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To cite this article: Chelsea Hughes, Jamie Torrance, Simon Dymond & Glen Dighton (2026) The experiences and engagement patterns of young adults who regularly view gambling livestreams: a qualitative interview study, *Addiction Research & Theory*, 34:3, 327-339, DOI: [10.1080/16066359.2025.2567270](https://doi.org/10.1080/16066359.2025.2567270)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/16066359.2025.2567270>



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Published online: 29 Sep 2025.



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RESEARCH ARTICLE



The experiences and engagement patterns of young adults who regularly view gambling livestreams: a qualitative interview study

Chelsea Hughes^a, Jamie Torrance^a, Simon Dymond^{a,b}, and Glen Dighton^a

^aSchool of Psychology, Swansea University, Swansea, UK; ^bDepartment of Psychology, Reykjavík University, Reykjavík, Iceland

ABSTRACT

Background: Gambling livestreams, where content creators broadcast themselves engaging with various gambling products, represent an emergent form of both digital entertainment and gambling promotion. Research has recently begun to highlight the motivations for viewership and its associations with gambling behavior/severity. However, qualitative inquiry into engagement experiences and ascribed value is needed to extend existing findings and provide deeper insights into the underlying processes that drive viewership.

Method: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 young adults from the UK who regularly viewed gambling livestreams. The interviews addressed experiences of gambling livestreams, motivations for viewership, structural feature engagement, and perceived impacts. Qualitative data were audio recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed *via* an interpretivist epistemology.

Results: Three main themes were identified: *'Social experiences and vicarious excitement'* highlighted how viewers were drawn to gambling streamers' personalities *via* parasocial relationships. Thrills were derived from streams that broadcasted high stakes gambling scenarios. *'Interactivity and building loyalty'* revealed how gamified structural characteristics transformed passive viewing into active community-based participation during livestreams. *'The urge and harm paradox'* demonstrated participants using livestreams to reduce gambling urges while simultaneously experiencing heightened urges to gamble. Increased gambling participation was reported as a result of gambling livestream viewership and streamers' deceptive marketing tactics were recognized.

Conclusions: Gambling livestreams are highly valued among those who regularly view them. They represent a complex digital phenomenon that simultaneously entertains and potentially harms audiences. These findings emphasize the need for broader regulatory frameworks and protective measures to address the emerging risks posed by digital gambling landscapes.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 1 August 2025
Revised 18 September 2025
Accepted 24 September 2025

KEYWORDS

Gambling; livestreams;
gambling advertising;
gambling harm; gaming;
qualitative

Introduction

The digital entertainment landscape has undergone profound transformation with livestreaming platforms fundamentally altering how audiences consume content (Lee et al. 2025). Platforms such as Twitch, TikTok Live, and Kick have emerged as dominant spaces where millions gather to watch real-time activities, from competitive gaming to live music performances (Naveed et al. 2017; Johnson and Woodcock 2019). Livestreaming has become particularly popular among young adults. Viewers aged between 18 and 24 made up 39.56% of Twitch's global audience, the largest age demographic on the platform, as of May 2025 (Statista 2025). This demographic also overlaps with the legal gambling age in many jurisdictions (e.g. 18+ in

the UK), placing them at the intersection of two high-engagement entertainment forms: livestreaming and gambling.

Within the livestreaming sphere, gambling content has carved out a prominent niche, with gambling streams consistently ranking among the most-watched categories. Gambling streams involve content creators broadcasting themselves engaging with various forms of gambling (e.g. online slots, casino games, sports betting, or loot boxes) while viewers watch and interact through live chat in real time. This genre now competes with and often surpasses traditional gaming streams in popularity (Wu and Clark 2025) and exemplifies the broader 'gambification' of spheres such as gaming and entertainment (Hing et al. 2022). This

CONTACT Jamie Torrance ✉ Jamie.torrance@swansea.ac.uk 📠 School of Psychology, Swansea University, Swansea, UK

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process of ‘gambification’, whereby gambling elements are integrated into traditionally non-gambling activities, has been documented in both sports (Hing et al. 2023) and investing (Newall and Weiss-Cohen 2022). The increasing popularity of gambling livestreams therefore suggests that they fulfill specific needs for viewers, warranting closer examination of the psychological functions and motivations underlying gambling stream viewership in young adults.

Many prominent streamers (including celebrities) are sponsored or act as paid affiliates for gambling operators (Press-Reynolds 2024). For example, they often receive funds to use during their gambling livestreams and earn revenue shares by directing consumers to operator websites or applications (apps) through affiliate links (Casu and Belfiore 2022; Hing et al. 2024; Singer et al. 2024). Many gambling livestreams could therefore be categorized as an emergent form of gambling promotion. However, unlike ‘traditional’ gambling advertising, livestreams are experiential and highly interactive, allowing viewers to witness, and actively participate in, emotional highs and lows in real time (Wu and Clark 2025). This may enhance the impact of such promotional content, particularly among impressionable audiences, such as young adults, who are known to be susceptible to social influence, risk-taking, and sensation-seeking during this developmental period (Chein et al. 2011; Sherman et al. 2016; Steinberg 2017).

From a theoretical perspective, theories of vicarious experiences in livestreaming suggest that viewers may derive satisfaction through experiencing streamers’ emotions and reactions as if they were their own (Lu et al. 2019; Lim et al. 2020; Lin et al. 2021; Kohls et al. 2023). This vicarious engagement could explain why gambling livestreams, with their inherent volatility and dramatic emotional peaks, might be particularly compelling to viewers who seek intense experiences without direct financial risk. Additionally, social presence theory as applied to livestreaming contexts proposes that the real-time, interactive nature of live broadcasts creates a sense of shared social space and community belonging among viewers (Hilvert-Bruce et al. 2018; Chen and Liao 2022; He et al. 2023). This heightened social presence could be particularly relevant to gambling livestreams, where viewers follow their favorite streamers, participate in chat discussions, and offer support through subscriptions and donations. This social dynamic is further reinforced through parasocial relationships, one-sided emotional bonds formed between viewers and content creators. Young adults, in particular, often perceive

streamers not just as entertainers but as relatable or aspirational figures, fostering trust and perceived authenticity (Evans et al. 2017). As a result, viewers may become more susceptible to streamers’ influence, including the normalization or endorsement of gambling behaviors. These mechanisms of connection, i.e. social presence, parasocial engagement, and vicarious emotional immersion, may collectively help explain the enduring appeal of gambling livestreams. These behaviors also reflect some of the commonly reported social motivations that underpin real-world gambling behavior more broadly (Rodriguez et al. 2015; Gainsbury et al. 2016; Floyd et al. 2025).

Theoretical and empirical research on gambling livestreams remains limited. Emergent studies have primarily employed quantitative approaches that focus on associations between viewership and gambling-related outcomes. For example, adolescents have reported increased gambling intentions after gambling livestream exposure (Grosemans et al. 2024), while adults have demonstrated positive correlations between viewership and problem gambling severity (Zendle 2020). From a psychological perspective, gambling livestreams deliver highly concentrated exposure to gambling-related stimuli, potentially creating risks for vulnerable viewers. Recent research has indicated that disordered gamblers may turn to these streams as a means of managing their urges, yet this consumption pattern can inadvertently intensify their desire to gamble (Wu et al. 2024). Subsequent research has also suggested that individuals drawn to gambling streams for enhancement, emotional regulation, or social connection have shown corresponding patterns in their gambling motivations. Specifically, the relationship between streaming genres and problem gambling severity appears to be mediated by viewers’ direct participation in these respective activities (Wu and Clark 2025).

While these previous studies have begun to provide some valuable insights into the motivations and impacts of gambling livestream viewership, significant gaps remain in our understanding of the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of viewers. For example, there is a lack of nuanced understanding concerning what specifically draws viewers to these streams beyond the gambling content itself. This includes the potential social/community aspects, the personal attributes of gambling streamers, and how value is ascribed to these various elements of the viewing experience. Of particular concern is the limited research examining the spectrum of viewer engagement, from passive consumption to active participation during livestreams. This distinction is significant given the structural features inherent

in gambling livestreams. Much like gambling products themselves (Leino et al. 2015; Auer and Griffiths 2023; Torrance et al. 2024) and other forms of gambling promotion (Torrance et al. 2021), these platforms incorporate built-in design elements, mechanisms, and presentation techniques that can actively shape consumer behavior (Abarbanel and Johnson 2020). For example, ‘channel points’ represent virtual currency that viewers earn by watching and participating in streams, which can be spent on channel rewards, special privileges, or interactive features. Additionally, predictive tools allow viewers to use their channel points or real money to bet on the outcomes of the streamer’s gambling sessions. A more comprehensive understanding of these viewer experiences and engagement patterns is therefore essential to better understand the scope of gambling livestreams and their potential implications.

Qualitative research approaches offer particular promise for addressing these gaps, yet to date, remain underutilized in this area. By giving voice to viewers’ perspectives and experiences, this approach can methodologically triangulate and extend the emergent research on gambling livestreams. Therefore, the current study employed in-depth qualitative interviews of young adults who regularly view gambling livestreams to explore the following topics:

1. The subjective value and meaning that young adults derive from viewing gambling livestreams.
2. Viewership motivations, including those beyond the gambling content itself.
3. The spectrum of engagement behaviors among young adult gambling livestream viewers, and the associated experiences of harm.

Methods

This study followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) guidelines (Tong et al. 2007). Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee at Swansea University [#1-2024-9068-8080].

Participants and recruitment

From a larger quantitative study ($n = 1,113$) examining livestream viewership, mental health, gambling, and gaming behaviors, we recruited fifteen young adult participants (18–24 years old) for this follow-up qualitative investigation. Participants in the broader study were given the option to indicate their willingness to participate in this qualitative component by providing their

Table 1. Participant characteristics and gambling behaviors.

Attribute	Frequency (%) ($n = 15$)
Age: Mean (SD)	21.9 (1.7)
Sex	
Male	11 (73.3)
Female	4 (26.7)
Ethnicity	
White	6 (40)
Asian	4 (26.7)
Black	3 (20)
Mixed (White and Asian)	1 (6.7)
Mixed (Indian and British)	1 (6.7)
Employment status ^a	
Full-time employed	6 (40)
Part-time employed	4 (26.7)
Student	9 (60)
Gambling frequency (past month)	
+20 times	8 (53.3)
11–20 times	4 (26.7)
6–10 times	1 (6.7)
1–5 times	2 (13.3)
Problem gambling severity (PGSI): Mean (SD)	8.5 (6.9)
PGSI categories	
High-risk	8 (53.3)
Moderate-risk	2 (13.3)
Low-risk	4 (26.7)
No-risk	1 (6.7)

^aParticipants could choose more than one answer.

email address for recruitment purposes, and from this pool we specifically selected individuals who had reported regular gambling livestream viewing (at least once a week) and having gambled in the last 12 months.

Participants’ demographic characteristics and self-reported gambling behaviors are presented in Table 1. Participants had a mean score of 8.5 ($SD = 6.9$) on the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI), which is a standardized tool used to measure at-risk gambling behaviors in community samples (Ferris and Wynne 2001). According to the risk-categories that result from summing individual PGSI scores¹, eight participants were categorized as ‘high risk’, two as ‘moderate-risk’, four as ‘low-risk’, and one as ‘no-risk’. The characteristics of participants’ gambling livestream viewership are presented in Table 2.

Procedure

Following provision of an information sheet, participants consented digitally. Subsequently, fifteen in-depth interviews were conducted over Microsoft Teams with each involving one participant and a member of the research team (CH). The interviews took place between June and October 2024. The interviews employed a semi-structured discussion guide that was developed iteratively, with data from transcripts and researcher

¹The PGSI categories associated with the lowest and highest gambling-risk have previously been represented via the labels ‘non-problem’ and ‘problem gambler’ respectively. However, to avoid stigmatising language, they will here be referred to as ‘no-risk’ and ‘high-risk’.

Table 2. Gambling livestream viewership.

Attribute	Frequency (%) <i>(n = 15)</i>
Gambling livestream viewing frequency	
+4 times a week	4 (26.7)
2-3 times a week	8 (53.3)
Once a week	3 (20)
Platforms used ^a	
Twitch	14 (93.3)
YouTube Gaming	11 (73.3)
Discord	6 (40)
Kick	2 (13.3)
Gambling modes viewed <i>via</i> livestream ^a	
Slots	11 (73.3)
Loot box openings	4 (26.7)
Casino-style games	4 (26.7)
Sports betting	2 (13.3)
Gambling livestream engagement ^a	
Watching	15 (100)
Live chat	13 (86.7)
Influencing the stream	13 (86.7)
Subscribing	15 (100)
Donating money	8 (53.3)

^aParticipants could choose more than one answer.

notes from initial interviews informing and refining subsequent discussions (Srivastava and Hopwood 2009). While maintaining flexibility, the interviews broadly explored: (1) viewership motivations; (2) perceptions and opinions toward gambling livestreams; (3) use of gambling livestream engagement features; (4) the impacts/effects of viewership; and (5) the personal meaning/value ascribed to these experiences. Example interview questions included: ‘*What would you say motivates you to watch gambling livestreams*’, ‘*Explain how you engage with gambling livestreams beyond just viewing*’, and ‘*What impact do you think watching gambling activities on livestreams has had on you?*’. All participants provided permission for audio/video recording to facilitate transcription and analysis. Data collection ceased when the research team deemed that data saturation had been attained. This was evident when interviews with new participants yielded no additional insights (Fusch and Ness 2015). Interviews lasted between 22 and 58 min, and each participant received a £20 shopping voucher as compensation for their time.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using an interpretivist thematic analysis approach, informed by Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase framework. Broadly, we intended to capture how young adults constructed meaning around their gambling livestream viewing experiences. The interpretivist epistemology therefore focused upon knowledge as constructed through individuals’ subjective experiences and interpretations (Peterson 2017). Consequently, rather than seeking objective truths, we aimed to understand how participants made sense of

their viewing experiences and the value they attributed to these activities (Wang 2019). The analysis proceeded inductively through the six-phase framework. All transcripts were read multiple times for familiarization, with attention to participants’ language choices and how they framed their experiences. Initial codes were identified directly from participants’ accounts, capturing both explicit meanings and potential underlying interpretations (Elliott and Timulak 2005). These codes were then collated to identify patterns of meaning-making across the dataset, with themes refined through regular team meetings to ensure authentic representation of participants’ accounts. Specifically, this process involved examining how participants assigned significance to their experiences, and we focused on how these experiences emerged consistently across participants’ narratives. Throughout this process, the research team adopted a position of interpretive empathy, considering multiple interpretations and exploring contradictions within narratives as meaningful aspects of participants’ sense-making processes (Gair 2012). We recognized that participants’ narratives were themselves interpretive acts, shaped by available social and cultural resources for understanding digital media consumption and gambling-related content. Final themes were defined according to their significance and pertinence to our research aims.

Reflexivity statement

For the sake of reflexivity and outlining our positionality (Lazard and McAvoy 2020), we are researchers specializing in addiction psychology and harm reduction. We acknowledge our professional orientation may have unconsciously shaped our interpretive lens toward pathologising gambling livestream viewership. Our harm-focused discipline could have influenced our questioning, analysis, and framing, potentially overshadowing the genuine appeal and social connections that draw viewers to this content. We recognize that participants are also active agents, not passive victims, who make deliberate media consumption choices. Despite these potential biases, we prioritized participant narratives to directly inform our analysis and manuscript. This statement provides transparent context while respecting participants’ autonomy and diverse motivations.

Results

Three main themes were identified as a result of the interpretivist thematic analysis. These included: (1)

Table 3. Summary of identified main and Sub-themes.

Main theme	Subtheme
1. Social experiences and vicarious excitement	Personality-driven attraction (Para)social connection through shared risk-taking Spectating high-stake moments
2. Interactivity and building loyalty	Gamified Loyalty Predictive Engagement as Active Participation
3. The urge and harm paradox	Urge-reducing motivations Urge-increasing impacts Gambling-related harm and deceptive practices

‘Social experiences and vicarious excitement’; (2) ‘Interactivity and building loyalty’; and (3) ‘The urge and harm paradox’. These main themes also encompass various subthemes (see Table 3) and are outlined below in conjunction with supporting quotes from participants.

Main theme 1: Social experiences and vicarious excitement

Personality-driven attraction

Participants consistently constructed their viewing motivation as driven by the streamer’s personality, which often superseded the gambling content itself. The gambling activities served as a vehicle for building parasocial relationships, with viewers developing strong connections to content creators who became central figures in their entertainment routines. Many participants described watching streams primarily for the entertainment value provided by charismatic personalities, with one viewer estimating they watch ‘60% for his personality and 40% for the gambling.’ This personality-focused attraction evolved into deeper connections through consistent viewing patterns, where streamers became familiar presences in viewers’ daily lives.

The streamer’s character transformed mundane gambling activities into compelling entertainment through engaging commentary and personality-driven content. Participants found themselves drawn to specific personalities who were ‘entertaining guys’ that they would follow across multiple platforms, checking their Instagram accounts and maintaining awareness of their lives beyond gambling content. These parasocial connections often originated outside the gambling sphere, with viewers following creators as they transitioned between content types. The personality became inseparable from the gambling content itself, creating a unique form of entertainment where the activity served as a backdrop for personality-driven performance.

It’s really just the content creator themselves, the streamer. Usually, I watch them from playing games or something and then they go into gambling content. (Participant 12: male, 22-years-old, low-risk gambler)

(Para)social connection through shared risk-taking

Gambling livestreams created unique psychological bonds between viewers and streamers that transcended typical parasocial relationships. The shared experience of risk-taking, even when vicarious, fostered feelings of connection and community that participants described as meaningful despite recognizing inherent contradictions. Viewers acknowledged building ‘trust’ with streamers despite knowing ‘it’s obviously a stranger on the Internet,’ demonstrating the emotional connections formed through regular viewing. These relationships felt genuine to participants, who described feeling personally invested in streamers’ outcomes and experiences.

This connection operated through behavioral influence and shared knowledge, with viewers actively incorporating streamer strategies into their own gambling practices. Participants described how ‘watching experienced gambling streamers’ could ‘educationally improve’ their own gambling strategies, creating a mentor-like dynamic despite the one-way nature of the relationship. The social aspect extended beyond passive viewing, as participants felt they shared activities and experiences with prominent streamers, creating a sense of common ground and connection based on gambling.

It feels like you have a connection with the streamer for me...having something that you do quite often in common with a big streamer in particular is always fun. (Participant 5: male, 21-years-old, high-risk gambler)

Spectating high-stake moments

Witnessing extreme financial risk provided vicarious thrills that participants found particularly compelling. This appeal lay partly in the extraordinary nature of the stakes, with viewers drawn to watching streamers who ‘open extremely expensive [loot box] cases’ or engage in gambling with amounts far beyond typical means. This spectacle created a form of entertainment distinct from personal gambling, where the enormity of potential wins and losses provided drama and excitement.

The unedited nature of livestreams provided perceived authenticity that enhanced the viewing experience. Participants were drawn to this immersion and were excited to witness the emotional reactions of the streamers based on the outcomes of bets placed. Huge losses often resulted in streamers becoming 'more erratic and temperamental' whereas 'everyone was happy' to see streamers succeed.

The accessibility of these high-stakes gambling scenarios was facilitated by streamers' substantial financial resources, which enabled them to consistently engage in betting at levels far exceeding what typical viewers could afford. This disparity in financial capacity was a key factor that allowed streamers to maintain the dramatic and high-risk content that viewers found 'so compelling':

They're betting with tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions... and they have what seems like an unlimited budget. (Participant 7: male, 23-years-old, low-risk gambler)

Main theme 2: Interactivity and building loyalty

Gamified loyalty

Channel point systems transformed passive viewing into active participation through progression mechanics that fostered deep viewer investment. These gamified elements created binding effects on viewing behavior, with participants describing satisfaction from accumulating points and '*seeing the highest [channel point] number possible in the channel.*' The psychological pull of these systems operated through multiple mechanisms, including status recognition within communities and the pleasure of numerical progression. Points became markers of dedication and involvement, creating tangible representations of viewer loyalty that reinforced continued engagement.

The loyalty-building effects were explicitly recognized by participants who noted how '*the more points that you have on a certain channel, it gives you a feeling of loyalty.*' This feeling translated into behavioral patterns where viewers felt committed to channels based on their point accumulation. Even viewers who didn't actively seek points found themselves influenced by these systems, which had become integrated into the gambling livestream ecosystem as standard engagement tools.

You gravitate a bit more towards them to continue, sort of, climbing up their tiers, getting those channel points and so on. (Participant 14: female, 22-years-old, low-risk gambler)

Predictive engagement as active participation

Interactive prediction features also fundamentally altered the viewing experience. These features created

opportunities for viewers to demonstrate knowledge and intuition about gambling outcomes, providing validation through successful predictions. Participants found that it was '*always fun to see predictions come true,*' especially when channel points could be wagered on outcomes, creating a meta-gambling experience within the stream. This participatory element satisfied competitive instincts and provided feelings of '*involvement*' and '*investment*'.

Psychological satisfaction extended beyond correct predictions to encompass feelings of genuine participation in the gambling experience. Viewers felt they were '*interacting more with the gambling stream rather than just chatting,*' with prediction systems creating structured opportunities for engagement. This active participation fostered deeper investment in outcomes, as viewers had symbolically staked their accumulated points on their predictions.

It felt like you were taking part in some of the gambling alongside streamers. (Participant 12: male, 22-years-old, low-risk gambler)

Main theme 3: the urge and harm paradox

Urge-reducing motivations

Participants frequently rationalized gambling live-stream viewing as a harm reduction strategy, constructing narratives that positioned viewing as safer than engaging with real-world gambling. This protective framing allowed continued engagement with gambling content while maintaining a sense of control and responsibility. Many viewers explicitly described using streams to satisfy gambling urges, explaining how watching provided '*some of the excitement without actually having to waste your money.*'

The substitution effect appeared strongest among participants who had imposed their own gambling restrictions or those attempting to reduce their gambling. One viewer explained how watching streams meant they '*don't feel like I need to gamble because I can see this person doing it,*' while another believed that it sometimes '*lessened*' their chances of gambling. This rationalization allowed viewers to maintain connections to gambling culture and excitement while aiming to avoid direct participation.

I view gambling livestreams as a better alternative to actually gambling. (Participant 4: female, 23-years-old, high-risk gambler)

Urge-increasing impacts

Despite urge-reduction narratives, participants also simultaneously reported that viewing gambling livestreams '*certainly encouraged cravings to gamble.*' The content's

appeal triggered gambling urges even among viewers who entered with intentions of passive entertainment. Multiple participants acknowledged direct causal relationships between viewing and increased gambling desires, with streams making them ‘*want to gamble*’ and increasing their ‘*curiosity*’ about gambling activities.

The mechanisms of urge increase appeared to operate through multiple psychological pathways. Witnessing significant wins created aspirational thinking where viewers imagined themselves in the streamer’s position, thinking ‘*that could be me*’ when seeing ‘*big streamers win lots of money*.’ Even participants with strict self-imposed limits found themselves battling with urges after viewing sessions. The struggle was particularly acute for those with histories of gambling harm, who found that watching specific content such as slot streams featuring familiar machines would lead them to ‘*hope to get the same sort of results*.’

It’s like after watching it, I feel, like, I’m fighting the urge to gamble more. I find it harder to stick to my £10 deposit limit... it definitely makes me want to do it more. (Participant 1: male, 19-years-old, high-risk gambler)

Gambling-related harm and deceptive practices

Participants demonstrated sophisticated awareness of deceptive practices while simultaneously experiencing their harmful effects. They recognized that streamers were often ‘*paid and it’s not their money that they’re gambling, it’s a gambling company’s money*,’ yet still reported being influenced by promotional content and artificial presentations of gambling success. This dual awareness created cognitive dissonance where viewers understood the misleading nature of content while remaining susceptible to its influence. The knowledge that outcomes might be manipulated to show streamers as ‘*more likely to win a large amount of money just to show that you can*’ didn’t fully protect against the content’s persuasive effects.

Financial harms manifested through direct pathways from viewing to increased gambling participation. Participants described how ‘*from watching, I started wanting to open [loot box] packs and put money into games*’. The seamless transition from viewing to gambling was facilitated by promoted gambling sites and affiliate links, making it ‘*so easy to just click a button and you literally just spend money gambling*.’

The broader societal harms were particularly concerning to participants who recognized the vulnerability of younger viewers. They noted how ‘*there’s a lot of kids in the actual stream, and they’re being exposed to gambling at such a young age*,’ with sign-up processes being ‘*so easy*’ that age verification consisted

merely of ‘*clicking to confirm you’re 18 plus*.’ This awareness of inadequate protections led participants to propose tighter restrictions on gambling livestreams, but implementation was not perceived by an easy:

I really don’t know how well you could enforce a block or monitoring of customers on sites like this.
(Participant 2: male, 20-years-old, high-risk gambler)

Conceptualizing gambling livestream viewership

Based on the themes identified through thematic analysis, we constructed a conceptual model that provides a framework for gambling livestream viewership (Naeem et al. 2023). The model begins with initial motivators, where participants are drawn by streamer personalities, the need to experience vicarious excitement, and the desire to reduce gambling urges through what appears to be a safer alternative to real-world gambling. Once engaged, viewers encounter multiple interconnected viewing elements within the livestream environment that include depictions of high-stakes gambling, access to gamified structural features, the maintenance of parasocial relationships, and deceptive streamer practices. Despite initial urge-reduction intentions, engagement with these viewing elements can lead to the outcomes and effects reported by participants: increased gambling urges, increased real-world gambling, and increased risk biases. We highlight the cyclic potential of this model whereby these self-reported effects may perpetuate viewership motivations. Similar processes have been reported in relation to online sports betting (Parke and Parke 2019) and loot boxes (Grosemans et al. 2024).

Discussion

By interviewing young adults who regularly view gambling livestreams, the aims of the present study were threefold. First, we sought to explore the subjective value and meaning that young adults derive from viewing gambling livestreams. Second, we aimed to better understand viewership motivations, including those beyond the gambling content itself. Third, we wanted to examine the spectrum of engagement behaviors among young adult gambling livestream viewers and the associated experiences of harm. Three key themes were identified within the transcripts: *Social experiences and vicarious excitement, interactivity and building loyalty*, and *the urge and harm paradox*, each of which reflects a layered interplay of psychological, social, and structural factors. Our findings culminated in a conceptual model (see Figure 1) that illustrates a cyclical process whereby initial motivations (e.g. urge-reduction, engagement with the streamer and

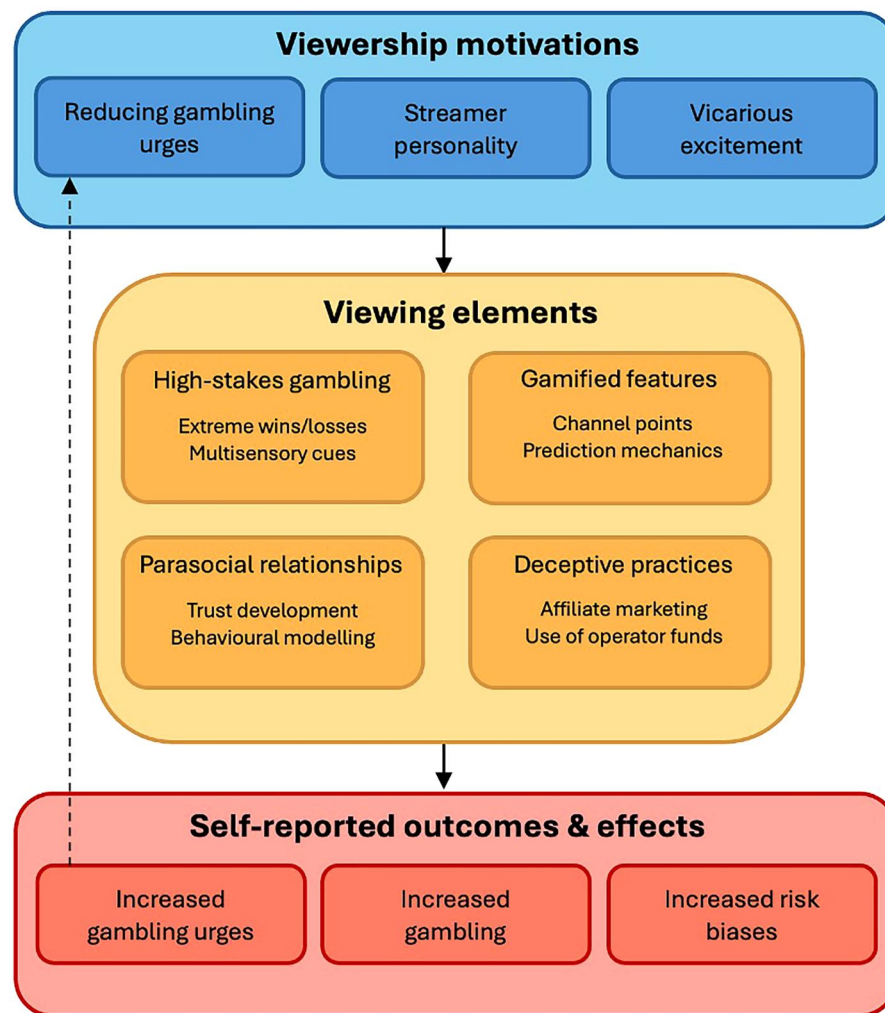


Figure 1. Conceptual model of gambling livestream viewership.

their personality, vicarious excitement) give rise to immersive viewer experiences which, in turn, produce unintended outcomes such as intensified gambling urges, increased gambling behavior, and cognitive distortions. These outcomes have the potential to reinforce subsequent motivations for continued viewing.

Participants' engagement with gambling livestreams demonstrated a combination of social connection and risk-taking. The centrality of the streamer's personality to viewing motivation suggests these platforms create hybrid entertainment experiences where gambling content becomes embedded within social interaction frameworks (Sjöblom and Hamari 2017). This embedding may render viewers more vulnerable to gambling-related influences precisely because the gambling elements often appear secondary to the social experience. The development of 'trust' relationships with streamers represents a particularly nuanced form of parasocial engagement that facilitates direct behavioral transmission. However, while some participants described streamers as relatable or trustworthy, others

viewed them as aspirational figures, raising concerns about persuasive influence over younger audiences. These parasocial connections, particularly among young adults, may heighten viewers' susceptibility to emulate behaviors without recognizing underlying commercial motives or financial risk (Evans et al. 2017). This duality underscores the need for more cautious interpretation of parasocial dynamics.

When participants described incorporating streamer strategies into their own gambling practices, they revealed how these relationships can lead to behavioral imitation despite the mediated nature of the interaction. This process aligns with social learning theory's emphasis on identification and modeling (Bandura and Walters 1977), where observing trusted figures influences behavior. Relatedly, research on peer influence in gambling contexts suggests that observing others' gambling behaviors can increase personal gambling involvement through elements such as social proof mechanisms (Gupta and Derevensky 1997; O'Loughlin and Blaszczynski 2018; Ramnerö et al. 2019). The spectacle of high-stakes

gambling provided a backdrop for these relationships, with participants drawn to emotional responses to extreme wins and losses that created shared experiential moments.

These parasocial connections may be further reinforced through sophisticated platform-level engagement mechanisms that extend beyond passive consumption. The gamified loyalty systems and predictive engagement features appeared to create sustained involvement that mirrors the structural characteristics of gambling products and environments themselves. The channel point systems described by participants exemplify this convergence, operating similarly to casino reward programs that utilize points, tiers, and status recognition to encourage continued gambling behavior (Quigno and Zhang 2016; Lucas and Spilde 2017). This also parallels findings from social casino games and loot box research, where gamified features like progression mechanics promote continued engagement (Ross and Nieborg 2021; Agbenorxevi et al. 2023). Beyond loyalty mechanics, the predictive engagement features also incorporate some fundamental structural characteristics of gambling: skills-based elements (Torrance et al. 2024), near-miss events (Palmer et al. 2024), and intermittent reinforcement (Ferrari et al. 2022). The validation participants described from correct predictions suggests these features provide similar psychological rewards to actual gambling without financial risks. These mechanics may therefore represent gambling-by-proxy where viewers experience similar reinforcement patterns to actual gambling environments. This convergence of parasocial bonding, gamified engagement, and structural gambling features is a likely contributor to graduated involvement toward adjacent real-world gambling activities (Wu and Clark 2025).

It appears as though this multi-layered engagement facilitates a paradox whereby participants described *increased* urges to gamble, despite initially watching these streams to *reduce* their urges. This finding aligns with broader quantitative research on the motivations and impacts of gambling livestream viewership (Wu et al. 2024) and reflects classic approach-avoidance dynamics (Breiner et al. 1999). Specifically, gambling livestream viewers may seek what appears to be a safer alternative to actual gambling, but instead encounter rich multisensory cues that trigger conditioned responses through Pavlovian mechanisms. The social bonding and gamified engagement features identified earlier may amplify these effects by creating sustained exposure to gambling-adjacent environments that maintain psychological proximity to gambling activities. Similar

processes have been highlighted within social casino game research, where individuals begin playing as a substitute for actual gambling but end up with heightened motivations to gamble with real money (Kim et al. 2015; Gainsbury et al. 2016; Hollingshead et al. 2016). However, gambling livestreams may represent a more complex phenomenon because they combine the structural features of social casino games with the social learning opportunities inherent in parasocial relationships. When trusted streamers model gambling behaviors within an entertaining, socially connected environment, the urge-reducing intentions participants described may be fundamentally undermined by the very mechanisms that make the content appealing.

Participants also reported experiencing distorted risk-related cognitions, which may be exacerbated by the non-disclosure of commercial arrangements between gambling streamers and gambling operators. Participants recognized that streamers often bet large sums of money that was likely provided to them rather than risking their own funds. This lack of commercial transparency has been previously criticized in relation to affiliate marketers of gambling who operate *via* social media (Houghton et al. 2019; 2020; Houghton and Moss 2023; Hing et al. 2024). Specifically, the undisclosed use of operator funds may facilitate availability heuristic biases (Tversky and Kahneman 1973), where viewers form risk assessments based on artificially inflated gambling outcomes observed through streamers' ability to make large bets without genuine financial consequences.

An additional finding emerged regarding the potential effectiveness of platform self-regulation. Twitch implemented restrictions in 2022 prohibiting many forms of 'luck-based' gambling livestreaming, such as slots and roulette, while continuing to permit 'skills-based' gambling content such as sports betting and poker (Hernandez 2022). However, our data suggests potential gaps in enforcement. As shown in Table 2, only 6 responses related to these permitted 'skills-based' genres, and notably, 'poker' falls under our broader classification of 'casino games', meaning we cannot definitively confirm whether these responses represented actual poker or other forms of casino gambling. Despite this limited engagement with ostensibly permitted content, 14 participants reported using Twitch to watch gambling livestreams overall. This discrepancy between the low reported consumption of permitted gambling content and the higher reported gambling viewership on Twitch may indicate that participants were exposed to prohibited gambling streams, suggesting that platform self-regulatory measures may not be entirely effective in practice. This raises important questions about the adequacy

of current enforcement mechanisms and highlights the ongoing challenges in implementing and maintaining online content restrictions.

Our findings overall highlight important implications for policy and practice. Current regulatory frameworks that focus primarily on traditional advertising channels may be fundamentally insufficient for addressing the complex, multi-layered nature of gambling livestreams (Maesse 2023). The personality-driven nature of viewership, where audiences develop strong connections with streamers, combined with platform-level engagement features, suggests that comprehensive regulatory frameworks must consider both content-specific restrictions and the structural elements that may influence real-world gambling behaviors. International regulatory responses demonstrate varied approaches to addressing these challenges, with Germany implementing comprehensive bans on gambling advertising *via* streamers (Macedo 2024), the UK introducing 'strong appeal' tests that restrict influencer marketing to under-18s (Committees of Advertising Practice 2022), and Twitch's aforementioned voluntary 'ban' on the majority of gambling content. Effective policy interventions should therefore integrate mandatory streamer licensing with gambling operator requirements, implement robust age verification across platform interfaces, mandate transparent disclosure of financial relationships between content creators and operators, and establish cross-border enforcement mechanisms that can address the international nature of streaming platforms. Participants themselves voiced concerns about the ethics of gambling streams, noting the need for stronger protections, clearer disclosures, and more robust age verification mechanisms. While some recognized enforcement challenges, many called for regulation to reflect the immersive and influential nature of live-streamed content.

From a harm reduction perspective, our findings fundamentally challenge the viability of gambling livestreams as a protective or therapeutic strategy for harmful gambling. Under certain conditions, livestream viewing may offer therapeutic benefits for conditions such as Anorexia Nervosa and Social Anxiety Disorder (Frommel et al. 2021; Sjöström et al. 2024). However, our findings suggest that rather than providing a safe outlet for urges, gambling livestreams may actually intensify urges and normalize high-risk gambling behaviors. Treatment providers and support services should therefore be aware that individuals may be using livestream viewing as a misguided attempt at self-management or relapse-prevention.

This study also has various limitations. First, 53% of our sample reported PGSI scores that reflected the highest gambling-risk category. Our findings here do not reflect to the broader population of gambling livestream viewers, particularly those with lower risk profiles or non-gamblers. Future studies should therefore include a broader range of participants from across the harm spectrum. Second, our findings cannot definitively speak to the causal effects of gambling livestreams on behavior. We cannot determine whether exposure to gambling livestreams leads to increased gambling behavior, or whether individuals with higher risk profiles are simply more drawn to consuming this content. Experimental studies (employing naturalistic and/or longitudinal designs) that focus on the behavioral and psychological impacts are therefore warranted. Third, our sample comprised participants from the UK exclusively. Indeed, gambling livestreams have international reach and so the implications are cross-jurisdictional. However, research from other locations where gambling livestreams are popular is needed to understand how cultural, regulatory, and market differences may influence viewer experiences and outcomes.

Conclusion

Gambling livestreams are highly valued among those who regularly view them, offering social connection, entertainment, and vicarious excitement facilitated through engagement with streamers. However, they simultaneously represent phenomena that have the potential of creating harm through gamified engagement features, behavioral modeling, deceptive promotions, and parasocial relationships that may heighten viewers' susceptibility to gambling-related harm. Importantly, these livestreams may increase viewers' urges to gamble despite viewers' initial intentions to use them as protective alternatives to real-world gambling participation. The conceptual model we present in this study illustrates how viewing motivations and interactive features can interact to reinforce and exacerbate patterns of engagement and risk. These findings emphasize the need for comprehensive regulatory frameworks and protective measures that address the multi-layered nature of evolving digital gambling landscapes.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the School of Psychological Research Ethics Committee at Swansea University [#1-2024-9068-8080].

Authors' contributions (CRediT)

Chelsea Hughes: Methodology; Validation; Investigation; Writing – review and editing

Jamie Torrance: Methodology; Formal Analysis; Writing – original draft; Writing – review and editing.

Simon Dymond: Funding acquisition; Writing – review and editing.

Glen Dighton: Conceptualization; Funding acquisition; Validation; Supervision; Writing – review and editing.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This project was funded by a seed grant from the Bristol Hub for Gambling Harms Research.

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