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**Title: “How does involvement in campaigning, impact close relatives bereaved by gambling-related suicide?”**

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## Abstract

Close relatives bereaved by gambling-related suicide are at the forefront of activism, seeking regulatory changes within the UK gambling industry. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews with four surviving close relatives, this study explored the personal impacts upon those involved in campaigning. Interview transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify and interpret patterns in the resulting data. This established the following four themes: the relationship prior to the suicide; engagement with media; the emotional impacts of campaigning, and the relationship following the suicide. The results of this study indicate that activism can create a continuing bond between the survivor and their lost loved one. The dynamic nature of activism distinguishes it from other, potentially unhealthy manifestations of continuing bonds. Activism can facilitate a healthy and evolving post-suicide relationship between the survivor and their lost loved one.

## Keywords

continuing bonds, gambling related suicide, affected others gambling, gambling harm, suicide activism, grief activism.

## Introduction

Although broadly accepted as a legitimate form of entertainment (Holdsworth et al., 2013), gambling activity in the UK occupies a continuum. Relatively innocuous forms of social gambling such as raffles or local lotteries can promote social cohesion and raise significant funds for charity (Cassidy, 2020). The UK Gambling Act (2005), however, ushered in an era of “unrestrained” (Orford, 2020, p.1) gambling in Britain. The extent to which the British gambling establishment influences public discourse around gambling, is not replicated in other jurisdictions (Orford, 2020, pp. 42-57). The liberalising impact of the Gambling Act (2005) (Sturgis & Kuha Jouni, 2021) also diversified the range of gambling opportunities (Günay, 2024). Increasingly sophisticated electronic gambling machines and new online gambling platforms have been associated with a rise in gambling activity and increased levels of gambling-related harms (George & Bowden-Jones, 2016; Orford, 2019). The most profound harm associated with gambling is suicide. Prevalence of gambling-related suicide is estimated to be 15 times that of the broader adult population (Karlsson and Hakansson, 2018).

People bereaved by gambling-related suicide are at the forefront of an emergent and vocal opposition to the “formidable” (Orford, 2019, p.1) power of the UK gambling establishment. Both individually and collectively, profound grief has motivated their calls for regulatory change. It seems unimaginable that activism can be free of personal impacts at a time of such significant loss. This study aims to explore the unique experiences of those involved in campaigning due to their bereavement, by asking “How does involvement in campaigning, impact close relatives bereaved by gambling-related suicide?”

# Literature Review

Key search terms were derived from the research question, and dialogue with in-field professionals. We identified commonly used synonyms, and together these formed the basis of the literature search (Table 1). Using the Ebscohost platform, we searched the following journals: Psychinfo; APA PsycArticles; CINAHL, and SocINDEX (Table 2). we also replicated the search using Google Scholar. The search period spanned 1995-2024. This incorporated the post-2005 period of impactful deregulation and 10 years prior, to avoid omitting contemporary influential research.

**Table 1.**

Literature Search Terms.		
Databases used	Keyword	Alternative words and derivatives
Psychinfo; APA PsycArticles; CINAHL, and SocINDEX; Google Scholar	Campaigning AND	Activis*, campaign*, protest*
Psychinfo; APA PsycArticles; CINAHL, and SocINDEX; Google Scholar	Close relatives AND	Loved one, family member, impacted other, affected other, concerned significant other, sibling; child*, husband; wife, wives, partner
Psychinfo; APA PsycArticles; CINAHL, and SocINDEX; Google Scholar	Suicide AND	Bereave*, grief, grieving, death, dead
Psychinfo; APA PsycArticles; CINAHL, and SocINDEX; Google Scholar	Gambling AND	Gambling harm, gambling addict*, problem* gambl*, disordered gambl*, gambling disorder*, pathological gambl*. Responsible gambl*

**Table 2.**

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria.	
Included	Excluded
Adults over 18	Children under 18
Activists	Non activists
Post-1995 literature	Pre-1995 literature
Completed suicide	Suicidal ideation or attempt
UK gambling	Non-UK gambling

The literature relating to gambling harm contains many pathologising terms, such as “responsible gambling” (Marko et al. 2023, p.1) and “disordered gambling” (Horch & Hodgins, 2008, p.505). This potentiates internalised blame and shame in those who experience gambling harm (Livingstone & Rintoul, 2021). We align with the destigmatising person-first phraseology proposed by Pliakas et al. (2022). Any use of potentially pathologizing terms in the current study is therefore solely to ensure accurate citation of existing research

61% of the UK adult population stated they gambled in the 12 months prior to April 2024 (Wardle et al., 2024). The liberalised UK gambling industry is one of the largest in the world, generating revenue of £3.3 billion through direct taxation (HMRC, 2023). Corfe et al. (2021) describe the additional economic contribution gambling provides through employment, both directly and within supply chains. The authors cite this as a rationale for opposition to an

increase in gambling regulation. For a significant number of people, gambling ceases to be a source of harmless recreation. The prevalence of gambling harm post-2005 has been measured by manifold surveys. The most recent report indicates that 2.7% of the UK adult population experienced at least “one severe consequence” of their gambling activity (Wardle et al. for [www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk](http://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk), 2024 (no page)).

Gambling harm is multi-faceted, and this is well represented in the literature. Potential areas of impact include: mental health; physical health; relationships; employment; education and finances of the person gambling (Goerge & Bowden-Jones, 2016; Orford, 2019; Vassallo et al., 2023). In addition to the significant emotional impact of these harms, the cost to public finances is estimated at between £260 million and £1.16 billion annually (Thorley et al., 2016). Langham et al. (2016, p. 2) posit a broad definition of gambling harm: “Any initial or exacerbated adverse consequence due to an engagement with gambling that leads to a decrement to the health or wellbeing of an individual, family unit, community, or population”. This definition acknowledges that whilst some harmful impacts are felt solely by the gambler, others are experienced by those close to them (Azemi et al., 2022).

47.9% of UK adults reported that someone close to them gambled (Wardle et al., 2024). Goodwin (2017) estimates that each problem gambler affects six other people. A systematic review by Vassallo et al. (2023) cites a significant body of research into those harmed by another person’s gambling. Orford et al. (2010) identify those affected as including: parents; spouse; siblings; children and friends. The finances, relationships and health of the person connected to the gambler can all be detrimentally affected (Orford 2019). The collective term of “affected other(s)” (AO) is now common in the literature (Lind et al., 2022, p.2). Dowling et al. (2016) however, illustrate how impacts vary significantly within this broad demographic of AO.

The proximity of the relationship to the gambler is decisive (Corfe et al., 2021). Gunstone and Gosschalk (2020) suggest that the most severe harms are experienced by: Spouse/partner; parent; child and sibling, respectively. They attribute this to the multi-faceted and close nature of spousal relationships. Consequently, references to couples-based gambling-related therapy are prominent in the literature (Tremblay et al., 2023; Vassallo et al., 2023).

Not all gambling imparts the same risk of harm. Online and electronic gambling products are associated with a higher degree of negative impacts (Atherton & Benyon, 2018). This distinction extends to affected others. Where the person gambling has a higher score on the Problem Gambling Severity Index (PGSI) (Gambling Commission, 2021) AO will experience commensurately more severe impacts (Gunstone & Gosschalk, 2020). Gambling addiction is often referred to as the ‘hidden addiction’ (George & Bowden-Jones, 2016 p.4; Ladouceur, 2004, p.501). Symptoms are often invisible, with people close to the gambler remaining unaware of the extent of harm, until the impacts have become critical (Holdsworth et al., 2013; Wardle & Laidler, 2023;). Livingstone and Rintoul (2021) attribute this invisibility to the alienating impact of internalised shame and self-blame experienced by the person gambling.

The most severe harm to the individual is suicide (Marionneau & Nikkinen, 2022). A scoping review by Gray et al. (2021) found that although multiple studies have examined links between gambling and suicidality, ideation and attempt form the dominant discourse. There is an absence of qualitative literature relating to the role of gambling within completed suicides (Andreeva et al., 2022). Research by Wardle et al. (2019) found that in the previous year 19.2% of problem gamblers had experienced suicidal thoughts, and 4.7% had attempted suicide. This contrasted with the broader adult population, where figures were 4.1% and 0.6% respectively.

The primary causes of gambling-related suicidality are indebtedness (Marionneau & Nikkinen, 2022) and feelings of shame and guilt (Andreeva et al., 2022). These feelings are exacerbated

by a pathologising industry-driven narrative of “responsible gambling” that imparts blame upon the gambler (Livingstone & Rintoul, 2020, p.107). Karlsson and Hakansson (2018) describe suicide mortality amongst problem gamblers as 15 times that within the broader population. Wardle and McManus (2021) suggest that this elevated risk factor contributes to an overall increase in UK suicide rates since 2010.

The impact of completed suicide upon AO is also scarcely represented in qualitative literature. Papers relating to gambling-related suicide were searched in depth, references to AO were absent. Equally, literature relating to AO was searched for any mention of suicide, ideation, attempt and prevention remained the dominant references (Tremblay et al., 2023; Vassallo, et al., 2023). Lind et al. (2019 p.7) briefly mention “grief” in a footnote, describing it as a “multidimensional or non-specified harm”. This suggests that suicide-grief is not framed specifically as a gambling harm experienced by the AO. This risks overlooking therapeutic interventions that might recognise factors unique to gambling-related suicide.

Unsurprisingly, in the general population close family and partners experience the most profound effects following a suicide (Andriessen & Krysinaka, 2012; Moore et al., 2015). Suicide bereavement invokes more isolation and stigma towards the survivor than most other causes of death (Allen et al., 1994). It seems reasonable to suggest that such feelings could be compounded by the additional shame and stigma associated with gambling harm. A possible parallel can be found in deaths due to substance use, where shame and stigma can pervade the lives of those closely bereaved (O’Callaghan et al., 2023). Open disclosure of the nature of the death can facilitate healing (Fiegelman et al., 2020). Despite this, stigma and shame can compel suicide survivors to hide the cause of death from others (Range & Calhoun, 1990). This can limit access to appropriate support resulting in disenfranchised grief (Fiegelman et al., 2020).



Existing literature reflects the centrality of meaning reconstruction, in adapting to life following bereavement (Gillies et al., 2014; Neimeyer, 2009). According to Neimeyer (2001) meaning in our lives is anchored by attachments to people, objects and environments. Suicide challenges these attachments, and the fundamental life-assumptions held by the survivor, including their relationship with their lost loved one, their own identity and their purpose.

The intentional element of suicide has a particularly challenging impact on this assumptive world and can impede the ability of the survivor to construct meaning following the loss (Holland et al., 2006). According to Neimeyer (2001), meaning reconstruction necessitates revision of our life narratives. He likens this to the loss of a main character in the middle of a novel. Disruption of the story requires it to be reorganised to create continuity between the past and the future. Attig (2001) suggests meaning making as a complex process where the bereaved reconstruct meaning both independently and interdependently with family and others. He describes a movement from “loving in presence to loving in absence” (p.34). Linked to meaning making, is the concept of post-traumatic growth (PTG) (Jordan, 2011). This involves accruing a benefit and experiencing psychological growth after a traumatic loss. Gorman (2010) points out that PTG is not inevitable and to some extent is reliant upon protective factors in the bereaved person, such as robust familial relationships, and high self-esteem. Meaning making can adopt varied forms including advocacy and social activism (Neimeyer, 2009).

Verberg (2006) contends that such social activism by families is more common than existing literature suggests. She states that parents and other family members are frequently involved in a variety of activities aimed at eliciting change at either a personal, social or political level. O’Callaghan et al. (2022) recognise activism as potentially healing through the alleviation of helplessness and increased connection with others.

The pursuit of accountability can be a double-edged sword. Davis et al. (2000) suggest that meaning making can be facilitated by the pursuit of justice or where a death stems from negligence or the act of a perpetrator. Conversely, Riches and Dawson (1998) identify that the grief of the survivor can be subjugated by involvement in lengthy, invasive and bureaucratic judicial processes.

Orford (2019) describes growing opposition to the power and regulatory influence of the UK gambling establishment. Wardle and Laidler (2023) position women bereaved by gambling-related suicide at the forefront of such activism. They describe the catalysing impact of their grief and anger. Campaigning in relation to gambling-related suicide is nonetheless largely absent from the literature. A consequent aim of this study, therefore, is to reduce this gap.

## Methodology & Methods

Our philosophical position is of critical realism using a phenomenological approach. This leads us to the interpretivist position. Interpretivism posits that individuals develop unique subjective meanings and understandings of their experiences. Rather than objectively true, these meanings are socially constructed. Social constructionism posits that a person's knowledge is not objective, but formed by their social interactions, and the cultural and historical influences of the world in which they live (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

## Reflexivity

Personal experiences of gambling harm and subsequent activism positioned Eugene Farrar as an insider within this study. Rather than seeking to neutralise researcher subjectivity, qualitative

research capitalises on this in co-constructing meaning from the experiences of participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Walsh (2003) suggests that researcher subjectivity is appraised by a “typology” (p.54) comprising: personal; interpersonal; methodological and contextual reflexive practices. Reflexive journalling, and collaborative reflection with in-field professionals, enabled Eugene to reflect on the influence of personal values upon his relationship with participants, and the results of this study.

Eugene’s status as an insider necessitated a reflexive approach to each stage of this study. The following were notable examples. As a survivor of gambling harm, the status of Eugene contrasted starkly with that of the participant’s lost loved ones. Interpersonal reflexivity identified the potential to experience survivor-guilt, and for feeling unentitled as a researcher, to witness the profound reflections of the participants. Reflexive journaling enabled Eugene to recognise the validity of his own experiences and his position within the research. Participant’s knowledge of Eugene’s previous activism again necessitated interpersonal reflexivity. “... you’ll know from your own campaigning ...” prefixed several participant recollections of their own experiences. Eugene contemplated whether this comparison stemmed from a perceived need for participants to validate their own experiences. Olmos-Vega et al. (2023) see such collaborative reflection between researcher and participants as promoting rigour within research but caution against “losing sight of the participant’s voices” (p.248).

Reflexively, Eugene appraised his contribution to the participant’s perception of power within the researcher-participant relationship. Eugene subsequently alluded to the qualitative differences between their respective experiences and restated his curiosity towards the participant’s unique perspectives.

The collective impact of reflexive activities in the context of the current study, was Eugene's deep awareness and acceptance of his position as lead researcher, and its influence upon the study.

## Methods

### Recruitment and Sampling.

Four people participated in the study. Two were recruited through purposive sampling, having been identified by their social media presence. Purposive sampling is a means of selecting participants with specific knowledge of the area of research. It is useful in relatively small qualitative studies where the emphasis is upon depth of knowledge (Palinkas et al., 2015). The remaining two participants were recruited through snowball sampling.

The call for participants was published on Twitter/X and Facebook. It was also distributed by email to support groups and researchers currently working within this demographic. Eligibility criteria for the study required participants to be aged over 18 years, to have lost a close relative to gambling-related suicide, and to have current or previous experience of campaigning in response to their suicide-loss.

The study gained ethical approval from York St John University (approval code- COU7021M-EF-1.3.24). Each prospective participant was provided with written information which detailed aims of the study, explained participant requirements and informed them of the statutory protection of their privacy. Each participant was required to provide written consent prior to being welcomed onto the study.

## Data Collection.

Participants were offered a choice between in-person or online interviews, and these were undertaken individually over a six-week period. Three participants opted to undertake in-person interviews. One person undertook an online interview using Microsoft Teams. All in-person interviews were conducted in small meeting rooms proximate to the location of the participant. Venues were sourced and arranged by the lead researcher, Eugene Farrar. One room was provided by a charity that adopts a position on the issue of gambling harm. Checks were therefore made with that participant regarding the potential for triggering distress.

Interviews lasted between 89- and 93-minutes duration. One in-person participant offered a supplementary interview for clarification purposes. This offer was accepted, and the secondary interview took place online, using Microsoft Teams, lasting 22 minutes. All interviews were conducted by the lead author Eugene Farrar. The interviews were semi-structured and comprised the same four open-ended questions enabling the identification and analysis of thematic codes.

Semi-structured interviews are effective in exploring emergent themes within complex subjects where existing knowledge is limited (Saks & Allsop, 2012). They can promote equity in the power between researcher and interviewee by facilitating a conversational approach (Etherington, 2004). The interviewer used a guide containing potential prompts. The content of the questions and interview guide were reviewed by the second author Dr Gary Shepherd. Prior to commencing the interviews, participants were welcomed warmly, provided with details of support organisations and reminded that the interview could be paused or stopped if they experienced feelings of distress.

## Data Analysis.

The three In-person interviews were audio recorded. The two online interviews were video and audio recorded via the Microsoft Teams application. All interviews were transcribed verbatim using transcription software. Transcripts were carefully checked and edited to ensure accuracy. Names of the participants, their lost loved ones and any other family members were changed to facilitate anonymity. Details of places, objects and organisations were also substituted to prevent jigsaw identification.

Data analysis was carried out using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Used widely in qualitative social science research, RTA is an effective means of gaining and developing deep insights from varied data sources, including interviews. RTA can communicate narrative of varying degrees of complexity and nuance, telling “a story about ... patterned meanings and why they matter” (Braun et al., 2023).

The first two rounds of data coding were undertaken by Eugene alone. This is common and good practice in RTA (Braun & Clarke 2022). All coding was undertaken manually. Data extracts were typed onto pieces of paper and code labels were written on each. This enabled a deep engagement with participant’s accounts. Although researcher subjectivity is an asset within qualitative research, a systematic approach to coding is important in gaining ‘insight’ and promoting ‘rigour’ (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.54). This was facilitated by two subsequent rounds of coding in collaboration with the second researcher Gary Shepherd.

This dialogical and mutually reflexive process facilitated consensus within the coding. We recognised codes that although rich, did not contribute to any patterned meaning across the dataset. We identified codes that were difficult to anonymise. These were all excluded from

the analysis. Inter-rater reliability was further promoted by anonymised dialogue with in-field professionals.

Early codes were deductive and semantic, influenced primarily by keywords from the research question, existing literature and pre-interview field research. As coding evolved, deep engagement with the dataset resulted in increasingly latent and inductive codes, based on patterned meanings within the participant's experience.

Candidate themes were developed and reviewed collaboratively by both researchers. This was undertaken manually using a process of "visual mapping" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.85), and involved laying out the codes on a large table and physically developing themes. Nine initial themes were constructed. Collaborative dialogue identified four dominant themes, and these are presented here. A small number of themes can be effective in articles with a "particular focus" (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.91)

## Sample Characteristics.

Purposive and snowball sampling yielded four participants who met the inclusion criteria in full. All participants were aged over 18 years. All had lost a close relative to suicide because of gambling-harm. The close relationships that were central within the literature were represented within the sample. Two participants were fathers who had lost an adult son. One was a husband who lost his wife. One was a male who had lost his younger brother. As far as the participants were aware, their lost loved ones engaged in only legal gambling activity. This included: Sports betting with both online and land-based providers; online poker; online slot machines, and online casino games. Participant Activism comprised manifold forms, including: print and broadcast media interviews; debate with industry representatives and supporters; lobbying politicians; attending political conferences; public events to raise the

profile of the problem, and sharing their experiences with others experiencing gambling harm.

## Results

This research asks, 'How does involvement in campaigning impact close relatives bereaved by gambling-related suicide?'. It establishes four themes: the relationship prior to the suicide; engagement with media; the emotional impacts of campaigning, and the relationship following the suicide.

### Relationship prior to the suicide.

Each participant described having had a close relationship with their loved one prior to the suicide. These relationships were characterised by an enduring openness. Ashley spoke about a long-standing nurturing role within his relationship with his brother, from an early age through to his brother's early adult years.

*"I'm two years older than Taylor but it felt very much like we were twins. He would always come to me to talk to me at a very young age ... as he was steering through childhood and teenage years. And being a young man ... I was his big brother, and he would always come and talk to me about things that were bothering him!"*

Greg reflected on the closeness of his relationship with his son, which he describes in this quotation.



*“... I mean, the thing with Stevie, he was very open. He'd always discuss things, tell me about things. He was a decorator, he loved his job. He'd come home and show me pictures of things he'd done”.*

Relational openness did not always connote awareness of the gambling-harm suffered by the family member. Greg details how his son's gambling activity remained hidden, in an otherwise communicative relationship.

*“Everything about him was open ... but it was just this thing that was hidden that we didn't know about, and that was the big thing”.*

Ashley however, describes how he was fully aware of both the extent and harmful effects of brother Taylor's gambling.

*“Yeah, I was very aware. For the last few months of his life. I was very much on that journey with him ... and the years building up to it, I was very much part of that journey”.*

The participants who were aware of their close relative's difficulties with gambling, detailed the profound effects that this had on their relationship with their loved one. Ashley explained how an erosion of trust changed the nature of his relationship with his brother. Here he describes the rupture gambling caused in their relationship and his relief at their subsequent reconciliation, shortly before his brother's death.

*“He became untrustworthy to me, which was really uncomfortable. And it meant that I had no choice, but to go from ‘soft brother’ tactics to harder ‘tough love’ brother tactics... and it put a bigger wedge between us for a couple of months. And it was only literally days before he died, we had a conversation and we decided to start again and [be] positive and all that sort of Stuff”.*

Chris described how the extent of his wife’s gambling, created a closer bond and a willingness to tackle the problem together, but simultaneously eroded trust within their relationship.

*“We became really ... even closer ... in the sense of how we sat down and were sensible about our approach around it. So I'd said to Claire, ‘we'll pay it off together, but I'm not sure whether I could trust [that] you're not doing it again’ ... But we never fell out about it we were, I was really supportive of her”.*

## **Engagement with media**

Some participants reflected on their ambivalent relationship with the mainstream media. Whilst media engagement gave their campaign a wider audience, journalistic emphasis on participant’s personal stories could become intrusive. This sometimes led to irrevocable breakdowns of trust between campaigners and journalists. Participants subsequently reported a more circumspect engagement with the media. Bill recounts negotiating with a television journalist to focus on campaign issues, rather than the personal story of his late son Karl. He describes his anger when the subsequent agreement was breached.

*“I suppose the worst case I can think of is the TV reporter who came along. I wanted to get three campaigning points over. They'd much rather have one. I said, ‘well no, these are important,’ and they wanted to have the story about Karl and see the pain in the parent’s eyes... (I) got an agreement that we would have half of the piece on campaigning and half on ‘tears to camera’ ... the piece came out 100% tears to camera and no campaigning point. I went ballistic ... that just taught me you can never trust a journalist.”*

Here Greg perceives and accepts an inevitable quid pro quo when working with the media. Sharing some aspects of his son’s story gains access to a wider audience for Greg’s campaign points.

*“There’s gotta (sic) be that balance ... the hook line I’ve got is our Stevie’s death, for the media ... so I’ve gotta (sic) use that, whether I like it or not. That’s what gets me my foot in the door. Then I’ve got to back it up with the facts, not just go in there with a sob story.*

Here Greg recalls how a local newspaper’s intrusive and exaggerated focus on his personal information, repudiated this informal reciprocity. He subsequently withdrew his collaboration with the newspaper as a result.

*“The Gazette said, ‘we’d like to speak to you.’ So this guy comes ... He starts asking me all these questions, ‘what was the last Christmas present Stevie bought you?’ I said ‘why?’ ... and he said, ‘I’m just interested’ ... ‘I can’t remember, but I think it was a razor’ ... and the story comes out like ... ‘Greg kept the razor Stevie bought*

*him' ... they really put it down as a sob story and forgot about the campaigning part ... and I thought from then on, they're out of the picture. No matter what they do they'll not get another interview with me."*

Chris recalls being powerless to challenge the inaccuracy and timing of a newspaper article about his late wife's death.

*"The Herald had done a piece about Claire ... and they tried to release it on the day that my daughter had started secondary school. They wanted to put it on the front page, and I asked them to take it down ... It wasn't even correct or factual. They were putting the method of suicide in there, and Cassie [my daughter] didn't even know. She knew she [her mum] died from suicide, but she didn't know how and where ... so I had to get the lawyers involved, and they [the newspaper] were basically like, 'we'll do whatever we want'".*

Media engagement presented a further shadow side. All participants believed gambling harm was the sole cause of their loved one's suicide, and the pursuit of accountability became central to their campaign goals. Yet public exposure invoked challenges to participant's framing of gambling harm generally, and as a cause of the suicide specifically. Here, Ashley criticises the characterisation of gambling as an innocuous leisure activity.

*“... if you didn't know my brother very well, like the coroner and you didn't have very much of an insight into how destructive gambling is ... the services and the products and the wolf in sheep's clothing, [the] bloody leisure activity bollocks about it... you would think ‘Oh yeah, it [gambling] had something to do with it [the suicide], yeah, maybe 50%’ ... but I would say 100%”.*

Bill reflected upon his surprise when realising that criticism of the industry was not universal. Political opposition to tighter gambling regulation challenged his assumption of unanimous support for his campaign points.

*“The House of Lords was very informal, just the families and Lords sat at the table. Only afterwards did I realise that not all these people are actually supporting gambling reform, some of these people are supporting gambling ... that took me slightly aback. They were polite and courteous but you could see they had a different agenda.”*

Rebuttals of participant’s campaign points were not always advanced with such courtesy. Open criticism of the gambling establishment was mirrored back at participants on social media. Here Chris recalls how some advocates of a liberal approach to gambling regulation, criticized him and even blamed him for the death of his wife. He explains how this motivated him to continue campaigning for increased regulation of the gambling industry.

*“Oh, they were so insulting. At first they were saying ‘it's your fault he died just because you wasn't (sic.) a good husband’ ... I'm very thick skinned. Like you'd expect someone to get really upset about it, I didn't. It just made me even more determined to kind of prove them wrong.”*

## Emotional impacts of campaigning

Participants reported a range of emotional impacts from campaigning, some felt that campaigning assuaged strong negative feelings connected with the suicide of their loved one. Yet even where campaigning was successful in achieving its primary aim, the emotional outcomes could be challenging. Ashley expressed how campaigning constitutes a lifeline for him. He seeks to alleviate the guilt he experiences due to his belief that he did not do enough to prevent his brother's suicide.

*“It's the only way I can stay alive and be sane. This is because at the root of it I know I could have done more, and I accept that. I don't want [people saying] ‘you did all you could, it was his choice,’ if he was in the right frame of mind, he wouldn't have done what he did.”*

Greg experienced joy and satisfaction when his campaigning was successful in its aim of changing lives by preventing future gambling-related suicides.

*“Brilliant. Fantastic ... I'm not being big headed or anything, but I think that because of something I've said, some people have stepped back [from suicide] because of what they've heard.”*

Here Bill explains how he only shares selected aspects of Karl's story. He describes how he manages the emotional challenges that this invokes.

*"... if you've seen me on zooms or teams or most meetings, I would talk about Karl at a superficial level and just give the highlights of, 'he gambled for six years, he tried treatment in various places, and it wasn't enough.' I will generally choke up to some extent and just take a second, and say 'just give me a minute, I'll be OK'..."*

Chris explained how his successful campaign outcomes sometimes impacted other campaigners emotionally. At times this induced unexpectedly difficult feelings for him, and these could take time to overcome.

*"... everyone else was going home and telling their husbands and ringing people up. And then I went home, and I was just sat there and I was looking at a picture [of Claire] and that was it ... that hit me sideways, that went on for a long time. I didn't realise I was gonna (sic) feel like that, I had no idea."*

Chris explored the emotional impacts of campaigning in personal therapy. This enabled him to manage his campaigning activity and the effect it had upon everyday life.

*"Yeah, I mean, we looked into ... being able to kind of manage expectations, and how I've changed ... Because [of] what happened when I was campaigning there was a lot that I felt was overwhelming. So, it was kind of like, taking a step back from going on social media."*

## The relationship following the suicide.

Three participants reflected on a strong ongoing connection with their loved one following the suicide. They described how they campaigned on behalf of their late close relative, and how this helped to maintain the bond they shared prior to the death of their loved-one.

Chris describes a strong belief that his wife would support his campaigns. He feels that campaigning brings them together and provides their post-suicide relationship with a shared purpose.

*“I felt like I was doing something for her and I felt like she was proud of it. So there was never a moment where I felt like she wouldn’t have agreed with what was happening ... It [campaigning] was like something that we were doing together. So I still felt very much part of Claire’s life and her part of mine”.*

When reflecting on his own campaigning activity, Ashley cites the vicarious fulfilment of his late brother’s wishes as his motivation. He experiences his brother as an encouraging presence.

*“And I’m doing this because again, I feel like my brother is here going, ‘bro’ (sic.) if I was alive, this is what I’d be doing.’ You know, I feel him. He’s like, ‘come on, let’s go for it bro, let’s go for it’ ....”*



Greg explained how his campaigning includes sharing the story of his son's suicide with people currently experiencing gambling harm. Here he describes how this connects him with his late son.

*“I was invited to the GA [Gamblers Anonymous] AGM and I did my thing. I talked about Stevie ... I sat down and this young lad came up. His name was Craig, and he came up and just sat like that ... and he was in a bad place ... I saw our Stevie in him ....”*

Greg detailed how campaigning had also given him a greater understanding of the effects of gambling harm. This assuaged his perception of shortcomings in his pre-suicide relationship with his son, and his initial belief that he could have done more to help him. This knowledge facilitated a different perspective within his post-suicide relationship with his son.

*“I think just looking at things and talking to other people ... hearing the similar type of things and talking to ex addicts. And I remember the thing my brother said to me ‘there are things that I did when I was gambling, that nobody will ever know, I’m too ashamed to tell anybody’ ... And you realise then that it wasn’t you that didn’t see it, it was that they did so well at hiding it.”*

## Discussion.

Participants in the current study experienced manifold positive and negative outcomes through their activism. Although they experienced difficulties and sometimes relational ruptures, participants all reported close, communicative relationships with their loved one prior to their suicide-loss. Three participants were aware of their loved one's gambling difficulties, and the

support this invoked, increased the emotional dimensions of their pre-suicide relationship. This contrasts with existing research that suggests pre-suicide relationships possess less emotional and physical engagement (Levi-Belz, 2017) when compared to relationships prior to other sudden deaths. The contrast between current findings and existing research may be attributable in part to the respective methodologies. The previous study was a quantitative survey of 159 participants, the current study is a qualitative enquiry comprising four participants, using in-depth semi-structured interviews.

Levi-Belz (2017) describes how emotions such as shame and guilt can contribute to a survivor's negative, retrospective evaluation of the pre-suicide relationship. Current participants however, described how knowledge of their loved one's difficulties invoked empathy in the relationship, and a desire to face challenges together, even where there had been an erosion of trust.

Sense-making following suicide involves striving to understand the reasons, and to reconstruct the route leading to the suicide (Dransart, 2013). Making sense of the loss is pivotal in the grieving process (Hunt et al., 2019; Neimeyer, 2009). Ross et al. (2018) describe how attempting to make sense of suicide-loss invokes manifold questions about the reasons for the death. Lengthy or unsuccessful attempts to understand the reasons for the suicide can exacerbate distress (Davis et al., 2000). Conversely, earlier ability to make sense of the loss can alleviate some of the distress (Davis et al., 1998). Three participants in the current study had been aware of the harmful extent of their loved one's gambling activity prior to the suicide. The fourth participant became aware almost immediately discovering the death. Due to the absence of any other identifiable behaviors or contributory factors, all participants formed an early belief that gambling was the sole cause of their loved one's death. Awareness gained through activism swiftly galvanized this belief. It gifted participants knowledge of certain industry practices and their propensity to cause harm. This accelerated their ability to make sense of their suicide-loss.

This contrasts with existing research that suggests making sense of suicide loss can be a lengthy process. Moore et al. (2015) describe a period of oscillation between “brooding” (p. 246) and finding a reason for the death that is acceptable to the surviving relative. A longitudinal study by Entilli et al. (2021) reported that making sense of suicide-loss occurred between six and 24 months and sometimes longer.

Making meaning following the loss is a central aspect of post-suicide grief. Survivors seek to integrate the past relationships with present and future experiences to facilitate personal growth (Neimeyer, 2009). Current participants exemplified this through goals of postvention, public policy change and a shift in public perceptions of gambling harm.

Activities ranged from providing emotional and practical support to individuals currently experiencing gambling harm, to involvement in campaigns to raise awareness or facilitate regulatory change. Doka (1999) suggests that where suicide loss is openly acknowledged and socially supported in this way, the potential for growth of the survivor is promoted and the likelihood of disenfranchised grief is reduced.

Media engagement was pivotal in advancing the current participant’s campaign narratives. Open acknowledgement of suicide loss invokes risks, however. The personal impact of media-based advocacy in response to gambling suicide is not represented in existing literature, something this study aims to address. Canadian research focusing on mothers bereaved by substance related deaths offers valuable parallels. Morris et al. (2021) describe how the survivor’s campaign aims can be subjugated or omitted entirely by sensationalist reporting which prioritises the “sad story” (p.4) and often compels survivors to be emotional (p 4).

The current study reported a similarly ambivalent relationship with media. Survivors recognised an interdependence in their relationships with journalists and sought a broadcast

narrative that balanced their personal story with their campaign points. They felt powerless against large media operators when their story was misrepresented, exaggerated, or exploited. This resulted in anger, a more selective approach towards subsequent media collaboration, and in some cases withdrawal.

Such withdrawal from media engagement could inhibit both the achievement of campaign goals and the open acknowledgement of suicide (Doka, 1999) thereby limiting the potential for making meaning of the loss. Disempowerment experienced by current participants contrasts with the experiences of bereaved Canadian mothers reported in Morris et al. (2021). The latter describe highly effective strategies for exerting control over the journalistic narrative and maintaining some power in potentially inequitable media relationships. Activism in response to gambling suicide is a nascent activity. This contrasts with campaigning in relation to substance related bereavement. It is possible that people within the latter demographic have a greater collective experience upon which they can draw.

Mainstream and social media echoing of participant's campaigning drew rebuttals from politicians, gambling industry representatives and some members of the public. Some saw increased regulatory curbs as an incursion on their liberties. Dorfman and Krasnow (2014, p.296) describe "framing" as the way in which people interpret new information against their existing values. Understanding the "default frame" (p.296) of the recipient demographic is crucial to media-based campaigning. Dorfman and Krasnow (p.296) describe an American "rugged individualism," characterised by a perception of personal responsibility. This is analogous with the libertarian approach adopted by many gambling industry proponents in Britain (Reith & Wardle, 2022).

Participant's criticism of the gambling establishment was often mirrored back at them via adversarial posts on social media. Counter arguments would reassert the frame of individual

responsibility, challenging the survivor's belief of gambling as the cause of death. This reflects experiences in the Canadian research (Morris et al. 2021), where participants experienced vulnerability following social media posts from "anonymous online trolls" (p.5). Although challenges to the reasons for the suicide could potentiate renewed distress in the survivor, the current study reported that it provided further motivation for activism, potentially enhancing growth and making meaning of their post-suicide life.

The current study pointed to strong 'continuing bonds' between survivors of the suicides and their late loved ones following the death. The continuing bonds approach to grief involves the survivor creating an evolving ongoing post-death relationship with the deceased (Klass et al., 1996). This challenges the belief initially posited by Freud (1917) that severing connections to the deceased facilitates adaptation to the loss. The fluid nature of the post-death relationship represents a shift from representations of grief as a linear process posited by Bowlby and Parkes (1970) and subsequently popularised by Kubler-Ross (1969).

Continuing bonds can manifest in manifold ways: keeping photographs or treasured possessions; celebrating birthdays; attending events enjoyed by the late relative (Lynn Gall et al., 2015), or maintaining the loved one's social media presence (Bell et al., 2015). Field and Filanosky (2009) describe two categories of continuing bonds. Externalised bonds may manifest as vividly seeing or hearing the voice of the deceased. Internalised continuing bonds could include sharing memories of the deceased with other people or imagining sharing a special event with the deceased (Black et al., 2022) Field and Filanosky (2009) suggest that internalised continuing bonds have a positive association with the post traumatic growth of the survivor.

Root and Exline (2014) suggest that continuing bonds are most adaptive when the relationship between the survivor and their late loved one can evolve and be continually re-evaluated. Activism is not expressed as a continuing bond within existing research. Findings from the current study, however, illustrate how the act of campaigning invokes a strong and dynamic presence of the late loved one in the life of the survivor, constituting a strong internalized continuing bond.

Three participants in the current study saw activism as a joint enterprise with their late loved one. Two described having dialogues where they imagined their late relatives' responses to their campaign activity. The postvention work of two participants invoked the perceived approval of their late relative. A large volume of research points to the normative nature and positive impacts of continuing bonds (Andriessen et al., 2022; Entilli et al., 2021). Levi-Belz, (2017), however, suggests that continuing bonds can foster a preoccupation with the deceased and impede the survivor's access to new and helpful relationships.

Adams et al. (2019) point to the risk that survivors may perceive a responsibility to live vicariously for their loved one. Levi-Belz and Ben-Yaish (2022) identify the possibility that continuing bonds might prolong the feelings of guilt, regret and anger that characterize suicide loss, in particular.

Goodall et al. (2022) recognise time since bereavement as a predictor of the efficacy of continuing bonds. In the current study, the activism of the most recently bereaved participant was motivated, in part, by guilt and regret at not having done more for his brother while he was alive. Jordan (2011, p.199) describes how suicide survivors often experience the "tyranny of hindsight", repeatedly judging their pre-suicide actions against knowledge acquired post-suicide. Conversely, participants bereaved between three and 10 years prior, described a

collaborative ongoing relationship, where the perceived support of their late loved one motivated them to undertake new and meaningful experiences through activism.

## Conclusion.

The benefits of continuing bonds following suicide bereavement are not universally accepted. Where they are externalised or symbolic, they can potentiate a preoccupation with feelings of regret and guilt. Those who campaign following a gambling-related suicide are often motivated internally by the experiences and memories of their lost loved ones. Such campaigning takes place in a highly dynamic socio-political environment. This enables a fluid and ever-changing relationship with their lost loved one. Activism in response to gambling-related suicide can therefore facilitate the growth of the survivor through establishing a healthy continuing bond.

## Limitations.

The following limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study: the sample size was relatively small and recruited by convenience sampling. The sample was taken from a small demographic where research-fatigue may have influenced willingness to participate. Although this potentially limited the volume of data, the study sought to elicit a rich qualitative account of experiences as opposed to a quantitative generalisable account. All participants were active campaigners, which may have resulted in an underrepresentation of any negative impacts of activism. Participant anonymity was a high priority due to the highly sensitive information shared, and the public scrutiny that this issue attracts. This presented ethical/analytical limitations, and it was necessary to exclude some participant accounts from the study.

## Future research directions

Future research could expressly invite participants who ceased activism or elected not to campaign in the first instance, potentially identifying a wider range of negative impacts. Future research might also explore the impact of the gender of the lost loved one, or the bereaved relative, in relation to their activism. Subsequent research may also explore the influence of time since bereavement in the context of suicide activism. Beyond the subject of gambling, future research might consider other highly visible and publicly-tracked post-suicide activism and the potential for the development of continuing bonds.

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