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THE GAMBLING HARMS OF INFLUENCER MARKETING

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Introduction

Gambling is becoming more accessible to young people [through the increase in non-traditional channels](#). Where such activities were previously confined to high-street casinos, gambling platforms are available and [marketed through various channels](#) accessible to young people, including online platforms, video games and social media. While restrictions on gambling advertising has tightened amid concerns around vulnerable groups, [online gambling has grown in acceptance and popularity](#). Online markets are ever more [accessibility](#). Black and grey market websites often omit age verification entirely.

[A recent study conducted by the UK Gambling Commission](#) reported that 21% of 11 to 17-year-olds had used their own money to gamble on regulated forms of betting in the previous year, and 15% were accessing unregulated channels. The same report identified a rise in young people experiencing problem gambling in the UK, from 0.7% in 2023 to 1.5% the following year. Social media is a powerful tool for gambling operators to increase their exposure and reach, particularly to younger audiences who comprise the highest percentage of users on these platforms. [In the US](#), four gambling brands alone accounted for around one post every six seconds in 2024.

While some social media platforms such as Twitch prohibit all branding, naming and linking to operators on stream, the growth in the number of social media influencers means such content should be considered a form of advertising, driving exposure and engagement with the industry. For adolescents already displaying gambling problem behaviours, increased exposure heightens the risk. [Evidence suggests](#) that consumers of gambling streams on Twitch display higher levels of problem gambling and urges.

Young people are more susceptible to succumbing to addiction, experiencing cravings with greater intensity. Brain development last until the [mid-20s](#). Differences in psychosocial development and experience in younger people leads to an heightened reward sensitivity and risk seeking, encouraging gambling participation. Adolescents are also highly susceptible to peer influence and online gambling and gaming platforms often include design elements based around community.

The use of colourful and visually appealing design and upbeat videogame-like music [could encourage children](#) to use these platforms. We are all susceptible to such influences, of course, but younger are at even greater risk of being “sucked in” than their adult counterparts. [Studies have strongly suggested](#) the association between gambling advertising exposure and increased gambling rates in adolescents with gambling promotions [four times as likely](#) to appeal to children as to adults.

[Casino content and marketing](#) can hold [significant appeal](#) for children, with a 2020 study showing that [96% of children](#) were exposed to gambling advertisements in the space of a month. Grey and black market websites that often incorporate graphics and cartoon characters that would typically be seen in products targeted at children. [A recent case](#) involved the [ban of a Play'n GO slot ad](#) deemed excessively appealing to minors.

Increased gamification of betting platforms ties in with a rising amount of video game content on social media platforms. In 2024, [video gaming accounted](#) for over 75% of Twitch content, and over 50% on Kick. Problematic gaming behaviours [may originate](#) from both [game design and child psychology](#), with many children who play games regularly displaying behaviours associated with addiction.

The rise of the influencer

Social media influencers can amplify the risks faced by young people by [creating online identities](#) that [forge connections](#) with their followers and by building dedicated communities that foster a further sense of belonging. Behavioural science principles tell us that [the messenger often matters more than the](#)

[message](#) itself. The credibility and appeal of the messenger (whether social media influencer, celebrity, or peer) can override critical evaluation of the actual message content – even when they encourage problematic behaviour.

Algorithms allow brand organic content to appear through recommendations based on prior preferences. Social media platforms have seen a rapid rise in influencers and content creators. These influencers are highly diverse in the range of content they produce, their online characteristics, follower numbers, methods for audience engagement, and the platforms they operate on. These influencers possess the capacity to [shape attitudes, choices and perceptions](#) of their viewers, making them [powerful tools](#) for brands, including gambling operators, to expand their audience base and increase brand visibility.

In recent years, however, the value of smaller creators has become recognised. They frequently achieve the highest engagement rates as they foster small, [tight-knit communities](#) that engage on a more personal level, building [authentic parasocial connections](#). A high engagement rate and emotional connection is likely to persuade audiences to adopt influencer recommendations that translate to a high conversion rate. Sponsorships and promotional content could take many forms. This could range from a “shout out” or a prize giveaway, through to affiliate links with commission, to more traditional advertising or sponsored content.

Influencers and illegal gambling

Following the introduction of strict measures on operators in recent years, particularly in the UK and EU, users have increasingly begun using unlicensed or unregulated remote online websites to gamble. The percentage of illegal gambling platforms in Europe grew by 30% from 2023 to 2024, [accounting for 71%](#) of the online betting markets. From a consumer perspective, it provides anonymity, it's quick to bet and it can be used on any online casino across the world, unlike bank cards.

These sites may include highly addictive features, including but not limited to: bonus buys and incentives for player retention, features for faster gambling, such as autoplay and turbo spins and tools to encourage prolonged playing, including pop-ups and email marketing.

Unregulated operators also often only accept cryptocurrency payments that come with higher risks. These operators also have no responsible gambling tools, such as deposit limits, self-exclusion options, warnings around the risks of betting, and advice on safe gambling practices, the latter of which is required in the UK, EU and Brazil. Operators may claim to have a licence that is in fact fake.

Influencers provide a way to reach audiences while operating in regulatory grey areas, especially for offshore or unlicensed operators. They provide an easy way to circumvent advertising restrictions while being able to customise their content and targeting. According to the [Deal Me Out report](#), up to five million clicks across social media each month were directed to black market sites via affiliate links posted by streamers and influencers. The combination of peer / messenger, regulatory gaps, and content targeting makes influencer marketing particularly effective – and problematic – around illegal gambling.

A case study

To get a better sense of the market, we followed 37 content creators over a four-week period to examine content creation, follower engagement strategies and transparency in declaring sponsored content. The content creators satisfied the following criteria: 1) between 1000 and 1 million followers on their primary platform; 2) they promote gambling on grey/black market sites; 3) they were based in one of the following: UK, Spain, Italy, Germany, Netherlands, France, Poland, Brazil; and they operated on one of the following platforms: TikTok, Twitch, Kick, YouTube, Discord.

Any reference to unlicensed or unregulated gambling, whether appearing on-screen, in video descriptions, in Discord servers, or on personal websites, was considered as promotion. Online description sections were examined for visual cues of (a) any form of safer gambling promotion and (b) gambling sponsorships or affiliate links. On-screen visual cues, such as branding, affiliate codes and safer gambling messages were also noted, along with any age verification prompts or age gates.

The minimum age for users across all five platforms is 13, except for Kick users in the EU, who must be above 16 to create an account, and globally users under 18 “may only use Kick with the involvement of a parent or guardian who agrees to Kick’s Terms of Service”. Although these ages are outlined in the Terms of Service (ToS), there is no formal age verification process, meaning children younger than 13 could register to any of the five platforms with a valid email address. The only mechanism to prevent users suspected of being below minimum age from accessing the platform is through the reporting system, which does not guarantee an account will be suspended.

Some of the content that can be accessed on these social media platforms is not suitable to users below the age of 18. [Twitch content classification guidelines](#) require streamers to label their gambling streams and community guidelines prohibit verbal or on-screen site referrals or link-sharing of slots, roulette, dice games and certain operators. Similarly, [YouTube](#) prohibits naming, branding, and linking of gambling operators and alternate channels where these are made publicly available. Both YouTube and TikTok do not feature categories for slots, casinos, or other betting or gambling content.

The ‘Browse’ section of Kick displays ‘Slots & Casino’ as the second category on its default page, making it easily discoverable and accessible. Kick holds a significantly more relaxed approach to gambling, stating that streamers must adhere to local laws, and permission to stream gambling content depends on the regulations of the country in which they are physically located. [The only reference to underage individuals](#) is the following: “Minors must not be involved with gambling, such as through participation”. And yet we were able to access a variety of gambling streams from several devices as guest users without encountering age verification prompts.

Of the 37 content creators screened, only 11 (30%) displayed safer gambling warnings either on-screen or in the channel description. 19 (51%) creators had sponsorships, affiliate codes or links to casinos visible on-screen or in the channel description, and of these, only 5 (26%) included safer gambling or 18+ warnings. Most responsible gambling safeguards were on German and UK content, comprising 9 (50%) content creators. Beyond restricted advice to “Gamble Responsibly”, few pages provided additional information, and hyperlinks to gambling awareness resources were uncommon. Only a small proportion of total creators had flagged their content as containing mature themes and, despite the enforcement of age verification prompts, these could be easily bypassed, requiring a simple click of a button, with no formal age verification requested.

A significant number of minors are accessing gambling content on the Kick and Twitch platform. Notable Twitch creators we studied all have at least 10% of their audience comprised of viewers under the age of 16. Creators with additional social media profiles can channel users from one to the other, from “harmless” content to harmful content. One creator, a Fortnite YouTuber with 300,000+ subscribers, streams slot machine content on Twitch to over 900,000 followers. This creates a pathway for children watching child-oriented content to enter gambling without safeguards.

On TikTok, no significant gambling content creators met the criteria of the study, and of the few identified, locations could not be verified. Most popular gambling content available on the platform consists of in-person gambling at casinos, gambling addiction and prevention videos, and a limited number of online gambling videos with low viewership and engagement. Similarly, there is scarce information about YouTube gambling content creators, and no adequate tool was found to identify content creators that met our criteria.

We focused on two types of Discord servers: (1) community servers managed by content creators, and (2) gambling community servers searchable through online listings. Of the influencers sampled, 16 were

found to have valid links to personal Discord servers. Within these, 14 servers contained gambling-related discussion channels, featuring content promotion, betting advice, wins sharing, creator-led raffles and gambling operator listings. Additionally, two Discord servers were found to contain specific channels with download links and instructions for how to set up a VPN (virtual private network) to bypass country-specific content restrictions. Some servers were found to reward creator watch time or Discord server interaction with points which can be exchanged for genuine currency or other tangible rewards with real-world value; some of these were presented as site-specific gambling credits.

Only one server implemented age restrictions on all its gambling content, and only one other server utilised an age gate on a single gambling-related text channel. In one case, participation in a raffle through the content creator's Discord Server required registration to a website illegal under that country's gambling legislation.

Most regulated sports betting servers require paid memberships to access their main features, such as top picks, tips and advice from experts, and other support features. They encourage safe gambling behaviours, such as emotional control and avoiding chasing losses, as part of their smart betting guidance. By contrast, smaller servers, particularly those owned by casinos and Discord-based casinos where users can play against each other, had no responsible gambling guidance. In several of these, one or multiple bots send welcome messages with attractive offers to encourage participation. Many channels contained links to unsafe betting platforms as well as information on VPN services coupled with discount codes.

Multiple content creators had links to Telegram - an end-to-end encrypted instant messaging service, that is far less regulated than messaging platforms like WhatsApp.

Although YouTube has no dedicated gambling category, three popular gambling content creators in the UK were identified who promote unregulated operators. Although these displayed no promotions on screen, their websites had clear links to casinos not licensed by UKGC.

Conclusion

The proliferation of social media and influencer marketing has created unprecedented pathways for underage individuals to encounter gambling content, often bypassing traditional regulatory safeguards designed to protect minors. Influencers, particularly those popular with younger demographics, frequently promote gambling platforms through seemingly casual content that blurs the lines between entertainment and advertising.

This creates an environment where gambling appears as just another lifestyle choice rather than a regulated activity with age restrictions. The parasocial relationships that young people develop with influencers make these promotions particularly persuasive, as recommendations feel like advice from trusted friends rather than commercial advertisements. Furthermore, the algorithm-driven nature of social media platforms can lead to gambling content becoming increasingly prevalent in a young person's feed, creating repeated exposure that can desensitise them to the risks involved.

We have identified a failure from both content creators and platforms to create a safer environment for viewers. Perhaps most concerning is how this digital landscape facilitates access to unregulated gambling operators who specifically exploit social media's reach and influencer partnerships to target younger audiences. These black market operators often lack the responsible gambling measures, age verification systems, and financial protections that licensed platforms are required to implement. The casual, entertainment-focused presentation of gambling content on social media can mask the serious financial and psychological risks, making it difficult for young people to distinguish between legitimate, regulated operators and potentially predatory unlicensed ones.

Research consistently shows that early exposure to gambling significantly increases the likelihood of developing problematic gambling behaviours in adulthood, meaning that today's social media-saturated environment may be cultivating a generation with heightened vulnerability to gambling addiction. The convergence of influential marketing, algorithmic amplification, and inadequate age verification systems creates a perfect storm that demands immediate regulatory attention and industry accountability.

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