

Gambling by proxy: Loot box live streams and the digital gambling ecosystem

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

While loot boxes have been at the centre of regulatory debates due to their structural and psychological similarities to traditional gambling mechanisms (Spicer et al. 2022; Xiao 2024), streaming platforms remain popular sites of engagement with loot box content. Despite action being taken against gambling content, with Twitch announcing a ban targeting slots, roulette, and dice games and YouTube updating their gambling content policy to address skin gambling and casino-style content, loot box streams thus far remain outside the scope of platform-level surveillance (Gerken 2022; YouTube 2025). Previous research highlights the increasing gamification and gambification of monetisation on streaming platforms (Abarbanel & Johnson 2020; Johnson & Woodcock 2019) and the blurring of boundaries between gambling and non-gambling activities with the passive consumption of gamblified media, conceptualised as interpassive gambling (Hoebanx & French 2023). Loot box content is a prominent manifestation of interpassive gambling; however, little attention is paid to the gambling-like interaction and participation that a live stream's modality affords beyond mere passive consumption.

To observe how loot box opening streams create conditions for gambling-like participation, a qualitative content analysis was conducted on YouTube. This novel and under-researched topic was explored through two sub-questions examining the role of the streamer in facilitating viewer participation (RQ1) and the ways in which viewers demonstrate investment within loot box opening streams (RQ2). Two games were selected: *Pokémon TCG Pocket* (*Pokémon*; Creatures Inc. & DeNa 2024) represents the digitalization of the physical trading card games which loot boxes borrowed their mechanics from, while *Counter-Strike 2* (*CS2*; Valve Corporation 2023), has a well-established streaming culture and loot box ecosystem. Three streamers, TimTheTatman and Nadeshot for *CS2* and Jonsandman Plays for *Pokémon*, were chosen based on their varying streaming styles and popularity, assessed by metrics such as subscriber counts and average number of live viewers.

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Twenty live streams were analysed: eleven featuring *CS2* cases and nine showcasing *Pokémon* packs. The *CS2* streams combined gameplay with loot box openings and averaged 6–10 hours, while the *Pokémon* streams consisted primarily of pack openings and averaged 1–2 hours. The data analysed comprised the different modalities of a live stream: the streamer's video feed captured through a webcam, the streamer's verbal and non-verbal actions and cues, the visual overlays and alerts, and the chat log, excluding the Twitch chat visible on screen.

The results shed light on how loot box live streams function as a gambling-adjacent environment embedded within a broader digital gambling ecosystem. A range of streaming techniques were used to create an engaging atmosphere, where the streamer directly invited the viewers to become active participants in the stream and explicitly framed themselves as opening loot boxes on behalf of the viewers. At the same time, streamers employed monetisation strategies, such as tiered recognition systems and direct solicitation, to encourage financial contributions from the viewers. Viewers demonstrated their investment in the stream through ritualistic behaviours, such as manifesting and claiming credit for favourable outcomes, and financial contributions. Most notably, viewers constructed wager-like transactions through the live chat, offering financial contributions contingent on specific loot box outcomes or streamer actions (e.g., "10 gifted if Wipz pulls gold"), revealing that the gambling logic can be emulated by the community itself, independent of the platform or streamer. Lastly, viewers actively followed and participated in gambling and gambling-adjacent activities introduced by streamers while moments of convergence revealed that for several viewers the stream exists within a wider personal landscape of gambling activity, positioning the loot box live stream as a node within a broader digital gambling ecosystem.

In conclusion, the gambling-adjacent nature of the loot box live stream is not an inherent property of the gamblified content, but a result of a symbiotic social environment actively constructed through a combination of streaming techniques, monetisation strategies, and viewer engagement, enabled by the interactivity that the live stream affords unlike pre-recorded content (Hamilton et al. 2014; Smith et al. 2013). Loot box streams function as more than an alternative site of loot box engagement; streamers encouraged direct loot box spending by channelling giveaway rewards back into the loot box economy and normalised gambling and gambling-adjacent activities by positioning them as an extension of the loot box experience. Future research combining observable data with in-depth viewer interviews could investigate the underlying motivations and authenticity of viewer engagement, while cross-platform studies extending beyond YouTube would address a meaningful gap left by this study. As loot box content continues to grow in popularity and streaming platforms become increasingly gamblified, these findings emphasise the urgency for regulatory attention that looks beyond isolated content regulation to account for the ecosystem-level dynamics through which gambling culture permeates digital spaces.

BIO

Marium Ibrahim Ahmed is an independent researcher with a master's degree in Communication Sciences: Digital Media & Society from KU Leuven, Belgium, obtained in July 2026. Her research examines loot box live streams and their role within the broader digital gambling ecosystem, focusing on how streaming platforms and monetisation mechanisms create conditions for gambling-like participation among viewers. She relies on qualitative content analysis to study these dynamics and is looking to continue this line of inquiry through doctoral study or further research opportunities.

Eva Grosemans is a postdoctoral researcher and research manager at the Media Culture & Policy Lab at KU Leuven, Belgium. Her research examines adolescents' and young adults' exposure to gaming and gambling media and advertising, and the impact of this content on their gaming and gambling intentions, attitudes, and behaviors. She relies on both quantitative (longitudinal surveys) and qualitative (diary studies and interviews) methods. She has obtained her doctoral degree in October 2024.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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