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EXCLUSIVE

Despite Strict Rules, Ads for Gambling Run Rampant on Google and Facebook

Overseas gambling sites spend millions to recruit customers via Google, Facebook, and Amazon's Twitch. Many of the ads violate Big Tech rules—and put minors at risk.

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Hellcase is a model of digital marketing strategy. With colorful advertisements on [Facebook](#) [↑ META 2.01%](#) and Instagram, multimillion-dollar campaigns on Google Search, and paid influencers on YouTube, the company reaches millions of potential customers.

There's one catch: The ads seemingly violate the terms of service for each platform. Hellcase, a Singapore-based online casino, lacks thorough age verification for users, a key requirement for anyone advertising gambling.

Google has still accepted some \$5 million worth of advertising from Hellcase over the past three years, driving an estimated eight million users to [Hellcase.com](#) [↗](#). A similar pattern takes place across the internet. A *Barron's* investigation identified 27 overseas gambling sites that use digital advertising to recruit customers. Most of them lack a gambling license.

In total, the companies spent an estimated \$28 million on Google Search advertising over the past three years, generating a total of 56 million visits to their sites, according to an analysis produced for *Barron's* by Similarweb, a web traffic analytics firm.

Many of the sites also run ads on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitch.

These gambling sites have a common theme: They rely on a popular online game called *Counter-Strike*. Players use virtual items from the game, known as skins, as currency to gamble. As [Barron's has previously reported](#), the stakes are real—the skins won as prizes often fetch thousands of dollars or more on third-party marketplaces.

Just as real are the risks—especially for minors, who “are more vulnerable to the effects of both gambling and gambling advertising,” says Mark Griffiths, a professor of behavioral addiction and director of the International Gaming Research Unit at Nottingham Trent University.

When it comes to developing a problem gambling habit, “just the fact of being an adolescent in and of itself is a risk factor,” he says.

Some ads on social media are introducing children to gambling “years ahead of where they otherwise would have found it if it wasn’t advertised to them,” says Rob Minnick, a gambling counselor whose videos about gambling addiction have been watched millions of times on TikTok.

Google’s Top Skin Gamblers

Skin gambling, which uses virtual items from videogames to place online bets, has become big business. Overseas sites have spent millions on Google Search ads to recruit gamblers. Here are the top five by ad spending.

Gambling Site	Total Ad Spend ▼	Ad-Driven Site Visits
CSGORoll	\$6M	10M
Key-Drop	\$5.8M	18.3M
Hellcase	\$5M	8M
Farm Skins	\$4M	6.9M
BanditCamp	\$2.9M	3.1M

Note: Data reflects July 2021 through June 2024.

Source: Similarweb

Skin gambling exists in a legal gray area across the globe. But the rules from Big Tech platforms seem clear-cut.

In the U.S., Google says it “doesn’t allow advertising for internet-based games where money or other items of value are paid or wagered to win a greater sum of money or other item of value.”

A spokesperson for Google, a unit of [Alphabet](#) ↑ [GOOGL](#) 0.58%, told *Barron's* that when “activities involved constitute gambling, including when they involve skins, our gambling policies apply.”

Rules from [Meta Platforms](#), owner of Facebook and Instagram, say, “Ads that promote online gambling and gaming are only allowed with our prior written permission.”

A spokesperson for Twitch, the videogame livestreaming service owned by [Amazon.com](#) ↑ [AMZN](#) 4.40%, told *Barron's* that *Counter-Strike* “gambling—and any promotion or sponsorship of skins gambling—is not allowed on Twitch.”

Nevertheless, the ads for skin gambling proliferate. At Google and [Amazon's](#) request, *Barron's* provided examples found in its reporting. Both companies said they would investigate. Months later, most of the gambling sites remain active advertisers. Meta Platforms disabled multiple ads following *Barron's* inquiries. Days later, the ads were listed as active again on Meta’s ad library, a real-time listing of advertisements running on its platforms.

In May 2023, the Australian Communications and Media Authority took action against popular skin gambling site CSGORoll for “contravening Australian gambling laws” by allowing users to deposit *Counter-Strike* skins “in exchange for in-game coins that could be used to gamble on casino-style games.”

“Skins gambling services are particularly concerning as they tap into a youth market and have the potential to convert gamers into gamblers,” said Nerida O’Loughlin, the regulator’s chair, in a news

release detailing the action.

In the year following Australia's regulatory action, Google continued to serve Australian users ads for CSGORoll, according to the company's Ads Transparency Center, an online tool that shows active and past ads published through Google.

In June, a Google spokesperson told *Barron's* that the ad account for CSGORoll's parent company "is no longer active with Google following appropriate enforcement action earlier this year."

But its ads transparency tool continued to show active ads for CSGORoll in Australia.

"We continue to examine this space to determine if any policy adjustments are warranted," the Google spokesperson said.

By early July, the CSGORoll ads in Australia had disappeared; ads directing users to CSGORoll's website are still active in the U.S.

In total, the site spent \$2.4 million on Google Search ads globally in the first half of 2024, according to Similarweb's estimates.

Google says that ads for gambling are allowed in Australia—and most other countries—"as long as the advertiser is a licensed operator...and provides a valid license."

CSGORoll offers no evidence of a gambling license anywhere on its website. In total, just four of the 27 skin gambling sites advertising with Google around the world offer proof of a government-issued gambling license. None of them clearly warns about the dangers of gambling—another requirement to advertise gambling on Google platforms.

Google representatives didn't respond to multiple requests for clarification about the licensing issue. None of the skin gambling sites responded to requests for comment.

Doubling Down

Over the past three years, 27 overseas firms have spent an estimated \$28 million on Google Search ads to promote their skin gambling operations, generating a total of 56 million visits to the sites.

Gambling Site	Total Advertising Spend on Google Search ▼	Ad-Driven Site Visits	Gambling License Provided on Site
CSGORoll	\$6M	10M	No
Key-Drop	\$5.8M	18.3M	No
Hellcase	\$5M	8M	No
Farm Skins	\$4M	6.9M	No
BanditCamp	\$2.9M	3.1M	No
GG Drop	\$835.2K	2M	No
CSGO.net	\$748.9K	2.7M	No
Rivalry	\$663.9K	222.8K	Yes
R1 Skins	\$644.4K	699K	No
G4 Skins	\$305.6K	1.8M	No
Dat Drop	\$243K	475.6K	No
CSGO Luck	\$187.7K	287.1K	Yes
Clash.GG	\$177.9K	119.5K	No
CSGO Big	\$141.1K	168K	No
Casedrop	\$68.4K	460.8K	No
Casehug	\$48.6K	45.3K	No
Daddy Skins	\$34.9K	104.6K	No
Rustix	\$20.4K	67.9K	No
Forcedrop	\$10.3K	61.2K	No
Hellstore	\$10K	162.2K	No
Insane.gg	\$7.4K	16K	Yes
CSGO Cases	\$3.8K	34.8K	No
Knifex	\$1.9K	108.7K	Yes
Flame Cases	\$1.4K	19.6K	No
CSGO Polygon	\$1.3K	6.3K	No
GG Rust	\$981	8.2K	No
CSGO Fast	\$191	<5,000.00	No

Note: Data reflects July 2021 through June 2024.

Source: Similarweb

The question of licensing and how to handle new-age gambling sites confounds governments around the world.

In Finland, national law [restricts](#) gambling to one state-owned company. “Gambling services offered by other operators are prohibited,” according to the national law enforcement agency.

Many of the skin gambling sites operating in Finland and across the world feature digital roulette, slot machines, and other games of chance found in traditional casinos.

But according to Juhani Ala-Kurikka, a senior adviser to Finland’s National Police Board, skin gambling sites are legal in the country because users on the sites win a “prize of monetary value” instead of money.

“Skins betting is therefore not seen as gambling but as lotteries,” says Ala-Kurikka. “Marketing them is legal according to Finnish law.”

Skin gambling sites have recognized Finland as a fertile market, given that legal framework.

Finland’s most popular *Counter-Strike* player is sponsored by FarmSkins, a skin gambling site that has spent some \$4 million on Google Search Ads over the past three years, according to Similarweb estimates.

FarmSkins and 16 other skin gambling sites regularly buy Google Search ads in Finland, *Barron’s* found.

In the U.S., federal regulators have failed to take action when it comes to skin gambling, with one exception.

In 2017, the Federal Trade Commission [settled charges](#) with two YouTubers who promoted a skin gambling site without disclosing their financial involvement in the site. One video was titled, “HOW TO WIN \$13,000 IN 5 MINUTES.”

Today, YouTube is filled with those kinds of promises, with the addition of some new disclosures.

Some YouTube accounts post footage of betting on skin gambling sites, prompting viewers to join them on the site using an affiliate code, which directs commissions back to the YouTuber.

Google’s policies seemingly [ban such activity](#), but the company says that compliance lies with individual creators. “YouTube creators are responsible for ensuring their content complies with local laws, regulations, and YouTube’s Community Guidelines,” said YouTube spokesperson Javier Hernandez in a statement to *Barron’s*.

On Twitch, Amazon’s livestreaming platform, *Counter-Strike* –related streams added up to 647 million hours worth of viewing over the past 12 months. Of the 300 most-watched *Counter-Strike* streams on Twitch, 120 of them are sponsored by at least one skin gambling site, according to *Barron’s* analysis.

Those sponsorships would seem to violate Twitch’s [rules](#).

“Sponsorships of skins gambling, such as for CSGO skins,” are among the list of banned activities, Twitch says, using a common abbreviation for *Counter-Strike*.

Many of the sponsored streamers are labeled Twitch Partners, a [designation](#) the company gives to streamers who “can act as role models to the community.”

The role model concept can be problematic, according to Griffiths, the

behavioral psychologist. If role models are “advertising particular products, adolescents are going to be more susceptible to engaging in those products.”

Twitch streamers and YouTubers who spoke to *Barron's* described receiving offers of nearly \$200,000 a month from skin gambling sites to promote them in their videos.

Twitch knows about some of these apparent violations of its rules. In reporting a prior article about skin gambling, *Barron's* sent Twitch a link to a streamer who was broadcasting his skin gambling in real-time on Twitch.

When asked for comment at the time, a Twitch spokesperson said her team was “digging into the examples you raised.”

Six months later, that streamer continues to livestream his betting sessions on skin gambling sites. The Twitch spokesperson said this week that she couldn't comment on specific accounts for privacy reasons. She noted that gambling-labeled content is blocked by default for minors and users not logged in to the service. A *Barron's* reporter, who wasn't logged in to Twitch, bypassed the content warning by clicking a button marked “Start Watching.”

Social-media algorithms are designed to keep users logged on, and gambling content is some of the most “engaging and exciting,” says Minnick, the gambling addiction counselor and content creator. Minors who stumble across it on their feeds can wind up in an echo chamber of gambling videos and advertising. It creates a “desire to gamble in people that otherwise might not have ever seen it until they were 21.”

Meanwhile, skin gambling sites are readily accessible to minors already familiar with a look and feel that's drawn from videogames.

“Most parents have no idea the extent of how the gambling industry has infiltrated so much of our normal everyday American life,” says Les Bernal, national director of the nonprofit Stop Predatory Gambling.

Social-media platforms have rules in place to protect minors from gambling ads. “Meta doesn’t allow targeting for online gambling and gaming ads to people under the age of 18,” company [policies](#) state.

In January, the Tech Transparency Project, an industry watchdog, put those guardrails to the test. The group used artificial-intelligence tools to generate an image of smiling children crowded around a smartphone, with dollar bills raining down. Then it added text: “This could be you! Swipe up to win big!!”

The group uploaded the image to Meta’s ad platform, choosing the 13-17 age demographic as its key target.

“The ads were approved in less than 60 seconds,” Katie Paul, director of the Tech Transparency Project, told *Barron’s*.

Hellcase, the Singapore site, has 76 active advertisements on Facebook and Instagram and has run nearly 3,000 ads on the Meta sites since 2018, according to the company’s ad library. In total, *Barron’s* identified 14 skin gambling sites that have advertised through Meta.

All of those ads, as well as the one from the Tech Transparency Project, would have needed Meta’s prior approval, according to the company’s terms. Meta didn’t respond to *Barron’s* when asked if that approval was granted.

One video ad from Hellcase currently running on Facebook and

Instagram shows a player spending \$3.30 on a digital slot machine and reacting with awe when he wins a prize worth \$119.47. As the ad ends, he says, “Hellcase: where every play pays off.”

As with the other tech platforms, *Barron's* sent Meta a list of skin gambling sites currently advertising on its platforms. Three days later, the company disabled many of the ads, including all of the ones from Hellcase.

“We are disabling the ads and accounts that violate our policies and will continue to monitor for others,” Meta told *Barron's* in a statement.

Two days after that statement, most of Hellcase's ads were once again active. Meta said its review was ongoing.

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