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THE DARK SIDE OF THE MOON

INFLUENCERS AND ILLICIT CRYPTO GAMBLING

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Introduction

Social media platforms have impacted upon how people communicate digitally, how they present themselves online, and how they shop as consumers. Today's social media landscape has created a new class of influencers whose audience now reaches millions of users worldwide on platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, X, Discord and KICK. Audiences see these individuals as authentic and trustworthy which allows them to influence public opinions across fashion, finance, travel – and activities such as gaming and gambling industries (Luqman et al., 2021).

Digital landscape transformations produce new marketing methods for gambling services which skip established regulations and oversight. Online and crypto gambling presents a notable trend where influencers act as main promoters to attract users to these services. The use of cryptocurrencies together with online gambling has created a revolutionary gambling space which enables anonymous transactions that resist detection and control (Auer & Griffiths, 2022). Crypto gambling sites operate in black or grey market areas because the mainstream, regulated, online gambling platforms operate under established licensing conditions and adhere to the Gambling Act 2005.

The acceptance of Bitcoin and the popular Monero (XMR: Monero ticket symbol) cryptocurrencies through these sites located on the dark web enables (i) customers seeking privacy and navigation around licensed sites and (ii) social media influencers, the opportunity to participate in the promotion of gambling to their audience or fan base, often at significant personal profit and without the customer protections afforded by regulated sites (LaBrie et al., 2021). Social media influencers may be doing this activity knowingly or unknowingly.

This paper considers the promotional activities of social media influencers regarding dark web crypto gambling sites that operate illegally. This paper explores the operational methods of these influencers along with their promotional strategies and their ability to avoid regulatory oversight. The research examines both the psychological effects and behavioural changes that result from this content particularly for young and vulnerable audiences. The paper explores social media campaigns for responsible gambling promotion alongside the difficulties of maintaining ethical standards in decentralised digital platforms.

Illegal and crypto gambling on the dark web

The definition of illegal gambling includes all betting or gaming activities performed outside of licensed and regulatory frameworks in jurisdictions where such frameworks exist, such as the United Kingdom. The unregulated activities in gambling include unauthorised casinos and sports betting sites along with online gambling services that accept restricted payments or serve prohibited areas (Sammut-Bonnici, 2020).

Crypto gambling represents a new online gambling sector that lets consumers stake bets or play casino games through digital currencies including Bitcoin, Ethereum and Monero. Several crypto gambling platforms have obtained licences but there are far more platforms that operate without regulatory oversight to serve illegal markets (Van Laar et al., 2021).

The combination of anonymity on dark web crypto gambling platforms makes them nearly impossible to track and regulate. The Tor Browser is a free and open-source web browser designed to enhance online privacy and anonymity by routing internet traffic through a series of encrypted relays, known as nodes. This process masks the user's IP address and location, making it difficult for websites, internet service providers, and other parties to track online activity. This browser grants users access to these platforms which operate from .onion domains while accepting privacy-oriented cryptocurrencies including Monero (XMR) which is popular for gambling.

The platforms operate traditional gaming products including roulette and poker alongside slots and sports betting markets. The absence of identity verification requirements along with inadequate consumer protection measures on these platforms makes them especially hazardous for consumers (Griffiths & Perez, 2020). Thus, there is a pressing need to develop better regulatory and educational / awareness programmes that aim to decrease online risks while building safer digital spaces.

The dark web provides an alternative network for digital operations which want to evade monitoring and prohibition and censorship. Crypto gambling flourishes in this space with an enhanced resistance to legal oversight compared to licensed and regulated gambling sites. The dark web gambling sites enable access through Tor anonymising networks by utilising “.onion” domain names which require users to install special browsers. These platforms operate casino games together with sports betting and lottery services that function without any user verification or licensing requirements or responsible gambling safeguards (Tzanetakis, 2021).

The dark web gambling websites accept transactions through cryptocurrencies only and Monero (XMR) stands out as the most popular privacy-oriented option among these cryptocurrencies. Monero functions differently from Bitcoin and Ethereum since it conceals sender and receiver details through its opaque blockchain structure which makes it especially suitable for illegal operations (Kethineni et al., 2022). Smart contracts - self-executing agreements written in code and stored on a blockchain – are used. This automatically enforces the terms of the contract when predetermined conditions are met, eliminating the need for intermediaries and manual intervention.

The lack of documented dark web gambling site shutdowns exists because of the complex technical aspects combined with jurisdictional obstacles. The dark web sports betting site “DeepBet” became one of the most notable cases when law enforcement agencies from Europol along with blockchain forensics firms conducted a joint operation that resulted in its shutdown (Europol, 2021). The platform “OnionDice” operated as a fake dice game that used altered results to cheat users out of their money. A known Eastern European fraud ring operated the scam but investigators failed to apprehend anyone because the perpetrators used decentralised hosting services and jurisdictional issues prevented arrest (Chen et al., 2022). These cases prove the operational resilience of such sites while showing how hard it is to prosecute their owners.

The enforcement of laws against dark web gambling faces extreme challenges because of multiple obstacles. Users and operators maintain complete anonymity which makes identification extremely difficult unless investigators possess advanced surveillance technology and insider knowledge. These platforms operate from distributed servers that span across multiple countries which protects them from local legal authority. Regulators who identify gambling site operators cannot extradite them when the operator’s country lacks extradition agreements or fails to recognise the criminal nature of their activities (Savona & Riccardi, 2020).

Influencer influence

Users gain access to dark web gambling services through the enabling actions of influencers. Influencers avoid posting direct “.onion” links on public platforms because of legal hazards yet they offer instructions about Tor setup and VPN configuration alongside directions to reach gambling forums which host link listings. The information network uses encrypted platforms Discord, Telegram and Matrix as its essential nodes (individual computers or devices that participate in a blockchain network, acting as a crucial part of the decentralised infrastructure). The vetted users who access restricted content including gambling site recommendations can join private channels or discussion groups hosted by influencers (Weimann, 2021).

Social media influencers link gambling websites to their profiles through both their bios, video descriptions and encrypted messaging services like Telegram and Discord. The practice of ‘shilling’ involves actors pretending to gamble during live streams or recorded videos to generate more audience interest by manufacturing winning outcomes, hype and urgency to gamble while a ‘machine may be hot’ and about to pay a significant, but false jackpot. The provision of affiliate codes allows influencers to earn commissions from user losses thus motivating them to recruit maximum gamblers (King et al., 2022). Influencers can take advantage of regulatory gaps through dual statements that their content serves entertainment purposes while blocking access to areas where regulated gambling exists. The combination of social media influence with anonymous financial transactions and insufficient cross-border regulation has established an ideal environment for illegal gambling promotion.

Social media influencers serve as primary promoters of crypto gambling through their wide connectivity and public perception of authenticity. The public views influencers differently from traditional celebrities because they possess a more relatable quality and higher levels of trustworthiness, particularly for younger or vulnerable audiences. The credibility of these influencers enables them to modify both opinions and behaviours especially those involving online gambling. These influencers now promote crypto gambling services through various platforms which include YouTube, TikTok, X, Kick, Discord, Instagram and encrypted messaging applications like Telegram and Discord (Deans et al., 2022).

YouTube stands as a good example of a platform through which crypto gambling promotion takes place. YouTube influencers use their channels to broadcast recorded slot machine gameplay as well as live streaming high-risk gambling sessions. The promotional content includes links to platforms such as Stake.com, Rollbit.com and Roobet.com along with direct links and promotional codes located in the video description. Influencers create an environment where gambling appears normal by displaying “big wins” and gameplay highlights while staying clear of sponsorships to make regulatory monitoring more challenging (Hing et al., 2022). TikTok and Instagram users distribute short gambling outcome videos through hashtags and captions which draw users into engagement. Influencers on X create multiple instances of crypto casino links through memes and references to crypto culture to present their promotional content in a softer manner (James et al., 2023).

Discord and Telegram serve as platforms that enhance user interaction while providing space for less controlled promotional activities. Influencers manage both public and restricted member groups which provide their followers with special gambling information and betting ‘strategies’ and pre-release promotional offers. Telegram has gained popularity because of its encrypted communication and limited content restrictions (Brooks & Poole, 2021). Through this environment influencers can promote illegal platforms without facing examination.

The promotion of crypto gambling through various techniques is commonly seen in influencer marketing. The affiliate code represents one of the main strategies influencers use in their marketing efforts. The gambling platforms provide their influencers with referral links or codes which they distribute to their audience. Users who join through an influencer’s code receive a commission payment based on losses or betting volume percentages to the influencer (Mills & Zabrocki, 2022). The affiliate programme structure drives influencers to promote aggressive betting patterns to their audience.

Most influencers obtain payment arrangements from grey or black gambling companies through fixed retainers as well as performance-based fees that depend on their content’s ability to drive significant user traffic. The simulation along with manipulation of gambling wins represents a typical method used in the grey or black market. Influencers use staged and real fake winnings to present the illusion of effortless achievement. The editing process of “big win” videos creates artificial emotional effects that distort both probability statistics and reward potential. Recently Roobet.com and Stake.com YouTubers face criticism for showing winning sequences while hiding their losses which misleads their audience about the real risks and lack of protection from unlicensed platforms (Browne et al., 2022). Influencers receive financial backing from crypto casinos through house funds and rigged accounts which they use to create fake success scenarios for attracting more users.

The promotional system heavily depends on users remaining anonymous. Many influencers protect their personal identities by using fake names together with digital avatars and voice alteration software. These influencers base their operations from locations where authorities fail to enforce laws against unlicensed gambling promotion such as Eastern European territories and Caribbean and Southeast Asian regions. The combination of VPNs enables influencers to fake their locations which enables them to bypass geographical restrictions and legal barriers that protect licensed and legal gambling sites. The influencers teach their followers how to bypass legal protections by providing them with instructions on how to do so (Hoffmann et al., 2023). Offshore crypto casinos establish their operations in jurisdictions with weak oversight which leads to enforcement challenges and increases the likelihood of user exploitation and data breaches.

Several influencers face both public and regulatory investigations because they endorse crypto gambling activities. For example, a group of YouTubers who stream content associated with Roobet.com crypto

casino has faced multiple warnings from gambling watchdogs. Influencers with millions of subscribers openly displayed Roobet.com gameplay while giving away cash prizes and providing referral codes according to Abdi et al. (2023). Multiple influencers choose to maintain such promotional activities because they earn significant profits and face minimal legal repercussions at present.

Underage and vulnerable audiences face increasing harm from these promotional activities. Influencers primarily use TikTok and YouTube platforms which attract large numbers of teenagers and young adults who are easy targets for persuasive messages and high-risk activities. Research suggests that people who experience gambling content at an early stage, risk develop greater risks of creating problematic gambling throughout their lives (Derevensky & Gilbeau, 2021). The combination of appealing graphics together with humorous content and casual language makes gambling seem both safe and desirable. Influencers specifically aim to reach younger audiences through their use of gaming elements and crypto-themed content which merges entertainment with gambling promotion (Newall & Weiss-Cohen, 2023). The vast majority of consumers do not know the difference between legal and back markets, and view them as 'one sector'.

The intimate bond between influencers and their followers makes the situation more challenging to handle. People who follow influencers tend to view them as close friends or authority figures thus increasing both their faith in the influencers and their willingness to imitate them. Users face direct financial risks and other harms when influencers promote gambling because many users lack understanding about the unregulated nature of these platforms. Research documents show followers have lost big money from using influencer-promoted links to sign up at illegal gambling sites which often left them without legal recourse (Gainsbury et al., 2022).

The promotional efforts of influencers in crypto gambling unite multiple engagement points with numerous platforms alongside unknown operations and aggressive marketing approaches. The combination of these elements produces a strong unmanageable phenomenon that puts users at risk from both legal issues and mental distress. The following section will consider the dark web's role in deepening user risks by creating an additional hidden digital space for influencer-promoted gambling to grow and thrive. This is a significant risk which few regulators are looking at.

The use of cryptocurrencies makes money laundering investigations more difficult because traditional paper trails are eliminated particularly when privacy coins are involved. Although dark web gambling operators maintain their anonymity on the internet, influencers who promote their services remain accessible through social media platforms. The establishment of a direct link between an influencer and an illegal gambling platform proves difficult because their promotions frequently use ambiguous language and encrypted communication channels. The use of burner accounts and short-term content posting by influencers makes it hard for authorities to gather evidence. The limited tools for off-platform activity monitoring on YouTube and TikTok allow influencers to secretly guide users toward dark web destinations through subtle methods.

The dark web crypto gambling activities together with influencer involvement in their promotion create a sophisticated regulatory challenge. The activities violate gambling laws while simultaneously raising the chances of fraud incidents and addiction problems and criminal network involvement. The increasing number of users who discover hidden markets through influencer content makes enforcement more difficult for agencies because they lack international cooperation and advanced tracking capabilities.

Legal and ethical issues

Through their influence social media users expose themselves to numerous legal and ethical risks by promoting crypto gambling which operates outside the law. The prosecution of influencers who promote illegal activities remains complex because digital content transcends borders while platform rules are unclear and jurisdictional laws differ. Through their operations in countries with weak or inadequately enforced gambling regulations, influencers manage to market unlawful services that would violate gambling laws in their followers' territories. Due to jurisdictional differences combined with the need for cross-border cooperation and technical evidence and proof of financial gain, authorities face difficulties when trying to build cases about violations (Lopez-Gonzalez & Griffiths, 2019).

The main legal challenge stems from establishing the precise classification of influencer-produced content. The legal proof of direct gambling promotion becomes uncertain when an influencer defends their content as entertainment despite any explicit gambling promotion. Users face difficulties when influencers use affiliate links alongside indirect platforms like Telegram and Discord because financial transactions become harder to track. The investigation becomes more complex because users utilise VPNs alongside cryptocurrency tumblers along with encrypted messaging apps that hide their identities and revenue flows (King et al., 2022). The attempt to prosecute influencers under advertising standards or consumer protection laws remains unsuccessful because both the influencers and their promoted gambling platforms maintain anonymity while enforcement agencies face limitations in their capabilities.

The ethical problems arise when influencers promote gambling activities through illegal or unregulated channels. One major issue is the targeting of young or vulnerable individuals. Research shows social media followers consist primarily of young people and many content creators create content specifically to attract teenagers and young adults (Clemens et al., 2023). When gambling content is delivered in an entertaining and humorous format, it creates a normalising effect which reduces perceived risks while increasing audience curiosity. Social media algorithms automatically present content to young and vulnerable people, even when influencers do not actively direct such material toward them. This situation conflicts with ethical marketing standards that demand protection for vulnerable audience members against deceptive material.

The ethical issue of addiction closely connects to the promotion activities performed by influencers. The promotion of gambling by influencers through entertaining formats creates an inaccurate public perception of its risks. Viewers may misinterpret gambling as a dependable way to earn money because influencers show their successful wins while hiding their losses. The way influencers connect with their audience creates an increased danger of negative outcomes. People who follow influencers tend to duplicate their actions even though they lack the financial means or comprehension of betting probabilities (Derevensky & Gilbeau, 2021).

Social media platforms including YouTube, TikTok and Instagram need to take responsibility for letting harmful gambling promotions occur while also failing to properly regulate them. These platforms need help, support and a framework to achieve this. This is because it is a specialist area and complex area. The majority of platforms do prohibit the promotion of illegal gambling services but they do not consistently enforce these policies, often through lack of specialist support. The detection of indirect promotional content by automated moderation systems remains challenging because they fail to identify links in comments as well as embedded videos and affiliate networks located on third-party websites. The YouTube policy against unlicensed gambling promotion exists but enforcement happens mostly when there is media attention or public outcry (James et al., 2023). TikTok started blocking crypto casino hashtags only after a recent intervention but users discovered new methods to communicate using coded language together with emojis.

The combination of watchdog groups together with investigative journalists serves as a key force in revealing unethical conduct. Platforms need support on safer legalised gambling as do influencers. The legal aspects and ethical issues related to influencer-promoted crypto gambling create extensive problems because (i) current legal frameworks lack sufficient regulation and (ii) platforms are not being guided and helped to raise standards.

Impact on Safer Gambling

The growing popularity of crypto gambling advertising through influencers stands as an obstacle to safer gambling initiatives. The efforts for safer gambling reduction stem from regulators, charities and gambling operators through their implementation of self-exclusion, time out, budget and spending limits and public education or awareness programmes. The latter can be funded and supported by gambling operators and is a useful way to raise standards, if routed through charities which are uninfluenced by this funding. The promotional strategies employed by influencers actively undermine these safer gambling principles because they target digital natives or young, vulnerable people. Influencers may be doing this knowingly or unknowingly.

Influencers typically depict gambling activities as normal and sometimes as a life goal for their followers. The promotional approach by influencers contradicts safer gambling information which warns about

monetary losses, potential addiction and impaired mental health. From our research the majority of influencers fail to discuss loss restrictions together with losing probability information, along with available resources for people dealing with gambling harm. The promotion of their content focuses on showing big wins along with luxury lifestyles and the excitement of risk which creates a false belief that gambling can be a profitable or enjoyable activity without negative effects (King et al., 2022). The way influencers communicate about gambling makes safer gambling messages irrelevant while confusing people about gambling risks because they present gambling as something safe instead of risky.

Risk normalisation develops when audiences become numb to gambling content because it appears within entertaining media such as livestreams or comedy sketches. People tend to view gambling as an unremarkable behaviour because they gradually lose sight of its status as a controlled and to some, risky activity (Newall et al., 2023). The fear of missing out (FOMO) emerges when influencers present exclusive giveaways and time-sensitive bonuses and VIP access which leads followers to make spontaneous choices because they worry about missing the chance (Derevensky & Gilbeau, 2021). Young and vulnerable people show particular vulnerability to these psychological effects because they naturally respond more strongly to peer influence and social comparison.

Social media platforms currently receive some responsible gambling content adaptation but such initiatives do not match the powerful impact of influencer promotion. Through digital advertising the UK GambleAware programme delivers “Bet Regret” and the Australian “You’re Stronger Than You Think” initiative warns people about risky gambling behaviours. The reach of campaigns remains restricted compared to influencer-driven content because of its strong user interactions and algorithmic growth and creator-follower social bonds (Hing et al., 2022). The formal communication approach used in responsible gambling campaigns produces little impact on the informal meme-based content that dominates TikTok and X.

Different efforts launched by regulators and charities to stop social media gambling harm have produced inconsistent results. The UK Gambling Commission recently established guidelines to stop operators from using influencers who draw in children and vulnerable people (UKGC, 2022). The UKGC guidelines prevent gambling companies from working with certain influencers yet they do not restrict those who promote unlicensed offshore crypto gambling services. The Federal Trade Commission in the US updated its guidelines for influencers to disclose sponsorships yet its enforcement power remains limited and penalties occur infrequently (FTC, 2023). Age restrictions along with self-exclusion features and content flagging mechanisms have emerged as platform-driven interventions. YouTube forces all gambling content to have age restrictions and bans all gambling websites that lack proper licensing.

The social media platforms TikTok and Instagram have banned gambling advertisements together with particular gambling hashtags but Instagram also uses keyword and phrase filters to block harmful content (James et al., 2023). The implementation of these measures proves to be inconsistent across different situations. Influencers prevent detection by automated systems because they employ coded language along with emojis and link shorteners which prove difficult for automated detection. The content appears briefly before removal to allow viewers to see it before moderation teams can intervene. Influencers establish new accounts called burners to publish prohibited content while their main profiles remain secure from suspension.

The theory behind self-exclusion tools proves ineffective when used in the context of influencer-promoted crypto gambling activities. Users must actively choose to limit their gambling access or set deposit boundaries in order to use these tools. The majority of crypto gambling platforms which operate either without licences or on dark web networks do not provide self-exclusion features to their users. Users can easily outsmart self-exclusion restrictions because they can access different cryptocurrency wallets or create new accounts with minimal effort according to LaBrie et al. (2021). Users who follow multiple platforms simultaneously according to influencers face an increased risk of switching between sites after self-excluding from one platform.

The absence of standardised safer gambling rules creates major challenges for crypto industry regulation at the global level. National regulators face difficulties in enforcing rules against platforms that operate from offshore locations since many influencer-promoted gambling services exist in countries without consumer

protection regulations. The attempt to get cryptocurrency exchanges to participate in safer gambling initiatives has ended in failure because these platforms claim they only facilitate transactions without taking responsibility for user fund utilisation (Kethineni et al., 2022). The lack of both regulatory structure and stakeholder responsibility leads to fragmented and non-effective safer gambling measures.

Our research has shown a few positive developments have started to appear despite all these challenges. Some influencers now use safer gambling messages in their content either through platform collaborations or to prevent public criticism. The messages warn users to “gamble responsibly” and provide links to helplines or include disclaimers stating that gambling does not generate profit. There is also the over 18s promotion on some influencer sites.

Recommendations and conclusions

The prevention of illegal crypto gambling spread by influencer promotion demands coordinated efforts between harm minimisation charities and organisations; digital platforms; regulators and international partners and Influencers themselves. Sustainable outcomes require coordinated action from all stakeholders because each group possesses different capacities to respond. Here we provide some suggestions about what is required to reduce the harms from illicit markets

First, harm minimisation charities and organisations could join forces with micro-influencers and content creators who maintain trust with younger audiences to create public service awareness campaign or educational content that differ from traditional approaches. Authentic harm-reduction messages will be promoted through partnerships which use reaction videos and Q&As and short-form content suitable for TikTok or YouTube Shorts platforms. Early intervention alongside youth engagement are essential because young users face maximum exposure to risks given their world view, yet they demonstrate minimum understanding of financial and psychological gambling risks (Hing et al., 2022).

Second, digital platforms should consider developing better content moderation tools and establish stronger rules about gambling advertisements. Modern algorithms need retraining for the purpose of detecting gambling promotion strategies through affiliate link placement in video descriptions and keyword filtering bypass methods. YouTube and TikTok should consider enhancing their system for detecting gambling-related content through human review when such content shows up with youth-targeted content. Domain registrars along with cybercrime units should join forces with digital platforms to establish platform-wide bans on unlicensed crypto gambling domains (James et al., 2023).

Third, digital platforms and influencers need support. An initial co-created Code of Conduct for platforms and influencers would be useful, together with upskilling compliance teams at platforms and influencers. Black market operators bring significant reputational risks to the regulated market and public perception. Community Care Gaming and our partners are also working cross-sector to co-develop an initial Code of Conduct for both platforms and influencers.

Fourth, international collaboration is a fundamental requirement for handling the worldwide nature of crypto gambling operations. Influencers maintain business operations across multiple countries which makes national regulatory frameworks insufficient. Through international organisations such as Interpol and the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) regulators should collaborate to exchange intelligence information and execute extraditions when necessary while developing a unified list of prohibited platforms. Multiple policy gaps exist because countries have different approaches to defining gambling and their regulations of cryptocurrencies.

All of this requires proper consideration of the unintended consequences of policy. The road to hell is paved with good intentions. With the best will in the world, we could attempt to reduce the black market in one sphere only for the harms to increase in another way. We should therefore begin by bringing all stakeholders together to properly understand how incentives and behavioural responses can be better aligned in the interests of safer gambling.

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