Responsible Gambling Practices from the Perspective of Gambling Counsellors in Macau

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Ken Wong Yuen Wai
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Synopsis

Early development of a credible CSR strategy could constitute a sustainable competitive advantage and “irresponsible” companies would be exposed to the risk of market punishment (Joseph, 2002; Löhman and Steinholtz, 2003). CSR and stakeholder studies have provided key theoretical directions for the exploration and effective management of issues relating to the social responsibility of gambling management (McIntosh, et al, 1998). Focusing on principles underlying the concept of sustainable development, consumer protection and community development, CSR is conceptually similar to responsible gambling (Murray and Vogel, 1997; Turban and Greening, 1997; Monaghan, 2009). In the past few decades, the gambling industry has developed so rapidly that it has become one of the most dynamic industries in the world (Stansfield, 2008). The concept of responsible gambling is one of the most interesting areas for gaming studies.

To cope with pressure from stakeholders, corporations are compelled to develop CSR strategies to avoid the risk of damaging their brand images and reputations (Maignan et al. 2002; Raynard and Forstater, 2002). Governments are under pressure to treat the negative social and economic consequences caused by the gambling industry (Eadington, 2003). At any given point in time, responsible gambling strategy has to ensure that gambling is provided in a manner that meets a community’s economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities (Hing, 2003).

Measured by gross gaming revenue, Macau is the world’s largest gaming market. Current laws in Macau have no regulatory requirements for responsible gambling. Eadington and Siu (2007) considered that the Macau government cannot just claim ignorance or pay lip service to control measures. In recent years, the Macau government has voiced its intention to implement a policy approach of responsible gambling. The six casino operators in Macau have been alerted to expect more stringent additional regulations to be imposed upon the gaming operations (Lam, 2009).
As Blaszczynski et al. (2004) reported, there is no common national or international framework for responsible gambling. There is a need for a strategic framework to guide key stakeholders to develop socially responsible policies. The framework in this study has been developed by combining the CSR gambling framework of Hing (2003) and the stakeholder framework of Fong (2009).

This empirical study explored the status of responsible gambling practices in Macau. In particular, it assessed the awareness of responsible gambling practices by one key stakeholder, the gambling counselling services sector, in Macau. The opinions of gambling counsellors about the awareness, acceptance and effectiveness of responsible gambling practices were explored. The research was conducted using a qualitative approach as there was no previous research on the Macau gambling counsellors and a qualitative approach allowed the researcher to penetrate into the perspectives of the marginalized voices. While limited by small, non-representative samples, the analysis of the 11 interviews enabled the research objectives to be accomplished and provided insights for further research and empirical application.

The findings show that the gambling counsellors’ views do not fall neatly into either primarily financial or social perspectives. Instead, their perspectives are found to be more complex and mixed than either the financial or social perspectives. Despite the marginalized situation that the gambling counsellors are facing, they have positive attitudes towards shouldering more responsibility for gambling-related problems. Most gambling counsellors consider that problem gambling counselling services could benefit from closer relationships with the casino industry. Moreover, some counselling centers have developed a solid relationship with other community support services, which is a great facilitator for Macau to implement responsible gambling. Gambling counsellors believe that well-trained casino frontline staff can play an important role in identification and intervention on the gaming floor (Delfabbro et al. 2007).

It was found that the gambling counsellors in Macau had some awareness of responsible gambling practices, but were generally sceptical about their potential effectiveness.
Distinctive features of Macau's market context and government behaviours were identified as key reasons for this low implementation rate. Although they knew little about what should be included in the responsible code of practice, they all looked to learn from the guidelines from other gambling jurisdictions. Most interviewees expressed doubts over a self-regulatory approach and a legislative approach was considered as appropriate.

Theoretically, this study has been limited by the way it was designed. It has focused only on the views of the gambling counsellors. Thus, the interpretations of some of these findings may be open to debate. Empirically, this study has been limited to one gambling industry stakeholder group in one market and over a limited period of time. As such, its empirical findings are specific to this context, which means that these findings have limited generalizability.

This study contributes to Macau's policy makers in formulating strategies to limit the ills of gambling in Macau. The government of Macao should enforce a greater degree of responsible gambling strategies than is currently implemented in order to improve their reputation and reduce criticism from key stakeholders.

This study has filled some of the gap in the extant literature by focusing on the opinions of one key stakeholder group, the gambling counsellors, about responsible gambling in the world’s biggest gaming market, Macau. Knowing the gambling counsellors’ perspectives on responsible gambling can allow policy makers to know the key success factors and the most voluntarily acceptable policies for the key stakeholders.