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Introduction

Gambling continues to be questioned as a panacea for all economic woes and extant literature reports escalation of tension between economic objectives and social/environmental responsibilities of the private enterprises that promote gambling such as the casino operators (Chhabra & Gursoy 2007; Ham, Brown & Jang 2004). Recent studies refer to problem gaming as a public social issue instead confining their concerns to the clinical and medical forms of inquiry (Dyall, Tse & Kingi 2009). This redefinition of problem of problem gambling as an issue of social concern extends the notion of impacts beyond an individual level and emphasis on a broader spectrum of social harm because of excessive indulgence in gambling thereby extending the onus of responsibility to gaming operators and government (Dyall & Hand 2003). To date, only a handful of studies have examined the controversial link between gambling and the content of advertising messages designed by casino operators from the lens of socially responsible marketing. Recent studies in Australia and New Zealand note that the code of ethic are still remiss and remain invisible for the most part in marketing messages designed by casino operators (Binde 2009). This study extends this line of inquiry to the United States as no research to date has critically examined the online marketing message of casinos across the country using a socially responsible lens. The purpose of this study is to examine online marketing messages aimed at gambling tourists by casino operators in the United States to identify initiatives associated with responsible marketing.

Methods

This study defines socially responsible marketing as a form of marketing that aims to provide information on how to gambling in a responsible manner, tries to minimize harm, and warns audience of the social costs associated with problem gambling. Furthermore, it also needs to inform visitors about the odds of winning and creates awareness of reflect on self-limitations. Two sets of data were collected in two phases. The first set of data, which was collected in 2009, examined signature websites of casinos from all across the U.S. to determine if socially responsible online advertising was employed. The second set of data was collected in 2010 and required students of a Southwestern university to examine randomly selected casino websites to see if the socially responsible measures are presented in a visible manner. For both data collection phases, content analysis was conducted of the signature websites of spatially-dispersed and both tribal and non-tribal selection of casinos in the United States. Each websites was viewed for key advertising and information content. In this study, using two independent coders enhanced the quality of findings and confirmed reliability. The themed contents were matched with the predetermined list of socially responsible indicators. Based on literature review, a set of indicators were designed to measure socially responsible marketing efforts.

Findings

It is found that majority of the signature casino websites in 2009 did not display information on problem gambling (17%). Moreover, most websites did not offer information on odds of winning (14%) neither did they warn audience against the repercussions of over indulgence or excessive gambling (14%). Promotion of on-site restaurant s and lodging also receives paramount attention. Approximately 25% offered information on related services in the adjoining areas, thereby providing evidence of supply chain connections

The key advertising objective appears to be persuasive in addition to informing the audience of the casino activities and activities. Attractive lights and colors present an enticing appeal and persuasive message creates a sense

of urgency and leaves the audience believing he or she must get to the casino fast to win the prize.

Messages are predominantly reported to be emotional in nature. On one hand, emotional messages are centered round ideas such as need for fun and excitement and emotional imagery also seeks to evoke emotions related to luxury. On the other hand, rational appeal messages also appear but to a smaller extent and these relate to the self interests of customers. Approximately 34% of the casino websites use the local history or culture to draw audience but all refrain from misuse of cultural icons of the United States. Casinos with most cultural icons were Native American casinos and they indeed have authority to display selected expression of their culture.

Only 10% of the casinos promote other attractions and services on their websites although recent trends of casino advertising content reveal extended attention to the non-casino products on the property such as shopping, spa, comfortable and luxurious rooms, service and outdoor recreation facilities. In sum, responsible gambling continues to receive inadequate coverage on the casino websites. Also, most of the responsible gambling related content appears in small font and is not clearly visible.

Conclusion and Implications

The results of this study indicate that the promotional messages of the majority of the casinos across the United States are designed to entice and persuade individuals to participate in different gambling activities. Normalization of gambling within the American society is promoted in a pronounced manner as messages show that gambling is woven into the fabric of day-to-day life style and is a normal part of life. According to the majority of the respondents, most casino websites use repetitive text and slice of life/lifestyle pictures and pictures of winners to create fake imagery of winnings and fun. Also, gambling related harm is not presented in a visible manner to warn people and provide an accurate view of odds of winning. No mention is provided alongside gambling advertisements on the majority of the websites of warnings of excessive gambling, odds of winning, and responsible gambling.

This study offers important implications for the socially responsible development and marketing of casino operations in the United States, thereby contributing to the “New Normal” research inquiry. Clearly visible text with messages on responsible gambling and information is required. Gambling advertising needs to be more subtle and less persuasive and provide a truthful picture of odds of winning. New harm minimization policies are required to regulate exposure to gambling opportunities that have the potential to be harmful and efforts are thus needed to promote awareness of gambling issues and signs so that problem gambling thresholds are not crossed.

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