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'Sometimes it's easier to seek support in the wrong places': LGBTQIA+ individuals' experiences of gambling harms

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ABSTRACT

Sexual and gender minority individuals face disproportionate mental health challenges, yet little is known about their experiences of gambling-related harm. This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of gambling among LGBTQIA+ individuals in the UK. Thirty-one self-identified LGBTQIA+ adults who had recently engaged in online gambling participated in semi-structured interviews. Reflexive thematic analysis produced three themes: (1) Gambling as escape from minority stress and exclusion, (2) Discrimination and limited representation in gambling spaces, and (3) Barriers to affirming support for LGBTQIA+ gamblers. Participants described using gambling to manage distress related to marginalisation, including discrimination, identity concealment, and social isolation. Offline gambling environments were often perceived as unwelcoming or unsafe, with participants suggesting that visible inclusion policies, staff training, and representation in the marketing of support could help create safer and more welcoming spaces. Online gambling offered privacy but also potential for harm. Participants reported structural and interpersonal barriers to support, including fears of bias and the absence of culturally competent services, which further discouraged help-seeking. These findings highlight how gambling harm among LGBTQIA+ individuals may be shaped by broader social and structural inequalities. The study highlights a need for inclusive, identity-responsive approaches to gambling harm reduction and support.

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Introduction

Gambling is a recognised public health issue that can cause significant harm to individuals, families, and communities (Cowlishaw et al., 2025; Marionneau et al., 2024). These harms range from minor consequences, such as lost time and small financial losses, to more severe and lasting outcomes, including debt, crime, homelessness, and suicide

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(Rockloff et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2024). For many, the negative impacts of gambling extend beyond financial costs, affecting overall wellbeing and quality of life (Kesaite et al., 2023; Marionneau et al., 2022; Ukhova et al., 2024).

Although gambling harms are widespread, with men generally reporting greater harm than women (Tran et al., 2024; Wardle et al., 2024), there is clear evidence of health inequality. Socially and economically disadvantaged groups bear a disproportionate burden (Raybould et al., 2021; Sharman et al., 2019). Research also suggests that sexual and gender minority individuals, including those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, pansexual, and other non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities (LGBTQIA+) may be at elevated risk of gambling harm compared with heterosexual and cisgender populations (Bailey et al., 2023; Lee & Grubbs, 2023; Rider et al., 2019). Lesbian and bisexual women appear particularly affected (Richard et al., 2019), findings for gay and bisexual men are mixed (Bush et al., 2021; Wicki et al., 2021), and transgender and non-binary individuals may face heightened vulnerability (Rider et al., 2019), suggesting disproportionate exposure across some LGBTQIA+ groups. Yet, the lived experiences of these communities remain largely absent from academic research and public health discourse, leaving critical gaps in understanding their specific risks, coping strategies and barriers to support (Devault-Tousignant et al., 2022).

LGBTQIA+ individuals experience significantly higher rates of adverse mental, behavioural, and physical health outcomes compared to the general population (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2024; Zeeman et al., 2018), including increased substance use and behavioural addictions such as gaming and harmful internet use (Broman & Hakansson, 2018; Schuler et al., 2018). They also face significant barriers to accessing healthcare including prejudice, provider inexperience, and fear of stigma which can result in delayed care, unmet needs, and poorer health-related outcomes (Argyriadis et al., 2023; Mizock & Lundquist, 2016; Utamsingh et al., 2015). These disparities are closely linked to the cumulative impact of trauma, discrimination, and minority stress (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2013; Li et al., 2024; Ramos & Marr, 2023).

Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003) explains how persistent exposure to proximal (e.g. internalised stigma, identity concealment) and distal (e.g. prejudice, systemic inequality) stressors contribute to psychological strain and increases the risk of poor mental health and maladaptive coping. Discrimination and stigma are main drivers of health inequalities among LGBTQIA+ individuals (Testa et al., 2015), and intersectionality frameworks suggest that those with multiple marginalised identities face compounded stress (Brooks, 1981; Mallory et al., 2023). For example, LGBTQIA+ individuals reporting sexual, gender, and racial/ethnic discrimination were nearly four times more likely to have a substance use disorder than those reporting none (McCabe et al., 2010). Similarly, the dual burden of disclosing both gender and sexual identity has been linked to heightened psychological distress (Felner et al., 2020). While strong evidence connects minority stress to substance use and behavioural addictions (Mongelli et al., 2019; Slavin et al., 2020), its relationship to gambling harm in LGBTQIA+ populations remains largely underexplored.

Although the evidence base is limited and sometimes mixed due to small samples, differing measures, and variations across sub-populations (Stanmyre et al., 2023; Zeeman et al., 2025), research suggests that LGBTQIA+ individuals may face disproportionately high rates of at-risk and disordered gambling compared with heterosexual and cisgender populations (Birch et al., 2015; Lee & Grubbs, 2023; Rider et al., 2019). Findings for gay

and bisexual men are mixed. Some studies report greater risk, such as US college athletes where 'problem gambling' symptomology was over three times higher among gay and bisexual men compared with heterosexual men (Richard et al., 2019), or greater impairment among those meeting criteria for pathological gambling (Grant & Potenza, 2006), while others find little or no difference (Bush et al., 2021; Wicki et al., 2021). By contrast, lesbian and bisexual women have been shown to report more frequent engagement in gambling activities and higher levels of gambling-related harms, including gambling disorder symptoms, compared to heterosexual women (Broman et al., 2022; Richard et al., 2019).

Research on transgender and non-binary individuals, though sparse, more consistently points to heightened vulnerability. Transgender and gender diverse adolescents are substantially more likely than cisgender peers to report 'problem gambling' (5.7% vs. 1.8%), with those assigned male at birth showing the highest risk (Rider et al., 2019), and refugee transgender individuals also appear at greater risk (Mattelin et al., 2022). Collectively, while patterns vary by subgroup, the available evidence indicates disproportionate exposure to gambling harms among LGBTQIA+ populations.

Access to gambling-related support services also remains a significant challenge for LGBTQIA+ individuals. Bush et al. (2020) found that none of the LGBTQIA+ participants experiencing gambling harm in their study had accessed formal support services. Participants reported negative experiences in mental health and social care settings, including a lack of LGBTQIA+ awareness, cultural competence, and affirming practices among professionals. Additional barriers included pathologised language, inappropriate questioning, and heteronormative assumptions, all of which reinforced exclusion and discouraged help-seeking. Similar issues have been reported by LGBTQIA+ migrants and refugees, who faced language barriers, limited awareness of services, and compounded stigma (Mattelin et al., 2022). These findings indicate a need for accessible, culturally safe, and inclusive gambling support services to reduce harm and promote health equity (Nieder et al., 2024).

Despite a growing awareness of disparities, few studies have qualitatively explored the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals affected by gambling harm (Bailey et al., 2023). This lack of research is notable given the value of qualitative inquiry in capturing the realities of marginalised communities (Lewis et al., 2023). Such insights are essential to understanding how gambling harm is experienced and navigated, including help-seeking behaviour and support barriers. The aim of this study was to generate new insights into the gambling experiences of LGBTQIA+ adults, a group underrepresented in existing gambling research (Zeeman et al., 2025). Specifically, the study sought to explore (1) how LGBTQIA+ adults describe their engagement with gambling; (2) what role, if any, sexual and gender identity plays in shaping these experiences; (3) whether gambling is associated with harms in this community; and (4) what forms of support or change might help to reduce harm and improve access to services.

Method

Participants and recruitment

This qualitative interview study invited self-identified LGBTQIA+ individuals with experience of online gambling to take part. Eligibility criteria required participants to identify as

LGBTQIA+, reside in the United Kingdom, and have engaged in online gambling within the past 30 days. Participants were recruited via Prolific, an online participant recruitment platform, using screeners for UK residence, LGBTQIA+ identity, and use of online gambling sites and games. After expressing interest, participants completed a short Qualtrics survey to provide availability. A researcher then contacted them directly to arrange an interview at a preferred date and time, providing a Microsoft Teams or Zoom link. Participants were informed that the study aimed to explore the gambling experiences of individuals within the LGBTQIA+ community.

In total, 31 individuals participated, ranging in age from 20 to 59 years ($M = 32.19$; $SD = 8.86$). The majority were White ($n = 24$), with the remainder identifying as Black ($n = 3$), mixed ($n = 2$), Asian ($n = 1$), and Arab ($n = 1$). In line with inclusive research practices (Blair, 2016), participants were invited to self-describe their gender identity and sexual orientation. Gender identities included male ($n = 21$), female ($n = 6$), non-binary ($n = 3$), and trans man ($n = 1$). Sexual orientations reported were bisexual ($n = 13$), gay ($n = 9$), queer ($n = 4$), pansexual ($n = 2$), asexual ($n = 1$), biromantic ($n = 1$), and hetero-flexible ($n = 1$). No participants withdrew from the study. No repeat interviews were conducted. While saturation was acknowledged as a concept, it was not pursued as an analytic aim, consistent with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019b).

Data collection

Ethical approval was granted by the Bournemouth University Research Ethics Committee (Ref: 52,218). All participants provided informed consent prior to interviews. Interviews were conducted between May and October 2024, using Microsoft Teams or Zoom, based on participant preference. Only the participant and interviewer were present. Interviews were carried out by two researchers (RBE; DH), one male and one female. One interviewer (RBE) is a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. Both researchers had experience in conducting qualitative interviews. A semi-structured interview guide was used to explore topics including participants' experiences with gambling products and gambling-related harms, the influence of their gender and/or sexual orientation on their gambling behaviour, perceptions of inclusivity within gambling environments and industry, and, where applicable, any support they had received related to their gambling (see Appendix). Interviews were audio-recorded using QuickTime Player and transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai, an automated transcription software. Automated transcripts were checked against the recording to ensure accuracy. Transcripts were not returned to participants for comment. Interview duration averaged 42 minutes (range: 24–86 minutes). Participants received a £20 incentive for their time.

Data analysis

Interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six phases (Braun & Clarke, 2021): Familiarisation with the data; systematic coding; generating initial themes; developing and reviewing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and producing the analytic narrative. Three authors (RBE, DH, CT) began by reading a subset of transcripts and noting initial points of interest. They met to discuss

early coding ideas, after which transcripts were divided and coded individually using Microsoft Word comments. The team then met to review initial codes, after which the first author (RBE) grouped the codes into initial themes with the last author (CT) providing consultation. RBE subsequently developed definitions for each theme, focusing on core organising concepts, and shared these along with illustrative quotes for feedback from CT. Revisions were made collaboratively to strengthen clarity and credibility. Final themes were reviewed and named by the full research team, with quotations used in naming to keep the themes closely aligned with participant experiences.

Our analytic approach was primarily inductive, with codes and themes developed from participants' accounts rather than predetermined frameworks, although the team was attuned to concepts such as minority stress. A summary of the analysis was shared with our Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) representative, whose feedback informed refinement to theme labels and interpretations to ensure resonance with lived experience and avoid pathologising language.

We approached our analysis with the understanding that we are active instruments in the research process and that all outputs are shaped by our subjectivities and reflexive engagement with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019a). The research team included both 'insiders' and 'outsiders' to the population being studied, enabling alternative and nuanced interpretations (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Specifically, three members of the team identify as LGBTQIA+, and one member has lived experience of gambling-related harms. Reflexive team discussions considered how these positionalities shaped the interpretation process.

The study has been reported in accordance with the COnsolidated criteria for REporting Qualitative research (COREQ) checklist (Tong et al., 2007). A completed checklist is provided as Supplementary Material.

Findings

Our thematic analysis produced three themes illustrating LGBTQIA+ community members' experiences of gambling: (1) Gambling as escape from minority stress and exclusion, (2) Discrimination and limited representation in gambling spaces, and (3) Barriers to affirming support for LGBTQIA+ gamblers.

Theme 1: 'it was a distraction from things I was going through': gambling as escape from minority stress and exclusion

Participants often reported using gambling as a coping mechanism for challenges tied to their LGBTQIA+ identities, particularly to escape or detach from emotional difficulties such as low mood and stress. Gambling was described as a response to the challenges surrounding their identity, offering a form of escape or distraction from feelings of exclusion, marginalisation, inadequacy, and depression.

> It just made feel, you know, with all the stress that was going on, it was kind of like a bit of hope. I'm using it as a coping mechanism rather than thinking about like, my feelings and emotions. [P24, bisexual, female]

> Gambling is a very escapist thing. You just go to another world when you do it, or you feel like someone else, and you feel like you have power. But you don't. [P21, bisexual, male]

> It's a form of escapism. When you've got a sucky home life or a life in general that is getting hard to deal with, it's easier to just get sucked away with something you don't have to think too hard about. [P12, biromantic, trans man]

It was common for participants to discuss the minority stress they faced as members of the LGBTQIA+ community, including repeated experiences of both overt and subtle discrimination and exclusion. For some, gambling became a way to manage this distress, offering a temporary escape from the emotional strain of navigating a marginalised identity.

> Life is harder when you're the minority … If someone says a microaggression or whatever, and you are the only gay person in the room of office, it's isolating. No one's trying to be mean, but they don't understand you've heard this all your life. So, you go home and switch off. Rather than thinking about what they said, it's easier to just gamble. You're just thinking about the gambling and the free spins. [P25, gay, male]

Social isolation played a key role in fuelling gambling behaviours, with many participants highlighting the absence of support networks during periods when their gambling was at its worst. Several participants specifically pointed to a lack of familial support, alongside limited broader social connections, which deepened feelings of isolation and made gambling more appealing as a means of comfort, control, or distraction.

> A lot of people are strongly opinionated towards gay people. That feeling of being excluded, being looked down upon you know, feeling ashamed of yourself, for me, it was, I didn't want to reflect on everything that happened in my life. I did go through a rough patch because of this. Especially from my ethnic background and my family. Gambling was a distraction. Some people get addicted to drugs, I got addicted to gambling. [P7, queer, female]

> I can speak from my own experience of not having a good support network at all, sometimes it is easier to seek support in the wrong places. [P27, bisexual, female]

Participants who concealed their LGBTQIA+ identities reported heightened feelings of isolation, with gambling providing some relief. For example, one participant described growing up in a religious environment where both their sexuality and gambling were heavily stigmatised, leading them to use gambling to release the internal conflict and pressure of hiding a key part of themselves.

> I had to live a double life when it came to religion and when it came to my sexual orientation … I think, bottled up together, it made me feel a certain way. That's what led me to gambling. Gambling also made me feel ashamed and made me feel looked down upon. [P7, queer, female]

Similarly, another participant found it easier to gamble with colleagues than to disclose their sexuality, using gambling as a means of connection while keeping a key aspect of their identity concealed. In this context, gambling was closely linked to a desire for social approval and connectedness, providing a way to fit in with peer groups.

> I've been at my current place of work for nine years and they don't know. I've not felt comfortable enough to tell them. I'm more comfortable going to the casino with them than I am to tell them I am bisexual. [P28, bisexual, male]

Other participants described turning to gambling to avoid confronting their LGBTQIA+ identity, particularly during periods of uncertainty or distress while navigating their gender or sexuality. Many participants reflected on the vulnerability associated with 'coming out' and how this process was entangled with addictive behaviours, including gambling. A common thread across these experiences was shame, with feelings of shame about LGBTQIA+ identities closely mirroring the shame felt about gambling habits, creating a cycle of self-stigma.

> I really struggled with the thought of being gay. Gambling was an escape. Being on my own and doing something like that, and having praise was a way of escaping from thinking about being gay. [P8, gay, male]

> I'm struggling with my sexuality. I've been depressed for a long time. It just led me to all sorts of things, like I was addicted to gambling and I was addicted to cannabis. I just became very isolated all the time. I pushed people away and gambling was the only constant thing that was left. [P16, gay, male]

However, some participants noted that their relationship with gambling improved once they had reconciled their LGBTQIA+ identity, suggesting that greater self-acceptance reduced the need to rely on gambling as a coping mechanism.

> When I was trying to come out was when I was at my lowest point. And obviously, that's when I gambled so much that I got myself into debt. I would gamble a hell of a lot. Once I came out of the closet, I've gambled a lot less. [P2, gay, male]

> Gambling makes you feel out of control, but when you take control of your gender identity and you express yourself, that gives you back control. [P26, asexual, non-binary]

Societal expectations of masculinity also influenced some participants' gambling behaviours as a way of coping with pressures to conform to gender expectations. Several male participants described feeling compelled to embody traditional gender roles, where men are expected to be 'money-motivated' and act as 'providers'.

> In some ways, a man has to provide. Therefore, you need to have something to do that. I felt gambling was the way to do it. That sense of being a man and having to provide led me to gambling. [P11, bisexual, male]

Linked to the perceived financial benefits of gambling, participants also described specific financial pressures tied to LGBTQIA+ identities, such as the costs associated with gender transition. In these cases, gambling was viewed as a potential, albeit risky and unsustainable, source of financial support.

> Some people might be gambling to fund access to hormone therapies because they're on a three-year waiting list for a gender identity clinic. I actually know people who do matched betting so that they can fund private healthcare for transition. [P20, gay, male]

> There is the hope that maybe they can get gender reassignment surgery if they win. [P25, gay, male]

This theme highlights how gambling can often be used by LGBTQIA+ individuals as a coping mechanism to manage the emotional strain of minority stress, social isolation, identity concealment and formation, and financial pressures tied to their identities. However, patterns of gambling sometimes shifted as participants gained greater

acceptance of their identities, suggesting a connection between self-acceptance and reduced reliance on gambling.

Theme 2: 'I don't want to be in that environment': discrimination and limited representation in gambling spaces

Participants commonly reported that LGBTQIA+ individuals feel excluded from offline gambling spaces due to discrimination, underrepresentation, and hyper-masculine culture, prompting them to turn to online gambling spaces. Many participants described these environments, particularly betting shops, as catering almost exclusively to a stereotypically masculine and heterosexual audience. This highly gendered atmosphere was experienced as unwelcoming, with several participants expressing feelings of discomfort, intimidation, and alienation.

> I just feel like it's quite male based, especially the bookies. When you're looking through the window and there's like, middle aged men sitting at a table making the bets, it's almost like a kind of pub atmosphere. Let's say someone different walks in, it just might feel a bit, uncomfortable and unwelcome. [P3, pansexual, female]

> I know that I would never walk into a sports betting shop. I wouldn't want to be in that environment. I would feel unwelcome. [P8, gay, male]

Participants also noted that gambling advertisements often reinforce hyper-masculine ideals with minimal representation of LGBTQIA+ individuals. These advertisements were seen to emphasise traditionally masculine traits, while rarely, if ever, referencing non-heterosexual or gender-diverse identities. Consequently, many participants felt invisible within gambling culture, with such messages reinforcing a sense of exclusion.

> The way sites are advertised, it's very much a traditional patriarchal male thing, and horse races and places where people gamble a lot, they're not places that gay people feel particularly welcoming from my experience. They're not promoting diversity there. [P21, bisexual, male]

> When you think about all the adverts, you know, the stuff that goes on in store, everything is kind of very much, butch male. They don't reference gay or other kind of gender identities or sexual identities in any way whatsoever. [P28, bisexual, male]

However, some participants acknowledged that gambling companies occasionally sponsor Pride events, though these efforts were perceived as superficial. Rather than reflecting genuine inclusion, these sponsorships were viewed as opportunistic attempts to capitalise on the LGBTQIA+ community, which was a particular concern due to the community's heightened vulnerability to addiction.

> A few of them change to a pride logo once a year, but we all know that can just be, you know, a bit of an easy rainbow washing for corporate purposes. I don't think there's a great deal of representation. [P20, gay male]

> I suppose they're just trying to make as much money as they can. If they feel like there's a lot of people in that community that gamble or might have an addiction, they might just be trying to take advantage of that. [P16, gay, male]

In addition to a lack of representation, participants described offline gambling environments as being overtly hostile towards LGBTQIA+ individuals. Many participants reported experiencing or witnessing discriminatory behaviours rooted in homophobia, transphobia, or gender non-conformity, which contributed to feelings of unsafety and exclusion. This was particularly prominent in sports betting environments, where gender-based discrimination and toxic masculinity were seen as particularly pervasive.

> Sometimes the toxic masculinity culture of the bookies, you know. If someone is kind of an 'out' queer person and maybe it's coded that way, then walking into a bookies, it might be kind of not really the answer. [P6, heteroflexible, male]

> I'm not really comfortable in this environment. It's a bit, it's a bit massively male oriented. They just look at you like some weird girl in here. I don't feel like I fit the demographic. [P27, bisexual, female]

As a result of these perceptions of offline gambling spaces, participants turned to online gambling platforms which offered anonymity, privacy, and safety. For some, the stigma surrounding gambling, combined with the discomfort of offline gambling environments, made online spaces more appealing as they allowed participants to avoid potential discrimination. Additionally, the convenience of gambling on a mobile device at any time or anywhere, along with the ability to keep their activities hidden from others, further enhanced the appeal.

> There's a bit of stigma about gambling out in public. I would never go to a bookies, it's so depressing. So, you find yourself more online. [P14, gay, male]

> You don't have to deal with other people that are there. You can just go online and kind of find what you need without having to deal with other people. [P22, queer, non-binary]

Despite this, some participants mentioned that online betting spaces are not entirely free from discrimination, with chat sections sometimes including anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiments.

> When it comes to certain sites and the way that chats are run, there's like, I got warned off a few sites like BetFred and Paddy Power because apparently their chat sections are full of anti-LGBT retired rhetoric. [P12, biromantic, trans man]

Additionally, participants expressed frustration with the lack of inclusive options on online betting spaces, with some noting that gender identification options often overlook non-binary identities.

> It's annoying. Every time I sign up for something, the first thing it comes up with is always what is your title? 9 times out of 10, it's not there. It's frustrating. It is kind of invalidating. It's like oh, I don't fit into these boxes of society. [P22, queer, non-binary]

While some participants suggested that gambling spaces could be made more inclusive and welcoming, others expressed concern that greater visibility of LGBTQIA+ representation in gambling advertising could risk further targeting and potential harms for the community.

> Because of your sexual orientation, you might be more subject to addiction. If you're not in a mentally strong place, you find things that will comfort you … If you get this heavy advertisement from these companies, it's like alcohol or drugs. You find that as an escape route from something you suffer. [P23, bisexual, man]

This theme highlights that offline gambling spaces can be exclusionary and hostile to the LGBTQIA+ community, with discrimination, a lack of representation, and hyper-masculine culture contributing to unwelcoming environments. Consequently, many participants turned to online gambling spaces for anonymity and safety, where the convenience also enabled more harmful gambling behaviours; however, these spaces were not free from discrimination either. Importantly, participants did not uniformly advocate for more inclusive gambling advertisements. While some felt that increased visibility might foster a greater sense of welcome, others voiced concern that such strategies could risk targeted marketing and heightened exposure to gambling harms.

Theme 3: 'go seek support elsewhere': barriers to affirming support for LGBTQIA+ gamblers

While a small number of participants described lived experiences of engaging with gambling support services, the majority spoke about anticipated fears or perceived barriers that discouraged them from seeking help. Participants identified several barriers hindering access to gambling support, including both personal (i.e. internalised stigma) and systemic (e.g. lack of tailored services, inadequate staff training) barriers, which led to feelings of exclusion from mainstream services. A significant concern was the fear of stigma and discrimination when seeking support. Many participants worried about being judged or treated differently due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, whether overt prejudice or unconscious bias, which deterred them from seeking support.

> If I seek support, they're going to tell me something like "you don't belong here" or "go seek support elsewhere". [P3, pansexual, female]

> I think there's some unconscious bias there. I would like to think that if you're on or working in a support service that you are the type of person that is very inclusive and doesn't have any judgement. But I always worry there is unconscious bias and even stereotyping there. [P8, gay, male]

The fear of judgement was particularly pronounced for those who visibly expressed their LGBTQIA+ identity, with concerns of potential discrimination from service providers.

> There are always people that are going to be critical if they are aware of someone's sexuality or if they are transgender. If it's evident, if it's clear that they are transgender to them without explicitly telling them, they might get different treatment. [P4, bisexual, male]

This fear extended beyond one-on-one interactions to group support settings. One participant explained that the prospect of attending Gamblers Anonymous felt daunting, as they were concerned about how their LGBTQIA+ identity would be received within the group. They feared their identity would not be accepted, making the idea of participating in a mainstream group setting feel both unwelcoming and unsafe.

> I would have difficulty going to a Gamblers Anonymous meeting because I don't know what they're going to ask me. You know, are they going to ask me about my relationships and what have you? Would they accept me if I did tell my story? [P28, bisexual, male]

Some participants were particularly uncomfortable with faith-based gambling support services, viewing them as alienating due to religious stigma. These services were often perceived as dismissive, judgemental, or intolerant of LGBTQIA+ identities.

> There are some issues around religion and Christianity and people's sexuality you know. The fact that a lot of gambling support services I've seen kind of have that faith-based element can be quite off-putting. [P6, heteroflexible, male]

Many participants felt that mainstream services failed to acknowledge their unique experiences as LGBTQIA+ individuals, with existing support structures being primarily designed for a cisgender, heterosexual audience.

> When I wanted to seek help, I didn't really see any organisation specifically for LGBTQ people, which becomes a problem. If there is support like that, people can freely express themselves, you know, because speaking to an LGBT person about your gambling addiction will make you feel relaxed. [P9, bisexual, male]

> I've not sought help because it's not geared towards people who are gay. The services, I would just assume they are more geared towards straight men that have got a problem. I just wouldn't use them. [P25, gay, male]

> Most support services are geared towards cis heterosexual people. That's just the way, but it needs to change. There needs to be more for the LGBT community with people within that community who understand just how easy it is to get sucked in. [P12, biromantic, trans man]

Participants' statements highlight a clear need for tailored services catering to the LGBTQIA+ community. While some general LGBTQIA+ services exist, participants recognised that these often do not address gambling issues, leaving a gap in support for this specific need. Therefore, participants advocated for safe spaces where they could express their identities without fear of judgement. While LGBTQIA+ specific services were seen as essential for fostering a sense of safety and authenticity, participants noted a significant absence of such services.

> I would feel happier knowing that it was a service tailored to LGBT because then you can be 100% open from the get-go and not worry about judgement. [P8, gay, male]

> If there was an actual full support network for people in the community, where 1) you knew you wouldn't be judged just because of how you present yourself or identity, and 2) from people who are in that community, you wouldn't feel judged. That'll go a long way. [P12, biromantic, trans man]

The lack of inclusive services was often linked to broader systemic issues, particularly inadequate staff training and a lack of understanding about the specific needs of LGBTQIA+ individuals. Participants emphasised that, in order to create truly inclusive services, staff must be educated on LGBTQIA+ issues and how these intersect with gambling behaviours. This would aid service users in receiving the tailored and appropriate support they require.

> If you're like me and you don't just have an intersectional identity but a multi-intersectional one, you sometimes feel like you don't fit in anywhere. In the services provided, there isn't enough diversity training. Instead of just paying lip service to diversity and inclusion, they need to actually take real steps and understand that it's not a tick box exercise. [P18, gay, male]

> I think that if people aren't trained or don't understand properly, certain issues, then even professionals might make assumptions that are unhelpful and kind of stigmatise certain groups. You don't really get a lot of training on specific issues that the LGBT community might face. [P24, bisexual, female]

Participants emphasised the importance of support service providers recognising intersectionality, as they felt mainstream services often overlooked the overlapping challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals who occupy multiple, sometimes marginalised, identities. They highlighted that this lack of recognition resulted in their needs not being fully addressed. Consequently, participants stressed the need for tailored support that acknowledges the complexity of their identities, including both LGBTQIA+ aspects and other elements of themselves, to create truly inclusive and effective services.

> If I contact a service that says it's there for the LGBT community, that doesn't mean I don't have another part of me that they don't need to take into consideration. [P18, gay, male]

> It needs to be more tailored, and that's for any minority group in it. Other minority groups don't know the experience of like racism. I'm going to know what that experience is and went through that. If someone else has, they're going to need more tailored support too. [P25, gay, male]

Participants consistently emphasised the need for greater LGBTQIA+ representation in the marketing of support services, particularly on website and advertising campaigns. They believed this increased visibility would offer validation and help combat isolation by showing that they are not alone in their struggles.

> I don't see much representation. It is a very generic representation that I see. A lot of the adverts and stuff are sports related and there is obviously a stigma that LGBT people don't get involved in sports, so they're not included in that. There really isn't much representation. [P8, gay, male]

> It would be beneficial. I would be validated that I wasn't alone. That there was nothing wrong with me. That I'm not a disgusting person for being gay. I'm not wrong for it. I'm not pathetic for having addiction issues. Recovery is possible. [P26, asexual, non-binary]

Participants also expressed a need for more proactive outreach, such as including LGBTQIA+ identity questions on service intake forms, to help create a more inclusive and tailored approach to support.

> Questions about are you a member? Are you having issues with gambling if you are a member of the LGBT group? You can be open. Making sure it's inclusive provides a safe space for people. [P21, bisexual male]

However, some participants were sceptical of how this information could be used, with fear that their data would be shared with gambling companies to promote tailored advertising.

> It's personal information. It's personal data. If anything, I could see a gambling company provided with this somehow and using that to their advantage or something to promote their products. [P4, bisexual, male]

This theme highlights the significant barriers LGBTQIA+ individuals face in accessing gambling support services, including fear of discrimination, a lack of tailored services, inadequate staff training, and insufficient representation in marketing. Participants emphasised the

importance of tailored and intersectional support and called for greater LGBTQIA+ visibility and proactive outreach to improve accessibility and effectiveness of support services.

Discussion

This study offers insights into the gambling-related experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals in the UK, a group underrepresented in gambling research despite well-documented disparities in mental health, substance use, and access to appropriate care (Bailey et al., 2023, Devault-Tousignant et al., 2022; Malkin & Stacey, 2023). Using reflexive thematic analysis, three themes were produced: (1) Gambling as escape from minority stress and exclusion, (2) Discrimination and limited representation in gambling spaces, and (3) Barriers to affirming support for LGBTQIA+ gamblers. These themes reveal how for some LGBTQIA+ individuals, gambling harms are often intertwined with identity, social exclusion and emotional coping strategies.

Participants described gambling as a deliberate response to the psychological burden of marginalisation, frequently used to manage rejection, concealment, and identity-related stress. Rather than serving as entertainment, gambling provided some participants with temporary relief from emotional pain, isolation, and loss of control, particularly in environments where their LGBTQIA+ identities were invalidated or hidden. This mirrors existing research showing that marginalised groups often adopt maladaptive coping behaviours, such as substance use, binge drinking, disordered earing, or problematic smartphone use to navigate stigma and exclusion (Huang et al., 2022; Katz-Wise et al., 2021; Pellicane et al., 2025; Santoniccolo & Rollè, 2024). These findings are grounded in Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003), which posits that chronic discrimination and internalised stigma contribute to poor health outcomes, including behavioural addictions. The pressure to conceal one's identity, especially in conservative, religious, or culturally traditional environments was commonly linked to gambling as a coping strategy. In such contexts, gambling filled the space left by familial rejection, societal silence, and internalised shame. This reflects broader research connecting familial rejection to maladaptive coping among LGBTQIA+ individuals (Pease et al., 2024; Rood et al., 2016; Salerno et al., 2022) and highlights the need for gambling support services that move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches. Without addressing deeper identity-based stressors, interventions may risk missing the root causes of harm. Therefore, effective support must be identity-affirming, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed (Nieder et al., 2024).

For some, gambling also functioned as a tool for identity management. Participants not 'out' to family, friends, or colleagues described it as a socially acceptable way to connect without risking disclosure. This reflects Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma management and Meyer's (2003) proximal stressors (i.e. identity suppression, internal conflict, hypervigilance) whereby some participants used gambling environments to navigate their concealed identities whilst mitigating exposure. These dynamics were even more complex for those facing intersecting marginalisations, such as cultural, racial, or religious pressures, which heightened the emotional burden of concealment. Gambling, in these cases, offered temporary retreat from disconnection. This highlights the need for intersectionally informed approaches to gambling harms, consistent with research linking intersectional stress to higher addiction risk and reduced help-seeking (Xin et al., 2023).

Encouragingly, some participants reported a reduction in gambling harm following increased self-acceptance and identity affirmation. Supportive relationships and safe spaces appeared to reduce reliance on gambling as a coping mechanism, mirroring research on the protective effects of community connection and identity affirmation (Acoba, 2024; Ghabrial & Andersen, 2023) and highlighting the value of interventions that promote self-acceptance and support. Peer-led groups, inclusive counselling, and affirming environments may reduce identity-related distress (Crummy & Hansford, 2025; Kara et al., 2025; McEwing et al., 2022). Evidence from clinical literature further suggests that peer-led therapy can reduce social isolation, foster identity development, and create a sense of community that mitigates stigma and marginalisation (Gair, 2004; Masten et al., 2007; Reading & Rubin, 2011). Such models highlight the potential for peer-based gambling interventions that not only address harmful behaviours but also provide spaces for processing shared experiences of discrimination and identity-related stress. Several participants also reported second-hand accounts of transgender and gender-diverse individuals using gambling to fund private gender-affirming medical care. These accounts, though anecdotal, highlight how limited access to timely, culturally competent healthcare may drive individuals towards risky coping strategies (Jessani et al., 2024; Neyenhaus et al., 2025; Pandya & Redcay, 2020). This highlights the urgent need to address systemic healthcare inequalities alongside gambling harms.

While gambling provided temporary emotional relief or social connection, it often took place in exclusionary environments. Physical venues like betting shops and casinos were frequently described as hypermasculine, heteronormative, and at times hostile. These experiences reflect broader critiques of gambling environments as reinforcing traditional gender norms while marginalising non-normative identities (Kairouz et al., 2022). As a result, some participants avoided these venues entirely, turning instead to online platforms for greater privacy and anonymity. Yet, exclusion persisted online with some reporting binary gender options, discriminatory chat content and a lack of inclusive language, illustrating how digital spaces can reproduce offline inequalities (Scheffer, 2024). Addressing exclusion across both settings requires inclusive design (e.g. expanded gender options), improved moderation, and staff training in LGBTQIA+ cultural competence (Budge et al., 2013). Without such changes, gambling environments risk continuing to marginalise LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Participants also noted the near total-absence of LGBTQIA+ representation within gambling environments, advertising, and related support services, which contributed to feelings of exclusion and reduced the likelihood of seeking support. This lack of visibility reinforced the perception that spaces were not intended for them, an issue echoed in broader health research, where underrepresentation has been linked to reduced service engagement among LGBTQIA+ populations (Lisy et al., 2018; Stannah et al., 2019). Inclusive representation (i.e. imagery, language, visible LGBTQIA+ staff or testimonials) has been shown to increase trust, relevance, and help-seeking behaviours (Dua & Bakhru, 2025; Hudson & Bruce-Miller, 2022). However, a few participants expressed discomfort with the gambling industry's presence at Pride events, questioning the authenticity of such sponsorships. These critiques focused on the contrast between temporary, performative displays of support during Pride and the everyday exclusion felt in gambling contexts. Consistent with research on the perception of 'rainbow washing' and corporate sponsorship of Pride (Goodman, 2022; Wulf et al., 2022), many participants viewed this

branding as symbolic rather than structural, leveraging LGBTQIA+ visibility for commercial gain without embedding genuine commitments into organisational policy, staff training, or service delivery. If gambling operators wish to engage meaningfully with LGBTQIA+ communities, sponsorship must be backed by year-round commitments to structural inclusion alongside representation, ensuring that visibility is reinforced by tangible reforms within services and internal culture.

Our findings reveal that LGBTQIA+ individuals face persistent barriers to gambling-related support, rooted in systemic exclusion across both gambling environments and service structures. Consistent with research on invisibility in healthcare (Keleş et al., 2018; Paschen-Wolff et al., 2023; Westwood, 2015), participants viewed mainstream services as culturally unresponsive, lacking visible inclusion, and often shaped by heteronormative assumptions. Many therefore called for services to be explicitly inclusive in both appearance and practice. Group-based support like Gamblers Anonymous was described as particularly unwelcoming, with fears of judgement discouraging disclosure. These concerns were compounded by prior negative experiences in other support settings (e.g. mental health and addiction services). In line with research on LGBTQIA+ religious identities (Fuist, 2016), participants also raised concerns of faith-based services and exposure to potential religious stigma.

Consistent with best practice literature (Hudson & Bruce-Miller, 2022), participants suggested peer-led models, LGBTQIA+ specialist practitioners, and partnerships with LGBTQIA+ organisations to foster trust and accessibility. Examples from substance use treatment demonstrate that tailored services with culturally competent staff, LGBTQIA+ representation, and visible non-discrimination policies can improve engagement and satisfaction among sexual and gender minority clients (Senreich, 2010; Taliaferro et al., 2014; Wilkerson et al., 2011; Qeadan et al., 2022). Such models provide useful templates for gambling support services seeking to reduce barriers.

Notably, only a minority of participants reported direct engagement with gambling support services, while most described fears of discrimination and non-inclusive practices as deterrents. These concerns could be mitigated through visible inclusivity (e.g. affirming language, LGBTQIA+ community participation), services competent in addressing intersectionality, partnerships with LGBTQIA+ organisations, implementation of user-led recommendations, and staff training on minority stress, stigma, and identity-affirming care. Comparable approaches have been effective in other domains, for example, delivering LGBTQIA+ tailored support that values empowerment in homelessness services (Tubertini et al., 2025), developing interventions that target psychological distress (Heredia et al., 2021), and increasing uptake of preventative health screenings and improving management of mental health conditions (McKay et al., 2022). Our findings highlight a systemic failure to deliver identity-affirming, intersectionally informed care, echoing broader research on invisibility and its role in reduced help-seeking behaviours among LGBTQIA+ communities (Crenitte et al., 2023; Narah & Sonam, 2024; Willis et al., 2023).

Limitations, and future directions

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations. As a self-selecting sample, the participants were primarily those with access to digital technology and a willingness to discuss their gambling experiences, which may not reflect the perspectives of LGBTQIA+

individuals facing digital exclusion or deeper forms of marginalisation. While the study included a range of sexual and gender identities, the sample lacked significant racial and socioeconomic diversity, limiting the extent to which the findings reflect the experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds or those in more difficult economic circumstances.

Importantly, the data represent the experiences of individuals who reported some level of gambling harm or emotional distress linked to gambling. It is essential to recognise that these experiences do not speak for all LGBTQIA+ individuals who gamble. Many within the community may engage in gambling without experiencing any harm, distress, or identity-related barriers. Additionally, insights related to the use of gambling to fund gender-affirming care were largely based on second-hand observations. While these accounts raise important considerations, future research would benefit from direct engagement with transgender and gender-diverse individuals to better understand the nuances of this issue, and wider issues that are more pertinent to this population, given the specific challenges they face.

Future research should adopt inclusive, identity-affirming approaches to better understand gambling harm within LGBTQIA+ communities (Bailey et al., 2023; Devault-Tousignant et al., 2022; Zeeman et al., 2025). Participants advocated for tailored support, such as LGBTQIA+ specific groups and culturally competent counsellors, highlighting the need to evaluate the impact of such interventions. Studies should also prioritise racial, cultural, and economic diversity to reflect the full spectrum of LGBTQIA+ experiences. Mixed methods, longitudinal designs, and community-based participatory research can offer deeper, more inclusive insights (Lansing et al., 2023; Wood et al., 2024). LGBTQIA+ voices must be positioned as central, not peripheral, to efforts addressing gambling harm.

Conclusion

This study provides insight into how gambling harm is experienced by some LGBTQIA+ individuals, highlighting the role of identity-based stress, exclusion, and emotional coping. For many participants, gambling was not just a behavioural issue but a response to stigma, invisibility, and systemic barriers to support, particularly among those facing intersecting marginalisations. Themes included gambling as a coping mechanism, invisibility in gambling spaces, and barriers to gambling support provision. These dynamics shaped both gambling behaviour and reluctance to seek help. Addressing such harms requires identity-affirming, culturally competent support that recognises the specific challenges that LGBTQIA+ individuals face. Future research and policy must focus on these perspectives to ensure interventions are inclusive and effective. Without this, gambling harm in marginalised communities will likely remain overlooked and inadequately addressed.

Author contributions

RBE conceived the study and wrote the initial grant application. RBE and DH conducted the interviews. DH, and ACB oversaw qualitative transcription and accuracy. RBE, DH, and CT performed initial codes. RBE and CT developed the final codes. RBE, CT, and DH led drafting of the manuscript. ChatGPT was used to support reducing the word limit of the first draft. All authors critically reviewed and worked on the final version.

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Data availability statement

The data is not made available at this time due to the sensitive nature of the interviews and the risk of participant identification from the transcripts.

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Appendix

Interview Topic Guide

Domain/Topic	Example Questions/Prompts
Gambling behaviours and patterns	"Please could you tell me about your experience of gambling?" "What type of gambling do you usually engage with?" "How often do you gamble, and with whom?" "Which devices do you typically use to gamble?"
Gambling tools, harms and control	"Have you ever used any safer gambling tools?" "Did you find any of them useful?" "Have you ever hidden your gambling from anyone?" "Have you ever felt like you lost control of your gambling?"
Social influences	"Do any of your friends gamble?" "Have you ever been concerned about anyone you know due to their gambling?" "How do you think others gamble (frequency, spending)?"
Help-seeking and support	"If you felt your gambling was getting out of control, where would you turn?" "Have you ever reached out to others to help with your gambling?" "Do you think there are enough support services available for LGBTQIA+ individuals?" "Would being part of the LGBTQIA+ community influence how you are treated by support services?"
LGBTQIA+ identity and gambling	"Do you identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community? If yes, please explain how". "Do you feel your sexual orientation has influenced your gambling?" "Do you feel your gender identity has influenced your gambling?" "Do you think the LGBTQIA+ community is recognised by the gambling industry?"
Gambling environments	"Where do you usually gamble?" "Do you feel that gambling venues are inclusive of LGBTQIA+ individuals?" "Do you think being LGBTQIA+ would influence how you are treated in gambling environments?"
Gambling at LGBTQIA+ events	"Have you ever gambled at LGBTQIA+ events such as Pride festivals or drag events?" "What were your motivations and experiences?" "Was there any support available at these events for people experiencing gambling-related harm?"
Broader reflections	"What are your thoughts on gambling industry sponsorship of Pride events?" "Do you think LGBTQIA+ individuals are more at risk of gambling harm?" "Do you have any additional comments about gambling or its impact on LGBTQIA+ individuals?"