

“Let’s unbox!”. Gambling-like elements on Twitch and simulated gambling among Flemish teenagers

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Video game streaming is on the rise, with 8 million creators streaming each month and over 31 million daily visitors on Twitch, the most popular game streaming platform (Twitch.tv, n.d.). However, gambling elements have found their way into video game streaming as well. The “slots” category on Twitch, which displays streamers playing a myriad of simulated gambling games, has over one million followers. Moreover, Twitch has implemented a variety of chance-based mechanics, such as the betting of virtual points on the outcome of in-game events, in hopes of increasing viewers’ engagement and enabling monetization (Abarbanel & Johnson 2020). This phenomenon of blurring lines between video games and monetary gambling - often coined simulated gambling in academia - shifts the limits and margins of what video games and video game streaming are. However, research on the topic of blending gambling elements in video game streams is scarce, and called upon by previous research (Zendle 2020). By using a large-scale survey, we aim to map the exposure of teenagers to these gambling elements in video game streams, and its relation with simulated gambling.

In September 2022, Twitch streamers advocated for Twitch to take actions against gambling on the platform. This protest arose after a well-known streamer admitted using donations to fuel his gambling addiction (Hern 2022). Twitch recently updated its policy, prohibiting the “streaming of gambling sites that aren’t licensed [...] in jurisdictions that provide sufficient consumer protection” (@Twitch, September 21, 2022). Other gambling-like elements, such as loot boxes, are not affected by the adaptation. In Belgium, paid-for loot boxes are qualified as gambling and deemed illegal (Belgian Gaming Commission 2018; Declerck & Feci 2022). Nevertheless, young teenagers are able to watch video game streamers opening loot boxes, enabling them to share in the experience. Teenagers might be triggered to try out simulated gambling after watching these videos, for example by (il)legally buying loot boxes themselves.

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Between November 2021 and February 2022, 2280 Flemish teenagers (Belgium, Dutch speaking part of the country) (46% self-identified as male, mean age = 14.1 years, SD = 1.45) took part in a large-scale survey on video gaming and simulated gambling. No less than 43.1% of our respondents indicated to have watched loot box openings in the past year. Significantly more boys (60.6%) than girls (23%) did so ($\chi^2 = 242.081$, $p < .001$). More than one in five respondents (22.3%) had watched a video of someone gambling (hereafter gambling videos). Again, significantly more boys (31.4%) than girls (11.7%) did so ($\chi^2 = 92.883$, $p < .001$). Both in the case of loot box openings and of gambling videos, age did not significantly differ between viewers and non-viewers. Around one in five respondents (19.7%) watched both types of streams (loot box openings and gambling videos).

Teenagers who watched loot box openings spent more time playing video games than youngsters who did not. Moreover, viewers of loot box openings were more inclined to open free loot boxes themselves than teenagers who were not exposed to these videos. Lastly, these viewers were more inclined to pay for loot boxes themselves than non-viewers. Similar findings emerged for gambling videos. Respondents who watched those streams spent more time gaming than respondents who did not. All differences were significant ($p < 0.001$). Importantly, significantly more gambling video viewers (41.4%) than non-viewers (12.9%) had tried out online monetary gambling themselves ($\chi^2 = 150.79$, $p < .001$). Lastly, respondents who watched gambling videos showed a higher intention to try out monetary gambling later in life (mean = 3.70 out of 1-10, SD = 2.93), than respondents who did not watch these videos (mean = 2.02, SD = 2.42) ($t(523.69) = -10.11$, $p < 0.001$).

In conclusion, teenagers who are exposed to gambling-like elements in video game streams (loot box openings and gambling videos), are more inclined to try out gambling themselves, than non-viewers. Seeing these gambling elements appear in streams of their favorite video game streamers can foster positive attitude towards monetary gambling amongst viewers', adding to the normalization of the activity. Considering the fact that early exposure to gambling increases the risk of gambling addiction later in life (Griffiths, 2003), regulation is needed in order to prevent teenagers from seeing this potential harmful content. We call for longitudinal studies in order to follow up on this disturbing indication and the rapid evolution in the online video and video streaming landscape.

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