports betting, are more likely to experience negative consequences associated with gambling, including addiction, financial problems, and relationship difficulties. Additionally, individuals who engage in multiple types of gambling may be more likely to have a general propensity towards risk-taking behavior, which could increase their likelihood of experiencing gambling

problems. In this context, as found that SBTs' interest in e-sports, virtual sports, and similar types of gambling, the absence of sports betting during the COVID-19 pandemic may be a direct and indirect risk for both themselves and their followers. Although not every SBT who engages in multiple types of gambling will necessarily develop a problematic behavior, it is considered a significant risk factor.

Most SBTs in the study's sampling put sports betting at the center of their lives, adopting it as a lifestyle, and positioned it (in their own words) as "indispensable" and an "addiction". This appeared to be an essential precursor to the feelings of emptiness that many SBTs experienced. The feeling of emptiness has been described as a complex, negative emotional state experienced differently by different individuals [61]. According to D'Agostino et al. [61], this feeling includes a physical or bodily component, a component of aloneness or social disconnectedness, and a component of a deep sense of personal non-fulfillment or lack of purpose. In addition, feelings of emptiness are associated with other emotional states (e.g., dysphoria, boredom, loneliness, numbness, etc.) and they are most often considered in the context of borderline personality disorder in the DSM-5 [62]. It is also encountered in depression, narcissistic personality disorder, and schizophrenia spectrum disorders, with its features potentially varying between different conditions.

"Sustainable Development Goal-3 (SDG), Good Health and Well-Being" [63], focuses on promoting mental health. Moreover, mental health is an essential aspect of overall health and well-being and is included within the scope of SDG-3. Therefore, all of the risks of experiencing negative consequences for both the SBTs and their followers can be considered within the scope of public health and SDG-3. Additionally, the ages of the SBTs participating in the study ranged from 20 to 48 years. Consequently, the negative psychological effects that these individuals experience can affect both the individuals and their families. In this context, the goal of ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all ages (which is also within the scope of SDG-3) gains importance.

For some SBTs, the lack of sports betting increased their awareness of life by returning to their personal and domestic world. The problems, such as incompatibilities with family and social environment, loneliness, depression, and anxiety, are among the consequences of gambling/sports betting addiction [56–58,64]. In this context, some SBTs who had given sports betting more prominence in their lives than their families allocated more time to their social circles and families and increased their awareness of life as a result of not being able to bet on sports during the COVID-19 pandemic. These SBTs positively managed the situation and periodically moved away from the determinant factors and risks of problematic sports betting. Although the pandemic has been associated with an increase in problem gambling among some individuals (because they have spent more time at home and have had limited access to other forms of entertainment), some SBTs stated that they were positively affected by the pandemic. This suggests that SBTs may have different perspectives than other individuals in situations such as the pandemic.

On the other hand, some SBTs turned to other forms of betting to overcome the sense of emptiness and to prevent their income from being interrupted. The SBTs who turned to other forms of betting stated that they mainly turned to e-sports betting during this period. E-sports, whose popularity has increased in recent years, further increased during the COVID-19 pandemic and attracted the attention of some industries (e.g., gaming, gambling, sports) [65–68]. Many sports betting operators have begun to offer various sportsbooks on e-sports events to their clientele due to their increasing popularity [69–74]. However, along with the growing prize pools and expanding consumer base, it is also expected that the growth of gambling marketing for e-sports will continue [73,75].

Wardle et al. (2020) [76] claimed that the COVID-19 pandemic could make e-sports a more common betting event, which is a catalytic moment for e-sports. Practically, the emergence of e-sports betting further sustains the development of the sports betting industry in Turkey. Hunt et al. (2020) [17], speculated on the potential of some individuals who regularly bet on sports before COVID-19 to turn into other forms of betting both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This shows parallels with the findings obtained in the

present study. Based on this information, it can be stated that some SBTs participating in the present study preferred e-sports betting as a useful alternative to traditional betting. With respect to traditional bets and e-sports bets, some SBTs stated that traditional sports bets were better and more exciting, while others (admittedly far fewer in number) said the opposite. In addition, some SBTs noted that the type or nature of bets does not matter and that having any event that they can bet on it is sufficient for their needs. In addition, the majority of SBTs stated that if the pandemic continued to limit their ability to bet on real sports, they would look for new ways to bet or would continue to bet on e-sports, while some SBTs stated that they would wait for life to return to normal before they resume betting.

To some extent, e-sports filled the gap of real sports by providing individuals with content or programs containing sports-like contests and competitions during the initial pandemic period. Here, e-sports was the only choice to satisfy individual needs for betting on competitive entertainment [66]. The options and alternatives for the SBTs who earn a sustainable income from sports betting were very limited during the initial stages of the pandemic and, thus, tried to continue their income generation by engaging in e-sports bets. This is supported by Ke and Wagner (2022) [66], who noted that e-sports content, which can replace sports content, may become more desirable and acceptable when there are no better alternatives. However, for a few SBTs who claimed they would gradually try to give up sports betting and/or wait for life to return to normal, they did not view e-sports betting as a good alternative to traditional sports betting.

5. Limitations and Future Research

The present study has some limitations. The present study utilized judgmental and snowball sampling to collect data, and the data were collected from Turkish SBTs. However, many of the participants also happened to be individuals with gambling problems. While the data provided some important insights concerning the psychosocial perspectives among SBTs, given the sample size, these findings cannot be generalized to all SBTs. To confirm the findings reported here, and to achieve more generalizable results, larger and more representative samples from Turkey and other countries are needed so that the findings can be compared to those reported in the present study. While the recruitment and inclusion criteria focused on SBTs, the qualitative interviews with the participants tended to focus more on how the pandemic had affected their own gambling rather than their role as professional tipsters. Consequently, more research is needed to examine how the pandemic may have affected the professional side of the SBTs in Turkey and around the world. A potential reason for the high levels of problem gambling in the sample could be due to the SBTs inaccurately describing themselves as professional SBTs rather than individuals with problem gambling [24]. The study also relied on self-report data that may be subject to various common method biases, including social desirability and memory recall. In addition, the relative brevity of the interviews may be viewed as a further limitation.

6. Conclusions

The present study explored how sport betting tipsters (SBTs) were affected by the changes in the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and what happened when they were unable to bet on traditional sports events. The study is one of the first to qualitatively examine the social and psychological processes related to SBTs, as well as the first to examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic among SBTs. The findings of this study provide important insights into the conceptualization of SBTs and how possible problems (e.g., lack of sports betting, the pandemic) were overcome. The study found that SBTs were affected psychologically, mainly adversely, by the lack of opportunities to bet on sports during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, felt emptiness because of the lack of sports betting opportunities, suffered a loss of income, and turned to betting on e-sports to overcome this. It was also found that the majority of SBTs did not report e-sports betting as

exciting as traditional sports betting but, in a pandemic or similar situations, they claimed they would continue to bet on e-sports if there were no other alternatives.

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